

Using Outlook to Reduce Back to Back Meeting Stress | 068

Don't you absolutely hate back to back to back meetings when you don't even have time to refill your water or catch your breath, or give your mind time to think and process what just happened in that meeting and what's about to happen in the next meeting? Well, keep listening.

[00:00:25] Welcome to Lean leadership for Ops Managers, the podcast for leaders in ops management who want to spark improvement, foster engagement and boost problem solving and still get their day job done. Here's your host leadership trainer, Lean enthusiast and spy thriller junkie Jamie V. Parker.

[00:00:50] Hey, hey, OP's leaders. I am going to tell you a little story about an old passion project of mine back when I was back in corporate, in operations management. I'm going to tell you a little bit about why I had this passion project, why it didn't work when I had it, and how it can work for you now, and how you can automate some of it so you don't even have to think about it. You can make it super easy. And so keep listening all the way through, because I got to tell you, I seriously do not understand why people are not screaming from the rooftops on this one. I am serious.

Sometimes I'm the last person to know. Sometimes I'm the last person to get the inside joke. And so if that's what's going on here, OK, fine, you all know this. I'm late to the party, right? Fine. But why in the world am I finding out? So, like, why haven't people been screaming about it? Why haven't people been sharing this right? So if that's the case, we'll tell you we're missing an opportunity to share. Great, good practices.

So let's get to my passion project. Here's where it starts at. Who the hell made 30 minute and 60 minute meetings the standard? Like, seriously, who did that? Because of course, here's what happens. Everybody makes 30 and 60 minute appointments, right? Not just at my last organization, basically every organization I've partnered with, that's the standard 30 minute and 60 minutes.

[00:02:19] And you know what happens next? Next, you have back-to-back meetings with zero time in between. Meeting A ends at 11 a.m. and meeting B starts at 11 a.m. And you're supposed to be in two places at once. And heaven forbid, you want to take a short break in between to, you know, like refill your water or take a restroom break or catch your breath, or if you have to walk all the way across buildings or across the plant to go from one location to the next.

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And on top of it, you can't even like let your brain think in between, right? It's straight from one to another. Now, occasionally you'll have an astute meeting facilitator who will make sure you get out a few minutes early, but I don't see it very often.

I'm just kind of I'm just going to tell it like it is now. I hope that that's not true in your organization. You're like, Oh, we are so respectful of everybody's time and everybody does this. That's great. My experience has been that at most organizations, that typically doesn't happen.

So what happens is you either have to leave meeting A early and you might miss some important start where they're making the decision or talking about next steps. Or you have to show up to meeting B late. And then what happens? Like, has anybody had this happen? So you show up to the meeting, be late because you had to stop by the restroom, you had to do a couple of things and show up at 11:05.

[00:03:40] Right? And then the meeting facilitator says, Oh Jamie, glad you joined us. Here's what we here's what we talked about so far and then slows the meeting down to repeat what happened in those five minutes that I wasn't there, right? So now we're like, totally disrespecting people's time. Right?

And again, your brain hasn't even had a chance to process right to process and close out what was happening in meeting A. Or to prepare for meeting B to review your notes to refocus on, OK, what's the purpose here? What is our challenge or what's our goal here? Right? Like all the way around, it's just inefficient. Bad quality, disrespectful. The way most organizations run meetings is just outright not good right now.

First of all, before I get into my passion project and how you can automate some of this, let me say this meeting should really only be scheduled for the amount of time they'll take, the amount of time they need, right? What is the amount of time I need to accomplish my goal in this conversation and then schedule that. So if it's 20 minutes, schedule 20 minutes, if it's 10 minutes scheduled, ten minutes, if it's 40 minutes, schedule 40 minutes.

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So it really kind of forcing yourself to think about what is my objective here, what is my goal here? What am I trying to achieve in this time period? And how much time period is needed to do that, to accomplish that and don't schedule extra, right? Because here's what happens you only need 10 or 20 minutes, say 20 minutes, you only need 20 minutes, but we go ahead and schedule 30 because that's the default and what happens? Well, the time gets filled, and instead of getting out at 20 minutes, you get out of 30 minutes because we filled the time or someone will say, All right, it's 20 minutes, right? And we're done, all right.

[00:05:25] Well, I'm going to give you 10 minutes back in your day. Like, No, you did not give me 10 minutes back in my day because I did not plan to have this 10 minutes available. So this is ten minutes is not available to me during my planning. So you're not giving it back to me because now I'm in reaction mode, right?

