Meet Less, Do More: 5 Rules for High-Output Meetings

By Sj Bulmer at Bulmer Consulting LLC

For small businesses, time is your most precious resource. Yet, the average worker wastes three to six hours per week in unproductive meetings. If your meetings don't feel like they're helping you get more done, you have a problem that drains your bottom line.

Meetings, when executed poorly, are a massive source of lost productivity. However, management expert Andy Grove noted that the meeting is the essential medium through which managerial work is performed. Therefore, the solution is not to eliminate meetings, but to structure them for maximum efficiency.

Here is a simple framework for executing quality meetings that keep your team accountable and projects moving forward, ensuring every minute counts.

Defining Your Meeting Structure

To execute a quality meeting, you must first clarify its purpose. Not all meetings are created equal:

- **The 1:1 Coaching Session:** This essential meeting between a supervisor and a subordinate should be owned by the subordinate, who is responsible for prepping and leading it. Its purpose is to share knowledge and proactively tackle thorny issues before they become crises.
- **Standing (Recurring) Team Meetings:** These are the most common but also the most dangerous, as a quality agenda often takes a backburner after a few weeks.

5 Rules for Executing Good Meetings

These five simple rules will handle 90% of your meeting output and maximize your team's productivity:

1. **Mandatory Agenda:** You must have an agenda or plan prepared at least 24 hours in advance. The agenda establishes the purpose and desired outcome. Rule #1: If a meeting does not have a purpose, it should not take place.
2. **Assign a Meeting Owner:** Every meeting needs an owner who is individually responsible for setting the agenda, keeping things moving, and tabling tangents. Without one, your team is destined to spin its wheels.
3. **Kick-Off with Purpose:** The owner must quickly establish why you are meeting and what the objective or outcome should be to level-set everyone's focus.
4. **Be Timely (No Drifting!):** Every meeting needs to start and end exactly on time. Build the habit of tabling any tangents for later discussion or follow-up.

5. **Actions are Non-Negotiable:** The output must be actions or outcomes—a decision must be made, or someone must be assigned to do something. If you're not generating actions, you're just sharing information.

Key Questions to Ask

- **Is This Task Truly Necessary?** Before scheduling, ask if the goal could be achieved with a simple email or shared document, rather than a meeting.
- **Who Needs to Be Here?** Only invite participants essential for achieving the meeting's objective.
- **What are the Next Steps?** Every project meeting should end with a clear list of actions, owners, and due dates.

Staying Current with Trends

- **Cancel If No Agenda:** For recurring team meetings, circulate an agenda reminder 24 hours in advance. If no one adds anything, the owner has the discretion to cancel the meeting entirely, forcing efficient use of time.
- **Time Boxing:** Consider shorter meeting blocks (e.g., 25 or 50 minutes) rather than the traditional 30 or 60 to build in transition time and force brevity.

By implementing these rules, you will be able to **meet less and do more**.