

Well hey, leaders, in this month's Leader's Circle, I'm going to take you behind the scenes to another unit from the At Your Best course, which we want to give you some complimentary access to in this session. It's a companion course to my book At Your Best, and it's all about getting time, energy and priorities working in your favor.

In this month's session, I'm going to cover how to rethink and reschedule your meetings. You won't actually find this in At Your Best, it's consistent with the ideas. But, this is stuff that didn't make it into the book that we have actually included. There are pro tips and strategies that will help you and your team really get time, energy and priorities working for you.

This one is something I've had in every organization I've been a part of, and every once in a while, I have to call an audible. And again, I've been the senior leader in those organizations. But, there's this thing called meeting creep, where you start out with an ideal calendar. And then, you have a new person join your team and you're like, "Well, I really should meet with her." And then, you've got a new layer of meetings in your company. Even recently, in my own company I found myself with meetings four or five days a week and I called an audible. I've done this several times in my leadership. I just said, "I don't want to have meetings every single day. Even I protect my green zone, it's not the most efficient way to organize things."

In this session, I'm going to walk you and your team through how to cut down and assess your meetings. My guess is the goal would be, of this session when you're done, to get you one or two meeting-free days a week, where nobody in your organization has meetings. That doesn't mean you can never have meetings, but I'm talking about the standard meetings and that kind of thing. I did that when I lead the church full-time, I've done that again recently in my company. For the most part, over the last decade and a half, I've had one or two days a week that are meeting free and it's glorious. But, meetings creep up again and again, so this session I think is going to help you rethink and reschedule your meetings.

Like many of the sessions inside Leader's Circle, I'm glad you're previewing this first because you probably want to rethink this before you share it with your team. But, I hope this helps. Here is this month's session.

Welcome to this month's Leader's Circle. It's an inside peek at some of the exclusive content that I've built around my brand new book, At Your Best. This month inside Leader's Circle, I'm going to take you into a session from the At Your Best course, which will help you rethink how you do your meetings and do a much deeper dive that will help you optimize them. I hope this gives you some precious time back. Here's this month's teaching.

In this session of the At Your Best course, I'm going to help you do a deeper dive into how to optimize your meetings. The reality is, is that many leaders, including me, could spend 80 to 100 percent of your working time in meetings, if you allowed that to happen. It just wouldn't be that hard. The only problem is, that for most of us, being in a meeting often means our work doesn't get done. I think of meetings often as the enemy of work.

Now, that's not entirely true. Meetings are necessary to get things done because work gets things done through people. That is the best definition of work. But, here's the tension: we live in meetings and our productivity dies in them. Meetings can be this huge distraction in a world where leaders often simply need to get work done. Patrick Lencioni and others have effectively critiqued the ways most leaders handle meetings. And if I'm not careful, I can easily spend almost my entire week in meetings and miss writing great books, writing articles for my website, leading a team in visioning and even preparing for the podcast interviews I have the privilege of hosting week in and week out.

The first rule of meetings is simply this: meetings expand to fill the time you've set aside for them, unless you decide they won't. If you set aside an hour for meetings, guess how long that meeting's going

to take? An hour, even if you have nothing to say. If you set aside two hours, guess how long the meeting's going to take? Two hours, even if you don't have that much work that's just what happens.

In this session, I'll walk you through five simple steps to get meetings for you rather than against you. I understand this exercise is going to be a lot easier for senior leaders than non-senior leaders who have less control over their calendars. But, you already know because you've done At Your Best that you have more control than you think. You have control over at least half your work week and 88% of your life. You already know that because I covered that earlier, in the masterclass. But, you will also learn that, if you're going to lead up in your organization, to express desires not demands to your boss, be ridiculously good at what you do, to ask questions rather than demand that changes be made. And, you are getting really good at what you do, so you probably know how to lead up by now, and that leads us into the five simple steps.

Here they are. I want to encourage you to, number one, to a meeting audit. Number two, assess the time and purpose of each meeting. Number three, trim your meetings. Number four, align your meetings to maximize your green, yellow and red zones. And number five, propose a meeting-free day or two.

