

Book Synopses:

Meetings, Conversation, and Organizational Sensemaking

Death by Meeting — Patrick Lencioni

The Surprising Science of Meetings — Steven G. Rogelberg

Meetings Matter — Paul Axtell

Interaction Ritual Chains — Randall Collins

The Business of Talk — Deirdre Boden

Sensemaking in Organizations — Karl E. Weick

Group Genius — R. Keith Sawyer

Talk: The Science of Conversation — Elizabeth Stokoe

Meetings: Managerial Time and Organizational Democracy — Helen B. Schwartzman

Death by Meeting

Patrick Lencioni (2004)

Patrick Lencioni's "Death by Meeting" argues that the widespread dread of meetings is not caused by meetings themselves but by the way organizations structure and run them. The book is written in Lencioni's signature format: a business fable followed by a concise theoretical model. The fable follows Casey McDaniel, the CEO of a fictional technology company called Yip Software, whose meetings are so dull and unproductive that they threaten the company's future. Through Casey's journey, Lencioni shows how the absence of conflict, drama, and clear purpose turns meetings into soul-crushing rituals rather than the productive forums they could be.

Lencioni's central insight is that most organizations try to address all their meeting needs in a single weekly staff meeting, which ends up being too long for tactical updates and too short for strategic discussions. This one-size-fits-all approach means that administrative details crowd out important debates, while strategic questions get only superficial treatment. The result is that no one finds the meeting satisfying: people who need quick tactical coordination are frustrated by digressions into strategy, while those who need deep strategic discussion feel rushed.

To solve this, Lencioni proposes a four-meeting model. The first is the "Daily Check-In," a five-minute stand-up meeting where team members share their top priorities for the day. The purpose is purely administrative: keeping people aligned without eating into productive time. The second is the "Weekly Tactical," a 45- to 90-minute meeting focused on current activities, metrics, and short-term obstacles. Lencioni emphasizes that this meeting should not have a predetermined agenda; instead, the team should build the agenda in real time based on what matters most that week. This prevents the meeting from becoming a rote recitation of standing agenda items.

The third type is the "Monthly Strategic," a meeting of roughly two hours dedicated to one or two major topics that require deep analysis, debate, and decision-making. Lencioni stresses that these topics should be identified in advance and that the meeting should feature genuine conflict and disagreement. He argues, borrowing from screenwriting theory, that meetings need "drama"—the productive tension that comes from people who care about an issue wrestling with

it openly. Without this tension, meetings default to passive information-sharing, which is both boring and ineffective. The fourth meeting type is the "Quarterly Off-Site Review," a one- or two-day session where the team steps back to review strategy, competitive dynamics, personnel, and morale.

A key theme throughout the book is that leaders bear primary responsibility for making meetings work. Lencioni argues that many leaders are conflict-averse and inadvertently signal that disagreement is unwelcome, which shuts down the productive debate that meetings need. He also notes that leaders often confuse efficiency with effectiveness: they try to make meetings shorter rather than better, which just compresses the dysfunction into a smaller window. The book makes the case that meetings are the most important activity a leadership team engages in, because meetings are where decisions get made, alignment gets built, and the organization's direction gets set. If meetings are bad, decisions are bad, and the organization suffers.

The book's limitations are worth noting. The fable format, while accessible, can feel simplistic for readers looking for empirical grounding. Lencioni draws primarily on his consulting experience rather than academic research, and the four-meeting model is presented as fairly universal rather than contingent on organizational size, culture, or industry. That said, the framework is practical, easy to implement, and directly addresses the problem most organizations face: trying to accomplish too many different things in a single meeting format. For readers interested in the structural design of meetings—matching meeting types to meeting purposes—this remains one of the most influential practitioner-oriented books on the subject.

The Surprising Science of Meetings

Steven G. Rogelberg (2019)

Steven Rogelberg's "The Surprising Science of Meetings" is the most research-grounded book available on meeting effectiveness. Rogelberg is an organizational psychologist who has spent decades studying meetings, and this book synthesizes hundreds of studies into practical recommendations. Unlike most books on meetings, which rely on anecdotes or consulting frameworks, Rogelberg builds his arguments on empirical evidence, citing specific studies and effect sizes throughout. The result is a book that challenges many common assumptions about meetings while providing an evidence base for improving them.

