

# Rethinking Meetings



*Why am I even here?*

I caught myself thinking that recently, thirty minutes into another how-long-is-this-possibly-going-to-last meeting. You know what I'm talking about. The meeting that drones on and on. The meeting where everyone sits not-so-secretly surfing Facebook on their smartphone. The warehouse meeting that somehow gets hijacked by "Doug" from accounting.



According to a survey of U.S. professionals by Salary.com, meetings ranked as the number one office productivity killer. And... I kind of agree. At [ECHOtape](#), we are in the midst of looking at all of the meetings we run, actively searching for ways to streamline and improve. While we haven't landed the best approach for us just yet, I did discover some amazing ideas that I thought were worth sharing.

The company that built Basecamp is quite rigid about meetings. In fact, if it were up to [37 Signals](#), there would be no meetings at all and discussion would be limited to IM and email. In the company's best-selling book *Rework*, they urge creatives to remember that "every minute you avoid spending in a meeting is a minute you can get real work done instead." But if you absolutely must meet, they have three rules: **Keep it short**. Have an agenda. Invite as few people as possible.

How short is short? Well, research shows that our attention

span is between **10 – 18 minutes**. In fact, TED (the nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks) has proven that a lot can happen in 18 minutes: In a 15-minute TED talk, Facebook COO [Sheryl Sandberg](#) inspired millions of women to “lean in.” [Steve Jobs](#) gave one of the most popular commencement addresses of our time at Stanford University and he did it in 15 minutes. [The team at Percolate](#) sets 15 minutes as the default length for all meetings. It took Dr. Martin Luther King 17 minutes to share his dream of racial equality. And Yahoo’s Marissa Mayer famously schedules [10-minute meetings](#).

**Set a timer.** Another 37 Signals recommendation – [set a timer](#). When it rings, meeting’s over. Period. In fact, many amazing artists –like Austin Kleon and Damien Correll–use timer constraints to fuel their ideas and creations every day. Check out [The Pomodoro Technique](#).

Bechance’s Scott Belsky abolished [Monday Meetings](#). Gathering people for no other reason than “it’s Monday!” makes little-to-no sense. And automatic meetings are often lessons in futility.

[According to Fortune’s Adam Lashinsky](#), Apple breeds accountability at meetings by having a Directly Responsible Individual (DRI) whose name appears next to all of the agenda items they are responsible for. With every task tagged, there’s rarely any confusion about who should be getting what done.

Catalyst, a group of young leaders in the South, [places an](#)

[emphasis on keeping meetings positive and loose](#). The answer is always “yes, and...” Keep things positive and ideas flowing by not shouting down initial proposals.

In a recent issue of “[Think With Google](#),” Google VP of Business Operations Kristen Gil described how the company spent 2011 getting back to its original values as a startup, which included reconsidering how the company approached meetings. Top takeaways include: No more than ten people at a meeting, and decisions should never wait for a meeting.

**Richard Branson** famously claims that innovative ideas come from innovative spaces. A boardroom and powerpoint puts everyone to sleep. Holding a meeting in a park or cafe will inject a breath of fresh air into any group meeting and likely generate new ideas and ways of thinking. He’s not the only one. See Nilofer Merchant’s [TED talk on walking meetings](#).

Eliminate electronic note taking. Meaning no laptops or cell phones; [hand-written notes are the way to go](#).

**Say it in five words.** To make sure everyone is on the same page, American Express vice president Christopher Frank requires everyone at a meeting answer the question, “What is this meeting about?”, with five words or less. “By clearly articulating the issue,” Frank wrote in an [article for Forbes](#), “you will get a good idea of the information you need, the people you should talk to and will ensure everyone is working towards the same goal.”

Reily, a New Orleans-based food and beverage company was

[profiled in the book \*Good Boss, Bad Boss\* by Robert Sutton](#). The company utilizes “stand up” meetings made popular for the Agile method of software development.

**Schedule the meetings for the same time.** Keeping employees in a rhythm allows them to not have their work unexpectedly disrupted.

**Stand up.** Daily stand-up meetings have become a common ritual of many teams, especially in Agile software development. [Jason Yip](#) distinguishes the subtle details of effective stand-up meetings.

Like I said, I’m not sure which of these will make the cut in our own meeting practices, but the ideas are fascinating. Maybe we should meet about it. (Just kidding).

*What are your top meeting tips?*