Step one is do a meeting audit. This one's pretty simple but it's easy to miss. Exactly how many meetings do you have? That might be hard to get an answer to right now because you just do them, you don't think about it. Start by going back a month or two and review your standing meetings, meetings that happen every week, or biweekly, or monthly. Just list them, write them down, how many do you have that are standing meetings that happen on a regular basis. Those are fixed meetings and you can count them pretty easily because you have them, no matter what. Then, go back over the last two months and count up how many additional meetings you had, some one-offs, some ad hoc meetings that are not recurring. And then, find the average. Maybe you had eight this month and six last month so your average is seven.

Well, add that to your fixed meetings that happen on a regular basis and now you have an idea of your current meeting load. Write down the number of meetings you have a month, and then calculate the time you spend in them. Not the scheduled time, because you're probably in meetings that always run late, but the actual time. If you have an hour meeting that goes 90 minutes, it counts as 90 minutes not an hour. On the odd chance you have a half our meeting that runs 20 minutes, well you can cut 10 minutes off that. But, calculate the average time and the amount of meetings you have every month.

Step two is this: assess the time and purpose of each meeting. Now that you know how many meetings and how much time you're spending in each meeting, you can start to assess the purpose. Because here's what happens, meeting creep happens in most organizations. Your team grows, you add more meetings for new staff members. Meetings go on too long, so now you've got to schedule another meeting to deal with everything you didn't deal with in that meeting.

Your meetings are going to fall into one of three categories. Meetings that are first, too long. Those are meetings that basically do not need to be as long as they are. They are an hour on the calendar, but you know deep down in your heart and so do most people in the room, that you could get that stuff done in 30 minutes if you really tried. That's category one, meetings that are too long and should be shorter.

Number two, and you probably have a couple like this, or maybe at least one, meetings that are actually too short. You likely have some meetings that require more time and need more of your focus to really be productive. Maybe it's a brainstorming meeting, or a one-on-one meeting with a really key person.

And then, the third category is meetings that are, this sounds like the Three Little Bears, just right. So too long, too short and just right. You probably have some meetings, it's a half hour, it needs to be a half hour. You don't need more, you don't need less.

Now, you've got the three categories. Meetings that are longer than they should be, meetings that are too short and they should be longer, and then those that are just right. Then, after you've calculated that and categorized your meetings, ask yourself why each meeting still matters. Some will definitely matter. Yeah, if I don't meet with my assistant, I'm in big trouble. If I don't meet with my boss, it's not going to go well. If I don't meet with the creative team, we're not going to get anything done. Okay, and then some won't. "Yeah, why are we doing that meeting? I can't remember, nobody seems to even know." Or, "We don't need that meeting." Or, "Actually, that's a meeting that could have been a Slack message. That's a meeting that could have been a project in Asana. We don't need a meeting for that." This will get you ready for step three. But before you move onto the next stop, be honest about the time you spend in each meeting and ask whether each meeting actually makes sense. Some will and some won't.

Now you're ready for step three, trim your meetings. Meetings are a little bit like hair, they keep growing and need trimming, and even cutting, on a regular basis. This is where you can start to reclaim hours every week, even if you save one hour a week. You're like, "Carey, I went through this whole unit, I saved one hour a week," it's not a waste. Do the math. Okay, saving one hour in an unhelpful meeting each week will result, over the course of a year, in more than a week's full of time savings, with 48 to 50 hours redeemed. One hour a week equals 48 to 50 hours a year, when you deduct vacation.

Thanks to your audit, you'll also realize that some meetings are too long. Calendaring apps, pay attention to this, set the default of meetings to one hour. Challenge that, you can even change that in your settings. Move from one hour default meetings to 45 minutes or 30 minutes. Or, turn a 30 minute meeting into a 15 minute standing meeting and you'll get a lot more done. Another way to cut or trim is to reduce the frequency. Maybe you need the meeting, but do you really need it every week? Maybe you can turn some of those weekly meetings into biweekly meetings, and other biweekly meetings into monthly, and a monthly meeting into a quarterly meeting. Again, I'm not saying everything has to be reduced, but if you want to free up time, there are probably more meetings that go on too long than meetings that are too short.

