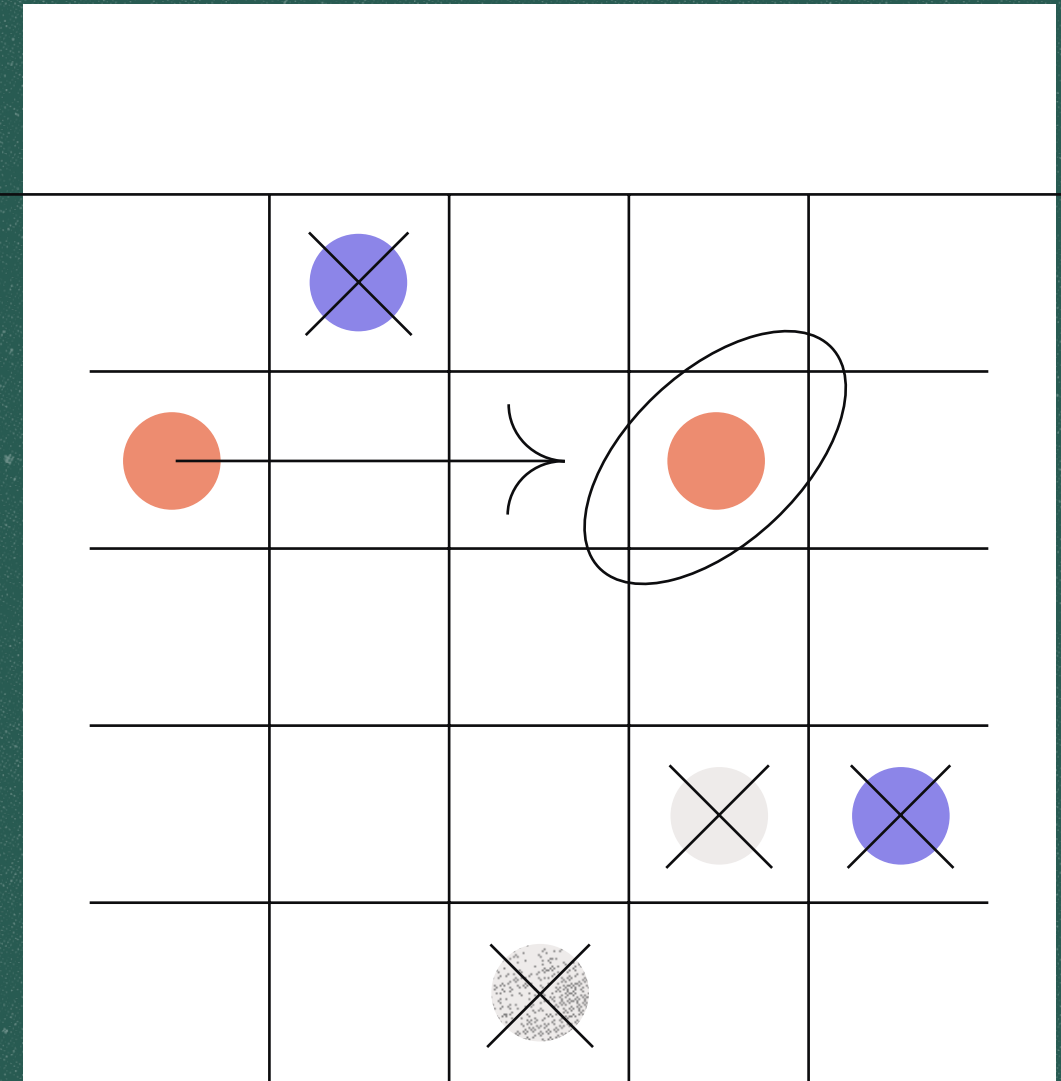


# Fixing meetings: A research- backed playbook



BASED ON RESEARCH FEATURED IN

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

