

Episode 309: Proven Meeting Strategies That Boost Productivity with Yari Ising

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00:00

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

Our time is the most valuable resource we have, and yet it feels like so much of it is wasted in meetings. Well, today's guest has some unusual but powerful strategies to help us all take control of our time and be more productive. Yari Ising is the founder of the Ising agency, a firm offering operations, recruiting and admin support for stretched thin, in house teams. With over ten years of experience leading teams, Yari has seen firsthand the common blind spots that managers have, along with what employees need most from their manager, Yari shares strategies and practices she's employed to help her team and her clients improve their meetings and get more done.

00:39

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

Plus, in the extended episode available to members of podcast Plus, Yari shares her thoughts on how we can do less to do more and incorporate technology into our meetings for better follow through. Now here's the conversation.

00:52

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

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01:17

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

Thank you so much for joining me today, Yari. More thank you so much for joining me today, Yari. I'm so excited. Meetings is my favorite topic and I'm super happy to have you here to talk about how we can make our days more productive using some, what I would say maybe are unusual meeting strategies. So thanks for joining me.

01:35

Yari Ising

Yeah, thank you so much for having me. This is going to be a fun conversation because I very much love talking about meeting strategies.

01:43

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

You're one of the rare few that way, right? Not many people want to talk about meetings, they just want to be done with them. So why don't we start with the challenge of having days that are full of meetings? I think we all experience this when you're just in a day of back to back meetings. But what are some of the problems that causes that we maybe are kind of ignoring or rushing past because we're just too overwhelmed and too busy to even think about it.

02:08

Yari Ising

The biggest part of it is not really allowing yourself and your team the time and space to be able to do the work that they are hired to do. A lot of times folks will just, you know, accept a meeting invite without really thinking about what their expected contribution is, and they end up wasting time sitting in meetings where they could have spent it doing a little bit more of the actual core work of what they're meant to be there for. I think that's probably one of the biggest issues that we're having or just culturally that we experience with having too many meetings. And it just kind of impedes on people's day to day and their mental states as well.

02:49

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

I feel like people want to fix their productivity and their meetings, and it's like two different things

that we have to fix. One is how do we create enough time and space, as you're saying, to do the actual work that we have to get done? And how do we make sure the meetings that we have are worthwhile and productive? Because they're like, mutually reinforcing or negatively reinforcing, and we're doing them both poorly.

03:12

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

So what are some of the strategies that you have found to be most useful in getting out of that cycle of endless, useless meetings?

03:20

Yari Ising

One of the things that I've kind of employed and really hold firm on my team is instilling a meeting culture where the rules of engagement are explicit. So ahead of getting into going into any meeting, I encourage my teams to really own their calendar and really ask themselves, do I need to be in this meeting? So the first thing that I do as a leader of my 13 person team is I make it very explicit. These are what my expectations are of your participation in meetings, and I fully expect you to have really prune your calendar. So the first thing is set those expectations upfront. I try not to have meetings on Fridays to instill that productivity, lead by example. Really, when it comes to those types of rules, I think that's the first thing as a leader and as a manager that you need to do is set that groundwork to really empower your folks to say, yes. This is my calendar. I own it, and I'm going to do what I think is right with my time. And then kind of going into, all right, you've received this meeting invitation. What level of contribution? I always encourage folks to ask, what level of contribution do you expect of me in this meeting? Is it just for awareness, or am I expected to be an active contributor to this conversation? And if you're just there for awareness and you have competing priorities, it's okay for you to say no. And it's okay, you know, to remind your folks that you have to say no sometimes. And so you can't be in every room, you can't be in every conversation if you really, you know, value your time. And I encourage my teams to do that.

