

# DEATH *by Meeting*

A LEADERSHIP FABLE



...about solving the most painful problem in business

PATRICK LENCIONI

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF  
*THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM*

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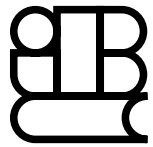


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*For my extraordinary wife, Laura,  
for your unwavering confidence and optimism.*

# INTRODUCTION

“If I didn’t have to go to meetings, I’d like my job a lot more.”

It’s a remark I’ve heard from many of the leaders I’ve worked with over the years. I used to think that it was understandable—even humorous—but I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s actually a sad comment on the state of our business culture.

Imagine hearing a surgeon saying to a nurse before surgery: “If I didn’t have to operate on people, I might actually like this job.” Or a symphony conductor preparing for a performance: “If it weren’t for these concerts, I would enjoy my work more.” Or even a professional baseball player: “I’d love my job if I didn’t have to play in these games.”

Ridiculous, right? But that’s exactly what we’re doing when we lament our meetings.

Think about it this way. For those of us who lead and manage organizations, meetings are pretty much what we do. After all, we’re not paid for doing anything exceedingly tangible or physical, like delivering babies or kicking field goals or doing stand-up comedy. Whether we like it or not, meetings are the

closest thing to an operating room, a playing field, or a stage that we have.

And yet most of us hate them. We complain about, try to avoid, and long for the end of meetings, even when we're running the darn things! How pathetic is it that we have come to accept that the activity most central to the running of our organizations is inherently painful and unproductive?

All of this is an unnecessary shame because meetings are critical. They are where presidential cabinets discuss whether or not to go to war; where governors and their aides debate the merits of raising or lowering taxes; where CEOs and their staffs consider the decision to launch a brand, introduce a product, or close a factory.

And so my question is this: If we hate meetings, can we be making good decisions and successfully leading our organizations? I don't think so. There is simply no substitute for a good meeting—a dynamic, passionate, and focused engagement—when it comes to extracting the collective wisdom of a team. The hard truth is, bad meetings almost always lead to bad decisions, which is the best recipe for mediocrity.

But there is hope. By taking a contrarian, nontraditional view of meetings, and following a few specific guidelines that have nothing to do with video-conferencing, interactive software, or Robert's Rules of Order, we can transform what is now painful and tedious into something productive, compelling, and even energizing. In the process, we can also differentiate ourselves from our competitors who continue to waste time, energy, and enthusiasm lamenting the drudgery of meetings.

To illustrate how this can be accomplished, I've written a fictional story about an executive in a unique struggle with meetings. Following the story is a practical description of my suggestions for implementing these ideas in your organization.

Good luck as you work to make your meetings more effective, and restore some of the passion that you and your people deserve.



# The Fable



# PREVIEW

Casey McDaniel had never been so nervous in his life. Not when he was a sixteen-year-old preparing to speak at his father's funeral. Not before he proposed marriage to his wife. Not when he stood over a nine-foot putt that would win or lose the biggest golf tournament of his career.

No, this was the moment. In just ten minutes The Meeting would begin, and Casey had every reason to believe that his performance over the next two hours would determine the fate of his career, his financial future, and the company he had built from scratch. For a moment he thought he was going to be physically ill.

*How could my life have unraveled so quickly?* he wondered.





PART ONE



# Flashback



# THE MAN

Most of his employees would describe Casey as an extraordinary man—but just an ordinary CEO.

On a personal level, they genuinely liked their leader. Casey was a devoted husband, a loving father to his four children, a committed parishioner at Sacred Heart Church, and a helpful friend and neighbor. It was almost impossible not to like—even admire—the man.

Which made his limitation as a leader all the more mystifying.