THE WORK INNOVATION LAB

BY  asana

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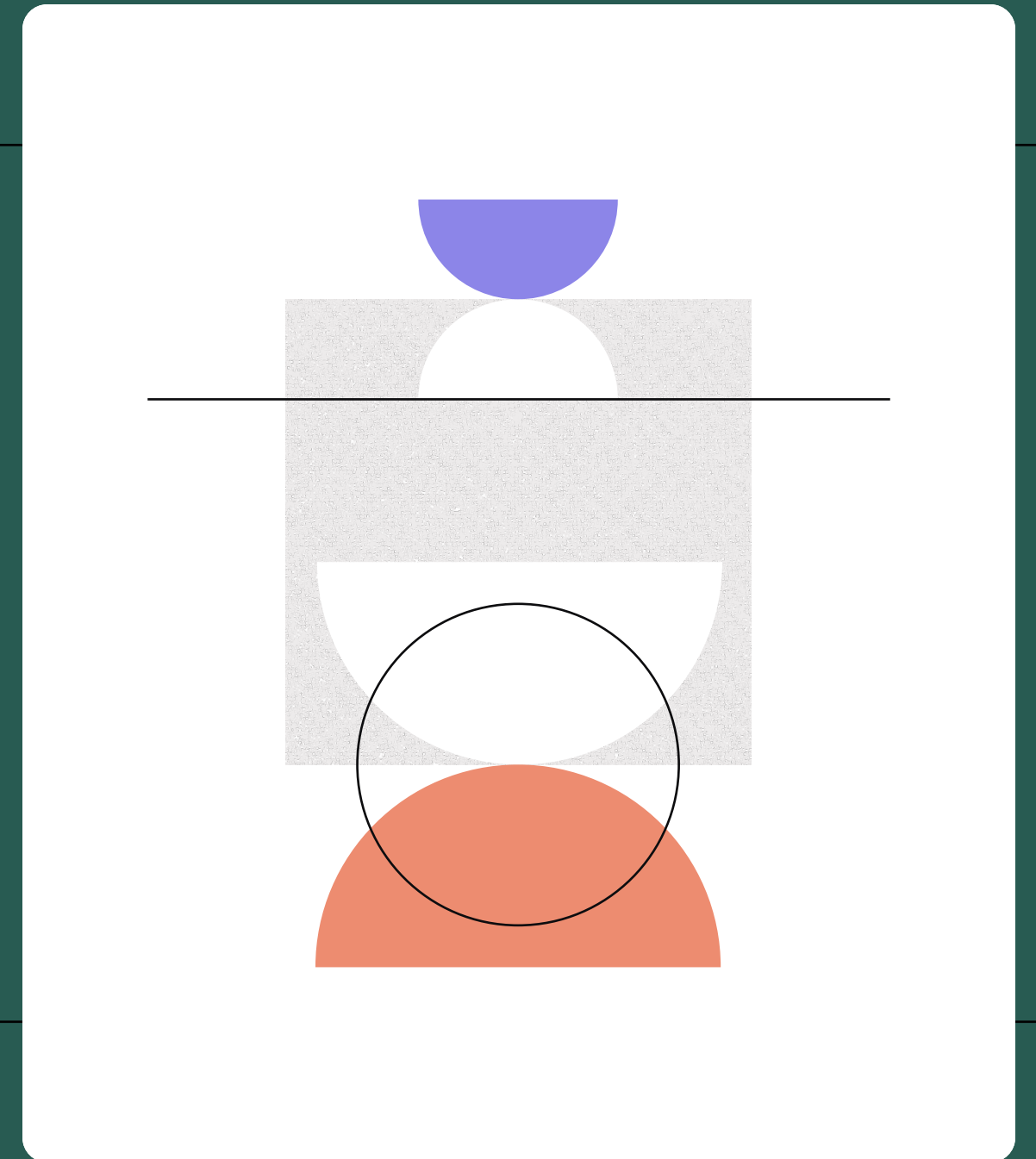
**Bob Sutton**

Stanford Professor and Bestselling Author

01

WHY NOW?