05:14

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

I love this idea of really empowering people to own their calendars because so many managers I work with are like, you know, if my boss needs this and my team needs that, and, like, I have no control. I can't time block anything I can't like. And we've kind of forgotten that we actually can own our time and we need, we should own our time and that we need to tell other people, too. Just because I ask for a meeting doesn't mean that you have to do it, right. Like, you get to own your calendar also, and I also really love being explicit about my, do I have to say yes to this? Why would I say yes to this event? It's another thing I kind of joke around people is that

when you get a calendar invite, the only acceptable reasons to say no are because you're sick, you're on vacation, or you're in another meeting. Right. And, like, that can't be real. Like, that can't be how we manage our time. Just because we got an invite, we say yes. And so what a beautiful thing to give your people that opportunity to say, is this the best use of my time on this day that I'm filled with, have my to do list filled with other things? It's amazing. I love this. How, how have your people responded? Like, have people actually taken you up on this?

06:25

Yari Ising

Absolutely. Actually, right before we jumped on this call, I sent a note to all of my folks and I said, hey, I have a bunch of one ones on my calendar. This is just a, you know, this is just an opportunity for us to connect. If you have competing priorities, I won't take offense to it. If you need to cancel or if we need to reschedule, I'm perfectly okay with that. And so I think it's that reinforcement and reminders that I think help people to say, okay. Yari says it's okay. So I'm going to take her up on it because I've got, you know, a thousand other things going on. So I think it's worked really well for my team. And sometimes I have to be more repetitive than I'd like to because over communication is effective communication. But I try to remind folks consistently and constantly because I find that sometimes folks do talk about how overwhelmed they are, and I have to be like, you don't have to be at every single meeting. It's been a really good response. And it's funny that we're talking about this because I recently did a retro with my team and meetings always come up where we talk about, have a set questions that I ask every quarter, what's going well? What needs to be improved upon? What do you want to be doing more of? What you want to be doing less of? And so my team, the topic of meetings comes up pretty frequently, and sometimes it's in the category what we want to be doing less of. But more recently, it's been, that's what we want to be doing or what we're doing. Right.

08:06

Yari Ising

So I find that, you know, just having those ongoing conversations and reminders has really made a huge impact on the productivity of my team and just our overall happiness. And those no meeting days are gold to our team and everyone, even people outside of our team, understand that Fridays are a no go for meetings. We're here, we're working. You can send us a note, but that time is off limits.

08:33

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

Tell me more about how you decided that a no meeting day was right for your team and then how you communicated and kind of managed that, especially with external stakeholders. Because I think that's a place where people often push back and they're like, well, I can do it fine with my team, but, like, you know, if someone from finance is calling a meeting for that project, I can't say no to them just because I don't have meetings on Friday. So how have you kind of communicated that to actually be able to protect that time?

09:02

Yari Ising

I think through consistent enforcement. That's been very effective where I am very protective of my time. And so when people ask, when are you available? Or can I throw some time on the calendar for Friday? Oh, unfortunately, Fridays are a no meeting day, but I have available time on Tuesday. I value transparent communications, and I encourage that from all of my team members. And there are times where there's something that's urgent and important that needs to happen. We need to have this call today or on a Friday. And so we have that flexibility built in. But if there is time to plan and prepare, then we kind of set that expectation upfront. Even with my leadership, folks understand that Fridays are a no go, generally speaking, for my team. So there are times where we do have to take meetings, but where we can control, we do.

10:08

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

Yeah, I mean, that's probably healthy way to kind of approach a no meeting day, instead of it being like a strict thing, giving it a little bit of flexibility. It also seems like if you were on vacation that day, unless it was an urgent, you know, really important thing, you would probably just not have the meeting on that day. It's almost like creating a mindset of these are like vacation days. We're out of the office and so we can't, you know, you can't schedule a meeting here because I'm not available. And instead of being on vacation, you're actually just heads down doing your to do list. And that's something that everybody can understand is this stays protected. What have you found to be, like, the benefits of having that head down day? Have you found that you're, and for your team, too, is, are people mostly just really productive, or does anybody struggle with having a whole day of no meetings and kind of running out of steam? And what's been the experience that your team has had?

