

The Future of Work podcast is a weekly show where Jacob has in-depth conversations with senior level executives, business leaders, and bestselling authors around the world on the future of work and the future in general. Topics cover everything from AI and automation to the gig economy to big data to the future of learning and everything in between. Each episode explores a new topic and features a special guest.

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01:18 Jacob: Hello everyone! Thank you for all of you who are joining us live, today's episode of The Future of Work with Jacob Morgan. My guest is Steven Rogelberg. He's the author of The Surprising Science of Meetings and he's also the Chancellor's Professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Steven, thank you for joining me.

01:38 Steven: My pleasure, thanks for having me.

01:40 Jacob: Of course. And then those of you who are joining live, please just let us know if you can see and hear us okay. I have the comments thing open here on my phone, so feel free to ask questions to myself or to Steven directly, and then I will go through them as they get asked and we will touch on all the wonderful questions that you have about meetings. So first question I have for you Steven, is maybe you can give us a little bit of background information, just about yourself and what you do and how did you get involved with studying meetings?

02:09 Steven: Well, so I'm an organizational psychologist. And as an organizational psychologist, I study the world of work. And I'm particularly attracted to topics that really frustrate the heck out of people and meetings fit that bill. So I've been studying meetings for over 20 years. And the goal of that research was to identify the types of problems, but most importantly, evidence-based solutions forward. You're really trying to recapture that time and make it a good use of time for folks.

02:50 Jacob: Makes sense. And meetings are something that we all deal with. Yeah, pretty much everybody. [chuckle] Well, everybody in the corporate world deals with meetings and there's a lot of complaints and problems about meetings, I'm sure you've heard all the issues that are out there. So maybe the first question for you, I'm really curious, when you think of meetings now, I wonder when did it become so crazy that people have eight, 10 meetings... Has it always been like this or were meetings just once a day, people get together, and then it just started piling on more and more?

03:28 Steven: Yeah, meetings are really an evolution in the world of work. It's a recognition that organizations can be better with and through people. As organizations basically recognized that employee voices would be helpful and meaningful, they wanted to develop systems and approaches to capture those voices. And that's really where meetings come in. So a world without meetings is actually much more problematic. We need meetings for communication, cooperation, consensus decision-making, and in many regards, organizational democracy takes place in meetings.

04:11 Jacob: Okay, so I suppose the first piece of advice is, "Don't get rid of meetings at your company."

04:16 Steven: No. In fact, that's a really dangerous solution. So, sometimes I get... So the book is...

I've been so fortunate. I wrote the book, it came out early last year, and I really didn't think that necessarily anyone would be reading it because it's a book about meetings and it has the word "science" in the title. But two days after it came out, the Washington Post named it the top 10 leadership book. And then it just kept racking up these recognitions. But what's exciting to me is I'm a professor, so me getting people... People being interested in the science is incredible 'cause that's all you ever look for. But I think that the fact that leaders are interested in the science and trying to solve this problem, it's really, really meaningful.

05:05 Jacob: Yeah, yeah. Well, let's start with what the problem is. So when you think of meetings now, what are the big problems or challenges that you see with a lot of meetings that businesses have?

05:18 Steven: So there's not one particular problem that stands out. Basically, meeting dysfunction is a constellation of problems. [chuckle]

05:25 Jacob: Yeah.

05:27 Steven: And it starts with not having a compelling reason to meet, not inviting the right people. Maybe inviting too many people or too few people, it's a leader not actively facilitating the experience, but instead allowing the dysfunction to percolate, maybe even being part of that dysfunction. So it's bad meeting processes. It's not ending a meeting well where folks leave the meeting going, "I have no idea of what we accomplished." So there's just so many potential points where a meeting can go wrong.

06:06 Jacob: So what do we do? 'Cause a lot of people listening to this either host meetings, or they're a part of meetings. What would an ideal meeting look like? 'Cause you broke it down to quite a bit of research and science in the book. And actually, maybe you can share some of the findings and research from the studies that you did and then we can talk about how to construct an ideal meeting.

06:29 Steven: So first of all, an ideal meeting does not exist. There's no magic formula for an ideal meeting. The research doesn't suggest that you can do A, then B, then C, and bam, that's the ingredients for an ideal meeting. What the research suggests is that the best meeting leaders have something in common. And what they have in common is a similar mindset and it's the mindset of being a good steward of others time. And when you have that mindset, you start to become intentional. You start to think about various decision points that exist when you're running a meeting. You just don't dial it in. So you start to ask yourself, "Why are we meeting? What do we truly need to accomplish? Who really needs to be there? What's the best way of getting this work done?" I'm sure we'll talk later about the fact that there are some alternative techniques such as leveraging silence in meetings, that can be very, very powerful. So the key characteristic of an excellent meeting is a meeting that's designed in an intentional way and a way that truly honors the time of those that are attending. And I'm sure we'll unpack some specifics around that, but that's really the generalization about what makes a good meeting.

07:54 Jacob: Okay, so let's say I'm in an organization and I'm a meeting leader, I wanna put together a meeting. Do you have any steps or advice for how to make sure that it is the best use of time and so that I do create a good experience for the people who are there? Because right now with technology as you know, you create a meeting invite, you enter in a bunch of people's emails and then whoosh, there it goes. You can create a meeting and an invite in 20 seconds and invite 100

people if you want.

