



THE PLAYBOOK

The Meeting

Meetings worth attending, in a small team. What one actually costs, the test before you send the invite, and how to run one that ends early.

Paul Prado Pacardo

Executive Assistant & Operations · me.kabuhayan.app

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OPENING

The cost nobody adds up

Meetings are the only significant business expense that is never approved, never reviewed and never cancelled.

ONE RECURRING MEETING, PRICED



That is roughly two months of one person, spent on a meeting nobody has reviewed since it was approved. Nobody would approve a two-month project without asking what it produces. Recurring meetings are approved once and then run forever, because the cost arrives an hour at a time and no single hour is worth an argument.

Figure: the arithmetic is trivial and almost nobody does it, because the cost arrives an hour at a time.

Seven people, an hour a week, forty-six working weeks. Three hundred and twenty-two hours a year, which is roughly two months of one person, spent on something that was probably set up during a difficult period two years ago and has never been examined since.

Nobody would approve a two-month project without asking what it produces. Recurring meetings are approved once and then run forever, because the cost arrives an hour at a time and no single hour is worth an argument.

This playbook is short and practical. A test before you create one, a structure that makes them end early, and an audit for the ones you already have.

What a meeting costs, actually

Three costs, and the first is the smallest.

The hour itself. Easy to calculate and easy to dismiss, because an hour is not much.

The fragmentation around it. A meeting at eleven does not cost an hour; it costs the hour plus whatever the preceding ninety minutes were worth, because nobody starts something substantial before a meeting. Two meetings placed badly can consume a day that shows as two hours in a calendar.

The attention cost of the badly-placed ones. Research published in Harvard Business Review in 2022, conducted with Soroco and based on observing 137 users across twenty teams at three firms, found knowledge workers toggling between applications around 1,200 times a day and spending just under four hours a week re-orienting after those switches. Meetings are one of several contributors to that, not the whole of it, and the sample is small. But the mechanism is right: the interruption costs more than the interruption.

The question is not whether an hour is affordable. It is whether this hour, repeated forty-six times, produces more than two months of a person's work would.

The three kinds, and only one needs everyone

Almost every meeting is one of three things, and conflating them is why they overrun.

01 To decide something

A question exists and the people who can answer it need to be in a room. This is the only kind that genuinely benefits from being live, and it needs the smallest number of people, not the largest.

02 To make something together

Working sessions, planning, problem-solving. Genuinely collaborative, and it needs the people who will do the work rather than the people who want visibility.

03 To tell people something

Status, updates, information. This is the majority of recurring meetings and it is the kind that should almost always be written, because reading is faster than listening and can be done at a time that suits.

The trouble comes from meetings that are all three at once. An hour that opens with forty minutes of status leaves twenty for the decision, and the decision is the reason the meeting existed.

Split them. Status in writing before, decision live, working session separately with fewer people. Almost every over-long recurring meeting in a small business is three meetings wearing one invitation.

The test before you send the invite

Three questions. It takes fifteen seconds and it removes a surprising share of meetings.

BEFORE YOU SEND THE INVITE

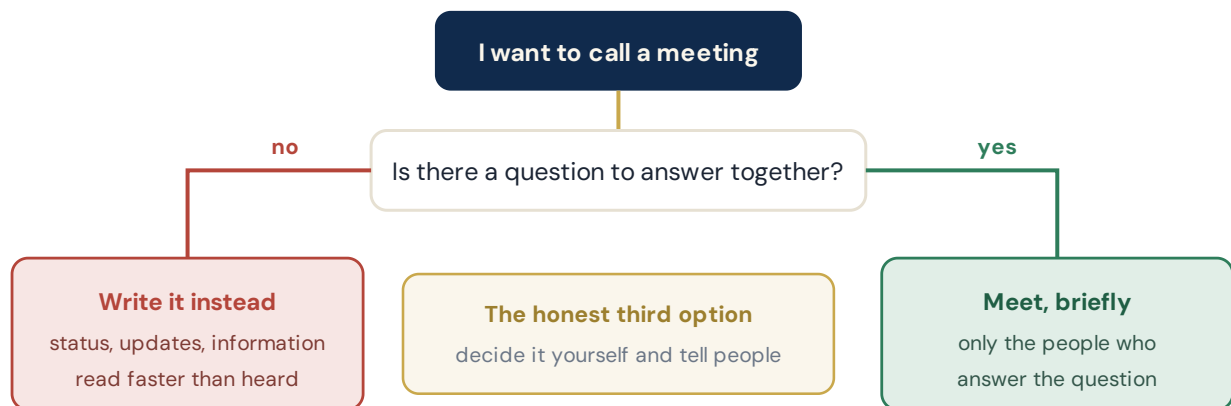


Figure: most recurring meetings fail this test and continue anyway, because nobody re-asks it.

Is there a question to answer together? If there is no question, there is no meeting. Information goes in writing.

Could I just decide this and tell people? The option nobody considers. Many meetings exist to distribute responsibility for a decision the organiser could reasonably make alone. That is sometimes legitimate and often avoidance.

