

A hand holding a pen is writing on a calendar grid. The calendar shows days of the week (MON, TUE, WED) and dates (1, 2, 7, 8, 14, 15, 22, 23, 30). A large, stylized, gold-colored checkmark is drawn over the calendar grid. The text "YOU SAY YOU WANT A MEETING REVOLUTION" is overlaid on the checkmark.

**YOU SAY YOU
WANT A MEETING
REVOLUTION**

working/
Simply®

The Premise:

A Meeting Revolution

No one likes attending meetings. Employees find them disruptive, time consuming, and quite often boring. Organizations that are overly reliant on meetings experience reduced productivity and have higher numbers of dissatisfied, disengaged employees.

Ineffective meetings exact a measurable toll on organizations. North American companies hold 11 million formal business meetings each day at a [cost of \\$37 billion per year](#). On average, business professionals spend 31% of their time attending those meetings -[that's about four days per month](#). Surveys from IndustryWeek and 3M Meeting Network indicate 30% to 50% of time spent in meetings is wasted. The result: [lost productivity and burned-out employees](#).

Working Simply believes there is a better way, and we can prove it. One North American research-based pharmaceutical corporation recognized the need to hold more effective meetings. Voluminous, poorly executed meetings made going to work feel like descending into a salt mine for its highly educated, professional employees.

Carson Tate, founder and president of Working Simply, Inc., proposed an innovative way to implement systemic change to the company's meeting culture.



“We helped a pharmaceutical corporation stage and lead a Meeting Revolution. As a result, the company saved 13,000 labor hours annually just by changing its meeting culture.”

— **Carson Tate**, Founder and President, of Working Simply, Inc.

DYNAMIC INDUSTRY DEMANDS EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

The pharmaceutical industry is under constant pressure to evolve. International market and regulatory conditions often change suddenly, challenging organizations that require years to develop and test new products. The hectic environment breeds uncertainty, increasing the urgency to share information and build consensus.

“Effective meetings can provide continuity in such an environment,” said Tate. “Meetings are important. Unfortunately for our client, it became a challenge to conduct consistently effective meetings over the long term.”



When Meetings Attack

The 600-employee global pharmacovigilance division held too many long and unproductive meetings. It hurt its ability to be effective performing what was arguably the most critical role in the company: responding to reports of issues with medications, evaluating mountains of data to determine medication effectiveness, and being at the ready if recalls become necessary for the sake of public health.

Employees in this division are among the most skilled and highly educated in the entire organization. Working under close regulatory scrutiny—often with U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) officials on site and at their sides—the employees must always be prepared and stay sharp.

“We had a meeting issue. It was affecting our productivity, effectiveness, and employee morale.”

— Senior vice president in charge of the global pharmacovigilance division

Numerous, overlong meetings forced employees to work on the fringes of the work day—early in the morning, at night, and on weekends.

“It was meetings that made their work days long. The meeting culture was creating work-life balance issues,” said Tate. “This was of critical importance to the organization, because it affected employee performance and engagement.”

An employee engagement survey confirmed widespread dissatisfaction with work-life balance, citing meetings as a primary contributing factor. The company had reached a tipping point.

↙ ↘ **Prioritizing Change**

Senior leaders were challenged to address the employee engagement issue.

“Large numbers of disengaged, professionally unsatisfied employees will affect your bottom line sooner or later,”

said Tate. “Data confirms that highly engaged employees translate into customer satisfaction, higher revenue, and increased profit.”

The senior vice president in charge of the global pharmacovigilance division knew the answer was fewer, better meetings. He also understood achieving that goal was easier said than done. With urgency building within the organization and no clear meeting strategy on the horizon, the global pharmacovigilance VP found a lifeline in the unlikelyst of places: The New York Times. He read an article Tate wrote¹ about effective meetings and reached out to see how she could help his organization’s meeting culture.

WHEN YOU’VE HAD ONE MEETING TOO MANY

An unsustainable, unproductive meeting culture challenges how we do business. It makes us ask questions, most notably, “Why am I in this meeting?” If your employee is in a meeting being held in a bathroom—yes, this happens—someone will inevitably ask, “Why am I here?”

When companies evaluate the number, duration, and purpose of their meetings, they take a step toward more effective meetings.

1. Carson Tate, “When You’ve Had One Meeting Too Many,” The New York Times, February 16, 2013.

WORKING SIMPLY TO THE RESCUE

No two Meeting Revolutions are the same. Working Simply tailors revolutionary strategy to the organizational culture, structure, business environment in which the company operates, and leadership style of the executive management team.

“We immediately realized this pain was so bad, everybody was hungry for a solution—executive management most of all,” said Tate.

Diagnosis: Ineffective and Exhausting Meetings

The first step was to evaluate the current state of meetings and solicit input from employees about specific meeting-related issues. The leadership team played an integral role in the development of a survey about the division’s meeting culture.