One of the book's most striking findings is about the sheer scale of the problem. Rogelberg reports that there are roughly 55 million meetings per day in the United States alone, and that most research finds about half of meeting time is considered wasted by participants. He also documents a phenomenon he calls "meeting recovery syndrome": the negative emotional and cognitive effects of a bad meeting persist long after it ends, reducing productivity on subsequent tasks. This reframes the cost of bad meetings—it's not just the time spent in the meeting itself, but the downstream drag on work that follows.

Rogelberg systematically addresses meeting design choices. On meeting size, he presents research showing that as group size increases, individual participation decreases and social loafing increases; he recommends keeping meetings as small as possible and being deliberate about who is invited. On meeting length, he challenges the default of 30- or 60-minute blocks, noting that Parkinson's Law applies: work expands to fill the time available. He suggests using unconventional durations (like 15 or 25 minutes) to create a sense of urgency. On agendas, he

offers a nuanced view: while agendas are generally helpful, the way most people write them—as vague topic lists—adds little value. He advocates for agendas framed as questions to be answered, which focus discussion and make it clearer when a topic has been resolved.

The book gives significant attention to the role of the meeting leader. Rogelberg presents evidence that leaders systematically overestimate the quality of their own meetings (a bias he calls the "leader blind spot"), largely because leaders tend to participate more and thus find meetings more engaging. He recommends that leaders actively solicit honest feedback about their meetings and be willing to hear that their meetings aren't as good as they think. He also discusses facilitation techniques: using silence and brainwriting (where participants write ideas before discussion) to counteract the dominance of extroverts and high-status individuals, managing tangents without being heavy-handed, and ensuring that decisions are clearly documented.

Rogelberg also takes on several sacred cows. He questions the ubiquity of standing meetings, arguing that recurring meetings should be regularly evaluated and cancelled when they're no longer serving a purpose. He discusses the research on standing meetings (where participants literally stand), which shows modest benefits for engagement and efficiency but notes that the effects diminish over time. He addresses the question of technology in meetings—when phone and video meetings work well and when they don't—and offers evidence-based guidance on managing attention and multitasking in virtual settings.

The book's final section addresses meeting culture at the organizational level. Rogelberg argues that improving individual meetings isn't enough; organizations need to think about their total meeting load and how meetings interact with deep work time. He presents research on "meeting-free" time blocks and discusses how to build organizational norms around meeting quality. One of his more provocative suggestions is to calculate the dollar cost of each meeting (based on participants' compensation) and make that figure visible, which tends to concentrate attention on whether the meeting is worth its price. Throughout, Rogelberg maintains a balanced tone: he doesn't argue that meetings are inherently bad, but rather that most meetings could be substantially better with relatively modest changes in design and facilitation. The book's strength is its empirical rigor; its limitation is that it can feel like a survey of findings rather than a unified theory of meetings.

Meetings Matter

Paul Axtell (2015)

Paul Axtell's "Meetings Matter" approaches the topic of meeting improvement from a practitioner's perspective, drawing on his decades of experience as a corporate trainer and facilitator. Unlike more research-heavy treatments, Axtell's book is organized around practical principles and specific conversational techniques. His central argument is that meetings are the primary venue where organizational culture is created and maintained, and that improving meetings requires improving the quality of the conversations that happen within them. This makes the book less about meeting structure and more about interpersonal dynamics, facilitation skill, and intentionality.

Axtell begins by making the case that meetings deserve more investment, not less. He pushes back against the common reflex of trying to have fewer meetings or shorter meetings, arguing

that the real problem is not the quantity of meetings but their quality. A well-run meeting, in his view, can accomplish more than hours of email threads or one-on-one conversations because it creates shared understanding and commitment in real time. He frames meetings as a leadership responsibility: the person who calls or leads a meeting is responsible for ensuring it's worthwhile, and this requires deliberate preparation, skillful facilitation, and genuine follow-through.

