

The Hidden Tax of "Fixing It in the Meeting"

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Something stalls on a team, and the first instinct is almost always the same. Put a meeting on the calendar. Get everyone in a room and talk it through.

I understand the reflex. It feels like doing something. But in a lot of the teams I work with, the meeting isn't where the misfire gets solved. It's where it gets buried.

THE MEETING INHERITS THE PROBLEM IT'S SUPPOSED TO FIX

Here's the part most leaders miss. The original breakdown was rarely about the words. It was about the gap between how one person sent the message and how the other person was wired to receive it.

Now you call a meeting to sort it out. Same two people. Same wiring. You've just added more words on top of a mismatch that was never a word problem in the first place.

Picture a project that's drifted. A manager pulls the team together to "get aligned." One person hears a working session. Another hears a performance review with an audience. They're both in the same meeting, reading two completely different rooms. An hour later everyone leaves feeling like something got settled. Nothing did.

THE TAX NOBODY PUTS ON THE SCORECARD

This is where it gets expensive, and the cost is close to invisible.

Asana's 2024 State of Work Innovation report found that time lost to unproductive meetings has doubled since 2019. In a company of 100 people, roughly 17 hours a week go to clarifying communication that already happened. That clarifying meeting you just scheduled? It usually generates its own round of things to clarify.

Zoom out and the number gets hard to ignore. Grammarly and the Harris Poll put the annual cost of workplace miscommunication at \$1.2 trillion. A real slice of that isn't the first misfire at all. It's the meetings, the follow-up meetings, and the side conversations we stack on top trying to talk our way back to solid ground.

WHAT THE ROOM IS ACTUALLY DOING

When people can't close a gap, they tend to do the socially smart thing. They perform agreement.

Nobody wants to be the person who slows the meeting down to say "I still don't actually get what you meant." So they nod. They say "sounds good." They move on. The discomfort ends, and everyone reads that relief as resolution.

It isn't. The gap is still sitting there, now with a layer of false consensus on top of it. And every time this happens, the misfire gets a little harder to name, because on paper it looks like the team already handled it.

WHY THIS IS THE MOMENT THAT MATTERS

Left alone, a communication gap doesn't stay a communication gap. People get tired of missing each other and start reaching for an explanation. The explanation is almost always about the other person's character. "He doesn't listen." "She's difficult." "They're checked out."

Once it turns personal, the meetings stop helping entirely. You can't fix a calibration problem with a room full of people who've quietly decided the issue is who someone is.

WHAT ACTUALLY CLOSES THE GAP

The fix isn't another hour on the calendar. It's naming what's really going on, out loud, early.

Something as simple as this works: "I think we're sending messages in really different ways, and they're not landing how either of us means them. Let's slow that down before it turns into something bigger." That one sentence does more than a whole meeting, because it puts the attention on the calibration instead of the content.

So before you book the room, try three things. Ask the person what they actually took the message to mean, not whether they're on board. Say what you meant in plainer terms than feels necessary. And check whether this needs a group at all, or whether it's really a two-person gap that a crowd will only obscure.

A meeting can be the right call. Just not as a reflex, and not as a substitute for closing the gap that stalled things in the first place.

Most teams don't have a meeting problem. They have a calibration problem that keeps getting handed to more meetings. Fix the calibration, and a surprising number of those meetings simply stop being necessary.

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