11:02

Yari Ising

I will say I find that having the either on a Monday or a Friday really kind of helps. Kind of. Especially on a Friday. I will say it helps kind of close out the week and all the things that you were too busy to do during the week, you can focus on getting them done on that Friday. And so I think it definitely helps with just churning out the work that you need, too. And I don't mean turning out as, like, we're machines, because we're not, but it's, you know, having to constantly do that context switching, because one day or, you know, 1 hour, you might be having a meeting with finance and then meeting with leadership and then a strategic call and then a brainstorming call.

That context switching is it impacts your ability to be productive, even when you do have your head down. So I find that having a day that's just fully dedicated to. All right, I'm just. No distractions. I'm just going to sit here and focus on the work that needs to be done. It just helps move things along a lot faster so that you can actually focus.

12:14

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

What I have found to be interesting for me is that I am an extrovert. And I get like, at some point in the day, I'm like, I just need to talk to somebody. Like, I just want to be in a meeting right now. Like, I'm done staring at my computer screen and typing. I really just want to go be in a meeting. And so it's been fascinating to see how different people kind of respond differently to having a full day of no meetings. I also get exhausted from a full day of meetings, and that's just like a little too much. But it is an interesting thing to make sure that you're talking with your team and people feel like they have whatever it is that they need to kind of keep their energy up. So we have that both heads down work and also whatever other kinds of our needs are met. So just a thing I did not expect to happen when I implemented this for myself.

12:59

Yari Ising

So my team, as I mentioned before, we have a quarterly kind of check in. What's going well, what's not going well, and our structure and the way that we approach our meetings and our rules of engagements in meeting has been just, it's been evolving over time. And so these no meeting Fridays are a thing that people value and they cherish and they hold, they protect it at all costs. And we also most recently talked about our Wednesday meeting. We have, we have a Wednesday meeting that has always been a source of conversation where folks are, all right, we really want to use this time to brainstorm, or we want to use this time. One quarter it was a brainstorming session, and then most recently it was a, hey, we really need an opportunity to kind of, like, socialize a little bit more. So can we turn that into like a tea time? And so we did. We tried. You know, we repurposed the meeting to be had to go from one thing to another, and

now we're reevaluating the use of that time. So I think it's, you know, to your point, sometimes you need, you have to do some trial and error to see what works for you personally and what works for you as a team and really make the best use of the time that you do have. And if my team told me, hey, you know what? I think these Wednesday meetings are just, can we just eliminate them? That's something that we can certainly talk about. And the floor is open to have that conversation.

14:28

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

What a great way to work with your team to make meetings that work for you and for everyone. It's another place that I think managers can struggle as we go into meetings, and we know what we're trying to get out of it. And it's a good use of our time because we are leading it. We're trying to get to something, and we, most of the time, if you're leading it, if it was a bad meeting, you wouldn't have done it that way. Maybe so. You're leading it for a reason, but it's not a good use for other people. So I love that you're including your team to say, how can we make this work for all of us? What's the best use of all of our time?

15:00

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

I want to talk about another strategy that you mentioned that was reading some things you wrote about, which is the exit strategy. Can you talk about this one?

15:11

Yari Ising

It's a tricky one, and it's a hot take because I think people can take that personally if they're the ones facilitating the meeting or in charge of the meeting. Having folks leave probably doesn't feel the greatest. I think it goes back to setting the stage upfront and nurturing a meeting culture that allows it to be okay for folks to leave the meeting. The first question, you know, before we're even in a meeting that you have to gracefully exit, I think we need to take a few steps back. Right? Are you, have you set a meeting culture where you've made your expectations very clear upfront of if you don't need to be in the meeting, you don't, you just say no.

15:55

Yari Ising

And then secondly, once you get through that phase of, or have that understanding across your

team, when an invite comes to your inbox, are you asking the organizer, do I really need to be there? So I feel like that eliminates that part of I'm going to just join this meeting, just to join it. And then, hey, you know what, I don't think I'm really needed here, so I'm just going to hop out. So I think that kind of eliminates some of that like, gray area because it's very explicit upfront. But once you're in a meeting and you have, again, competing priorities, or if you have another meeting you have to go to, or you know what? I really should be focusing my energy on something else because I'm a big fan of just not multitasking.

