

# 5 steps to decrease time spent in meetings



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If you are like most healthcare leaders, your most valuable commodity is time. Regardless of the size of your organization, time can be slowly pulled away from you depending on what others believe is more important. After a while, this continuous time-suck can lead to burnout and job dissatisfaction.

During my first few years in administration, I happily attended every meeting, event or interview in the organization. This resulted in 60-hour workweeks and a need to complete tasks in the early mornings and weekends, which did not matter much because I was energetic and tried to get the work done while my wife slept. Often the completed work was less than my best effort but I submitted it so I could move on to other projects. After a while, my wife got frustrated by my long work hours and I grew weary of the routine. I am sure many of you can relate to this experience.

## Solutions

A few years ago, I read a *Harvard Business Review* article about time diaries kept by chief executive officers (CEOs) in large organizations, who spent

approximately 32 hours of their workweeks in physical meetings, on conference calls and at events.<sup>1</sup> Another study<sup>2</sup> notes that employees spend 80% of their time in meetings, on the phone and responding to emails.

The articles prompted me to create a time diary [download: [mgma.org/time-diary](http://mgma.org/time-diary)] to map daily tasks. My previous role as a regional vice president covered several areas; involved multiple bosses; and entailed meetings for the medical group, hospital, region and system. Imagine my surprise to find that I spent more than 70% of my week (excluding breaks for lunch and travel time) in scheduled and impromptu meetings. After including clinical time with patients, I had exhausted more than 90% of my scheduled workweek, which left 10% to complete solitary tasks, such as following up on to-do items, project work and clinical duties. It didn't take a mathematician to see that this was not adding up in my favor.

The time diary made me reflect on the teachings of Patrick Lencioni, a renowned organizational health guru who believes that effective leaders should spend no more than 15% of their workweek

in meetings.<sup>3</sup> Having studied Lean methodologies, I began reviewing each item on my spreadsheet. It was humbling to see that much of the time-consuming activities were wasteful and self-induced. I developed my own five-step meeting approach using a derivative of the 5S concept (sort, straighten, shine, standardize and sustain)<sup>4</sup>:

1. Designate.
2. Eliminate.
3. Separate.
4. Abbreviate.
5. Delegate.

I went line by line on my meeting spreadsheet and asked the following questions to make the time I spent in meetings most efficient:

- **Designate:** Is this a problem-solving, working, decision-making or informational meeting? Am I responsible for the meeting or a participant? Understanding the meeting type and level of participation can help decide the best format to share information or address a topic.
- **Eliminate:** Can the meeting be scheduled ad hoc or combined with another meeting or event? Are there better ways to distribute the information?
- **Separate:** If it is a regular meeting, does it need to occur as frequently? For example, can we change it from weekly to biweekly? Frequency sometimes inhibits productivity, which can lead to addressing the same items at your next meeting.
- **Abbreviate:** What is the meeting duration and can we complete the work in one hour instead of two? Here are a few other ways to shorten the meeting:
  - Ask for a standing meeting at the site where the work or issue is occurring.
  - If you are not leading the meeting, ask if you can only attend for the time that pertains to you.
  - If a meeting is off-site, seek ways to curtail travel time (such as videoconferencing).
- **Delegate:** Do I need to attend this meeting? I received invitations for quality meetings even though there was a medical director for quality in the group who enjoyed attending the events and provided a brief synopsis on his return.

After plotting my time, I sent the Excel spreadsheet to my direct reports, who had similar challenges, and asked them to review their time allotment. We implemented a rule that limited

meetings to no more than 25% of a manager's time. If asked to attend meetings that fell out of the restricted parameters, staff contacted me and most of the time I let a meeting sponsor know my staff was unavailable.

### Return on investment

Within a few months, I regained more than 30% of my time to complete solitary tasks; managers decreased their time in obligatory meetings and increased the time available to support care centers. Our leadership team morale improved and production, as measured by completed assignments, increased substantially. I recently started using Harvard's cost calculator to better understand the financial effect of meetings on our group.<sup>5</sup> It has done wonders to help us decide whether we need a meeting and who should attend. ■

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#### Notes:

1. Mintzberg H. "The manager's job: Folklore and fact." *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 1990.
2. Cross R, Rebele R, Grant A. "Collaborative overload." *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2016.
3. Lencioni P. *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 2012.
4. "About 5S." Kaizen Institute. Undated. Available from: [mgma.org/5S](http://mgma.org/5S). Accessed on Jan. 4, 2016.
5. "Estimate the cost of a meeting with this calculator." *Harvard Business Review*, Jan. 11, 2016. Available from: [mgma.org/meeting-calculator](http://mgma.org/meeting-calculator). Accessed May 26, 2016.