



Lean Meetings?

Using Lean's Quick Changeover principles to better manage meetings

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Lean Meetings?

Do you ever feel like you are a prisoner to too many meetings, running from one meeting to the next?

Do your meetings feel like they last forever and lack action or closure?

Ever wonder why a meeting was called you were invited or other times why you weren't invited to a meeting you wanted to attend?

Ever find yourself in a meeting after "the meeting" to discuss what did or didn't happen, or what needs to happen next?

Is it a challenge to squeeze all of the meetings you are required to attend on your calendar?

How many meetings should a healthy company have and when do we cross the line on healthy communications and too many meetings that are proxy for poor processes?

I see this as a challenge for company after company and it is not a new problem. In fact, I believe our continuous access to information and 24/7 communications, along with the expectation of immediate feedback have made this issue worse than ever.

Background Story

I've been applying various forms of continuous improvement techniques and methodologies since my early days with DuPont in 1980, and I continue to appreciate and learn more from basic principles. Recently I was relating to students in a workshop how Lean principles and techniques made famous by manufacturing companies, also apply well to service companies. Specifically we were discussing "quick changeover" and they were struggling to apply it or relate to it because they didn't use expensive or complex equipment or instrumentation that constrained their operations. In the dialog that ensued, once again I was pleased to see how the basic Lean principles came through and in this case shed some light on the issue of too many meetings.

The company I was working with doesn't manufacture a product, instead they are service provider that wins contracts with other companies. As a result, their processes are paper or electronic based and the processing is essentially accomplished via employee brain power. After some back and forth discussions, questions and answers, I found out that their employees felt overwhelmed by meetings. I next asked if they thought meetings were a "value added" activity in general. Thinking to myself, I have yet to see a business model where a company made more profit from having more meetings nor am I aware of a role like "Chief Meeting Officer", so I was anticipating the reply should be "no". Indeed the reply was "no" and in fact they unloaded on me about how long, inefficient and often redundant their meetings were. They even went on to describe how there were meetings before the meeting to plan and meetings after the meeting to discuss what did or did not happen during the meeting. Finally I had connected with them, so we spent the next 30+ minutes developing ways to reduce time spent in meetings, using Lean quick changeover techniques.

Lean Quick Changeover Principles

From a Lean perspective, meeting time is often a form of preparation for some other core process or effort, much like a welder organizing his tools and preparing to weld. Seldom is the actual "value added" work done in the meeting. Therefore our "Lean goal" would be to minimize the time spent in meetings so more time could be spent on "value added" activities.

To develop ideas, we used the following Lean quick changeover techniques and principles:

- Maximize the "value added" or operational time of your constraint
- Prepare for constraint downtime while the constraint is operating



- When possible, convert internal activities to external activities so they can be performed while the constraint is operating
- Minimize the downtime of your constraint
 - Only perform internal activities while the constraint is down
 - Streamline all internal activities to minimize constraint downtime

In our example, the employees working at the service company are the "constraint" so that when they are in meetings, they are not able to perform their core "value added" functions, therefore we treat meeting time as downtime.

Let's Be Realistic

Now I'm not saying meetings have no value to the business, but many of us feel overwhelmed trying to get through the meetings and other "stuff" we feel forced to deal with before we can finally focus on the more important things that are core and fundamental for making the business successful. Interestingly, these core "value added" activities are most often the work where the employee gains the most personal satisfaction too. So while meetings are likely necessary, we can use Lean quick changeover techniques and principles to improve them.

Lean Meetings

Look at meetings from a Lean perspective using Lean quick changeover techniques and see if the following ideas wouldn't result in a positive change of less time spent in meetings and more time spent doing the more important core "value added" activities.

- **Goal:** Meetings should be shorter
- **Recommendations:**
 - Provide an agenda with estimated times, for each attendee prior to the meeting
 - Consider a policy of NO agenda, NO meeting
 - Start on time and use a time keeper during the meeting to hold accountability
- **Goal:** Meetings should be more productive
- **Recommendations:**
 - Clearly establish the meeting's purpose with desired outcomes, prior to the meeting
 - Include the appropriate stakeholders for decisions and actions
 - Document attendee roles, actions, owners, due dates and next steps during the meeting and publish these to the group
 - Have the proper meeting support supplies and equipment to help make for a productive meeting experience
 - Chart paper, boards or smart boards for notes
 - Projectors or TVs for viewing presentation materials and other visuals
- **Goal:** Meetings should drive results
- **Recommendations:**
 - Outcomes should be communicated
 - Document agreement, understandings and "action items"
 - Include names, next steps and dates
 - Send out meeting notes to attendees and other interested stakeholder
- **Goal:** There should be fewer meetings
- **Recommendations:**
 - Think about why you feel like there is a need for another meeting; If meetings are required due to poor or broken processes, fix the process!



- Be respectful of the need for everyone to have time that is NOT spent in meetings; Schedule meetings well enough in advance for people to plan and coordinate their available time.
 - Consider a minimum 48 hour advance meeting notice rule
- Track how much time you spend in meetings versus time spent NOT in meetings and trend this time downward.

Take a look at your meeting practices and consider if your company might benefit from some of these recommendations. While this may not feel like it is leading edge stuff, you may find getting back to basics and having meetings under control may help you find the focus and executional success to tackle some more interesting challenges!