Meetings That Don't Suck with Elise Keith
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Welcome to Brainfluence, where author and international keynote speaker Roger Dooley has weekly conversations with thought leaders and world class experts. Every episode shows you how to improve your business with advice based on science or data.

Roger's new book, *Friction,* is published by McGraw Hill and is now available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and bookstores everywhere. Dr Robert Cialdini described the book as, "Blinding insight," and Nobel winner Dr. Richard Claimer said, "Reading Friction will arm any manager with a mental can of WD40."

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Now, here's Roger.

Roger Dooley: Welcome to Brainfluence. I'm Roger Dooley.

If I say the word meeting, I'm guessing that you might at least in your mind groan and say, "No, not another meeting." My favorite humor writer, Dave Barry, once wrote, if you had to identify in one word the reason why the human race has not achieved, and never will achieve its full potential that word would be meetings. Are you nodding your head in agreement?

Well, today's guest has a message that may surprise you. Elise Keith is the founder and meeting maven for Lucid Meetings, a provider of software and training. She's the author of *Where the Action Is: The Meetings That Make Or Break Your Organization*. And she'll be here to tell us how to run meetings that get stuff done, and that people won't dread attending. Elise Welcome to the show.

Elise Keith: Thanks for having me.

Roger Dooley: Yeah. So, Elise, in looking over your resume, I noticed that you studied theater in college. Did that give you any insights, or perspective on communications and meetings in particular?

Elise Keith: Absolutely. So, one thing that happens when you are training to be a performing artist, right? Whether it's in the theater, or in music, or dance, or any of these kinds of group activities where you're performing together you come with this assumption that we're going to get together on a regular basis and collaborate, and practice, and work through things so that we can get to an excellent result. And we're going to get to that excellent result by Friday. And if it's Aida there's going to be an elephant, and there is no choice, right? The show will go on. It will be fabulous. It will be fabulous by this date.

So you have this sort of built-in pattern of how to collaborate effectively as a group on schedule to a level of quality. Unfortunately, we didn't necessarily have as much built-in like, "And then you go off and get a job, and you eat every day." So I left the performing arts world, and joined the software world where we had the same requirement, right? We had things we were trying to accomplish by a certain date with other people to a level of quality for an audience. And there was no expectation about how we would go about doing it.

Roger Dooley: I would mention one thing, too, is in theater you learn to wait for the other person to say their line, and you have to be pretty attentive. You don't sort of start checking your email on stage, and then they finished what they were saying. And that's probably a good habit to have for a meeting where you say your piece, but you're very attentive to what everybody else is doing.

Elise Keith: I think Lencioni did a good job in Death by Meeting. He writes about how you should learn from watching the movies if you want to run effective meetings because like any good drama, a good meeting has an arc. It has a story arc. Monologues are boring. There's only so many really long speeches that we can endure, and we mostly endure them because they're written by Shakespeare, and we're supposed to love them, but that doesn't work so much in the business world. So you're right, that whole what's the setup? How do we get all the players engaged? What's the back and forth? How are we coming to the climax here? All of that. That arc of storyline, and the back and forth interaction is really key to any collaborative, exciting, enjoyable experience. That goes for meetings just as much as it does for daytime TV.

Roger Dooley: So, Elise, why do so many people despise meetings, or at least say they despise meetings? You make the point that maybe not everybody does despise meetings.

Elise Keith: I think meetings are one of those places where we get to explore. When you truly look at them they've got a real polar profile, right? I think in one of your earlier interviews you were talking about somebody who worked for you who was in 30 meetings a week. That's probably somebody who said that I can't get anything else done because I'm in meeting after meeting after meeting. And then when you sit back and look at it from that sort of generic perspective, you can say, "Yeah, meetings are a waste of time, and da, ta-da, ta-da," but on the other hand, when you're not sure what to do, when you lack a sense of control, or you're not sure how to go about solving a problem, and when you think maybe the other people who are in that room might be making decisions without you, the equation flips.