One of the book's distinctive contributions is its emphasis on the conversational micro-skills that make meetings effective. Axtell devotes significant attention to how meeting leaders open and close discussions, how they invite participation from quieter members, how they manage disagreement, and how they ensure that decisions are clearly stated and understood by everyone. He argues that many meetings fail not because of poor structure but because the leader doesn't know how to "hold the space" for productive conversation. For instance, he notes that leaders often move on from a topic before checking whether everyone actually agrees with the conclusion, which creates the illusion of alignment but leads to problems downstream when people act on different understandings of what was decided.

Axtell provides a framework for meeting preparation that goes beyond creating an agenda. He recommends that leaders think carefully about what they want to be different as a result of the meeting—what decisions should be made, what commitments should be secured, what understanding should be built. He also recommends that leaders consider the emotional and relational dimensions of the meeting: who might be resistant to a decision, who needs to feel heard, what dynamics between participants might affect the conversation. This attention to the social and emotional texture of meetings distinguishes the book from more purely structural approaches.

The book also addresses several common meeting dysfunctions. Axtell discusses how to handle participants who dominate discussions, how to deal with tangents and off-topic conversations, and how to manage the tension between efficiency and inclusion. He offers specific language and techniques for each situation—not scripts exactly, but examples of how a facilitator might intervene. He also discusses the challenge of follow-up: ensuring that commitments made in meetings actually get carried out. He argues that the meeting isn't really over until the follow-up is done, and that leaders who don't close this loop are undermining the value of every meeting they run.

The book's strengths are its practicality and its emphasis on the human side of meetings. Axtell writes clearly, offers actionable advice, and treats meetings as fundamentally about people rather than processes. Its limitations are the flip side of these strengths: the book lacks empirical grounding, relying instead on Axtell's personal experience and observations. Readers looking for research evidence or a systematic framework will find it thin. But for someone who already understands the theory and wants to get better at the craft of running meetings—especially the conversational and relational aspects—this is a useful and accessible resource.

Interaction Ritual Chains

Randall Collins (2004)

Randall Collins's "Interaction Ritual Chains" is a major work of sociological theory that develops a micro-sociological account of how social life is built up from face-to-face encounters. Collins's

central concept is the "interaction ritual" (IR): a situation where people come together in physical co-presence, establish a shared focus of attention, and develop a shared emotional mood. When an IR is successful, it generates what Collins calls "emotional energy"—a feeling of confidence, enthusiasm, and group solidarity that participants carry with them into subsequent interactions. When it fails, participants leave feeling drained, bored, or alienated. Collins argues that these micro-level rituals are the fundamental building blocks of all social structure, from friendships to organizations to entire societies.

The theory builds on Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence and Goffman's interaction order, but Collins pushes these ideas further by making interaction rituals the explanatory foundation for macro-level social phenomena. He argues that individuals are essentially "chains" of interaction rituals: their identities, emotions, beliefs, and group memberships are all products of the rituals they participate in. People seek out situations that will give them emotional energy and avoid those that drain it. This creates a stratification of emotional energy: some people, by virtue of their position in ritual chains, accumulate more emotional energy than others, which gives them charisma and social influence.

For understanding meetings, the book's most relevant contribution is its analysis of what makes group encounters succeed or fail as interaction rituals. Collins identifies several key ingredients: physical co-presence (being in the same space), barriers to outsiders (a sense that this is a bounded group), a mutual focus of attention (everyone engaged with the same topic or activity), and a shared emotional mood (a common feeling that builds and intensifies through the interaction). When all four elements are present and reinforce each other, the ritual generates emotional energy and group solidarity. When they're missing—when attention is scattered, when people are disengaged, when the emotional mood is flat—the ritual fails and energy dissipates.

This framework has direct implications for meeting dynamics. A meeting where participants are genuinely focused on the same problem, building on each other's contributions, and experiencing a shared sense of urgency or excitement is a successful interaction ritual. It generates the kind of buy-in, morale, and ownership that meeting organizers hope for but can't manufacture through structural design alone. Conversely, a meeting where people are multitasking, where the discussion lacks focus, or where the emotional tone is one of boredom or resentment is a failed ritual that actually depletes the group's social capital. Collins's theory suggests that the social outcomes of meetings—the buy-in, morale, and sense of ownership—are not separate from the meeting's productivity but are actually produced by the same mechanism: successful interaction rituals.

