

WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



Science of meetings

When you think about work culture today, what comes to mind? Morning cups of coffee, checking your emails, endless spreadsheets? One of the first things that popped into my head is meetings. They may not be our favorite work activity, but they've certainly become a staple in the corporate world. Many of us find our days filled with them. Back-to-back-to-back-to-back. With so much time spent in meetings, it begs the question: are meetings helping or hurting our productivity?

This is the WorkWell Podcast Series. Hi, I'm Jen Fisher, Chief Well-being Officer for Deloitte, and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk all things Well-being.

(Teaser) Steven: Meetings are one of the rare activities at work that we can actually cost. We can look at time by salaries and say this meeting costs this much money. So, I like thinking of it as what's the return on that investment. So you invested, you actually just spent two or three thousand dollars. In a lot of organizations, you say you're spending two or three thousand dollars, someone says, "Uh I'm not sure, let's talk about that." When it comes to meetings we don't have those conversations.

(music)

Jen: I'm here with Dr. Steven Rogelberg. He's a Professor and Director of Organizational Science at the University of North Carolina—Charlotte. His research focuses on Team Effectiveness, Leadership, Engagement, Health and Employee Well-being, Organizational Research Methods, and Meetings at Work.

(music)

Jen: Your most recent research and your book, quite frankly, is focused on the science behind meetings. How did you pick this topic? Why meetings?

Steven: Sure. As an Organizational Psychologist, I'm attracted to study topics that impact the employee experience of the work. My specific interest are really things that are always

frustrating the heck out of people. Definitely meetings fit the bill. So, I was really motivated to study this topic and try to figure out ways to help people deal with it.

Jen: How did you even go about doing this research? It seems nontraditional in terms of what you would research.

Steven: It is, but in some regards it should not have been. Because we know that people are spending a tremendous amount of time in meetings at work. So, it's a perfect topic. But for whatever reason, bad meetings have just been accepted as a way of life at work, but in some regards at Universities as well. They can be studied. There are a variety of techniques from having people keep diaries, recording their reactions, and evaluations right after a meeting or at the end of the day. Typically, I've even done experiments where you bring folks into lab settings, and we've manipulated lateness to meetings and looked at the effects.

Jen: What has your research actually shown about the effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of meetings? How do we currently or most often see them today in the corporate setting?

Steven: I've been doing research on this crazy topic for 20 years, so it is a lot of studies. I do think meetings have become larger over time because it is getting easier and easier for us to sabotage (oh, I shouldn't say sabotage) to hold hostage someone's calendar. But definitely it's the same issues over and over again. So, what I basically concluded is that pretty much every meeting yields some positive insights; some nuggets. The problem is really the ratio of good times to bad times. I think that's the way of looking at meetings. What our data suggests is that around 50 percent of time in meetings is wasted time.

Jen: How do you define wasted time?

Steven: Time that people do not feel that they needed to be there; that it was relevant to them; that they found it engaging; they felt that it was well run. Basically, time in the meeting that was, in a sense, not honoring their participants' time.

Jen: On the flip side, what does make a meeting effective or engaging for people?

Steven: The best meetings, first of all, are relevant to everyone whose attending. So, everyone in that meeting says, "Hey, this was a good use of time; I'm happy I'm here; this is relevant to me." The best meetings have a leader in charge who is making sure that the experience is moving, asking the right questions, that it doesn't go off in tangents. So, the best meetings have an engaged leader. The best meetings have a culture among attendees such that there is safety and trust and people can bring their full selves to that meeting, and they know that they can have conflicts, but they are conflicts around ideas and not around the person. And then the best meetings end with everyone saying, "Ok, here's what we decided and here's whose committed to doing each of these things." Those would be the major characteristics and you add that all together, it just keeps coming back to the fact that you have invested X number of minutes in this activity and you leave saying, "I'm glad I did."

Jen: It was a good use of my time. So where are we failing?

Steven: There are a few reasons. First of all, there appears to be something called a "meeting leader blind spot." That when I survey people after a meeting, most people will typically have some negative responses, but one person will typically be quite positive.

Jen: And that's the leader of the meeting?