Who actually answers the question? Invite those people. Everybody else can read the outcome. The instinct to include people so they are not left out is understandable and it is expensive, and there is a better solution: send them the decision afterwards, which respects their time more than their attendance did.

Agendas that are questions, not topics

The single change that most improves a meeting, and it costs nothing.

Write the agenda as questions to be answered, not topics to be discussed.

"Q3 planning" is a topic. It can absorb any amount of time and end without resolving anything, and everybody will leave with a different impression of what happened.

"Do we hire the second developer before or after the migration?" is a question. It has an answer, everybody can see whether the meeting produced one, and it is obvious who needs to be present.

Two or three questions maximum for an hour. An agenda with seven items is a list of things that will be mentioned rather than decided.

Send it with the invitation, not on the morning. A question sent three days early gets thought about; the same question raised live gets an off-the-cuff opinion, and off-the-cuff opinions from senior people are unusually sticky.

THE LINE THAT ENDS MOST MEETINGS EARLY

Open by reading the questions out and asking whether anybody can answer any of them right now, without discussion. Sometimes the answer is yes to one or two, and the meeting is suddenly twenty minutes.

Running it so it ends early

Four habits. None is difficult and all of them are unusual.

Start with the decision, not with context. The instinct is to build up to it. In practice the context gets discussed until the time is gone. Put the question first and pull in only the context needed to answer it.

Name who decides, out loud, at the start. Most meetings that overrun are meetings where nobody knows whether they are advising or deciding. One sentence removes it: I am going to decide this, and I want to hear your thinking first.

Write the decision in the meeting. Visibly, in the words being used. Not afterwards from memory, which reproduces the disagreement it was meant to settle.

End when the questions are answered. Ending a sixty-minute meeting at thirty-five minutes should be a normal event rather than a small triumph. If it never happens, the meeting is scheduled to fill the time rather than to answer anything.

Give the time back rather than finding something to fill it with. The first time you do this people notice, and the meeting becomes something they are willing to attend.

The written alternative

For the largest category, which is telling people things, writing beats meeting on almost every dimension.

It is faster to consume. Most people read several times faster than anyone speaks.

It is asynchronous. Nobody has to be free at the same moment, which matters enormously across time zones and is worth something even in one office.

It leaves a record. Six weeks later there is something to check rather than four differing recollections.

It forces precision. Vague thinking survives being spoken and does not survive being written down, which is why writing the update sometimes reveals there was nothing to say.

What writing loses is the reaction. You cannot see somebody frown at a document. So keep a short live slot for questions on the written thing, or invite objections explicitly with a deadline, because silence in response to a document is genuinely ambiguous in a way silence in a room is not.

Auditing the recurring ones

An hour, once, and it is the highest-return hour in this playbook.

List every recurring meeting. For each, write the number of attendees, the length, and what it produces. That third column is the one that does the work, because a meeting that produces nothing nameable has been running on habit.

Then apply four dispositions.

Cancel anything nobody can say what it produces. If somebody objects afterwards, reinstate it, which is a better test than any discussion.

Shorten anything scheduled for an hour that could be twenty-five minutes. Meetings expand to fill their slot, without exception.

Shrink the invitation list for anything where most attendees do not speak. Send them the outcome instead.

Convert to writing anything that is purely status.

THE EXPERIMENT WORTH RUNNING

Cancel one recurring meeting for a month rather than debating it. Almost nothing is lost in most cases, and the ones people genuinely miss will be requested back within a fortnight. That is better information than any amount of discussion about whether it is valuable.

Fewer, shorter, and about a question

Seven people in a weekly hour is two months of a person a year. That is a real budget and it is the only one nobody reviews.

Before creating a meeting: is there a question, could I just decide it, and who actually answers it. Write the agenda as questions rather than topics, two or three at most, sent with the invitation. Say at the start who decides. Write the decision down live. End when the questions are answered.

Put status in writing, keep a short slot for questions on it, and audit the recurring ones once a year by asking what each produces.

The page overleaf is a one-pager to fill in before you send an invitation. Most of its value is that it is quicker to cancel the meeting than to complete it.

Paul Prado Pacardo

Senior Executive Assistant, Operations and Project Manager.
Ten years supporting C-level leadership. Available for remote work.

me.kabuhayan.app
linkedin.com/in/paulpacardo
pacardopaul18@gmail.com

Meeting one-pager

Fill in before sending the invitation · v1

Before you send it

The question we are answering

a question, not a topic

Could I decide this alone?

if yes, do that and tell people

Who actually answers it

everyone else gets the outcome

Who decides

say this out loud at the start

What people should read first

Decision, written during the meeting

Owner and date

Answer

Audit the recurring ones once a year. List each, with attendees, length and what it produces.

Cancel anything nobody can name an output for; shorten anything on an hour that could be twenty-five minutes; shrink the list where most people do not speak; convert pure status to writing.

Ending a sixty minute meeting at thirty-five should be normal rather than a triumph. Give the time back instead of filling it.