Ok, so anyways, we're just going to put that out there in general, but I know that that might be a big step for some folks. So we're going to kind of take a little intermediate step and talk about my old passion project. So here I am. I'm in this role. I've got meetings, some of them I'm scheduling, some other people are scheduling and I'm in back to back to back meetings on some days and I am over it, right? I was so over it and so I decided to go on a mission.

[00:06:12] I was going to change the standard meeting times and instead of us doing 30 minutes in 60 Minutes, we were going to start doing twenty five minute and fifty minutes that way. At the very least, there was time in between to transition. In fact, my colleague Johan joined me in this little passion project for a bit, right, so he was like my partner in crime for it, and we never expected that we would change the whole enterprise or change our whole operating company. But we thought, you know, at least for our division, at least for the people that we work with most often, let's change this.

And so we started by talking about it and asking people to make adjustments. We started manually changing our in times for our own meeting appointments so that they would end early, right? And it didn't work, our influence turned out to be quite small. And I mean, I don't know, maybe if he and I were to go back in time and try it again, perhaps we would have learned more about how to effectively influence people and get a different reaction or response or result. Maybe. But I know that there were some other

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variables that made this challenging for people to adopt as a change because who decided that 30 minutes and 60 Minutes were the standard? I don't know.

[00:07:33] But what I do know is that Microsoft Office, there the defaults. We're playing a big part in people's habits because the Microsoft Office Calendar defaults would be 30 minutes or 60 minutes, right? 30 minute meeting is your default. And then if you went to change it, there would be 15 minute increments in a dropdown window. So I could do 15 minutes. I could do 30 minutes, 45 or 60. Right?

And so asking someone to change from a 60 minute meeting to a 45 minute meeting or from a 30 minute meeting to a 15 minute meeting like people are definitely not ready to do that. They do not think that their meeting could be done in that little time that there's that much waste in their current meeting structure, right? So nobody's going to pick from that dropdown to say, Oh, I'm going to schedule a 15 minute meeting instead of 30. Like that was not going to happen from a behavior standpoint.

And so what we really just wanted them to do, though, was to change to 25 minutes and 50 minutes, right? So twenty five minutes or 50 minutes or something like that. And to do that, you had to manually change the time and outlook so you'd open a new appointment. It would default and you'd have to go in and type in the new in time. And the reality is the defaults won out right.

[00:08:46] The 30 minute and 60 minute appointments went out. And so Johan and I could go in and we could do it for our own, but nobody else was doing it, so it wasn't really having the impact that I was wanting it to have, right? It wasn't really actually changing. So I actually used to joke. This is how strongly I believe that this is a thing, right? So I used to joke that whatever Microsoft employee could make the Outlook default meeting times to blocks of 25 minutes, they deserve a Nobel Prize like serious. We are talking about changing the way we do business. Nobel Prize.

And while we're on it, I'm taking a little detour. The other thing that I think of Microsoft employee could win a Nobel Prize for is by making the reply all button harder to hit like reply All should be a button that you have to like make a couple of clicks to get to because this reply all nonsense is out of control.

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Now the good news is as we move to virtual work and teams and slack in different tools like that, you can start to look at email differently. But you know, those have their own sets of issues with you got to turn notifications off so that you can get a pull instead of a push and all that stuff. Right. So whole different beast. But let me go back to my passion project, so my passion project didn't work.

[00:10:06] I did not have the impact I was wanting to have. And then I went out into my own practice, and so I was like, OK, well, I can definitely control me, right? I may not have been able to influence everybody else, but I can control me. So when I set up my calendar scheduling system, this is a you schedule once, where people will book time on my calendars to talk about what their challenges are and how I can help them develop leaders.

So I set those time blocks up to like 25 minute blocks, right? So you could set a twenty five minute appointment, you set a 50 minute appointment. And I also tried to remember to manually make appointments end earlier when I was the appointment setter, right? Like, I tried to go in and do that manual change and make that part of the standard of how I was doing it.

So fast forward several years. Right? Fast forward to the summer, and I was doing my own Improvement Kata project, where I was the learner related to my time and getting work done to the workday, so I didn't have to carry it to the weekend. And, you know, I learned several things through that process. One of the things I learned is that within my outlook calendar, I prefer a five minute reminder. Instead of a 15 minute reminder, the five minute reminder works better for me now.

[00:11:23] I don't have a reminder on all appointments, but I do on some of them because I want to be respectful and arrive on time. And the default in outlook is 15 minutes. So I would get a reminder for the 15 minute I would dismiss it and be like, OK, cool, I'm at my computer. I'm good. Then I would start working on something and get really in the zone and work past the meeting start time, like, oh, or I would hit snooze and then have to snooze it or dismiss it again, right?