Steven: Exactly! So, there is a misalignment between the leader's experience and everyone else's. So, this blind spot really prevents them in making changes. If you feel you're good at something, you're not all that motivated to change. Next is the fact that in organizations, the data suggests that only around 20 percent of leaders ever receive any training on how to lead a meeting. This is crazy. How do you have an activity that occurs 55 million times a day in the U.S. alone and we have no training? So, you've got this blind spot, you don't have training, and the final piece. I do speeches to various organizations. It may be organizations of CEO's, Chief Talent Officers, and I love to ask this question because I always know the answer. The question is: "How many of you have on your Employee Engagement Survey any content around meetings? Do you want to take a guess at how many raised their hands?"

Jen: Zero.

Steven: That's a really good guess. It's been a couple, but in general, organizations don't have that. You put these all together, blind spot, no training, and now no feedback or accountability. This is a perfect storm. These bad meetings and bad meeting practices have just become normative and despite the fact that its clearly frustrating to people, there's just hasn't been an appetite to change it.

Jen: I would say for someone in my role and the world I live in, all of us are over connected, over worked in some sense and looking for any way to be more productive in our workplace, certainly, and in our overall life and if the majority of us feel like we're wasting time in meetings, this seems like a natural. Why wouldn't we do it?

Steven: You're absolutely right. If people were flushed with time they would be like, "Hey it's okay. I'm fine with this." But people are so incredibly pressed. It even goes beyond that because a bad meeting not only waste time, but a bad meeting has other negative effects. You have opportunity costs; you could have been doing something else. You have that frustration. We find that bad meetings undermine your engagement overall with the job and we even find something called "meeting recovery syndrome."

Jen: Say more about this.

Steven: This is the idea that when you have a bad meeting you just don't leave it at the door. It sticks with you. You ruminate, and you co-ruminate. In fact, we just completed a study a few days ago and this was a global study. It was around 55 percent of people indicated that when they have a bad meeting, it affects their productivity on other task afterwards. So, there is a lot of damage associated with bad meetings.

Jen: That makes a lot of sense. So are you developing a training on how to run a good meeting.

Steven: Yes. But my approach to training is really different. I want to make meeting leaders intentional. Once someone is intentional, then good things will happen. And I want to give one quick example. I talk about this idea that the best meeting leaders recognize inherently that they are a steward of others time. As soon as you recognize that you're a steward of others time, then you just don't want to dial it in. You care what other people think so you start making careful choices. Careful choices about who needs to be there, choices of what's on the agenda. Now interestingly, we act like a steward when it comes to meetings with customers. Right? When we meet with customers, we never dial it in. We are intentional. We are deliberate. We know we don't want to screw it up because there are consequences. But all that intentionality gets thrown away when it comes to employee meetings.

Jen: It just feels like there is a compulsion that anytime there is a topic that needs to be decided or discussed, we just call a meeting.

Steven: Well, let's say that a world without meetings is much more problematic than a world with meetings.

Jen: So, meetings aren't bad.

Steven: No, they aren't bad.

Jen: We need them.

Steven: And a lot of meeting activity is well-intentioned. It would be my contention that the goal is not to eliminate meetings; but to eliminate bad meetings and to just improve the ratio of that good time to bad time. So, the fact that you want to solicit input from others, that you want to create an inclusive environment; I don't want to stop you from doing that. I just want you to do it in a way that in a sense is more sufficient, that truly accomplishes your goals of inclusion and engagement, and doesn't serve to derail them.

Jen: Did you all look at human behavior in terms of is there an inclination for an individual... They get invited to the meeting, they feel obligated to accept verses decline? Or is there any... does FOMO come into play here? So, they go to the meeting just in case something gets talked about and they don't want to miss out on it?

Steven: I think that happens a lot and there are ways of addressing that issue. While people complain about having meetings, they are also worried if they are not invited to a meeting. When we are designing a meeting, we can easily identify people who are core to that meeting. That's not hard for us to do. We truly know who has to be there. It's almost like planning a wedding, we know who needs to be at the wedding. But then you have that secondary group, right? And once you start touching that secondary group you say, "Oh, now this person needs to go; oh! This person needs to go!" And then it gets really big. So, what we need to do is think of that secondary group a little differently. They need to be told about the meeting. They need to be told that here's what we're going to talk about in the meeting. And if they have any input, please provide it. They need to be told that they are going to get meeting minutes, right after that meeting. And they need to be told that at any point in the future they want to attend these meetings, they are more than welcome. If you do those three things...

Jen: You're giving them permission to opt out.

Steven: They will opt out. And not only will they opt out; but they will thank you. Because what's the gift that we all want?

Jen: Time.