Again, this gets a lot easier if you use your one-on-ones, as I've taught earlier in the course, to capture a ton of information by developing an optimal workflow system. You might even discover that one or two meetings is completely irrelevant and you don't need to do them because you can deal with all the information through a productivity app like Asana, Trello or Basecamp. Remember, not every meeting can be cut but if you trim the fat out of other meetings, eliminate some that have really outlived their usefulness, then you might be able to extend one or two critical meetings, that brainstorming meeting, that essential direct report, that honestly need more of your time and more of your focus. That's okay, too, as long as it's productive. Meetings expand to fill the time you set aside for them so, as a rule, set aside less time. That's step three, now onto step four.

Align your meetings to maximize your green, yellow and red zones. Now that you've done a thorough assessment of your meetings, it's time to align them with your green, yellow and red zones. Green zone, your energy's at its highest. Red zones, you're exhausted. Yellow, you're in the middle. You're not at your best, you're not at your worst. A very good rule of thumb is that, for a lot of leaders like me, your yellow zone is actually the best zone for most meetings. Unless you're a manager and all you do is manage people, then you want your best reports in your green zone. But if you have other projects that are really important, like maybe you're editing a video, or maybe you're working on a talk, or you're developing a strategic plan, or you're really working on the annual report, or a financial report to shareholders, or whatever you're working, maybe that needs your green zone rather than your meetings.

I use a lot of my yellow zone for meetings. Your energy is not at its peak but it's not super low, either. Most of the time, you'll function really well when you hold meetings in your yellow zones. Red zones, on the other hand, when your energy is low, should be avoided if possible because it's really hard to arrive at great decisions when you and everybody else in the room are exhausted.

Finally, think carefully about how many meetings and what kind of meetings you'll book in your green zone. Much of that is job dependent, as I've hinted at already. Because I produce content for a living, I almost never use my green zone for meetings, unless it's brainstorming or something super critical. I do my most important work undistracted and uninterrupted in my green zone, those three to five hours a day where I'm at my best. That is what actually moves the needle in my company. If I have a meeting in my green zone, I make sure it's an optimal use of that time. Now if you're a manager, hey green zone might be the very best use and you need to coach your team, and lead your team and grow your team in your green zone. That's up to you.

But, I can also imagine what you're thinking. "Carey, great theory. But, what happens if your team's red, yellow and green zones don't line up?" Well, you're right. They actually almost never line up perfectly. If you've got 10 employees, it's very unlikely you have all morning people or all afternoon people, where they're at their best at the same time of day. That's where the act of give and take and compromise comes in. You may have to give up a few of your green zone hours each week for meetings, even if that isn't the most strategic for you.

The key, and this is the mistake, is to put your most important meetings in everyone's red zone. I did a consultation with a friend in Atlanta once, he had a big staff of about 80. They had an executive leadership team meeting that was happening in the afternoon on a Wednesday. When I told them about green zones, yellow zones, red zone, high energy, mid energy and low energy, they synced up all of their zones and they realized, "Wow. Our leadership team meeting happens when most of our executive team is in their red zones. Most people are tired." That's why they all hated that meeting, it was really important work, it was at the wrong time of day. They moved it by a few hours, when everyone's energy was higher, and they made much better decisions. With a little give and take, you'll be able to arrive at a calendar that will help most of your team win most of the time.

And then, the fifth step, and this one's a lot of fun, is propose a meeting-free day or two every week. It's a radical idea, it's a bit easier to accomplish than you imagine. What if you had one or two days a week where no one had any meetings? It's more than possible and I've led my team into this practice at different points throughout my leadership. I promise you, nobody ever complains about it, ever. But, the question is well, why would you do that?

Well, we've already talked about the hyperactive hive mind and how, when you continually task switch between Slack, and email, and phone calls and texting, you can't focus. But, having one or two days a week with no meetings really gives you margin. It gives you room to breathe. It gives you room to think, to dream, to catch up. To work on your gift, not just in it. So currently in my company, I did this when I was leading the church full-time too, we just banned meetings on several days a week. These days, we're not doing any meetings on Tuesdays and Fridays. The meetings that have to happen, they have to happen on other days between nine and three.