# Applying strategic subtraction to meetings



## Why now? Applying strategic subtraction to meetings.

### STRATEGIC SUBTRACTION

Organizations are naturally inclined to solve problems through “addition”—by adding rules, processes, procedures, and meetings to day-to-day work. Too often, this addition results in confusion, fragmentation, and friction over time. Fortunately, there’s a solution. Research published in *Nature* shows that when people are primed to subtract, they adopt a subtraction mindset and focus on subtraction rather than addition. Strategic subtraction is about clearing the way for people to focus on the most important things in work and in life. Strategic subtraction unleashes time for creativity, deep thinking, and developing relationships with others.

Meetings have been one of the biggest time sinks in organizations for decades. Despite developing innovative technology and updated work practices, meeting bloat has expanded.

Professor Rob Cross of Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, reports that collaborative activities such as attending meetings have ballooned by at least 50% over the past two decades. And, since the pandemic hit in 2020, people have been attending even more meetings—13% more as compared to pre-pandemic levels. Unsurprisingly, given social distancing and remote work, these meetings had the added burden of being more digitally draining as well.

Since meetings have taken over calendars steadily, organizations can no longer afford to fritter away their employees’ time with these time sinks.

This playbook is an antidote. We’ll guide you and your organization in applying strategic subtraction to meetings by conducting wide-scale meeting audits and edits. We’ll talk about how our research at The Work Innovation Lab can help leaders tackle the meeting bloat on their teams and, finally, we’ll walk through our results at Asana, and how eliminating low-value meetings improved the ones that remained on the calendar—even for people who didn’t directly participate in our experiments.



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BOB SUTTON

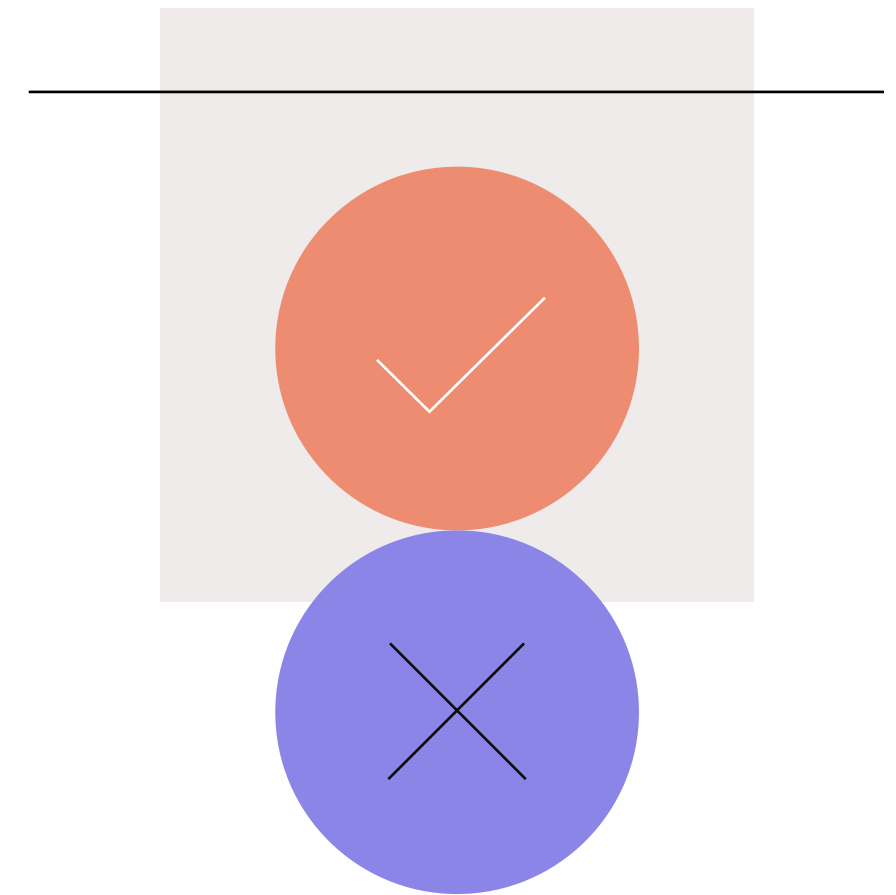
STANFORD PROFESSOR AND BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Subtraction clears our minds and gives us time to focus on what really counts. It sets the stage for creative work, giving us the space to fail, fret, discuss, argue about, and experiment with seemingly crazy ideas—the ideas that can transform a company, and make employees happier and more productive.