We find people working really hard to get into meetings, and afraid to not go to meetings. And when asked, would you rather go to a meeting and work this out with your team, or send a bunch of emails back and forth for two days they'll pick the meeting every single time. So the whole mentality about meetings being something that we loath it's just one of those things where the way that people behave doesn't match that statement in any way, shape, or form.

Roger Dooley: How did you start your career and end up focusing on meetings, Elise? That's not sort of the obvious leap to say, "Wow, people hate meetings, or say they hate meetings, I think I'll specialize in that."

Elise Keith: Well, I did start there, right? I started with the whole like, "Oh, people hate these. Well, why don't we work on creating software that embeds best practices so that people don't have to work so hard. They can have fewer meetings, and they'll take less time, and they'll get awesome results. And then we'll basically work to automate away as much of the meeting work as possible, thereby, reducing meeting friction because nobody likes meetings." So that was the original idea behind Lucid Meetings, our company. It was a flawed idea for a number of reasons. Part of what we found when we were doing that was that we had built a tool that was made to reduce the friction in the way a company, or an organization meets, right? Reduce the friction in their system, but the reality is most companies, most teams don't have a system that you can optimize in the first place.

Roger Dooley: What do you mean by that?

Elise Keith: Well, that said, when you look in places, and that's what we did. We stopped and we were like, "Okay, wait a second. People

want to run better meetings, or they want to have fewer meetings." We say, "Okay, well, here's how you do an agenda, and monitor time." And all of that kind of stuff, but they weren't able to use those tools because when you look at it in more detail we're not running a meeting with an agenda. In our teams we're running many meetings every day, all of them with very different agendas in theory, and all of them ideally intended to create, and help us get to different goals. So when you look at the question of meetings in general it's a nonsense question.

Roger Dooley: So you have to look at meetings in specific?

Elise Keith: You have to look at meetings in specific. So what we did is we said, "Okay, meetings in general actually means nothing." Right? It's just a way to get people to say, "Oh, meetings are a waste of time." It's the entirety of the conversation about meetings. "I work on meetings. Meetings are a waste of time." Then we get that circular doom loop where then there's nowhere to go from there. So instead what you look at is you're, okay, well what's going on in the organizations where they're doing this particularly well? Right? What's happening?

Amazon gets used as an example here quite a lot because Amazon has really strong guidelines about how they meet, how often they meet, what they do in those meetings, and how those meetings work together to help drive the business forward. Amazon's not alone in that. That turns out to be the key to success for meetings in any endeavor. You understand what you're trying to achieve, and you design a system of meetings that helps you achieve those goals. Once you've got a system, then you can start to optimize it, then you can pull the friction out of it.

Roger Dooley: So what are some categories of meetings? You can't talk about just a meeting in general, but what sort of major categories do they fall into that you could then start saying, "Okay, well this is what that kind of meeting should look like."

Elise Keith: We did the research on this and there are 16 distinct types of meetings. Basically, it's a toolkit. You've got meetings that are good for helping teams that have decided to do some work together, check in on that work, and keep the work moving, right? They're all about creating trust, and momentum, and maintaining strategic alignment. So let's talk about one of those for a second, if that's okay?

Roger Dooley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Elise Keith: Cisco, great big old tech company decided recently that they were no longer going to work on performance management in the way they had in the past. They were no longer going to set the annual goals for every person, and make them do a check in with their manager every 60 days. They found it just didn't work. It was a lot of effort and had no results, but they very much wanted to increase team engagement, and employee engagement because they knew based on the research that when people felt like they were working on a team that they trusted doing meaningful work, and that they were working for a company they believed in, that the company had a future, that they were more engaged, they were happier, and their performance went up. So, treat people well up front, you get better business results.

We were like, "Okay, well, how do we practically increase engagement?" And what they did over many years of experimentation is they found that when they had team leaders check in with team members every week on two questions,

team engagement went up reliably. So that's a one-on-one meeting. So they designed a system of very specific one-on-one meetings that they could then deploy across 15,000 teams, and increase employee engagement across the board reliably.

Roger Dooley: And these two questions?

Elise Keith: In this case, one of the keys to this particular one-on-one is that the employee initiates it. So this is not the manager asking, but it's the employee initiating, and what they do is they say, "Here are my priorities for the week. Here's where I need help."