Steven: Time. So, they will thank you for it. And you've got an organization that is more effective, the meetings are more effective because they're leaner, everyone there is more engaged because it's relevant; multi-tasking will decrease, all kinds of good outcomes.

Jen: So, does this same principle apply when you're talking about conference calls and virtual meetings?

Steven: Yes, absolutely.

Jen: Is there any different dynamics? Because I feel like, actually on conference calls and virtual meetings, you see a lot more multi-tasking. You ask somebody a question and they're like, "oh wait, you cut out there."

Steven: Yes, exactly.

Jen: Which I am guilty of doing all the time, I must admit.

Steven: Me too! Basically, the remote virtual meetings are ripe for so much dysfunction. I'll share... I think you'll get a kick out of this. If you ask people what's the most dysfunctional meeting type, they will say the remote meeting. If you ask them what meeting type you most prefer to go to, they will say...

Jen: The one with food.

Steven: That's a good guess; but they'll say the remote meeting, right?

Jen: Because they can get work done.

Steven: That's right, because they can do other things. That is so messed up. That just tells you everything you need to know that this is a big problem. So, I have a chapter in my book that focuses on the remote meeting. Because the leader needs to do some additional types of skills; I'll give you a couple of examples. First of all, when you're leading a remote meeting, you have to fully embrace your role as an air traffic controller. It is on you to make sure that accountability and identifiability happens. So, you are constantly calling people out. When there is role call in a meeting, people don't say their names; YOU say their names and YOU make sure they are there. YOU are providing order to the chaos. You're keeping track of whose talking and who's not talking. And if you haven't heard from Gordon you say, "Hey Gordon, I haven't heard from you." So, you are present, fully focused on the facilitation of this experience; and you want to default to video whenever possible again to create that accountability and identifiability. Then, here's the crazy controversial thing, you want to consider banning the "mute" button. Now, I don't mean always you should ban it. But think about this, when you attend a meeting face-to-face you're not able to eat lunch,

walk the dog, go to the bathroom; you are expected to be present. And there you find a quiet place...

Jen: But certainly, there are awkward times when we wish somebody had muted and they didn't.

Steven: Very true! So, there are some exceptions. But in general, kind of think of the symbolism. If you say, "no mute buttons," all those people remote will say, "Ok, I need to find a quiet place, where I can be fully present." And that is key, or I shouldn't be there.

Jen: Or I shouldn't be attending the meeting.

Steven: Those are some examples that can help make these meetings more effective.

Jen: What's your point of view on walking meetings, either in person or virtually? One of the things that I try to do is walking meetings, because it gets me away from being in front of my laptop and the urge to multi-task while I'm on a conference call.

Steven: It goes back to a comment I made about intentionality. There are a variety of tools and techniques leaders can do. So, that's the first thing, recognizing that you have choices as a leader and one of the choices is taking a walking meeting. Walking meetings have some good data around them. People seem to like them more and there appears to be enhanced creativity in walking meetings. Plus, they get you moving and that's a good thing. It's harder to multi-task, right? Because you're going to hit a tree if you multi-task. But walking meetings have some conditions. For example, they need to be small. Two or three people at the most. You need to let everyone know in advance that there's a walking meeting, so they can wear the right shoes. You need to make sure that the agenda fits; you can't be showing a deck. But I love the idea of a supervisor when he/she is meeting with or doing a check-in meeting with the reports and they say, "Hey, let's go take a walk." I like it.

Jen: In your research, did you uncover what the perfect amount of time is for a meeting?

Steven: It does not exist. There is not a perfect amount of time. What we need for people to do is think about how much time is needed, given a set of goals. This starts with just not defaulting to one hour. There is nothing sacred about a one-hour meeting. We have one-hour meetings because that's the default standard on...

Jen: On our calendar?

Steven: Whatever... That is not a good reason to have a one-hour meeting. Especially given Parkinson's Law, which is the idea that work expands and would fill whatever time is allotted to it. So, we can use this to our advantage. I have a chapter in my book where I say meet for 48 minutes. I don't mean literally have every meeting for 48 minutes. But I'm trying to be provocative and say think carefully about it. And if it is a 48-minute meeting, that's fine. If the meeting starts at 12 minutes after the hour, that's fine. Just make a choice that fits what the goals are. Furthermore, once you decide how much time the meeting should be, I want you to consider dialing it back a bit. Create a little extra pressure. A little extra pressure enhances the focus. And the research suggests that it leads to better outcomes.

