

# maximus insights

The #1 killer of meetings  
(and what you can do about it)



# The #1 killer of meetings (and what you can do about it)



Peter Bregman  
CEO of Bregman Partners, Inc.  
Harvard Business Writer

"That was dreadful. Not only was I bored, everyone else was bored too. Disengaged. I'm terrible at facilitating these kinds of meetings. But they're so important. I've got to get better at it. I need to find a better way."

I wrote that in a journal entry about seven years ago. I still remember the meeting that finally drove me to change how I run meetings. There were about 10 people involved — the CEO and his direct reports — and we met for two days offsite, in a hotel, so we wouldn't be distracted. The goal was to discuss and agree on our plans for the next year. A strategy offsite.

I had prepared meticulously. I met one on one with each person on the team and collected their thoughts about the strategy of the company and what might get in the way of its successful execution. Using their input, I designed the flow of the two days and asked each person to prepare a PowerPoint presentation of the strategy for their area.

The result? When each person stood up to present his strategy, everyone else did one of two things: tune out or poke holes.

Most presentations elicit those reactions because most presentations are polished and thorough and designed to *satisfy* their audience, as well as to build confidence that the speaker knows what he's talking about. People tune out because nothing is required of them. Or they poke holes because, if they don't tune out, it's the most interesting thing to do when someone is trying to prove there are no holes.

So over the following seven years, I experimented with designing offsites. I did team-building activities, I stayed at the front of the room throughout the meeting, I took myself out of the meeting completely, I taught skills critical to the meeting like communication and team dynamics, I had the CEO run the meeting, I took the CEO out of the meeting completely, and dozens of other tweaks.

Over time, I identified a single factor that makes the biggest difference between a great meeting and a poor one: PowerPoint. The best meetings don't go near it.

PowerPoint presentations inevitably end up as monologues. They focus on answers, and everyone faces the screen. But meetings should be conversations. They should focus on questions, not answers, and people should face each other. I know it sounds crazy, but I've found that even the hum of the projector discourages dialogue.

Meetings are exorbitantly expensive when you add up the number of highly paid people in the room at the same time. They should be used as a time to engage deeply in issues, not to update each other on progress.

Try this. Instead of having executives prepare clear, well-thought-out (and boring) PowerPoint presentations about their *own* businesses, try having them lead informal discussions about their *colleagues'* businesses, using flip charts to collect important points, draw conclusions, and agree on action plans with owners and timelines.

Before the meeting, assign each executive an issue to explore that is outside his or her silo. A problem related to manufacturing might be assigned to the head of sales. A problem in marketing might be assigned to the head of operations. The executive's task is to investigate the issue and prepare some ideas and solutions for discussion.

This breaks people out of their silos (a challenge I wrote about in [Solving Your Organization's Open-Faced Sandwich](#)), conveys their collective ownership of the company, and keeps people from getting too prideful or too defensive about their particular business. In other words, it keeps the meeting real.

Save at least an hour or two at the end of the meeting to develop communication plans to disseminate the decisions. I'm always a little surprised at how many inconsistencies and disagreements are surfaced only when it comes time to commit to precisely what is going to be communicated.

There is, of course, a lot more that goes into a successful meeting. But following the "no PowerPoint rule" has the greatest impact because it keeps the energy where it should be: solving problems together.

I always get a little nervous when I run an offsite because, if it's run well, it's unpredictable. Ideas, insights, and solutions arise that never would have come up without the collaboration of the people in the room. Arguments can break out at any time. But what makes offsites unpredictable is also what makes them exciting and valuable.

Last week I spent two days running a strategy offsite with the CEO and leadership team of a large technology company that is experiencing the good-but-very-real problems that accompany rapid growth. Each executive led a conversation about an issue in a colleague's business. Each conversation ended with an agreed-upon action plan with owners and timelines. All this was accomplished without the background hum of a projector.

At the end of the meeting, after a two-hour conversation about communicating our decisions to the rest of the organization, the CFO — a true cynic when it comes to spending (wasting?) time in meetings — turned to me and said "that was a really useful way to spend a couple of days."

Coming from him? That's journal-worthy.

## Peter Bregman- Bio

*Peter Bregman is the CEO of Bregman Partners and is a strategic advisor to CEOs and their leadership teams. He is the author of [Point B: A Short Guide To Leading a Big Change](#) and [18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done](#). Peter is a regular contributor to [Harvard Business Review](#), [Fast Company](#), and [Forbes](#).*

*Peter has used his approach to improve performance at some of the world's premier organizations, including [Goldman Sachs](#), [Morgan Stanley](#), [NASDAQ](#), [JP Morgan Chase](#), [Allianz](#), [Victoria's Secret](#), [Converse](#), [Katz Media Group](#), and [FEI](#), among others. He has worked with companies throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, Asia, and Australia.*

*He has based his work on the notion that an organization, at its core, is a platform for talent. By unleashing that talent, focusing it on business results, and aligning it with a compelling vision, both the individual and the organization thrive. Since 1989, Peter has trained and coached all levels of management and individuals to recognize their leadership, exhibit leadership behaviors, model and stimulate change, and foster their own development and growth as well as that of their teams and colleagues. Peter earned his B.A. from Princeton University and his M.B.A. from Columbia University.*

## Maximus International Better results, faster...

*Maximus works globally with a number of large and medium organisations to offer unique leadership solutions that maximise people and organisational potential. We create a measurable and immediate impact to your business and bottom line, and our commercially focused approach to transformation is encapsulated in our philosophy: **Better Results. Faster.***



**maximus**

**A** Level 11a, 17 Castlereagh Street Sydney NSW **P** 02 9216 2800 **W** [maximus.net.au](http://maximus.net.au)