# 02

A CASE STUDY AT ASANA:

## Fixing meetings to eliminate low-value meetings and improve all meetings.



## The pilot: “Meeting Doomsday”

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Most of my 1:1s [I could eliminate from my schedule]. I just feel bad canceling them, but I don't really need to chat face to face with one person regularly...or if I do I would rather schedule the time ad hoc.

MEETING DOOMSDAY PARTICIPANT

Our journey of applying strategic subtraction to meetings began in early 2022 when we conducted a “[Meeting Doomsday](#)” exercise with Joshua Zerkel, Head of Global Engagement Marketing at Asana, a work management company.

Meeting Doomsday, as we called it, consisted of two main steps. The first step was a meeting audit, where employees on Josh's team who elected to participate studied their calendars and identified recurring meetings that they found lacked value. Most of these “bad” meetings were once useful, but had grown too big, and the purpose had become unclear or too broad—and many were kept on calendars for fear of harming other people's feelings.

The second stage was the actual “Meeting Doomsday.” Each employee removed all of the standing meetings with fewer than five attendees from their calendars for 48 hours. Then, after sitting with their newly cleansed calendars for 48 hours, team members were asked to repopulate their calendars, but in a way that was going to be most valuable. We found that the complete obliteration of recurring meetings gave people the permission and conviction to eliminate some meetings for good.

“



EDITOR IN CHIEF, ENTREPRENEUR

That’s why I love Asana’s experiment. They basically asked everyone to rebuild their day from scratch instead of trying to fix their already-existing days. It’s like asking, ‘What would this look like if you built it for the first time?’ That way, there’s no going backward to investigate what’s wrong. Instead, there’s only going forward — building what you need for now. This thinking can drive major decisions.



## ✓ Results snapshot

### Meetings shrunk

Many meetings were shrunk. This included some 30-minute meetings converted to 15-minute meetings, some 60-minute meetings changed to 45-minutes, some weekly meetings moved to every other week or month, and some meetings deleted permanently.

### 11 hours saved per month

In total, each person saved an average of 11 hours per month, totaling about 3.5 workweeks (based on 8-hour workdays) per year.

“

Meetings can be a fantastic way to collaborate, an utter waste of time, and everything in between. To get a snapshot of the current state of affairs, you have to take a hard look at your team’s meetings—you can’t assume that all is well. As it turns out, until we ran this experiment, my team had no idea just how much time we were wasting in needless or ineffective meetings.

JOSHUA ZERKEL

HEAD OF GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT MARKETING, ASANA

## Scaling the pilot: The Meeting Reset

After the pilot was successful, we decided to scale it to more people. We ran a larger experiment with 60 people in our Marketing department. The 60 participants were helped most by the audits and edits. Still, we saw constructive ripple effects for others in our Marketing department, other groups at Asana, and even our external partners.

One key learning from the pilot with Josh's team was that people wanted more guidance on how to evaluate meetings that lack value—what makes a meeting boring, frustrating, counterproductive, or a waste of time?

We developed a rating system to use in the audit phase of the Marketing-wide Meeting Reset. Participants told us that this part of the audit was especially useful—and it can be used by anyone to set the stage for subtraction. In particular, We asked meeting participants to assess two elements of each meeting on a three-point scale:

- The effort required (including prep, the actual meeting, and follow-up) for each recurring meeting on their calendar.
- The value of each recurring meeting for helping them to reach their goals.