The survey results provided granular, actionable data of the employees’ dissatisfaction with the meeting culture. The leadership team discovered meetings were too long, lacked structure, and—most important—often did not resolve anything.

Working Simply collaborated with them to define a clear vision for success, including specific metrics that would ultimately measure it.

With the senior leaders fully invested, we engaged the rest of the pharmacovigilance division.

TEACH THEM TO FISH

“Unlike traditional consultative relationships that go on in perpetuity, our style is to teach our clients to fish. When the engagement is over, they have all the tools and skills to sustain an effective meeting culture.”

— Carson Tate

Staging An Intervention

Everyone has endured superficial “How To” seminars or courses on leading more effective meetings. We made it clear from the outset that our approach would be different. This was a culture change that would be led and implemented by the team. It was critical for employees to have a lead role in shaping their own future.

“We asked the leadership team to help us come up with both qualitative and quantitative goals for the engagement,” said Tate.

The pharmacovigilance leadership team began with a clear message: fewer, better meetings.

Define Success

“We needed to move the needle on the employee engagement survey,” said Tate. “That meant employees working fewer hours each week, spending less time in meetings, and seeing those meetings as meaningful.”

To reach that goal, the Meeting Revolution would have to achieve numerous quantitative milestones such as:



Reduce aggregate meeting hours



Eliminate unnecessary standing meetings



Hold fewer meetings



Decrease the average meeting time from 60 minutes to 45

THE CHALLENGE OF LASTING CHANGE

To affect lasting transformation, it is important to understand the psychological resistance to change. We considered several theories as we developed our Meeting Revolution philosophy. [Chip and Dan Heath's book SWITCH²](#) provided us with a useful perspective on resistance to change.

The SWITCH methodology explores how to unite the head (intellect) and the heart (emotion), and eliminate obstacles to change. This forwardlooking work provides real-world examples of how these methods can be used to affect lasting, transformative change.

“We select tools and methodologies that are appropriate for the problem we seek to solve. Resources like SWITCH help us understand the psychology of change and help us build strategies that motivate our meeting revolutionaries to embrace it.”

— Carson Tate

2. Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* (Crown Business, 2010).

★ **Define Better Meetings**

You say you want fewer, better meetings. How do you make that happen?

We believed our client had to improve in three key areas:



Meeting leadership



Participant engagement



Tactical execution

We helped identify tenets for how to improve in each area. Meeting leaders needed to clearly define the meeting objective, draft an agenda to achieve that objective, communicate effectively, and engage all participants. For their part, meeting participants had to be prepared and arrive ready to engage in healthy discussion.

“Organizations often overlook the seemingly mundane details at their own peril,” said Tate. “A meeting’s effectiveness can hinge on something as simple as being sure a conference bridge line is available.”

We challenged the client to evaluate the basics of meeting logistics. Does this meeting have a purpose? Are the right people here? Have we allotted enough time to complete the stated objectives? Do we have all the tools necessary? Are we even in the right room?

*Defining best practices in these areas sets
the stage for a Meeting Revolution.*

The next step involves finding the right people to lead it.

We Assemble Champions

The VP in charge of product safety chose 50 champions of change to be responsible for instigating a division-wide Meeting Revolution. These champions were handpicked for their leadership qualities, functional roles, or proximity to functional leaders within the division.

“We taught this group to stage the revolution incrementally and help it gain momentum organically,” said Tate. “It’s one thing to get a room full of executives and directors on board. However, soliciting buy-in from a division this large requires effective internal change agents with a positive focus.”

STAY FOCUSED ON THE POSITIVE

After the champions were identified, we introduced them to the concept of Appreciative Inquiry (AI).³

AI is a forward-leaning approach to change. It requires an organization to look at the best of the organization and identify what is good about the culture, people, and organization.

AI makes us ask,

“What do we want more of? What are our strengths and how do we leverage those strengths to create the change we want?”

Too often, change initiatives are sidetracked by the negativism associated with critique of the status quo. This collective inquiry into the best of our current state helps draw a road map to [what could be](#).

3. Appreciative Inquiry Commons, <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu>.

The Workshops:

Fishing Lessons

The workshops would prepare the champions for leading the Meeting Revolution. They started at the conceptual level and then finished with meeting scenarios.

MEETING CHAMPION WORKSHOP TOPICS

- 1 *Visioning*
- 2 *Introduce Change*
- 3 *The Dawn of the Revolution*

In the workshops, participants experienced us demonstrating the techniques we were teaching and engaged in meeting simulations, role-plays, and coaching.

“The workshops take the fishing lesson to the next level,” said Tate. “This group has the most responsibility, because it’s tasked with execution. During these events, we give them opportunities to practice and experiment with their new skills and provide all the tools they need to succeed.”

1 Session 1: Visioning

The champions developed a clear vision of the future state of meetings in the first session. Using AI, we helped them envision that future, challenging them to be the best of—and the best for—the organization.