08:23 Steven: Yeah, exactly. So there's so many pieces of advice that can be shared with a meeting leader and so I'll just pick a couple that are from the book. So one for example, is picking how long the meeting should be. Right now most meetings are one hour. Why do you think that is?

08:50 Jacob: [chuckle] I have no idea.

08:51 Steven: Well, it's just a default setting on Outlook or Google Calendar. People just kind of move to the default and say, "Yeah, that's what a meeting should be," but that's not a good reason. What we wanna do is for a leader to think carefully about, well, how long should this meeting be given what I want to accomplish. Especially because the research shows that something called Parkinson's Law exists and Parkinson law is the idea that work expands to fill whatever time's allotted to it. So if you allocate an hour for a meeting, guess what? It's gonna take an hour. But we can use this for good. We could start scheduling meetings for 25 minutes, for 35 minutes, whatever we want and we will get it done. And interestingly, once we determine an amount of time in a meeting, what I encourage meeting leaders to do is actually to dial it back five minutes or so. Because the research also shows that when groups are under moderate levels of pressure, they perform more optimally. So in the very design of the meeting in terms of determining that time, it's critical. So we can unpack other things about how large the meetings should be and all that...

10:05 Jacob: Yes, yep. Please, please.

10:06 Steven: Oh, okay. [chuckle] So meeting size is another really important consideration. We know that as meeting size increases, so does dysfunction and so we need to keep meetings as lean as possible. So how do we do that? It's actually quite tricky because one of the things that we find is that while people don't like going to meetings, they're actually really bothered when they're not invited to a meeting. So...

10:41 Jacob: It's like inviting somebody to a family event just to be polite where you know they're gonna decline, like to a wedding for example, you're like, "They're still not gonna show up, but we got to invite them just to be nice."

10:51 Steven: I love that. In fact in the book, I used the wedding example. We know who really has to be at the meeting. Where we get ourselves in trouble are those secondary individuals. So for those secondary individuals, we have to figure out a way that they don't have to attend. And I'll tell you right now, it's easier than ever. As we've moved to more remote meetings, obviously given the pandemic challenges and issues, remote meetings can be very easily recorded.

11:22 Steven: So for those secondary individuals, if we have a conversation with them saying basically, "Hey we're having a meeting about A, B, and C. I don't think it's all that relevant to you but I'll share with you a recording. And if at any point in the future you want to attend one of our meetings, you're more than welcome." Well, they'll get that recording and the beauty of it is they'll listen to that recording in twice the speed 'cause you can fast forward it. They can listen to it at their convenience, and they still feel like they have been welcomed but with those types of conditions in place, they'll opt out. So your meetings will stay lean and the people that are there, it will make the most sense for.

12:08 Jacob: I remember hearing the... Are you familiar with the Amazon two pizza rule?

12:12 Steven: Mm-hmm.

12:14 Jacob: So for stuff like that, and for those not familiar who are listening or watching Amazon has this policy where if you order two large pizzas, two large pizzas should be able to feed everybody who's on the team who's participating in that meeting. And if not, then the size of the meeting is too large. So do you... Well, first is that do you think that's kind of a good way to think about it? I'm not sure how many people that is. Maybe, I don't know, five, six people or something like that.

12:41 Steven: It really depends. When I do these, some speeches in Europe, people will say, "Were those Americans eating pizza, or were those Europeans eating pizza?" But that rule of thumb causes pause. And that's what I want. I want pause. I want the leader to stop a moment, not to hold captive a whole bunch of people's calendars. I want them to stop and think about who really must be there. So the Amazon rule of thumb is great but there are other thoughts. Some organizations have actually... Like Microsoft Japan has made it that you can't have more than eight people in a meeting unless you get approval. Now, that sounds extremely draconian, but it's not, because again it causes pause.

13:36 Jacob: Yeah.

13:37 Steven: And then it circles back to something I mentioned earlier. What do the best meeting leaders do? They're intentional. And choosing who to be there is like that best example of intentionality.

13:50 Jacob: Yeah. So when I went to go visit Amazon Headquarters with my wife, I think it was last year, we also learned about one of the unique practices that they have. And you touched on this earlier with little bit of silence. And so if you wanna host a meeting at Amazon, basically they have this white paper approach, where... And you're familiar with this, I'm assuming. And for those of you listening and watching who are not, I believe you have to... If you're leading a meeting, and you wanna present something, you have to start off by putting together, I think it's a three-page white paper where you summarize your ideas, arguments for it, you present everything. And then the way that each meeting gets started at Amazon, is everybody gets a copy of this, and they don't get it in advance, they only get it at that meeting.

14:38 Jacob: And for the first, I don't know, 15 minutes or so, everybody reads the exact same document together in silence. And that was I thought one of the most unique practices I've seen for an organization when it comes to meetings, and I'm curious what you think of that, and if you've heard of or seen any other interesting examples that you like.