You might say, "Well, that sounds really arbitrary," but it's amazing how efficient people get when they're like, "Oh yeah, it's Friday. We can't book a meeting. Okay, why don't we do it this way? Oh yeah, it's Tuesday. We can't book a meeting. Okay, how about we do it this way?" It's amazing how effective people get. Meetings expand to fill the time you set aside for them so just set aside less time.

Another wonderful companion for your meeting-free day is the idea of a meeting cap. I find that if I have fewer than 12 meetings a week, we don't accomplish enough as a team, I don't get enough input as a

CEO. If I have more than 15, I start to feel overwhelmed and I feel like I don't have enough time to get my work done. Currently, and this'll vary from season to season and your answer will be different, my assistant and I cap my meetings at 15 meetings a week. Now, you might be higher, you might be able to do 30 meetings a week and thrive. That's awesome. You might be lower. It's like, "Man, if I have more than seven meetings, I'm done." But, you probably have a cap, you probably have a limit, a max at which meetings become counterproductive. Pay attention.

What we do in my company is, when we notice that we're getting beyond the 12 to 15 range, if it's going lower it's like, "Okay, you know those people you wanted to meet? We have margin now." If it goes higher it's like, "Okay, this is a really tight week, we're going to do 18 meetings this week. But next week, you'll have 10." We just negotiate that way. I know, because I know my number, that if I can lead consistently with 12 to 15 meetings a week, I'm going to be at my best. And even though you may have open slots in your calendar, if you passed your meeting cap the answer isn't, "Oh, I'll squeeze that in Thursday at six PM." The answer is, "I'm sorry, my week is fully booked." Yeah, I got 15 hours of meeting so that means I've got what, 25 hours other hours open, but my week's full. It's full.

In the principles we shared in the course you just say, "Yeah, I'm already fully booked that week." And then, you push the meeting request into another week, or perhaps you decide you don't need to take the meeting at all, or you convert it into some other kind of proposition. "We'll work on project software together," or whatever.

With those five steps, you're on your way to rethinking and rescheduling your meetings for optimal performance at work, which of course, also leads to a way better work life and personal life. So, here are the five steps. Do a meeting audit. How many do you have? Assess the time and purpose. Trim your meetings. Align your meetings to maximize your green, yellow and red zones. And then, propose a meeting-free day or two. There's more in the application guide and I would love for you to dig in, to figure out how you can free up more time in your meetings.

So leaders, that is my little rant this month on meetings. Obviously, there's a few ideas that we developed in the At Your Best book that we hint at and we'd love to help you get connected with that. If you have any questions, just let me know inside Leader's Circle, we'd be happy to serve you. I would encourage you to do a meeting audit about every six months to a year.

I'll tell you one more story, before we wrap up this month. My team, I wasn't in on these meetings, but every Monday they did what they call an admin call followed by a marketing call. So several years ago, we didn't have a marketing department, that got added. Then, there was the admin call. At first, it was just a few people who were on the admin call, but then the entire team except me started going to the admin call. I started asking them about it and I'm like, "Why are we doing the admin call?" And then they decided, "Well, it's not very efficient," so they amalgamated the admin call and the marketing call.

I was talking to them about that. I said, "Okay, you've reduced it from two hours to 90 minutes." And then, something hit me. I'm like, "Oh my goodness, I totally forget about this." I said, "Do you know why we have the admin call?" Nobody who was currently on the team could remember why we had the admin call and then I remembered why we started that meeting. We started the meeting because, about three or four years ago, I had two assistants who were always in and out on maternity leave. It turned out that they were able to do the job half time. They would meet on Mondays to sync up the calendar and go. Now, they ended up going on mat leaves at different time, maternity leaves, and then they would come back but they still had this admin call.

So now, fast forward a few years, I have a full-time executive assistant, a full-time podcast manager and we don't really meet for the same reason that call was started and nobody really knew why they were doing it anymore. So guess what they did? Collapsed the meeting. It's really good to rethink why you're

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doing what you're doing because sometimes, you're just doing it because, "Monday at 10, we always have our admin call meeting. We always have that meeting," and it creeps up on all of us.

Anyway, really hope that helps, leaders, and hope you enjoyed these sneak peaks from the At Your Best course. We'll say more about that inside Leader's Circle, but it's an honor to be with you, week in and week out. Thanks for doing what you're doing.