Roger Dooley: Okay. About how often would they check in?

Elise Keith: Weekly.

Roger Dooley: Weekly. Okay. Is that a formal schedule? If the employee does not check in during a given week will then the supervisor followup with them, or no?

Elise Keith: First of all they began by making it optional, right? The employee can check in if they want, and then the manager can reply if they want. They found that in the teams where they were consistently doing both, so the team member would check in, and the team leader would then talk to that person, performance went up. In all of the other variations, they didn't. So rather than putting the burden on the team member, what Cisco did is they implemented a performance expectation for every team leader that they would reply to 80% of all check-ins, right? They made meeting performance part of their job performance, and they said, "If you're going to be a team leader, this is your metric." And what they found, because it also served the people there, right? They enjoy their work better. They're liking each other better as teams is that their compliance rate was closer to 92%.

Roger Dooley: Right. And that sort of follows the what gets measured gets done thesis that if you actually track this stuff, and make that part of somebody's job and evaluation then it's going to happen.

Elise Keith: The important thing to that was that getting back to what are the different types of meetings, and what does it mean to have a meeting system is that you do want to get to a place where meeting performance can be a part of job performance, but only after you understand which meetings you need to be holding, and what they're meant to accomplish. In that example, that's Cisco looking to drive one specific outcome. They're looking to increase engagement.

Roger Dooley: Right.

Elise Keith: Another meeting that's a critical lever point is the action review. You can see that one used by first responders, and military, and firefighters, and what-not. They do the same thing. When they want to increase innovation they increase the frequency with which teams get together, and run action reviews. The action review is this really short learning meeting, right? What happened? What do we think about? What are we going to do next? That's the core function for that meeting. In cultures where innovation is a key deal, that's a core practice, and they do it faster, and more often than in other cultures. Pixar is famous for having a weekly, essentially, an action review. It's a design critique as they work through making new movies, and is part of what they consider to be their secret to making consistently excellent animated wonderments.

Roger Dooley: Right. Again, it's very focused. It seems like that is sort of the key element of what your whole book is that meetings have to have a particular focus. To me, the worst meetings that I've

been part of, and I've been a part of many have been those that have sort of wide ranging topics, and people providing updates on things, and other people are talking about future plans. It's a pretty certain thing that not everybody in the meeting is going to be interested in much of what's going on. For one, it makes for a much longer meeting. So, in general, pretty much a terrible meeting. Undoubtedly, there's some stuff may get accomplished, but there's a lot of wasted time in those.

Elise Keith: There is. I think this particular audience might appreciate how much bad design there is in that as well from a human cognitive kind of perspective. So let's take just an example. Let's take the weekly team meeting, which is a pretty standard meeting that lots of teams have. When run well that's a place where people reconnect as a team. They feel a sense of belonging. They reconnect with what they're supposed to be doing. So they stay in the loop, they stay informed. And then they help each other solve problems. So it's about saying, "Hey, we as a team, we agreed to do this thing. How's it going? Let's make sure we trust each other because we're being accountable, and that we're maintaining momentum." And that whole thing is about managing risk and maintaining status quo.

Sometimes you get into one of those meetings and somebody will go, "Oh, my gosh. We've got this terrible problem. Let's take a couple minutes, and brainstorm a bunch of cool out of the box ideas for solving it." Out of the box thinking, that's awesome, but it's also psychologically contradictory to what we're doing when we're in a social group trying to maintain status quo. It's just fundamentally unsuccessful because you've put yourself in a room full of people where you're trying to say, "No, I toe the line. I'm accountable. I'm trustworthy. This is what we do." And then you're saying, "Hey, be creative. What might we do otherwise?" So in that situation, you're far better off stopping,

taking a break, and then setting up the conditions for creative thinking, which is an entirely different head space.

Roger Dooley: Elise, you talk about meeting binges and then meeting fasts. Is there a way if you go into a company that has say a pretty broken meeting culture, there are a lot of meetings, they aren't very productive, and the managers are ready to say, "Okay, no more meetings," which obviously isn't a solution as you point out in the book, just put an end to this because we've got so much of our valuable employees time tied up in these meetings that it's not sustainable. How do you go about sort of whittling things down and saying, "Okay, we're going to have meetings, but we're going to limit them in some way to make sure that they're productive and actually getting stuff done?"

