Why Meetings Still Suck with Steven Rogelberg (S6E6) (Transcript)

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CC: Welcome to Work Better, Steven.

Steven Rogelberg: Thank you. It's great to be here.

CC: So Steven, I remember a million years ago watching a video that was called Meetings, Bloody Meetings, and it was hosted by John Clease from Money Python, and it was old when I saw it. So it feels like meetings have been a problem for a really long time, and I'm wondering why you think that these are such a challenge to try and solve for?

SR: Yeah, humans have been gathering since the beginning of time. This is just what humans do we gather, but we're at an all time high for the amount of gathering. My recent data suggests there are around a billion meetings a day around the globe, and we know there's a lot of frustration and we know that this time isn't optimal. So the question, why are things just as bad as they are? I think it's really important and it's really, the answer is blind spots.

CC: Oh, interesting.

SR: So first we have a blind spot that has been identified that leaders think they're better at running meetings than anyone else thinks. So basically if you survey people coming out of a meeting, the leader says, yeah, that was good, while the attendees don't necessarily feel that way. So that blind spot kind of prevents them from really making big changes because they think the problem is based on everyone else. That's one type of blind spot. Then we have organizational blind spots. If you look at in an organization's engagement survey, which is supposed to capture work experience, there's never content on there around meetings. So this whole feedback process where employees can talk about how meetings are going and managers getting feedback on it, that's not happening. That's a second blind spot.

And then a third blind spot is if you look at various talent and HR practices and organizations, meeting content is not baked in. If you look at onboarding, you won't see meeting content in there. If you look at new leaders transitioning into leadership roles, there should be content around meetings. So really we have this strange phenomenon going is that we know people are spending an unbelievable amount of time in meetings. We know they're wallowing, and yet we're just keeping our eyes closed. And we're just assuming that bad meetings are just the cost of doing business and that's false.

CC: So Steven, it feels like something happened around the pandemic when people all started working virtually what we've seen in our research, and I think Microsoft has seen a similar kind of pattern of behavior of a lot more shorter duration meetings that rather than having the hour or two long meetings, we're starting to have all of these 30 minutes in rapid succession. Is that what you've seen in your research? And if so, why do you think that happened?

SR: Well, meeting activity was going up before the pandemic, but the pandemic definitely gave it a big kick, and we haven't given back that kick in meaningful ways. Post pandemic, the real increase in meetings is really due to three factors. Factor important is that managers just want to involve employees, right? So that's a good hearted reason and the mechanism, that's one reason. Then we have the not as good, which is it's just so easy to schedule meetings now take people's time away. So instead of being thoughtful and making good choices, we just schedule a meeting instead. Then there's the third factor. The third factor is a little bit more nefarious, and the third factor is managerial insecurity.

Basically given the pandemic managers were left wondering, well, how do I manage? What does that mean to be a manager when my people are not with me? And the conclusion drawn by so many managers is it means me having more meetings where I'm constantly checking in on their work, constantly just driving them. But it comes from a place of insecurity. It's just not trusting your people to get it done. So that third reason is obviously problematic, and so many managers just started putting these 20 minute, 30 minute holds all over people's calendars. So they could just check in on whether they're getting the stuff done, and unfortunately that undermines their productivity and also their thriving at work. So there's some real negatives associated with it.

CC: It also feels like there's still plenty of meetings going on where you feel like, did we really need a meeting for that? We just cover that in an email or some other form of communication. And with AI starting to be more capable of note taking and helping us to digest whatever the content is. Do you see the number of meetings starting to go down? Perhaps

SR: What I want to see is actually less about the number of meetings going down and more about decreasing time in meetings.

CC: Important nuance…

SR: I want the focus to be on, well, how long should these meetings be, right? So anytime that instead of meeting for 45 minutes, we meet for 25 minutes, that's a lot of time. I want to decrease meeting lengths. I want to increase meeting sizes. Right now we have way too many extra people at meetings that aren't necessary. So these actions give time back, but it doesn't have the potential unintended consequences of hurting collaboration and coordination and cooperation.

CC: Sure. I'd really like to delve into a couple different types of meetings that you've done a lot of work on, and one is the one-on-one meetings. I just came from a one-on-one before I came to this podcast recording and also virtual meetings or meetings where we have virtual participants.

So let's start with the latter. I mean, one of the things that we've seen in our research is a surge to where the majority of our meetings now are not fully in person. There's always at least one remote participant. We're a global organization that that's almost impossible for us to have meetings that don't have one remote participant, but it's become the norm in most organizations. Or we're also seeing behavior where people are sitting at their individual workstation and taking a meeting on video as opposed to getting up and walking to a meeting room to participate in a meeting in person. So let's talk about those virtual meetings. What are some of the things that are going on there that you think we could make better?