Collins also offers insights into the role of status and power in interaction rituals. He argues that rituals tend to amplify existing status hierarchies: high-status participants typically receive more attention and deference, which gives them more emotional energy, which further enhances their status. This creates a feedback loop where some voices dominate meetings not because they have better ideas but because the ritual dynamics favor them. Collins discusses how this can be both functional (providing clear leadership) and dysfunctional (suppressing dissent and diverse perspectives).

The book's main limitation for practical application is that it's a theoretical work, not a management book. Collins is building a general theory of social life, and meetings are just one of many settings he analyzes. The writing is dense and academic, and readers looking for actionable meeting advice will need to do significant translation work. However, for anyone trying to understand why meetings have the emotional and social effects they do—why some meetings leave people energized and aligned while others leave them demoralized—Collins provides the deepest theoretical account available. His framework explains phenomena that purely structural approaches to meetings cannot: why two meetings with identical agendas and

participants can produce completely different outcomes depending on the quality of the interaction that unfolds.

The Business of Talk

Deirdre Boden (1994)

Deirdre Boden's "The Business of Talk" is a groundbreaking study that applies conversation analysis (CA) to organizational settings, with a particular focus on meetings. Boden's central argument is that organizations are fundamentally constituted through talk—that the conversations people have in meetings, hallways, and offices are not merely reflections of organizational structure but are the very medium through which organizational reality is created, maintained, and changed. This perspective, drawing on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, treats meetings not as tools for accomplishing pre-existing organizational goals but as the primary sites where those goals are formulated, negotiated, and given meaning.

The book is based on extensive empirical research involving recordings and detailed transcripts of actual organizational meetings. Boden uses the fine-grained methods of conversation analysis to show how participants in meetings accomplish organizational work through specific conversational practices: how they introduce topics, how they build or resist consensus, how they make and respond to proposals, how they manage disagreement, and how they signal that a decision has been reached. One of her key findings is that the orderly flow of meetings depends on locally managed conversational practices—turn-taking, topic management, repair sequences—rather than on formal rules or predetermined agendas.

Boden pays particular attention to the phenomenon of topic management in meetings, which is directly relevant to the observation that conversations tend to flow from one topic to another in ways that don't always map cleanly onto formal agendas. She shows how topics are introduced, developed, sidetracked, and returned to through specific conversational mechanisms. For instance, she analyzes how participants use "topic-initial elicitors" to introduce new subjects, how they use "formulations" to summarize and reframe what has been discussed, and how they use "pre-closing sequences" to signal that a topic is being wrapped up. She demonstrates that what might look like chaotic topic-shifting actually follows orderly, if complex, interactional patterns.

One of the book's most important contributions is its analysis of how decisions actually get made in meetings. Boden challenges the rational-decision-making model, which assumes that meetings involve clearly defined problems, systematic evaluation of alternatives, and explicit decision points. Instead, she shows that decisions in meetings often emerge gradually through conversational interaction: a proposal is floated, modified in response to objections, implicitly accepted through the absence of further resistance, and then retroactively treated as having been "decided." This means that it can be genuinely unclear, even to participants, exactly when and how a decision was made—a finding that aligns closely with the observation that "it can be unclear when a decision is actually made."

Boden also examines the relationship between meetings and organizational structure. She argues that meetings are where the abstract structures of organizations—hierarchies, roles, policies—are made real through interaction. A person's authority doesn't exist in the abstract; it's enacted and recognized (or challenged) in the moment-to-moment flow of meeting talk.

Similarly, organizational decisions don't exist as abstract propositions; they exist as interactional accomplishments that have to be continually sustained and reaffirmed through subsequent talk. This perspective reframes meetings not as instruments for implementing organizational decisions but as the very process through which organizations decide and act.