Elise Keith: I mentioned that we had looked into what really awesome high performing organizations are doing with meetings. At that very, very high level they have these well-defined sequences of meetings so they know how they set their strategy. Everybody knows how decisions are made. They know how to be included, how to solve problems, all of that kind of stuff. It's really quite special to behold, but there are a lot of steps before you get there.

The first step for that whole progression is to stop and take a look at what's actually going on with your meetings, and see them for the system that they are. We have a couple of different ways that we approach this when we work with clients where we help a client look at, first of all, what's possible. What are some of the practices? What does it look like when you do it well? And then look specifically at what you're actually doing, and try and understand a little bit about why you might be doing it, and then level set on some new agreements.

So, new agreements. Generally, these are working team agreements that are stated like ground rules, or team norms. A lot of teams will start there, right? They'll say, "Okay, we're going to not have any meetings on Tuesdays because we're going to leave Tuesday's time blocked for productivity." For example, might be a rule that you put in place. "We're going to start all of our meetings by reading the briefing." So that's one of Amazon's guidelines on meetings. They start meetings by reading a briefing, and you don't schedule a meeting if you don't have a briefing.

So that's all great, but it tends not to be enough on its own what actually required is for folks to look at the meetings that they're running, and pull them apart, and design specifically the ones they actually need to be running. They will start often by saying, "Okay, we're going to meet every week as a team, and we're going to make our decisions like this." Once they start to design those specific conversations, just like Cisco do with its one-on-ones, then you can start to optimize. Then you can start to work your way towards actually having a very functional system.

Roger Dooley: Elise, today, a lot of people are dealing with remote teams, and remote individuals working from home, working from some remote office. Fortunately, I don't participate in too many meetings these days, but what I found in those situations is everybody's on mute so they don't hear them answering emails, or something. How do you keep a remote group of people engaged? I mean, if people are sitting around a table together, it's a little bit more obvious if somebody's completely not paying attention, but not so much when they are just a voice in the end of a phone.

Elise Keith: Well, let's examine that one a little bit because you said a couple things there that are important. First, you said, "How do

you keep people engaged? It's easier to know if they're paying attention when you're sitting in the room." So the first one that I'd challenge is that paying attention is the level of engagement that you should be seeking. The level of engagement that helps everybody in the room feel like that time was a good use of their time is one where they're actively participating, not just paying attention. The answer for how you keep people engaged, or get people engaged in a remote setting is very similar to how it is in an in person setting. And that's that you are running an interesting meeting that they need to be in because together you are there to accomplish a goal. You're working together.

To give you an example, I think the other thing I would challenge in what you just said was that you say, "You don't do a lot of remote meetings." And yet here we are on Skype, two people coming together at an agreed upon time for a fixed amount of time to create a shared result. And you were prepared, and I was prepared. We started with some quick introductions to make sure we were all good to go. We're going through the business of this discussion, and at the end we'll get a result. Now how is that not a meeting?

Roger Dooley: Well, it's a meeting, but it is a one-on-one as well. The problem is when you've got 12 people in the meeting, and there's only two in the conference room, so everybody's not participating all the time. Also, you don't have the... Well, we're doing okay here, but I can see where the body language, and facial expressions are important, too, for an optimal meeting where you can see if you say something, and somebody looks puzzled or upset, you can pause and say, "Hey, was that confusing, or did I say something wrong?" Where when folks are not on camera, and just voices you just don't hear anything.

Meetings That Don't Suck with Elise Keith

Elise Keith: Yeah, that's true. And that's one of the reasons why oratory is just not appropriate for the meeting format. That's something you can move outside of meetings for the most part. It is more challenging, absolutely, when you're remote in some ways, but it also unlocks some new opportunities that you don't have when you're in the room. So let's consider for a second the dynamics of how you set up a meeting room when it's a physical room, right? So you have a room, and everybody's sitting around the table in a circle. Well, while you're all sitting together around in the circle, and you have somebody who's making a decision, the people to either side, and I think is it Cialdini who looked at this? The people who are sitting to either side of the person whose making the decision don't get heard by that decision-maker, whereas, the person who is directly across from them on the table has undue influence, what's focal is causal.

