

The Magic of 30-Minute Meetings

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Five years ago, after becoming frustrated with my fruitless tendency to juggle multiple activities at once, I tried an experiment: for one week, I would not multitask and see what happened.

The experiment changed everything for the better. My relationships improved, my stress dissolved, and my productivity soared. There is zero downside to focusing on one thing at a time without distraction.

One of the side benefits of my focusing on one undistracted task at a time was a new and almost unbearable impatience for wasted time. In the past, if I was on a call that wasn't going anywhere, I would do email or surf the web. In my post-multitasking world, staying focused on a dragging call was painful.

Which is how I stumbled on the single most life-changing, business-transforming revelation of my last five years:

Compressed time.

First, though, a caveat. There are some things in my life — dinner with friends, writing, sleep, unstructured time with my family — that deserve to live in the spaciousness of stretched-out time.

But other things — like most meetings and tactical work — could benefit from compressed time.

Often we schedule one hour time slots. Why? How did an hour become our standard time allotment for so many meetings, phone calls, and appointments?

As my impatience with wasted time grew, I tried a new experiment: I cut the time I allot for many activities in half.

I started with something easy. I used to work out for an hour a day. Now it's down to 30 minutes. My results — weight and conditioning — improved.

Here's why: my intensity is higher (I know I only have 30 minutes), I eat better (I don't rely on my workout to keep slim), I integrate movement more into my day (I don't rely on my workout to take care of all my fitness), and I never miss a workout (I can always find 30 minutes).

If you have half the time to accomplish something, you become hyper-aware of how you're using that time. And hyper-focused during it. Most of my phone calls are now 30 minutes or less. My podcast is 15 to 20 minutes. Even many of my conference calls, with multiple parties, are 30 minutes or less. People on the calls, aware of the time constraint, are more thoughtful about when they speak, and more careful not to follow tangents that aren't useful.

People also listen better because, when things are moving faster, we tend to be more alert. We know that a single distracted moment will leave us behind. And, since that keeps us more engaged, we end up having more fun in the process.

Nowhere has this impact been more transformational — and more evident — than in the leadership coaching we do at Bregman Partners. For the past several years, all the coaching we do is accomplished in 30-minute sessions.

The obvious advantages are obvious: everyone saves time and money.

- But here's what's less obvious: the coaching isn't simply *as* powerful, it's vastly more so. When the coach and the client both know they have only 30 minutes, they move into high gear.
- Clients show up. Just as with my workouts, people are far less likely to skip a 30-minute session than they are an hour.
- Everyone is on time. Every minute counts in a 30-minute conversation and they know it. The session gets started more quickly, as the relationship is built on doing good work, not small talk.
- People are much more likely to come prepared. There's no time wasted on tangents and going-nowhere conversations. Clients know what they want to cover and have put some thought into it beforehand.
- The time pressure enhances focus and attention. People don't focus on three issues; they tackle the single biggest opportunity or persistent, intractable obstacle. And they move on it. Focus leads to success.

- Coaches are more willing to be courageous, and clients are more willing to be prodded. In a 30-minute session, coaches can't waste time beating around the bush. They get to the point faster and earlier, interrupt more bravely, and ask more provocative questions.
- Clients get more done in between coaching sessions. I'm not sure why this is. But here's my hypothesis: Leaders at all levels need to be highly skilled at getting to the point quickly and efficiently. The compressed, focused coaching session hones the skill of getting to the point quickly, focusing on the most essential elements of a situation, and taking action.

The downside? I haven't seen one yet.

Try it yourself. Transition some of your hour-long meetings to 30 minutes. As you do, consider these three steps as a way to make the 30 minutes most powerful:

1. Read what you need to beforehand and tell everyone else to do the same. Think about your questions and concerns. Decide what's important to you and what you can let go of. Ask yourself the most important question: What outcome do you want?
2. Decide on the one thing that will make the biggest difference, and spend the 30 minutes on that issue, topic, or opportunity. Get started right on time, no matter who isn't there, and be bold and disciplined at keeping the conversation on track. Let go of anything that is less critical. Make decisions quickly, even if they are imperfect. Getting traction on a single thing is far more useful than touching on many without forward momentum on any.
3. The sign of a great meeting isn't the meeting itself. It's what happens after that meeting. Save at least the last five minutes to summarize what you learned, articulate what was valuable, commit to what you are going to do as a result of the meeting, and clarify how you will assess the success of your next steps.

You will need these “get to the most critical point fast” skills — and the courage to use them — if you are going to make the most of your time. You need to be bold, and even provocative. You need to be willing to interrupt, thoughtfully and for the greater good of moving ambitiously towards what is most important. You need to let go of things that don't really matter.

And you need to be fully present. No multi-tasking. No texting under the table. No distractions. Which is also the upside: you get to be fully present in what you are doing.

There is a cost. While it's energizing, it also takes a lot of energy to be so focused, even for a short amount of time. It's a sprinter's tactic.

On the other hand, when you cut your meetings and other activities in half, you'll have a lot more time to relax at dinner with friends, write, sleep, and spend unstructured time with people you love.