Since our champions would be expecting change from their colleagues, we took them out of their comfort zones at the outset of the first session. The champions all had clinical backgrounds and were—for the most part—analytical, left-brain thinkers. We gave them a series of exercises designed to make them experiment with more right-brain, creative thinking.

“When we fill up a room full of clinical researchers and have them performing skits and drawing pictures, people realize quickly that anything is possible.”

— **Carson Tate.** Founder and President, of Working Simply, Inc.

Using AI techniques, the champions avoided counterproductive venting and instead concentrated on the positive. “The group develops the desired outcomes,” said Tate. “The champions then take the vision and determine how to achieve it.”

Champions left the visioning event with only one action item: talk about the future state of meetings with their colleagues. The revolution took hold on two fronts. While the champions learned to become agents of change, the rest of the organization anticipated a brighter tomorrow with fewer, better meetings.

2 Session 2: Introduce Change

“Rather than dust off an academic method that our participants would likely be familiar with and regard as anything but innovative, we had them read Chip and Dan Heath’s book *Switch*,” said Tate.

Like AI, the core concepts of *Switch* build on the positive. We kept the champions looking ahead and focused on making the good better, rather than picking apart historical problems. The group then divided into four teams.

Participants chose teams based on the aspect of the meeting culture they were most interested in changing. The four teams each concentrated on one aspect of an effective meeting.

FOUR ASPECTS OF AN EFFECTIVE MEETING



Leadership



Execution



Engagement



Technology

The four groups identified necessary changes in each category to achieve the desired future state. They put together action plans that identified specific steps. Together, we created an increasingly detailed picture of an effective, post-revolution meeting culture.

We made sure there was time to evaluate the action plans before moving on to the third and final session. “We reviewed their plans in detail and provided feedback on how to improve,” said Tate.

“You don’t start the revolution without a good action plan.”

- Carson Tate

3 Session 3: The Dawn of the Revolution

Session 3 was dedicated to refining plans, formalizing meeting tools, and then simulating a meeting using both. The champions emerged from the final session with a meeting toolkit that included best practices, a standard agenda format, and facilitation and interaction guidelines.

The final exercise was a simulated meeting that tested the functional value of each tool. The groups refined and finalized their toolkit after this test.

“At this point, our champions had the training, knowledge, and tools to succeed,” said Tate. “It was time for them to go fishing.”

RESULTS

“Shortly after the Meeting Revolution began, the champions reunited for a big meeting to re-engage with the idea of fewer, better meetings. When we saw the meeting outline, we knew they were ready to sustain the new meeting culture on their own.”

— Carson Tate

Culture Transformation

Though members of the organization had shown overwhelming support for changing the meeting culture, how would individuals react to, for instance, tardiness becoming unacceptable?

Champions met with executive coaches to determine what was working and what was not. Were all the necessary tools in place? “As the revolution gained momentum, we helped them to keep finding ways to refine the new meeting culture,” said Tate. Senior leaders were observed as they facilitated meetings. After providing them with real-time feedback, we customized a plan to accentuate their strengths and remove their blind spots.

Small wins helped build momentum until the revolution reached critical mass. For example, the company’s web conferencing tools were unreliable, creating delays that extended meetings and frustrated participants. In response, the technology team drafted and posted simple instructions in every meeting room. Web conferencing ceased to be a roadblock.

New World Order

The post-revolutionary global pharmacovigilance division stood out in stark contrast to the conditions of the past. It eliminated 13,000 meeting hours. Redundant, information-only meetings were eliminated and alternative meeting formats were used, for example, fully leveraging the division’s SharePoint® site, videos, and email updates. The new meeting culture promoted punctuality, adherence to agendas, and decisiveness.

One-hour meetings no longer exploded into half-day marathons that left real work piled on desks, waiting for midnight-oil work sessions.

Employees stopped eating at their desks. They were not working into the night or on weekends because of time spent in unproductive meetings. They were getting more sleep, engaging with their family and friends, and pursuing personal interests. “Work was no longer consuming all of their time,” said Tate.

As meetings became shorter, less frequent, and more effective, division leaders saw real impact on the bottom line.

“A staff of just over 600 people saved 13,000 labor hours annually as a result of staging a Meeting Revolution.”

- VP of the product safety division

Meeting Revolutions Go Viral

The revolution continues. As inter-departmental meetings introduced the new techniques across the company, other departments and divisions demanded their own Meeting Revolutions. It became a company-wide phenomenon.

“With the right training and support tools, such as e-learning, a Meeting Revolution model can scale throughout a company,” said Tate. “We teach one person to fish, then he teaches the next person, and, before you know it, we affect systemic change throughout an organization.”

RESOURCES

[“When You Have Had One Meeting Too Many”](#) by Carson Tate

[Switch](#) by Chip and Dan Heath

[Appreciative Inquiry Commons](#).

Yes, we can help you build a winning workforce

Get In Touch:

www.workingsimply.com / info@workingsimply.com / 704-362-1526