14:57 Steven: Sure. So definitely Amazon has some nice approaches to meetings. I'm actually doing a presentation for the next week on leading remote meetings. So the purpose behind that approach... There are multiple purposes. So Amazon has... So first of all, they don't want a person's charisma when presenting using PowerPoint to overly sway the meaningfulness of discussion. So when ideas are written in paper that charisma doesn't come into play as much, it's the merits of the idea.

15:35 Jacob: Yeah.

15:36 Steven: A second motivation is the fact that a lot of meeting leaders are extremely frustrated that people don't come to their meetings fully prepared. Well, if you build in preparation time into the meeting itself, then everyone is on the same page when it's time to start having that discussion. So that's another really nifty approach. So I'm definitely a big fan of silence in meetings. So the research on silence is really intriguing. If you have two groups and they're asked to brainstorm ideas, the group that brainstorms with their mouth in comparison to the group that brainstorms in silence. And the silence brainstorming can be done on index cards or into a Google Doc, which is perfect for the remote meeting technology.

16:25 Jacob: So you mean everybody in the team has access to the same Google Doc, and they can't talk but they just kinda type out their ideas?

16:31 Steven: Exactly. And those groups that brainstorm in silence generated nearly twice as many ideas.

16:37 Jacob: Wow!

16:37 Steven: And the ideas tend to be more creative, more innovative and disruptive. 'Cause people don't have to edit themselves, and everyone can talk at once.

16:46 Jacob: Yeah.

16:47 Steven: And again, this is a perfect technology to integrate with remote meetings. I'm working on... In my workshop that I'm doing on those remote meeting webinar, basically I try to share a variety of new tools and techniques, and one of them is you bring everyone together into the meeting. The leader takes five minutes at the beginning of the meeting to lay out the problem and the challenge. And then sends everyone the remote, a web, a Google Doc link, then people just start typing into that Google Doc, and commenting upon other people's content. And it becomes this incredibly vibrant meeting. People aren't talking, it's all taking place in the Google Doc. And then at the end, the leader can bring it back together, they can start to make decisions on next steps, it's a really fantastic approach.

17:42 Jacob: Have you seen or are there any other organizations that you like besides Amazon, as far as how they approach meetings? Any other cool... I haven't actually been able to find many. I think, where has a policy where during every meeting one person each time has to take notes for the full meeting and share with everybody else. So they are like weird little unique quirks that some organizations have, but it's kind of hard to find meeting practices from companies.

18:12 Steven: There's no company that is nailing meetings, it's just not happening. There are companies that the proportion of leaders who are doing it right is a little bit better, but every company is struggling. So even I gave a speech at Google, and I don't know if you're familiar with that. There's a famous memo that Larry Page... It was his second memo when he came back to Google, and he sent a memo saying that he's banning 60-minute meetings, and he's banning 30-minute meetings. Instead, meetings will either be 25 or 15 minutes so that people have time to transition and bio breaks. So I was at Google and I thought I would see this in practice and it wasn't, it was the same 30 minute and 60 minute cadences that we see in any organization. So I think even the companies that... I think everyone struggles.

19:13 Steven: And it's interesting, meetings are incredible because they're so critical, we spend so

much time in them, but at the same time, there's a tremendous blind spot that exists. And the blind spot is one that individual leaders have. Our research shows at the close of a meeting, if you ask every individual in that meeting, "How was it?" One person tends to say, "That was really good." Do you wanna guess who that one person is?

19:50 Jacob: The person who is running the meeting.

19:51 Steven: It's the person running the meeting. So that's a blind spot.

19:55 Jacob: Yeah.

19:55 Steven: And if you have this inflated sense that the meeting was good, and we clearly know that's not aligned with reality, then you're not motivated to make changes. But organizations have blind spots. Organizations are just accepting bad meetings as a way of life, and that's a false assumption. I'll give you an example of how this... The organizational blind spot manifests. So we know that engagement surveys are commonly used in organizations. It's hard to find one that doesn't. I've presented to chief human resources officers of most of Fortune 100 companies, and I say to them, "How many of you have content on your employee engagement surveys about meetings?" Let's say there's a 100 of these chief human resources officers. How many you think raised their hands, saying, "Yes, we have content around meetings."?

20:51 Jacob: I've actually never heard of an organization... And I've talked to quite a few HR people, I've never heard of somebody have meetings as part of their survey, so probably very few if any.

21:04 Steven: Good. Yes. Two.

21:06 Jacob: Two. [chuckle]

21:08 Steven: So, how do you reconcile that? There are approximately 55 million meetings a day in the US alone. This is how people are spending their time.

21:17 Jacob: That's insane.

21:19 Steven: Or assess it on engagement surveys, so there's no organizational accountability.

21:24 Jacob: Yeah. So do we... I've also heard some organizations do instant meeting surveys. Do you recommend that, where right after the meeting is over, maybe three to five questions get sent out to everybody who is a part of that meeting, just providing feedback on it?

21:42 Steven: So [chuckle] one thing that people hate on as much as meetings is taking surveys.

21:47 Jacob: Yeah, that's the... It's true.

21:48 Steven: Taking surveys on meetings is a double whammy.

21:51 Jacob: Yeah.