Roger Dooley: Right. Cialdini wrote about that in Pre-Suasion, you see what's in front of you.

Elise Keith: Absolutely. You have all kinds of really fascinating, complex human dynamics that go on when you're in a room together. The big, long boardroom style table, or the U-shaped table have very clear seating positions that indicate power and dominance. Some of that goes away when you go remote. When you go remote, and you have a well-designed meeting, one where everybody is contributing in multi-modes at once, you can contribute both verbally, but also in writing, right? So people are typing notes, or they're brainstorming ideas, or they're chatting, or whatever. All of a sudden you have leveled that playing field by using technology, and breaking up some of the physical dynamics of the in person thing in a way that's very hard, and requires some pretty advanced facilitation skills when you're in a room together. So there are pros and cons.

Roger Dooley: Right. That's a good point. I like that. I think that, too, if the meeting is designed, and the topic is correct, and so on, you won't have people who are answering email in the background because they actually have a stake in what's going on. I think that's most common when you've got a big meeting, and just folks talking about tech stuff, and you've got marketing people who don't have a clue as to what they're even talking about they can tune out, and do something else. One of the concepts you have in the book, Elise, is a single topic agenda. To me that goes toward exactly that problem where if you've got multiple topics, then undoubtedly you're going to have people who have varying levels of interest at different points in the meeting, and you're going to be consuming probably more time for more people. Explain single topic agenda.

Elise Keith: The single topic agenda is exactly what it is. It's a way of identifying that there's something you need to accomplish. My way of helping people understand what an agenda is meant to be, right? The way that we use agendas, or that they're misused in corporate America today is people say, "Oh, I've got to have an agenda for a meeting, so I'll put up a list of all the things we maybe need to talk about." And that's a laundry list of possibilities. That's not a plan for success. So what an agenda is meant to be is meant to be the way that you market your plan for achieving that goal together in the meeting. If you don't have more of a plan then we need to achieve this then you don't need an agenda. You just don't need it. You should stick with the single topic, which is our purpose is to make a decision about how long this podcast will be, and that's it.

In terms of how you run it every effective meeting has three essential phases. The first is connection, and greetings where you welcome people into the conversation, and you connect them to why you're in the room together, or on a call together.

And you have to do this because it's just a smart thing to do, but also we are all dealing cognitively with a million things when we walk into the room. One of the authors we like to work with talks about the six fields of distraction, right? You've got physical pain, and emotional pain, and other work you're doing, and technology distractions, and all kinds of other stuff in every single person's head when they walk into that room.

The first part of the single topic agenda process is you greet everyone. Everybody speaks within that first five minutes, and you reconfirm why you're in that room so that they clear, and they become present. Then you can move onto whatever that discussion is, but before you wrap, before you leave, you absolutely have to take a few minutes to say, "Okay, what did we decide? And write that down. Get very, very clear this is what we decided. Who will do what by when?" And then if you want an excellent meeting culture, "Thank you. I appreciate you for being here. That was a great contribution."

Roger Dooley: Some of our listeners may not be CEOs. Most of them are not CEOs, or in necessarily a position where they can influence the way the company runs. Some may be part of a larger organization, and maybe more perhaps victims of a bad meeting culture. How do you suggest that somebody who doesn't have high-level organizational power are there things that they can do to at least start the improvement process, or do things in a way that helps them, and perhaps those around them?

Elise Keith: Yeah, absolutely. First of all, one of the things to recognize is that every meeting that you're in as an opportunity. There are other people sitting around in that room who are making decisions about how they feel about you and your contribution, how they feel about working on that team, how they feel about

the work, and are making decisions about the work itself. So orienting yourself to being aware that that's the dynamic that's going on, and helping seize that opportunity to the best of your ability is a mindset shift I would invite you to take regardless what level you're at. And then from there that opportunity, the really, really excellently well-run meetings require some amount of design, and some amount of skill. So educate yourself on what an effective meeting looks like, and begin to contribute to increasing the effectiveness of the meetings that you're in.