Total excess processing. So this is when I started exploring how to make changes to the outlook default and I changed the outlook, default reminder time. And I'm like, Cool, all right. I did that. It's five minutes. Now, through this process, I also started paying more attention to my appointment scheduling habits in

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general, and I learned that my own adherence to my passion project twenty five minute segments had dropped.

Like, oh my gosh, I'm becoming one of them. I'm doing 30 and 60 minute appointments. When did that happen? How did it happen? I don't know. And then I thought to myself, Really? Has Microsoft still not solved this problem? I mean, I just changed the five minute reminder. Maybe I can change this, too. And so I went searching. And guess what? In outlook, you can now go into your calendar settings and change the default meeting times, which is what I did, and I'm going to put the instructions for this in the show notes, right? So now here's what happens on my calendar.

[00:12:53] I say I click the new appointment button. It defaults to a 25 minute appointment and it says about 30 minutes. And if I drop down to pick more times, the second option is a 50 minute long appointment where it just calculates the 50 minutes and it says about one hour. And it's fantastic. And I love it, and I'm so excited. And this is why what people should be doing and like going up onto the rooftops and shouting and telling everybody about it, right? Like it is there, it's there now.

I still think Microsoft is missing out because someone over there should make these the default. And if you want to use 30 and 60 minute appointments, you should make it harder to do that. Then you have to actively go change your settings to 30 and 60 and make these 25 50 the default, right?

So hey, Microsoft employees, if you're listening. Mm hmm. Still, there still an opportunity, but really like this is I'm super excited about it and like talk about game changer. And I know some people think like, that's not a big deal. It's five minutes here, there. It's not going to change our organization. But let me tell you, if you want to demonstrate respect for people, then you need to do this because expecting people to run, meeting, to meeting, to meeting and not getting that break, that's not cool, right?

[00:14:10] So when I saw this, I was stoked. I was like dancing through the house. I'm like, Yes. Now. If you all knew this already and I'm late to the party, then OK, so be it. But what I would say is you got to tell people this stuff right, like share with people. So if you knew this little secret weren't telling anybody, you got to tell people.

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And I can tell you that I haven't gotten any appointments like this from other from the organizations I work with. So if it does exist, not everyone's using it. Now, what I will say is that I do not know if this capability is on every version of Outlook or if it's just like Outlook 365 versus Outlook Enterprise versus Outlook, whatever the different versions are. And I have no idea about Google Calendar or any other calendar tools that you might use.

Not really a tech person, but what I can tell you is it's in my outlook. I'm going to put the screenshots in the show notes. So if you go to processplusresults.com/podcast and then find this episode, I think it's episode number sixty eight, then you can see the screenshots for how I change this. And if it is there for you, you should make this change in your settings.

[00:15:25] Everyone in your organization should make this change in your settings and then you need to do one more thing, then you need to learn how to honor that in time. Figure out how to end your meetings five minutes early or 10 minutes early. Get better at facilitating your meetings and respect people's time to transition from meeting to meeting or from meeting to task. Right.

So not just make the default also follow through and honor that in time, but do it like seriously, you do it, get everybody in your organization, you know, to do it and start making this happen. So if you're sitting there going, what's my next step? That really is your next step, except I'm going to actually challenge you to do one of two things.

Ok, so number one, I want you to either one or two. Number one is to do it, to make this change in your calendar settings, to go and do this and then start honoring it, do it right. That's option number one or option number two. If you are not going to do it, then I want you to make a list of reasons why you think you shouldn't make this change. Right.

So if you choose not to do it, not to take this action, not to make these changes in your settings, I don't want you to do it from a passive, dismissive standpoint. I don't want you to do it because you're making assumptions or because you're putting constraints on just automatically if you're not going to do this.

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[00:16:51] You should have good reasons for not doing it in those good reasons might exist. There might be good reasons for you to not do it. But don't just not do it and not do the work on it, if you don't do it, then have good reasons for not doing it. And Microsoft, if you're listening, can you please make those the default? All right. That's it for today.

Next week, we have a really cool surprise episode for you. I know it's Thanksgiving week, so you might think you don't want to listen, but you could, right? Maybe it's those chores or travel times. You get to listen to it anyways. And if you can't listen next week, be sure to come back and listen to it when you're back in the office.

Now, then, after that, after Thanksgiving, we are going to wrap up the last two episodes of our Q four executive series. We are joined by Jasmine Gorey from Santaland Logistics and then by Chris Chippendale from Credit Union, so be sure to tune in to those episodes. All right. I hope you love my little tip or trick or whatever you want to call it. My my brand new stuff that blew my mind. I had no idea this had been changed and fixed. Oh my goodness, life changing for me. Until next time.