21:51 Steven: I do like the idea of periodically a one-question survey is administered where people

can share some feedback and then those results can create a dashboard for leaders. I do like that. But yeah, the thought of every meeting having three to five questions, that sounds like hell. [chuckle]

22:14 Jacob: It does. Well, yeah, especially you have four, five, six meetings in a day, it becomes pretty insane. I guess what's the solution? Because a lot of these organizations that do engagement surveys, for example, some of them do once a year, once every two years. So how do you get the feedback or the data to improve meetings as a leader?

22:35 Steven: Well, so the most local and organic way is for the leader themselves to own this. And I'll give you an example. So... And I'll back up and share a little context. Essentially, I've been able... There's been a lot of media attention around the book. And the one question that I get asked by the media that completely throws me, is they'll say, "Well, what's the one piece of advice? The one best piece of advice?" And that kills me because other than saying, "Well, buy the book." There's so many piece of advice. But I got to a point that if I had to identify one piece of advice, it's this. If you want to make your meetings better, ask the people who regularly attend your meetings, "How is it going?" Have a quick survey where you ask people, "What's going well? What's going not so well? And what are some ideas for improvement?" And make that part of who you are as a leader 'cause meetings are inherently shared experiences.

23:38 Jacob: Yep.

23:38 Steven: Going back to something I mentioned earlier, about being a good steward of others' time. Well, asking people how the time is being used is the greatest example of being a good steward. By periodically owning this process, collecting some information, seeing what themes emerge, making some improvements, you're gonna get better. You're gonna get better. You're gonna learn some great things. Oh, I'm sorry.

24:06 Jacob: No, no, no. I was gonna say that, it sounds like you, as a leader, need to be a little bit of a data scientist here and start to collect data and information from the meetings that you're running?

24:18 Steven: That's right. That's right. And it's funny that... Again, it all ties to that steward mindset. We wanna deliver good customer service. The way that we do that is, we also collect customer sat data and we constantly learn from it and try to develop from it. We want to do good at our meetings. The natural extension is, well, we should occasionally, not all the time, but occasionally, collect some data and see how we're doing at it. It just should be a natural process for a leader, and it also should be built in to the ecosystem of the organization. When you think about leadership development and leadership onboarding, well, meeting leadership skills should be part of that effort.

25:06 Jacob: Yeah.

25:07 Steven: People should receive coaching on their meeting leadership effectiveness. And then you have the engagement surveys, and then training should be done. But training is a really tricky nut to crack because most training programs around meeting skills are flawed. They tend to take this... Do you wanna hear a little bit about?

25:30 Jacob: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm curious.

25:31 Steven: Okay. These meeting training programs tend to take a very tactics-based approach. They say, "Do this, this, and this, and then you'll have a good meeting." And a good example is agendas. They might say, "The most important thing a meeting leader should do is have an agenda." Well, the research on agendas is actually not all that impressive. Agendas in and of themselves do not promote meeting effectiveness. And if you stop and think for a moment, that really shouldn't surprise you. First of all, so many agendas are recycled, meeting-to-meeting without any thought.

26:11 Jacob: Yeah, copy and paste.

26:12 Steven: Right. [chuckle] And what matters more is what's on the agenda. Did you even ask for input from others? And what's even more important is, how did you facilitate that meeting? Those agenda items? When we just teach people tactics, like have an agenda, you're not gonna see the positive results. When you teach people mindset and intentionality, which is really the harder stuff, and not typical in training content, that's when I think some really good things can happen.

26:40 Jacob: Yep. I was gonna ask you this question, but a bunch of people are asking me, live, right now, so I might as well just get to it and ask you myself. And this is about virtual versus in-person meetings, because a lot of people are saying, "What's going on of in this current pandemic?" All meetings are now virtual. And so, do you have any suggestions or feedback for how to run a successful virtual meeting versus an in-person one? I'm not even sure what the key differences are, but maybe you can provide feedback on that. And the other question that keeps popping up is, people are saying that they're finding that they're having more and more meetings, and they're not actually having the time to do the work. So maybe we can talk about... Maybe if you're not a meeting leader, can you say no to meetings? Can you say, "I'm not gonna take anything?" How would you go about saying no? Let's start with the first one, which is the virtual meetings that millions of people around the world are now being forced to do.

27:46 Steven: So remote meetings, they're tricky. We've collected effectiveness data of all different meeting types. And what we find, in general, is that around 50% of time and meetings is effective.

28:01 Jacob: How much?

28:01 Steven: When it comes to remote meetings...

28:04 Jacob: Is not effective?

28:05 Steven: Exactly.

28:06 Jacob: Wow.

28:07 Steven: And in remote meetings, that number drops further. I'll do a funny story to summarize the terrible state of affairs. As I just said, remote meetings are the least effective. But if you actually ask people what meeting type they most prefer to attend, they will typically say, "The remote meeting." And the reason being is, why would they prefer something that's ineffective?

28:37 Jacob: It's so you can tune out, maybe, I don't know.

28:38 Steven: That's exactly... So you can multi-task and that...

28:44 Jacob: The crazy thing at leading up to that, did you see that there is this Zoom hack going around, where people are able to loop themselves, making it look like they're paying attention in Zoom calls, and they're off doing who knows what?

28:57 Steven: I did not know that.

