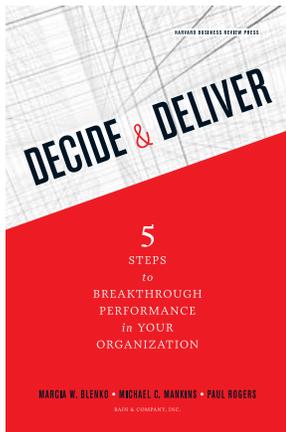


Decision Insights

Stop wasting valuable time!

By Michael Mankins and Jenny Davis-Peccoud



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It's a few days before your company's biweekly management meeting, and agenda items are pouring in. The CIO hopes to review plans for an Oracle implementation. The EVP for Europe wants to discuss some disturbing competitive trends in her region. An executive for North America needs to present a major factory-automation proposal. The marketing SVP wants to show some alternatives for a big multimedia campaign, and the CEO himself hopes to discuss a revamp of the annual budgeting process.

Receiving a draft agenda from his assistant, the CEO reorders it, putting operational items up front so that most of the meeting can focus on strategic issues. Once the meeting begins, however, his plan goes awry. The group has an hour-long debate about the marketing campaign. The discussion of the Oracle system turns into a lengthy gripe session about the IT department. Pressed for time, the group quickly greenlights the factory-automation proposal, postpones consideration of European competition and has an awkward, inconclusive discussion about budgeting. People leave the meeting in a sour mood, complaining about wasting time.

Top management's time is one of a company's scarcest resources. The typical company's senior executives spend less than three hours a month working together as a team, and usually less than three hours discussing strategic issues. The result? Constant frustration. Poorly considered decisions. Bad investments and missed opportunities. And the trouble isn't just at the top. Managers throughout large organizations often find their days eaten up by endless, unproductive meetings. They leave work wondering where the time went.

But it doesn't need to be this way, because individual leaders can make a difference. Many have learned to manage their meetings to get things done quickly and effectively, with maximum output and minimal time loss. There are seven key techniques:

1. Separate operations from strategy

Operational matters require detailed discussion and analysis. Strategy requires a big-picture, forward-looking view. The two mindsets are different, and the two kinds of topics mix poorly. As a leader, you can hold separate

meetings for each purpose. The executive board of a major European bank, for instance, once spent its twice-weekly meetings reviewing loans and discussing daily operations. But then competition heated up, and the bank found itself struggling to hit its targets. A new chairman eliminated one of the weekly operations meetings and added a monthly day-long session on strategy, where the board could make significant resource-allocation choices. The result: better, faster decisions, and less wasted time.

2. Focus meetings on decisions, not discussion

Simple, easily implemented changes in meeting protocol often have big effects. For example, senior management at Intel makes it standard practice to begin every meeting with a single statement: "The purpose of this meeting is to inform you about X, to discuss Y and to decide on Z," where Z is a specific, well-defined decision. You'll find that labeling agenda items in this way encourages people to move the information-only items to pre-reading materials whenever possible, leaving more time for decision making.

3. Prioritize high-value items

Management author Stephen Covey famously urged executives to distinguish between the important and the merely urgent, and to ensure that important matters received the attention they merit. A useful tool for identifying important decisions is a decision architecture—essentially, a list of key decisions along each step of a business's value chain, prioritized by the value at stake and the degree of management attention required. You can create such a list for your unit or function, and then use it as a guide for setting meeting agendas. Without it, the urgent is likely to displace the important.

4. Move items off the agenda

You also need a rigorous process for resolving issues, including an unambiguous timetable that details when and how team members will reach a decision and how it will be executed. Bob Walter, the legendary founder and former CEO of Cardinal Health, liked to refer to

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delay as “the worst form of denial.” Senior managers at his company worked under a strict decision timetable driven from the top.

5. Demand real choices for each major decision

It’s said that whenever Henry Kissinger, the former US secretary of state, asked his foreign policy team for alternatives, the team would always present one that led to unconditional surrender to the Soviet Union, a second that led to thermonuclear war and a third—the one the team favored. Ask your teams to present real choices, not false ones. How many times have you sat through an investment proposal knowing there was another viable course of action but not knowing whether it had been considered and rejected?

6. Introduce a common language for decision roles

The executive team of a large insurance company found it difficult to make decisions because of the company’s deep-rooted consensus culture. Finally the CEO introduced the RAPID® decision-rights tool, which lets a team

assign specific roles to each member. (R is for Recommend, A is for Agree or sign off on, D is for the decision maker and so on.) Once the team was accustomed to the tool, one executive said, “We go into a meeting now and people say, ‘Who has the D?’ and ‘Who has the R?’ It streamlines everything.”

7. Make decisions stick

Managers at many companies waste countless hours reviewing and revisiting decisions that should have been made only once. So make a point of summarizing the decisions made at a meeting, along with commitments and to-do’s for follow-up (with deadlines!). Then record these in a decision log and review the follow-up at the next meeting.

Leaders who recognize the value of time can adopt these practices right now. Once you do, your teams can focus on the most important issues, consider alternatives and make the best choices in the shortest amount of time. And people will leave their meetings not with a sense of frustration but with a sense of accomplishment. 

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