Participants used a three-point scale, where 1 is low, and 3 is high. Even before they moved to the stage where they removed all standing meetings from their calendars for 48 hours, several participants told us that they changed and eliminated meetings that required a lot of work and were of little value because of this rating system.

## ✓ Results snapshot

### 48% of meetings considered not high value

Of all one-to-one meetings reported in the audit phase, nearly half (48%) were not considered high value, giving us a great opportunity to rethink those meetings. Many of these meetings were once productive but hadn't been updated as the work evolved—or, in some cases, as the work ended!

### 265 hours saved per month

The 60 participants who completed the experiment saved 265 hours per month by reducing unproductive recurring meetings—about four-and-a-half hours per person per month. Some of these meetings had been created in the early stages of the pandemic when everyone was learning how to stay connected through technology. After employees had developed new ways to stay connected, these meetings had outgrown their usefulness.

### 70% of time savings from changes other than canceling meetings

We were surprised that only 30% of the time savings came from canceling meetings entirely. The remaining 70% came from changing meetings in other ways, including restructuring meetings, for example, by delegating attendance or converting certain components of meetings to be asynchronous communication.

### >80% accuracy in new model

We also built a model that predicts low-value meetings with more than 80% accuracy! The model accounts for such factors as the day of the week (Monday meetings have the highest value) that the meeting is held, attendees' seniority, and even the language in the meeting title (“catch up” meetings and “coffee” chats had lower value). This model will be useful for folks who did not participate in the experiment so that they can immediately pinpoint their most unproductive meetings.

## ✓ Results snapshot

TYPE OF CHANGE	MONTHLY HOURS SAVED	% OF TOTAL TIME SAVINGS
Cancel	79	30%
Restructure <small>(e.g., converting meetings to async stand-ups)</small>	72	27%
Adjust cadence <small>(e.g., changing weekly meetings to monthly)</small>	45	17%
A hodge-podge of other changes <small>(e.g., moving a weekly meeting to every other week for the first month after the Reset and then deleting it)</small>	42	16%
Shorten <small>(e.g., changing 30-minute meetings to 25-minutes)</small>	27	10%