28:58 Jacob: Yeah, I don't know if this is a feature with Zoom or something, but you can record a loop of yourself, literally just staring at a camera like this, nodding your head, and you loop that footage over and over. And people are gonna be like, "Oh my God, look at Jacob, he's so focused paying attention." Meanwhile, I'm doing the laundry, doing who knows what around the house.

29:20 Steven: Right. Remote meetings are definitely tricky. Besides all the regular meeting problems you have, you have all these communication flow issues. And then you have the issue of social loafing, and social loafing is this idea that we reduce effort in the presence of others, especially when we feel anonymous. And that's what typically happens in remote meetings. We can make them better. There are definitely evidence-based paths. I spend quite a bit of time in my book talking about this 'cause it's so important. But let me share with you a few, let me give a few quick tips.

29:55 Jacob: Yeah, yeah, and actually, so, one question on social loafing. Wasn't there, I remember either reading or writing about this years ago. Wasn't there a study that was done like a tug-of-war study? Do you know what I'm talking about? Am I making this up? Am I crazy?

30:11 Steven: You're not making it up. Crazy, I don't know.

30:13 Jacob: Can you share that, this sounds really interesting.

30:15 Steven: Okay, so, this is one of the classic studies that was done to identify social loafing. And basically, what they did is they created an apparatus, where they had someone come in, and they said, "You know what, I want you to pull this rope, like tug of war, as hard as you can." So they were able to identify what an individual's capacity for pulling it. Then what they did is they put someone else on the rope with them. And then they could see and they knew what that person, what that person did too. And what they basically found is as you added people to the rope, that person kept reducing the amount of their own personal pulling. He started to defer to the crowd. And this has been found using all kinds of experiments. One of my favorites is actually around screaming. You have someone scream as loud as they can. Then you start pairing them with more and more people and their scream volume just keeps decreasing as more and more people are added. We keep finding this phenomenon that as we're in a crowd, as we're less and less identifiable, we just keep reducing our efforts. This plagues large meetings, and virtual meetings in particular.

31:32 Jacob: Very interesting. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off. I was just curious if I've read... That was right, but yeah, you were gonna talk about some...

31:40 Steven: Sure, okay. They're continuing this theme around intentionality. There's a whole host of things that one can do and you need to think about the folks you're meeting with, to see what makes the most sense. First of all, you need to be extremely careful not to over-invite. And I think we touched upon that earlier, so I won't talk more about that. You have to be even more aggressive with your time limits. People's attention spans are way too low right now to have a long meeting.

We should be having short meetings to keep building alignment, but not just draining people's time. We are able to get more focused when there's a shorter meeting, especially with smaller attendance. We need to sharpen our agendas. A good example is if you look at agendas, most are framed a set of topics to be addressed. What I wanna encourage meeting leaders to do is actually to frame your agenda as a set of questions to be answered. This is a very different cognitive exercise. When you frame it as a set of questions to be answered, you have to be so much more thoughtful and intentional. You have a better sense of who needs to be at the meeting, they're relevant to the questions. And you have a better sense of whether the meeting has been successful. The questions have been answered in a compelling way.

33:03 Steven: You need to try to get people on video as much as possible, because when people are on video, they'll be more present. You start to address some of those social loafing issues that we mentioned earlier. Continuing on. And again, there's so many important tips around meeting leadership. A meeting leader has to fully kind of embrace this role of active facilitation. They need to be dialed into that. They need to be caught drawing people in. "Sasha, share your thoughts." "Gordon, I haven't heard from you for a while, let me know what's going on." Other techniques are things around using some technology like voting apps, right, so silence does not necessarily mean agreement. If people can start voting on their phones around certain options, you will truly be able to test consensus.

33:58 Steven: Use a little chat box in your software. Not to have side conversations, but if someone wants to talk, they can indicate in that box that they have something that they would like to say so that you are dialed in to those dynamics. And then clearly, you need to end the meeting well. Sometimes with these remote meetings, they can kind of drift. Before that meeting ends, usually three to four minutes before the end, you say, "Okay, here are the decisions we made, and for each one of these decisions, here is the DRI." And this is the language that Apple uses, to the Directly Responsible Individual. Folks leave that meeting saying, "Here's what was decided. Here's how those questions were answered." And they know who's responsible for enacting what was answered.

34:45 Jacob: Yeah. No, that makes a lot of sense. How can you say no to a meeting or can you? If you keep getting invited to meetings, eventually, you're gonna be like, "I can't possibly do any of these." Or, "I can't do so many of them." Do you have any advice for how to tactfully just say no without just directly saying no and being a jerk?

35:10 Steven: There's a few different types of approaches. One is the mechanism where people block out a certain time on their calendar, so that, clearly, they seem busy, so hopefully, that time won't be taken away from them. That's one strategy. Really, what I hope happens, is I want leaders of departments and of teams to say, "We know that there's an epidemic of lots and lots of meetings, and we know that people could feel really frustrated by this, so we have to create a culture on our team or our department or our division, where we stop over-inviting. That we let folks know what's going on, we provide minutes so they can track things, but that it's okay to start saying no." My response to your question is as an individual, we often don't have that power, but we can start creating norms as a collective. And this really is not gonna be hard to do, because we know that these are shared frustrations.