Jen: How do you feel about the “icebreaker” activities where people get to know each other or get to know something about you? As opposed to just giving your name rank and file. Are those time wasters? Are they valuable? Or do they actually connect people to one another?

Steven: They can work, but often leaders and facilitators lose control over them. Next thing you know, you’re spending 30 minutes to 1 hour on these and that really upsets people. So, I think there is a host of really powerful things you can do for people that takes five minutes; maybe 10 at the most. I will also say that when we create a more diverse meeting experience, there will actually be more “getting to know” each other naturally. For example, one of the best ways of getting people engaged around a problem is to actually have them get into pairs first. Work as a pair and then come back as a broader group. So, when you get people in pairs no one can multi-task. Everyone has to be present because you’re just in a pair; so, you’re fully engaging. Then when you go back to the group, in some regards, you’ve primed the discussion, people are ready, they have thoughts, and they’ve generated those thoughts without hearing everyone else’s thoughts. So, the more pure and potentially more disruptive. Then you start having the conversation and what almost invariably happens is that someone will say, “Hey, my partner Sasha, she actually had some really good ideas.” Maybe Sasha was introverted and wasn’t going to share them, but this person starts to become an advocate for those ideas. So, my point being that by getting people in dyads, you and I are actually getting to know each other, but we’re doing it through productive activity.

Jen: Without having to make it an artificial... “tell me what your super power is.” I like that a lot.

Steven: Exactly.

Jen: So as a meeting leader, you plan, you’re intentional, you have a meaningful agenda that you have thought through. What happens or what do you do when that completely goes out the window?

Steven: Well, you don’t necessarily have to fight it; depends on where it’s gone. But if you’ve created your meeting by soliciting input from others that’s probably less likely to happen. So, if I’ve asked people what we should cover in the meeting, I’ve learned what’s on their minds and it might be the case that I will cover what they’ve said. If there are things that I won’t cover, I can still address them in a different form. So, I would say if your meeting is constantly running off course, it means you’re not building your meetings effectively. Furthermore, if you have someone who kind of takes meetings always on a tangent, it means that you’re not doing your job as a facilitator. Or you’re not thinking about the alternative ways of doing things that would elevate more voices so that tangent person wouldn’t have as much power and influence.

Jen: One of the more recent things that I’ve seen happen in meetings is this notion of a parking lot. If something comes up that’s not on topic, but you still want to acknowledge someone’s idea and it’s still a good idea, but it’s just not relevant to today’s discussion. Is that an appropriate way to handle it?

Steven: Yes, I think it’s great! I call it something different. I find that if you say, “We’re going to put that in the parking lot everyone.” The cynicism is like....

Jen: We're never going to see it. So, what's the new terminology?

Steven: I don't know what the new is, but what I do is I am creating the agenda for next meeting at the time of the current meeting. So, if an issue comes up, I am literally recording and saying, "Ok, we'll get that next meeting." And I have this running list of notes that allows me to make sure that person recognizes that they were heard, but that's going to be next time.

Jen: That kind of leads me to another aligned area. There is a lot out there about brainstorming and group brainstorming; whether it works or doesn't work. Do you have any? Have you looked at any of that research or...?

Steven: I do. I do.

Jen: Ok. Can you say more about that?

Steven: Sure. So, we know that brainstorming and ideation is extremely common meeting activity. The way we currently do it is quite problematic. If you have... gather 10 people together around the table and say lets brainstorm; there is only so much air time. One person speaking at a time. Furthermore, once one idea is said, then people's experience of their brainstorm starts to change. That first idea tends to start a new reality. So, brainstorming in that matter can be very tricky. But there are alternatives. There was research that compares brainstorming where people either write down their ideas or put them into an app or brainstorming where people are talking. Those that are silent brainstorming results in nearly twice as many ideas and those ideas are more innovative and creative, and again, more disruptive. Because that allowed full engagement. It allowed full unfiltered engagement. So, we want brainstorming, but these are some nice ways of doing it. Then there are other really simple things, right? If we want to brainstorm, we can use pre-meeting time. We could ask people to contribute their ideas before the meeting starts and put them on the board or whatever you want to use. And say here are some ideas that we have and what do you want to pursue. Then we can use another app, this is so easy, by the way, where literally you put in the QR code. People scan it on their phones all the ideas that you're seeing on the screen show up on the app and you vote on five that you want to discuss. Everyone's engaged, and it's being done in a way that prevents the forces of "group think" from emerging.

(music)

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