SR: Virtual meeting effectiveness is actually at an all time high. So before the pandemic, the evaluation of virtual meetings was lower than face-to-face meetings, but during the pandemic, people got much better at it. So ratings of virtual meetings are up and in many ways virtual meetings have more promise than face-to-face meetings.

Virtual meetings are inherently more democratic in that there's no head of table effects. Everyone's box is in equal size and positioned equally around a screen so you don't have this magnet of conversation going in one particular direction. That's important. Virtual meetings also have an alternative vehicle for communication, the chat function, which is a great way of bringing more voices into the conversation. And then there's a variety of plugins, voting plugins, whiteboard plugins that allow for more effective decision making. The virtual meetings are not a problem. Virtual meetings are truly an opportunity.

The meeting that's the lowest rated is the hybrid meeting. So a hybrid meeting is when some people are in person and some people are remote that enjoys the worst ratings, especially from those who are remote. The people who are remote just don't feel as part of the experience, they don't feel as engaged, and they typically are multitasking.

So hybrid meetings are really not reaching their promise. And so really the best practices in general is that if not everyone can attend in person, just go virtual, let everyone do it virtual so everyone is in the same place. Now, if it happens to be the case that there's just one individual that's hybrid, then I think we can be creative in how we handle that. So for example, pull out a chair on the table, stick an iPad and let that person's image be there so that we don't forget 'em. The other thing is to play with time zone so that the person that's remote one time is not the remote person.

CC: All the time. Sure…

SR: That's another way of kind of distributing it. But in general, virtual meetings really can be extremely effective. And they do have some opportunities that we don't see with other meeting modalities.

CC: I do see that point. I see a lot of hybrid meetings, so kind of the problematic ones that you're talking about and I am just wondering about, it feels like those are really hard to part with because there's a desire at least to say, Hey, those of us who are here physically, we want to be together. We don't want to be in a world where we're coming into a workplace and then sitting on a screen just because one of us is based in a different location. I don't know. Would you ever go the other way and say, well, if you can't be there, then we'll have to get your input in a different way and everybody stays in person.

SR: I mean, that's certainly possible too, depending on what the goal is of the meeting and that person's unique expertise.

So yeah, I mean that could work. But I think stepping back what people missed during the pandemic was not going to work and having meetings, that's not what they missed. What they missed was going back to work and feeling seen, feeling connected. These spontaneous moments, these unexpected moments, that's what we missed. So as an organization's bringing their people back into work, I think it's important to think differently. I just don't think we want everyone to come back to work to sit in a conference room. We want to give people lots of latitude for just these little spontaneous conversations, going out to lunch, having breaks, walking to the bathroom and bumping into someone. And so I feel like that's a different issue. That's a different problem to solve is how can we make the space of work compelling in and of itself. But I know the answer is not just by having all your meetings there.

CC: So let's talk about the one-on-one meetings next. Your hypothesis is really an interesting one that those meetings are a lot more important than maybe we give them credit for. Could you talk about why you think that they're so important?

SR: Yeah, thank you. So first, let me back up and just make it clear about what I'm referring to when I say a one-on-one. So when I'm talking about a, about a meeting that's facilitated and orchestrated by a manager with each of her directs, but it's not for the manager, it's for the directs. It's for the directs to share what's on their minds, their concerns, their challenges to ask for help and support, where they choose to do so. It's not a meeting where the manager is getting status updates unless the employee wants to share that, because managers get status updates in so many different ways.

So it's a dedicated window that should exist on everyone's calendar in a regular cadence, whether it's weekly or every other week, that employee truly feels seen by their manager.

Now, one-on-ones conducted that way. While my hypothesis is that it matters, the hypothesis has already been supported. We have huge amounts of data. I mean, Gallup has studied over a million folks linking these one-on-ones to outcomes. And the outcomes are tremendous that when employees have these types of genuine, meaningful encounters with the manager, their engagement levels are about three times higher than those that aren't. Their productivity is higher because so many roadblocks are being removed. Team effectiveness is better. As there's more coordination amongst individuals, people feel more included and committed in the workplace. We all know the adage that people tend not to leave bad jobs, they leave bad bosses, and these are your opportunity to prove you're not a bad boss. And then the unexpected thing is, is that we actually find that managers, when they make this investment in time, they actually report having more time.