36:26 Jacob: Yeah. Yeah. And maybe instead of saying no, there's kind of a more polite... I suppose you could say something like, "Is it possible for me just to see the recording afterwards?" Or maybe there are some questions that you can start to ask like, "Thanks for inviting me. What is it that you hope I can contribute to this?" Just making sure that people actually can justify why you should be

there, because it's so easy when you have somebody's email to just kind of like, "Oh yeah, I'm not sure if Tim needs to be there but I... Why not? Let's just fill him in just for the sake of it."

37:03 Steven: Yeah.

37:03 Jacob: I also encourage people, if you get invited to so many of these meetings, maybe you can start asking some of these questions of your leaders and the people who are inviting you, just to see if they can justify why you need to be there. Because as Steven mentioned, with so many technologies, you can watch recordings, you can read notes. You can get updated on things without actually having to be there. Another common question that a lot of people are asking, and the one that I was gonna ask you as well, is how do you get people to participate? Because we've all been in those meetings, where it's like, maybe you're a leader running the meeting, and you say, "Okay, does anybody have any questions or feedback or concerns?" And nobody says anything. And this can be either virtual or this can be in person. How do you get people to participate, without making it weird?

37:50 Steven: Yeah. First of all, it's setting up the... Designing the meeting to encourage participation. If you take, for example, creating your agenda as a set of questions to be answered. That's really motivating for people. Some people don't even know how to participate because they don't even know what's being talked about, but if we frame it as a set of questions, that sets a nice little backdrop for participation. And then if the meeting is lean, there's greater expectation for a participation. And then when that meeting leader is dialed into facilitation, right? A meeting leader who's all about featuring themselves and doing all the talking is going to create a really bad meeting for everyone else.

38:37 Jacob: Yeah. It doesn't sound like a pleasant meeting.

38:39 Steven: No. So as a meeting leader, your job is to try to bring out the conversation in others, think about your role, right? You have this very successful podcast series, and one of the things that makes you successful is that you're able to engage your guests and get them to communicate and to steer a meaningful conversation. Well, that's meeting leadership, right? You're not doing this podcast to feature yourself, you're doing this to try to create this environment that other people can derive benefit from. Well a meeting leader has to internalize that themselves. And then there's other things that they can do. We mentioned earlier about how silence can be leveraged. Silence is a great way of engaging people. Other techniques are if a meeting leader wants Sandy to participate more in the meeting, but she tends to be shy. Well, before the meeting starts a leader can say, Sandy I really look forward to hearing from you on this topic. Or the leader could say... She could say to Sandy I'd like you to lead this agenda item. Or I'm gonna let you facilitate it. So there's just a whole bunch of very purposeful activities that the leader can do, that just makes engagement and inclusion a consequence of.

40:03 Jacob: I think a lot of meeting leaders assume that they are presenters, instead of facilitators. And they assume that their job as a meeting leader is just to lecture and talk the whole time, as opposed to being... I don't know, it's almost like you're kind of, I don't wanna say performer, but you're kind of... I don't know. It's like you get a bunch of random people together at a cocktail party and your job is to try to get them to talk to one another, by making introductions, "Hey, you know so and so, you guys are on the same team. You guys have the same interests." I don't know what you call that person, but somebody who's bringing people together.

40:38 Steven: Yeah. It goes back to what we talked earlier, about this idea of being a good steward.

40:43 Jacob: Yeah.

40:44 Steven: Right? Because if you really embrace that mindset of being a good steward of others' time, which I think, again, is what you try to do. When you have that mindset, the thought of people leaving that meeting saying, "That was a waste," is extremely disconcerting to you.

41:02 Jacob: Yeah.

41:02 Steven: And you wanna make sure it doesn't happen. So I think that mindset is absolutely key. And actually, I love your example of a party, because in many regards, good meeting leaders also recognize that inherently they're a host. They have called the gathering together. So what does a host do? A host welcomes people. A host makes people feel appreciated. A host expresses gratitude for being there. A host makes introductions when people don't know each other. Right? So... It's so interesting that when we think about being great meeting leaders, we actually possess so many of these skills, but we just don't apply them [chuckle] in the context of meeting with our peers or direct reports.

41:48 Jacob: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Another question that came in is, how much impact do you estimate bad meetings have on employee engagement, and does that matter on roles, generations, etcetera? So have you done any studies or seen any research on the impact that bad meetings have on organizations, in any way?

42:07 Steven: Yes. So that's been a big stream of research that I've done. Bad meetings take a toll on individual wellbeing, fatigue, stress, engagement, motivation. We've even documented something called, meeting recovery syndrome.

42:28 Jacob: Oh my goodness.

42:28 Steven: I know. And this is the idea that when you have a bad meeting, you just don't leave it at the door. It actually sticks with you. You ruminate and you co-ruminate, you have to tell someone else about your bad meeting. So, the consequences of bad meetings for individuals and for teams, and then as a result for organizations is really well-established. But there is a flip side. What we have found is that when leaders are more careful in the calling of meetings, really making sure that they are relevant, when leaders carefully manage time in meetings, and when leaders create freedom of speech in meetings, that employees report feeling more engaged with the jobs overall. While we often think about meetings as being places of drain, meetings done right can actually be places of gain.