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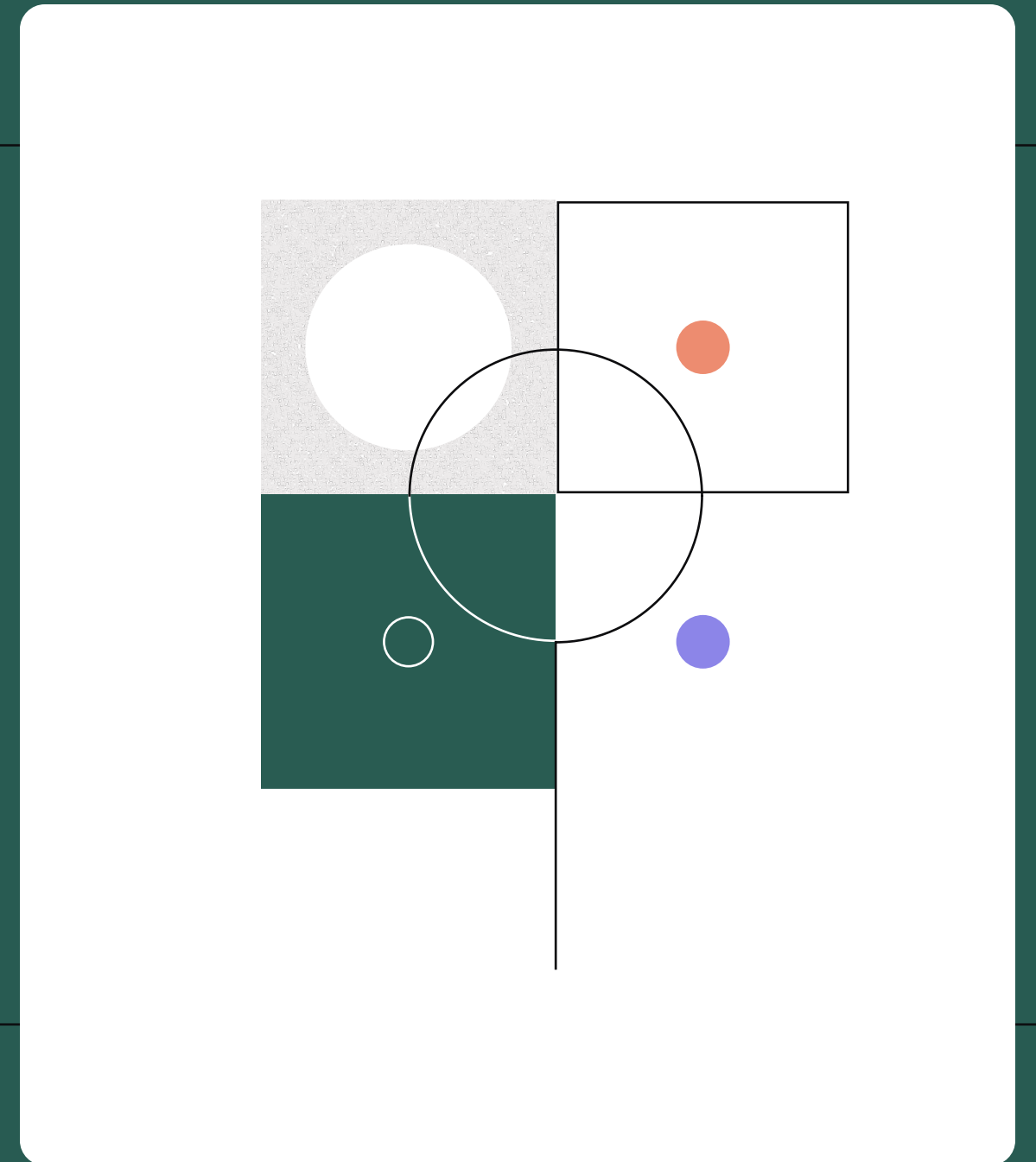
My schedule has felt different this week in terms of meeting load and I know the Reset is at least partly responsible, if not completely.

MEETING RESET PARTICIPANT

# 03

A GUIDE TO FIXING MEETINGS

## Four resources to help leaders and their teams fix their unproductive meetings



## 01 Timeline for your team's Meeting Reset

Here is a suggested timeline for conducting a Meeting Reset:

- **One week before the Reset:**  
Start preparing for the Meeting Reset by getting buy-in from key stakeholders and drafting communication for participants, including what they'll get out of the activity.
- **Day 1:**  
Communicate the purpose of the Meeting Reset to participants in a way that demonstrates how it will benefit them and the organization. (This playbook makes a useful pre-read.)
- **Day 2:**  
Assign tasks for everyone to complete a meeting audit. Give participants who decide to participate one week to complete the audit and log their takeaways in their spreadsheet.
- **Day 9:**  
Ask participants to delete all their recurring meetings with five or fewer attendees from their calendar for 48 hours.
- **Day 11:**  
Invite participants to add back meetings to their calendar—but in a way that is going to be most valuable. Encourage participants to permanently delete low-value meetings, change the cadences, and shorten meetings that are too long.
- **Day 42 (or one month after participants add back meetings to their calendars):**  
Analyze the results, crunch the time savings, and share the results.



“

This was a great exercise, and the spreadsheet was VERY HELPFUL to see it all laid out in a table!”

MEETING DOOMSDAY PARTICIPANT

## 02 Meeting audit template

Here is a meeting audit template for you to copy and use.

OPEN THE TEMPLATE →

## 03 Message templates for people who will be impacted by the Meeting Reset

Here is a template for you to let other meeting attendees know that you'll be canceling your meetings and to propose ways to make your meeting more valuable.