And the reason being is that they tend not to be as interrupted throughout their work days and that people just save their issues to when they have their regular one-on-one. But furthermore, think about how much time it takes to fix problems and rework one-on-ones, decrease those things happening because employees are having their needs met. So this is the one meeting that should never be an email. It is a time investment that pays dividends. And really if any individual, any manager takes a moment and stops and says, and reflects, reflects on a time where they had someone in power, take a genuine interest in them, how that made them feel. Once you do that reflection and realize that you can give that gift to the people that report into you. And by doing so, you're helping raise all the boats, not just the employee's boat, but your boat as well as the broader team and the organization.

CC: Yeah, I think it's so helpful. And when I think about it, nobody ever, when I was becoming a new leader, nobody ever taught me how to have a one-on-one or what to do, how to structure it. So I would say for those of you listening who maybe are wondering if your one-on-ones are as effective as they could be, you might want to pick up Steven's new book called Glad We Met the Art and Science of One-on-One meetings, and I think that would be really helpful. So one of the things I want to ask you, Steven, as we wrap up today, is about implications to space. Because a lot of the listeners here are people who are thinking about the physical environment, whether they're designing or planning or investing. Do you have thoughts for us about what we could do to help make meetings better than they are today?

SR: The physical space is definitely an opportunity, right? We're still using physical spaces that reflected our understanding of meetings 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80 years ago. And there's a lot of assumptions built into that. There's a lot of assumptions built into an oval table with a single screen built into the room. I mean, there's data that shows that the person that's across from you in that table tends to be the person that you disagree with the most, and the person next to you is someone you agree with the most just because of the physical dynamics.

CC: How interesting. Yeah.

SR: So I do think there's some really neat opportunities, and especially as it relates to hybrid meetings. How can you actually bring those hybrid folks into the meeting space itself? So when I talked about literally having an iPad at a table spot as a way of doing that, I'm not joking. We could start to think differently. We could start thinking of you have physical people at the meeting and then next to them is a poll with an iPad on it that shows that person and that person's engaging. That's a nice way of visualizing a contemporary meeting space. But then it's even just guidance on how to use space. So for example, a best practice is to have people switch seats. We know that people always tend to sit in the same place. That's true

And that norm, because it actually keeps things fresh and more interesting. Taking breaks during meetings, even short meetings, has been shown to be very effective. So what does a break look like in contemporary meeting spaces? One of the best predictors of meeting satisfaction are treats at a meeting. And so what are contemporary meeting spaces? How does that potentially reflect? Should all meeting conference rooms have a little fridge where people can have a drink and something like that to help bridge that separation from what they were doing before going into the meeting, into the meeting space itself? So I think there's lots of really great opportunities to reimagine the meeting space given what we now know in the science around meetings.

Your iPad comment reminds me of how Steelcase designers are literally changing the shape of the traditional conference table and the orientation of the room by curving the table to face a long wall. The curved design of the table makes sure everyone in the room can see one another as well as be eye level with remote participants.

CC: Steven, thank you so much for joining us today on Work Better. I think this has been really helpful, and I know that meetings are kind of a perennial challenge, but I think Steven's given us some things to think about that can at least start to make a difference. So thank you for joining us today.

SR: Oh, you're very welcome. It's really great being here, and I definitely want to refer your listeners to my website as well, steven rogelberg.com, because I tried to make it into this massive repository of information and collection of the science. So definitely check out steven berg.com. Also, my books are there, as you noted. So big thanks for that shout out. But please know I'm not making a penny off of these books. Every penny I make is being donated to the American Cancer Society. Check the books. If you want to learn about meetings or if you want to help eradicate cancer, both would be

CC: Great and both are worthy causes. So thank you so much for that, Steve. Really appreciate those resources.

SR: My pleasure. Thank you for having me on.

Chris: Thanks for listening today. When we have more effective meetings, both hybrid and in-person, our days are more productive and we leave more satisfied. If you liked this episode, check out Season 2, Episode 1 with Amy Gallo where she talks about building, nurturing and sustaining relationships at work – even the most difficult ones.

Join us next time when I'm joined by Joaquina Garrido and Susana Quintas from Madrid, Spain who will help us understand why a sustainable office isn't simply about environmental sustainability. They're the authors of a new playbook that looks at how workplace culture intersects with environmental sustainability. Joaquina and Susana help us identify what we're getting wrong about the workplace – and how we can help people to come together to build trust, belonging and impact the company's bottom line.

If you enjoyed today's conversation, would you share the episode with a friend or colleague, like us and visit us as steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered right to your inbox.

Thanks again for being here and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.