43:17 Jacob: I've also heard stories of people who have meetings after their meetings, to debrief about the meeting. So, I definitely think that it's got a little crazy, a little out of control out there, so some of these tips and advice should certainly be applied. What happens if, for example, you're... And I don't know if you've explored this at all, the difference between introverts and extroverts, when it comes to meetings? 'Cause there have been a lot of articles and things written about this in books, written about introverts who maybe wanna participate or lead meetings or... Any suggestions or feedback for people who are introverts in meetings?

44:00 Steven: The best fitting one is recognizing that so many of our current meeting structures do

privilege extroverts. Every time we do talking-based techniques, we are privileging extroverts. So if we do more writing-based techniques, and silence-based techniques, then you're kind of equalizing that. So I think the best meeting leaders, again, have a diversity of experiences. As I mentioned earlier, there are around 55 million meetings a day in the US. What's amazing is that there's so many similarities between them. Everyone is basically doing meetings very, very, using the same practices. So when a meeting leader can have some diversity in their approach, that can be really energizing and then it also can be better fitting for a wider range of personalities.

44:57 Jacob: So, and I suspect... I know what you're gonna say to this, but for somebody who wants to host, let's say, a 30-minute meeting, there's no specific... Would you structure that 30 minutes in a certain way, for example, first five minutes let's do this, 10 minutes for this, five minutes for that, 10 minutes for that?

45:17 Steven: Maybe, maybe. It depends on what you're trying to accomplish. If your experience with this group is such that they lose focus, and that they ramble, time limits associated with particular items could be fantastic. So this is again, one of the examples of, as a meeting leader you need to reflect, you need to think about. I like this idea of a meeting leader doing a pre-mortem. And a pre-mortem is you stop and think about the meeting going wrong, what happened, and how can you prevent it. Well, if you think that this group lacks focus, then assigning times for various agenda items could be extremely helpful. In fact, you could do it for certain items and not other items. You have that power. And so, this thought of being intentional can manifest in many different ways and that's why I think that... When I think about why my book has connected with folks, is that it just presents so many different choices a leader can make, and basically just makes the case of, pick what makes sense for you as a person, and what makes sense for your team, and what makes sense for what you need to accomplish.

46:01 Jacob: Do you think that one of the reasons we have so many meetings, maybe unproductive meetings, is because there are a lot of leaders out there who don't give any autonomy or decision-making power to their people? And so, everybody has to be cc'd on everything, everybody needs to be invited to every meeting. In other words, if employees had more autonomy and they were able to make decisions without having to get approval for everything, do you think we would have less meetings?

46:01 Steven: I think it would reduce some number of meetings. But really the problem, yes, we are having probably too many meetings, but really, the problem is not the number of meetings we have. The problem is the number of bad meetings we have.

47:20 Jacob: Yeah.

47:21 Steven: And so I just wanna keep the focus on making our meetings better, and the fact is if we start being more careful about who we invite, that's gonna decrease the number of meetings there are.

47:36 Jacob: Yeah.

47:36 Steven: Right? So I want, the strategies I wanna keep advocating for are these leaner meetings, less time in any particular meeting, and then less meetings will be a natural consequence of that, but I don't want less meetings to be the driver of, because that doesn't fix the problems.

47:54 Jacob: Got it, got it. So yeah, less meetings itself is not the goal, it's like you said, that's just kind of the outcome of when you make changes to the core. So we talked a lot about if you're a meeting leader but what if you're not a meeting leader? Is there still something that you can do to improve it? Can you quietly pull your leader aside and say, "Hey, I was in that meeting. Just a couple of suggestions for feedback." 'cause a lot of people don't actually host meetings, they're just a part of them all the time and they feel sort of powerless, to do anything. What do you do in that situation?

48:28 Steven: So as a meeting participant, you're relinquishing a tremendous amount of power and so you don't have many tools that you can, you can do. Now depending on your relationship with the meeting leader, you could have say something off-line to that person, but really, the things that you can do are [A] be a model meeting participant, right? So you do it right, you don't ramble, you listen carefully to people, you just kind of act how you like everyone else to act. Two, you can also do shadow facilitation, right? So you could be saying things such as, "Gordon, I know you were working on something similar to this, what are your thoughts about it?" Right? So you could be kind of helping facilitate behind the scenes. So those are a couple of things that you can do. But I would say that everyone can find some meeting that they lead, be it a meeting at work, be it a meeting in their community, be it at a meeting at home, and you can run that meeting better. You can be the example, you can choose to make sure that you're being a good steward. And I think ultimately, if each of us looks for making our personal meetings better, then the norms and standards will start to change.

49:48 Jacob: Got it, yeah, no, I think, I mean that makes complete sense and even talk about meetings in our personal lives, we also have those two. And so, those are also important to remember. What about dealing with negative people, because we've all been on those meetings where you have some people who are confrontational, who are... Everybody butts heads with them, they're just... I don't know what the right word is to describe them, but we all know those types of people, they just, I don't know, for some reason, we just don't get along with them.