The easiest way to do that is to volunteer to take the notes. When you take the notes, if you're writing them for the group, they are not wrong when they say, "He or she who takes the notes owns the result." If people are happy for you to take the notes because they should be happy for you to take the notes if nobody else is doing it, you all of a sudden have permission to then start to ask the hard questions. "Hold on a second everybody. I think we just made a decision there. Can we state that clearly again, so I can make sure I get it right in the notes. Okay, this is great, but I missed who was going to actually do that work. Do I have an action item that I should be writing down here? Oh, it looks like Jane didn't have a chance to weigh in on this one. Jane, is that going to work for you in your department?"

You get the opportunity to ask incredibly powerful questions that change the outcome when you become the owner of the note taking. That's a personal development way, I mean, but if you are in a position where you want to influence the organization, you can make the case to the people in charge because there is easy, easy math to be done on meeting improvement, and easy, easy math to be done on how dramatic a competitive advantage the companies that meet will have to take to your leaders.

Roger Dooley: Right. I think both of those are good strategies, but I love the note taking idea because that's something that probably anybody can do because nobody wants to volunteer to take notes. I mean, meetings are bad enough without having to then spend time writing them up, but by doing that, as you say, you get to ask the questions, you get to sort of control the conclusions a little bit. And that's a great start. I suppose the other thing that somebody could do is even at their level they may be the organizer of some small meetings, if not the big ones, and they can try and do those in as an effective a way as possible that might serve as a model for others.

Elise Keith: Absolutely.

Roger Dooley: I mean, instead of going to a meeting that, "Wow, God, that was another horrible meeting." Say, "Hey, this person's meetings are actually pretty good. They're pretty sharp." Because I think you will convince people that you know what you're doing if you can run an effective meeting.

Elise Keith: Well, "And did I hear somewhere that you had had an opportunity to work at McKinsey, or with McKinsey for awhile?"

Roger Dooley: Nope.

Elise Keith: Yeah. So one of the things we find when we work with folks in the analyst world is that at the lower rank and file, they complain a lot about their meetings, but the farther up you get in the organization, there's no question that if you have made it to a certain level in the organization, you know how to run a decent meeting. Yet in most organizations, and this was true of the people I was talking to recently, and I don't know if it was back then, or still is at this exact moment, but the data says that while the farther up you get in the ladder you will spend more

and more of your day in meetings. That's just kind of how leadership is done. Leaders lead through meetings. Very, very few, fewer than 25% of the leaders ever have any training. If you want to advance in your career, and stand out in a way that is incredibly competitive, knowing how to run a better meeting than all of the other potential leaders around you is a really smart way to do it because that's what leaders do.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, I think that's probably a good place to wrap, Elise. Today, we are speaking with Elise Keith, founder of Lucid Meetings, and author of Where the Action Is: The Meetings That Make Or Break Your Organization. Elise, how can people find you?

Elise Keith: They can find me, and my company, and our work on lucidmeetings.com, and there you'll find all kinds of free resources showing how the best of the best companies run their meetings, and a free diagnostic survey where you can see how your organization's habits stack up against the rest of the world.

Roger Dooley: Great. Well, we will link there to Elise's book, and to any other resources we spoke about on the show notes page at rogerdooley.com/podcast, and we'll have a text version of our conversation there, too. Elise, thanks for being on the show. Maybe someday we'll end up in the same meeting other than this one.

Elise Keith: That would be great.

Thank you for tuning into this episode of Brainfluence. To find more episodes like this one, and to access all of Roger's online writing and resources, the best starting point is RogerDooley.com.

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And remember, Roger's new book, *Friction*, is now available at Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and book sellers everywhere. Bestselling author Dan Pink calls it, "An important read," and Wharton Professor Dr. Joana Berger said, "You'll understand Friction's power and how to harness it."

For more information or for links to Amazon and other sellers, go to RogerDooley.com/Friction.

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