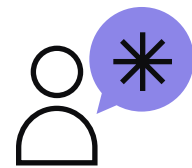
OPEN THE TEMPLATE →

## 04 Tips for working with Reset-resistant teammates



### Share this playbook.

Remind them that we've tested these tools on ourselves at Asana and that they work. Highlight the likely time savings of performing a Meeting Reset.



### Emphasize the collective benefit.

Meeting audits and edits aren't solo activities. All meetings involve more than one person. Emphasize the importance of team-wide participation to get the full picture of which meetings need to be adjusted.



### Reward participation.

Reward people with prizes or other incentives for participating. Consider rewarding participants who eliminate the most time spent in bad meetings.

# Five Learnings

Based on our own journey at Asana, we developed five key lessons to keep in mind as you apply strategic subtraction to your organization's meetings:

## 1. Do your meetings have a purpose?

Asana's latest [Anatomy of Work Global Index](#) study found that 23% of employees believe unclear processes—such as meetings with unclear purposes—directly lead to missed deadlines. Before attending any meeting, make sure you are crystal clear on its purpose. (Hint: meetings without any agenda may be an indication of this.)

## 2. Don't schedule meetings on company-wide No Meeting Days.

[Research](#) shows that having “No Meeting Days” can increase productivity, reduce micromanaging, and even boost collaboration. But the benefits dissipate when people schedule meetings on No Meeting Days. We found that the most unproductive meetings happen on Wednesdays, during Asana's No Meeting Wednesday. At Asana, Wednesdays are a day for meeting detoxing, and async communication. Meetings are viewed as less productive when folks violate this social norm.

23%

of employees believe unclear processes—such as meetings with unclear purposes—directly lead to missed deadlines.

ASANA ANATOMY OF WORK GLOBAL INDEX

# Five Learnings

## 3. Not sure where to start?

It can be daunting to delete a meeting entirely. If you are hesitant to delete a meeting or think that it still has some value, try restructuring that meeting. In our Meeting Reset, we found that participants were most likely to accept recommendations to restructure meetings (like moving meetings to async or delegating attendance at the meeting to one or two team members)—and these were also associated with the most time savings, after meeting cancellations.

Remember that minor changes, like changing 30-minute meetings to 25-minute meetings, can quickly add up. If you have 20 recurring meetings on your calendar, the average for our Meeting Reset participants, cutting each meeting by 5 minutes will save you more than one-and-a-half hours per month!

## 4. Language matters.

People don't like being told what to do. We found that people were more likely to accept recommendations and change their meetings when we used softer language for recommendations. For example, when we told participants to “consider” changing the lengths or cadences of meetings, they were more likely to comply as compared to when we used more directive language such as “switch this meeting to 25 minutes.” Offer guidance, not rigid direction. Remember, even if the entire team or organization doesn't participate, those who do will still create positive ripple effects.

## 5. The goal should not be efficiency at all costs.

Neat and tidy, highly-efficient meetings are not always good. For example, creativity is often messy, inefficient, and frustrating. Meetings that fuel creativity or deal with sensitive, tough topics are likely to be inefficient—and that's a good thing.

## Fixing meetings—for today and tomorrow

Bad meetings can drag down productivity and efficiency for individuals, teams, and organizations. By implementing this playbook to improve meetings with strategic subtraction, your organization can recoup time and focus on the most important things in work and in life, including creativity, building trust, and strengthening relationships. Those bad meetings can be contagious and have vile side effects that become worse over time. Conquering meeting bloat needs to be built into your culture, and it needs to be a mindset—not a one-time event.

The Work Innovation Lab is a think tank by Asana that develops human-centric, cutting-edge research to help businesses evolve today to meet the growing changes and challenges of the future of work. To learn more about The Work Innovation Lab and get our other research-backed insights, visit [workinnovationlab.com](https://workinnovationlab.com).