

MEETINGS

The Most Productive Meetings Have Fewer Than 8 People

by Paul Axtell

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There are many problems with the way most meetings are run. One of the most political is the invite list. Deciding who to include can be tough but too many managers default to including everyone. In an effort to not make anyone feel left out, they unknowingly decrease the quality of the meeting. Robert Sutton, a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University, looked at the research on group size and concluded that the most productive meetings contain only five to eight people. Why? There is a tipping point beyond which the quality of the conversation begins to erode.

When well-intended managers are too inclusive with their meeting invites:

- There is not enough time for everyone to participate in the conversation.
- Rich back and forth debate is replaced by shallow comments.
- Information-sharing and catch-ups distract from addressing higher priority issues.
- People become more guarded and less candid.
- Tough topics and decisions are not put on the agenda, then are dealt with off-line instead.

As a result, people often lose respect for the meeting which leads to less preparation, participation, and action. It can become a vicious downward cycle.

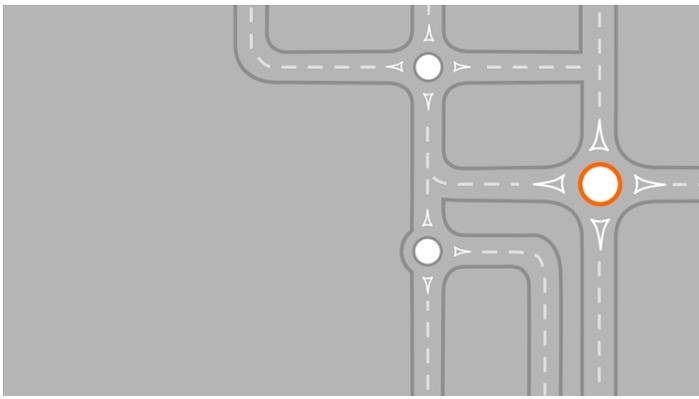
Smaller groups, on the other hand, help build a sense of intimacy that opens the floor to a meaningful and candid discussion. Fewer people means more time to listen to and consider the perspective of each team member. Clarity and candor emerge. Alignment follows.

First, tell your team that you're making a change. Be transparent. Let them know that, moving forward, your meetings are going to be smaller with the intention of making them more effective. You are aware of how much time and energy everyone spends in meetings, and you want to implement a strategy that will yield the best results. Tell them that the research says smaller groups lead to richer discussions and better decisions. While it may take some time, you intend to experiment with meeting size and use this theory as a touchstone.

Be thoughtful with your invite list. To make sure you have the right people in the room, you have to know specifically what you're going to address. Have a clear agenda and make sure you've allotted each topic of discussion enough time. From there, ask yourself: Who must be present for the discussion to yield results? For who would you cancel the meeting if they could not attend? Start with this core group. Add more people only if you think they will add value to the conversation or gain value by being there.

YOU AND YOUR TEAM SERIES
Meetings

To avoid confusion, share the criteria by which you will extend invitations with your team.
Explain it is based on:



- Who has the most knowledge about the topic of discussion
- Who will have a lot to do with the implementation
- Who will be directly impacted
- Who might learn from participating

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If your team is hesitant, the below practices may help them embrace this shift:

- Extend permission for people to ask to be included. Err on granting permission if people present a solid reason for attending.
 - Extend permission for people to decline to attend. Let people know that you trust them to make the right choices about how they spend their time.
- In every meeting, make sure someone takes minutes for people who are not in attendance.

Be clear with your team about their responsibilities – both those who are in attendance and those who are not. Encourage those present to actively participate by doing the following:

- *Take ownership of their perspectives:* perspective shapes participation.
- *Practice focused listening:* be attentive, patient, nonjudgmental.
- *Practice focused speaking:* be clear, concise, relevant.
- *Practice self-awareness:* ask for the information they need, be thoughtful in their responses.

Remind participants to take into consideration the perspectives of those who are not present.

- What questions would they ask?
- What would they like to be informed about?
- What would they like to be consulted on?
- What actions would they like to be involved in going forward?
- What should be communicated to them afterwards?

Lastly, if members of your team decide to decline their invitation to the meeting, make it clear that they still need to:

- Review the agenda.
- Supply any relevant information they possess to someone who will be in attendance.
- Review the meeting minutes and check in with attendees about updates afterwards.
- Take on projects the leader assigns them.
- Align with the decisions that are made.

Measure your success. Once you've implemented these changes into the structure of your meetings, track and manage how effective your meetings are and how your team is handling the change. Collect feedback and continue tweaking until you've nailed down the system that works best for your organization.

Keeping meetings to eight or fewer people is a guiding principle to help you be more deliberate about who attends. With skilled facilitation and good meeting practices, it's possible to have effective meetings of twenty people or more. But that should be the exception, not the rule. Ultimately, you may have less people in the meetings themselves, but your team – and your company – will benefit as a whole.



Paul Axtell is an author, speaker, and corporate trainer. He is the author of two award-winning books: *Meetings Matter* and the recently released second edition of *Ten Powerful Things to Say to Your Kids*. He has developed a training series, *Being Remarkable*, which is designed to be led by managers or HR specialists.

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