16:43

Yari Ising

I am not a fan of, you know, having email open and sending emails and, you know, slack messages or matter, most messages, if you're in a meeting and you're like, okay, I think it's time for me to depart. I think it's respectful to tell the meeting leader, hey, I've got to hop to something else. Thank you so much for, you know, for facilitating this meeting. I've got to go. And at that point, because you've already set that groundwork, at that point, the meeting facilitator should know that, hey, it's nothing personal. This person just has some, has, you know, a competing priority. It could be a little trickier to do when you're in another meeting with stakeholders or external folks. So if you are accepting the invite, I always tell my teams and tell myself, if you're committing to this meeting and participating in the meeting, you're committed to it. So there are some instances where it's okay and it should be understood that it's nothing personal and then there are other times where you've made the commitment. This is a meeting that you're in now.

17:53

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

That's such a good rule of thumb of if there's some reputational risk involved, that would you show up, you commit to it, you show up, you engage. And if it's internal and we have an understanding around what's a good practice, then if it's not the best use of your time, it's okay to hop. I think you wrote this in the article, too, that you would rather have two people engaged in the conversation than ten people there, two of whom are engaged, and the rest of whom are multitasking and not paying attention. And it is so easy at meetings to multitask, and it's not respectful. Right? It's not good for us as the meeting leader. We know when our people are not paying attention. Like, you can see it on their faces. Sadly, although some of us have gotten very good at the, like, I'm smiling while I'm also typing this other thing, but for the most part, right, it's not good. We're not really engaged, and we're not also really putting all of our brain power into the other thing that we're doing.

18:52

Yari Ising

Right?

18:52

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

We're kind of, like in this weird half zone that's not really optimized for anything. So what a great way to just say, hey, if this isn't the best use of your time, like, you have other things that you need to get done. Don't sit here and pretend like you're involved. Actually, just like, say any top and go do the other thing. And that's great.

19:14

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

What do we need to do then, as meeting leaders? To make sure that if our people are either declining invites in the first place or gracefully exiting meetings, that they feel like they have more important things to do. And this really isn't the conversation that they need to be in. How do we make sure that they stay up to date and know what's going on and are involved in the right ways? Because so much of what happens in meetings actually needs to get spread beyond just the few folks who are there.

19:43

Yari Ising

It's a great question and a balance that I think takes time to get to. What I found works for me are either recording meetings or using tools like womb or things like that to have an archive of what was discussed and share it out with folks that the information is relevant to. So a lot of my trainings are recorded. Any professional development talks or any of those meetings that are important for people to, you know, that have context that other folks will need are recorded and shared out so that people can watch it on their own time. You know, where my entire team is dispersed around the country, so we have different time zones. We have, you know, things that we deal with, you know, obviously with conflicting schedules. So I find that having recordings or doing some using a tool like bloom, it helps to make sure that the message gets across to everyone that needs to hear it.

20:48

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

I love audio messages. I feel like we've really, as a culture, kind of, like, downplayed the opportunity to create audio and video messages to send to people. The science on this is so fascinating that we can hear, like, ten times more than we can, faster than we can speak. It's like a crazy thing. So it might take you ten minutes to record the message, but your team could listen to it and on, like, double speed and get all the information perfectly accurately with all of

your tone of voice and your expression and everything in, like, half the time. It's just unreal. It's, like, so cool that we can save our team members time by just simply right, like, recording it instead of saying it in a meeting or even typing it out, which can be challenging for some of us to put our ideas and really get the nuance and the tone into the writing. And for some folks, reading is fast, and for some folks, reading is slow, but, like, we can all listen, for the most part, we can all listen to something and understand it and pretty quickly. So I just love that. Highly recommend video loom messages and other tools, too. Okay, before we wrap up, what is one of your favorite meeting techniques that you've deployed with your team that's been really helpful that we haven't yet chatted about? Just kind of.

22:10

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

What's one of your favorites?