50:21 Steven: Sure.

50:22 Jacob: How do you deal with that type of a person during a meeting or do you deal with them during the meeting?

50:29 Steven: So that, again, there's multiple strategies that one can take. You could... I'm a big believer in trying to raise other voices as a way of counteracting that voice, so to the extent that we can get other people participating, then that negative voice starts to get drowned out. I'm a big fan in that particular case, that maybe silence could be a really good approach, right? Because silence based techniques equalize those voices. It could very well be the case that this person doesn't even know that those are their characteristics and maybe just having a conversation offline about it, could be really helpful. So, I think those are a few different approaches.

51:14 Jacob: And I like the Google doc thing, 'cause it's very hard for me to imagine somebody who's argumentative and who likes to control all the conversations, just sitting there typing, "Oh, you're not..." [chuckle]

51:24 Steven: I know, I know.

51:26 Jacob: Because it usually comes out in their personality and their body language, like they

talk louder, they make themselves bigger, they, but you can't do any of that, I suppose you can type in all caps in the Google doc but aside from that, I mean you're, everyone [51:40] _____, same playing field and nobody can monopolize and take anything over, so I love that piece of advice.

51:49 Steven: Thank you, yeah, and what I encourage meeting leaders to do is to try new things. So that Google Doc, it's awesome. Like when you start experimenting with silence, here's a related technique for kind of addressing that situation, is if you're in a room of folks, and this actually could be done remotely. For example, Zoom does breakout rooms.

52:14 Jacob: Yup.

52:14 Steven: You get people working in pairs to chat about the topic and then you bring everyone else back into the main room, the whole dynamics change. When people have worked together in dyads, then they have a lot more to contribute, their energy will start to drown out kind of that real negative, that real negative person.

52:38 Jacob: Well, I know we only have a couple of minutes left, here, so maybe last one or two questions for you. To wrap up, before I ask you where people can grab your book and connect with you and all that sort of stuff, any last parting words of wisdom or advice or suggestions for people who are listening or watching this, who wanna run effective meetings? Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you wanna make sure we get in?

53:01 Steven: We talked about a lot.

53:02 Jacob: We did! I've never talked so long about meetings.

53:07 Steven: No, I think we covered really a large array of topics. I feel good about it, and I hope that the takeaway that people have is that they're excited to try something new, right? So if they've never framed their agenda as a set of questions to be answered, try it out, right? And I think there's a lot of those examples and that's really what the book is trying to convey.

53:33 Jacob: So maybe we can just wrap up on those. So a couple of things that we talked about, be intentional of who you invite to the meetings, focus on time and don't just kind of default to the 60 minutes, instead of developing agendas, try to ask questions instead. We talked about having maybe a Google Doc or leveraging some time of silence instead, we talked about the size of the meeting too. And..

54:00 Steven: We talked about some of the unique characteristics of remote meetings and how...

54:03 Jacob: Oh yes, remote meetings as well, and so how to make those effective and how to include other people in participating in those meetings. And I suppose there's also some of the basic stuff for remote meetings, right? Like make sure people can see your face and it's just not like your forehead it's in the web cam. There's just stuff like very basic common sense stuff that people may forget. So, hopefully, we won't need to talk about those things.

54:27 Steven: Hopefully not.

54:28 Jacob: Yeah, well, great. I think that covers pretty much everything. So, where can people go to learn more about you and the book, you have a lot of check lists in the book and then really

interesting findings, but anything you wanna mention for people to check out, please feel free to do so.

54:41 Steven: Okay, thank you. So I have a website. It's thesurprisingscience.com. Again, thesurprisingscience.com, and I do have a bunch of resources on there, more content, so I really encourage people to check it out, and then I, reach out, I'm doing right now to no surprise, I am doing a bunch of webinars around remote meeting leadership, but I've changed my model. I basically have moved to a 15-minute or 20-minute webinar on the topic. People, again, goes back to the attention span issue, we mentioned earlier. So it's really important right now that we hone our meeting leadership skills. I know there's a lot going on, but it's actually top priority. We can't be wasting time in bad meetings, there's no... We don't have the capacity for it, so it's worth taking the 15 or 20 minutes and stepping back and getting people on the same page on how to run these remote meetings effectively. So, reach out if you wanna talk about that as well, and definitely, thank you, it's really fun to be able to chat about meetings for an hour.

55:50 Jacob: Yeah, I'm definitely gonna try to implement some of these things with my team. I have a call with my team tomorrow, so there's gonna be 10 of us on a Zoom call, so I'm gonna try to implement some of the stuff from your book that I learned and your website again was, what was the site?

56:03 Steven: [Thesurprisingscience.com](https://thesurprisingscience.com).

56:05 Jacob: [Thesurprisingscience.com](https://thesurprisingscience.com), perfect. Well, Steven, thank you so much for joining me today, I really really appreciate it.

56:12 Steven: My pleasure.

56:13 Jacob: And thanks everyone for tuning in, all of you who are alive, and those of you who are listening to the podcast afterwards. My guest again, has been Steven Rogelberg, checkout his book, author of *The Surprising Science of Meetings*. It's available wherever you can find a book and I will see you all very, very soon. See you later.

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