22:12

Yari Ising

I have a lot of hard and fast, like, rules of engagement that I think my team really grasp onto, which I think is great. We have limits on, you know, how long a meeting can be, depending on what it is. So my meetings are all 45 minutes by default, like, as the longest meeting time, so that we have that buffer period one if the conversation gets really good and we need a little bit of extra time before our next meeting, or we just need to, like, grab a cup of coffee before we go into another meeting. That's one of the things that really works well for us, is we do 15 minutes increments, 45 minutes being the longest. And one of the other things that I employ that I feel has been really helpful for getting everyone in the same mindset are the right space or mental space to be able to contribute effectively is if I know that we're going into a conversation that might be a little contentious or we're having a really busy season and things like that, and we have a lot to go over and a lot to cover. I start my meetings with a mindful moment where I literally tell everyone, shut your cameras off. We're just going to sit here quietly for like two minutes before we kick off this meeting to reflect and kind of decompress from any of the prior meetings that you've had or any of the other busyness that. That you're kind of carrying around with you so that we can all be fully present.

23:46

Yari Ising

So I'm a huge believer in mindful leadership and kind of giving yourself mental space to, like, make decisions and things like that. And I, and I reinforce that in my team as well, especially during meetings. So those are two of the tactics that I think have worked really well for my team.

24:04

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

First of all, yes to all of those things. 45 minutes meetings. It drives me crazy the way that calendaring apps work, where really it's like you have to type in if you want something other than a standard on the hour. It's just frustrating. We need to get rid of that and have meetings that are whatever length that's needed for the meeting and not just assume it has to be an hour. So yes, and mindful moments, that's such a beautiful way to start a meeting. And we are all running from one thing to another, whether it's the task you were just working on into this conversation or another meeting into this meeting. And it's so easy to bring that baggage and have your focus be like, still three steps behind you, even though you're now physically present in this other space. And to be able to just take a minute, I can imagine that the productivity that comes out of that, just like the 1 minute of being able to refocus and recenter and then be ready for this conversation, probably makes those conversations and those meetings so much more effective and get so much more thinking in the room and so much more engagement. And it only takes 1 minute.

25:13

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

So what a beautiful tip for everyone to encourage their team members and themselves to just do that transition. We are out of time, though.

25:20

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

So, doctor, can you tell us about a great manager that you worked for and what made this person such a fabulous boss?

25:26

Yari Ising

I thought about this for a while because I've had some really great managers. I've learned a lot, but I had one who she empowered me in a way that I don't think I'd ever been empowered before. It was a working relationship where she gave me all the tools that I needed to succeed and understand the tasks that were expected of me. And she let me be autonomous and let me make the decisions that I, you know, that I thought were right for me at the time. And she let me explore, you know, what it meant to do my job and how to do it. That experience really stood out and made me the leader that I am today and really kind of helped mold the type of culture that I want to nurture within my teams.

26:17

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

Oh, beautiful. And where can people learn more about you and keep up with your work?

26:22

Yari Ising

My website is, itsyari.com, so itsyari.com. I post blogs on there, and I also am on [LinkedIn](#), so feel free to come hang out and see what I have going on.

26:37

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

Awesome. All right, well, thank you again so much. I feel like we could all now go make our days more productive, empower our teams to own their time and improve our meetings. So thank you so much for joining me.

26:49

Yari Ising

Thank you so much for having me. This was fun.

26:51

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

In lieu of a guest bonus this week, I'm sharing my workshop handout for optimizing meeting participation. You'll learn how to decide who should be engaged before, during, and after a meeting, how to best engage them, and how to make the shift so that everyone who's not invited still feels engaged appropriately at each stage. To get this guest bonus and many more, and the extended episode where Yari shares her thoughts on how we can do less to do more and incorporate technology into our meetings for better follow through, become a member of Podcast Plus at themodernmanager.com/more. All the links are in the show notes, and they can be delivered to your inbox when you subscribe to my newsletter. Find that at themodernmanager.com. Thanks again for listening. Until next time.