The book's main strength is its empirical rigor and its ability to reveal the hidden complexity of seemingly mundane meeting interactions. By examining actual transcripts at a granular level, Boden shows things that survey-based or interview-based research on meetings cannot: the precise mechanisms by which meetings work (and fail to work) as interactional events. Its main limitation is accessibility. The book is written for an academic audience familiar with conversation analysis, and readers without that background may find the technical apparatus—detailed transcription notation, sequential analysis—challenging. The style is also dated in places, reflecting early 1990s academic conventions. However, for anyone who wants to understand how meetings actually work as conversational events—as opposed to how they're supposed to work according to management theory—this remains an essential and largely unmatched resource.

Sensemaking in Organizations

Karl E. Weick (1995)

Karl Weick's "Sensemaking in Organizations" is one of the most influential works in organizational theory, introducing a framework for understanding how people in organizations construct meaning from ambiguous, equivocal, and confusing events. Weick's central argument is that organizations don't simply process information or make decisions about a pre-given reality. Instead, the members of organizations actively construct the reality they then respond to, through a process Weick calls "sensemaking." Sensemaking is not the same as interpretation or decision-making; it's the more fundamental process of creating the frameworks, categories, and narratives that make interpretation and decision-making possible in the first place.

Weick identifies seven properties of sensemaking that distinguish it from other cognitive and social processes. Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction (who we think we are shapes what we notice and how we interpret it); it is retrospective (we make sense of events after they happen, not before or during); it is enactive of sensible environments (our actions create the situations we then interpret); it is social (sensemaking happens through interaction with others, not in isolation); it is ongoing (it never starts from scratch but is always embedded in a stream of experience); it is focused on and by extracted cues (we latch onto small, salient details and build larger stories around them); and it is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (a plausible story that enables action is more useful than a precise analysis that doesn't).

The relevance of this framework to meetings is profound. Meetings are one of the primary sites where organizational sensemaking occurs. When people come together in a meeting to discuss a problem, they are not simply pooling pre-existing information to arrive at an optimal solution. They are collectively constructing an understanding of what the problem is, what it means, and what responses are available. The "mental model of topics covered in the meeting" that participants share (or fail to share) is a product of collective sensemaking: participants are continuously trying to make sense of what has been discussed, what has been decided, and how different topics relate to each other and to the meeting's overall purpose.

Weick's concept of retrospective sensemaking is particularly relevant to understanding how meetings work. His insight is that we understand what we've done only after we've done it—we act first and make sense later. In a meeting context, this means that the meaning of a discussion often becomes clear only in hindsight: what seemed like a tangent turns out to have been crucial, a comment that seemed minor turns out to have been the pivot point of a decision, and participants reconstruct the meeting's narrative after the fact to create a coherent story of what happened and why. This is why different participants can leave the same meeting with genuinely different understandings of what was discussed and decided.

Weick illustrates his theory with vivid organizational case studies, including his famous analysis of the Mann Gulch wildfire disaster, where a team of smokejumpers lost their ability to make sense of rapidly changing conditions, leading to the collapse of organized action and the deaths of most of the team. While this is an extreme example, Weick uses it to illustrate principles that apply to everyday organizational life: the fragility of shared understanding, the importance of ongoing communication for maintaining coordination, and the danger of treating organizational routines as fixed rather than as ongoing accomplishments that require continuous maintenance.

The book's strengths are its theoretical depth and its ability to reframe organizational phenomena in ways that reveal hidden dynamics. Weick's writing style is distinctive—densely allusive, full of unexpected examples and connections—and rewards careful reading. The concept of sensemaking has become one of the most widely used frameworks in organizational studies. Its limitations for practical application are significant, however. Weick is building theory, not offering prescriptions. The book does not tell you how to run better meetings or improve organizational decision-making in any direct way. Instead, it gives you a way of thinking about what's happening in organizations that can inform practical action. For readers interested in understanding the cognitive and social dynamics that underlie meeting interactions—why shared understanding is so hard to achieve and so easy to lose—Weick's framework is foundational.

Group Genius

R. Keith Sawyer (2007)

R. Keith Sawyer's "Group Genius" examines the nature of collaborative creativity—how groups of people working together produce innovations that no individual could have generated alone. Sawyer, a psychologist and former jazz pianist, draws on research in creativity, group dynamics, and improvisation to argue against the "lone genius" myth. His central claim is that most significant creative breakthroughs emerge from collaborative processes, even when they're retrospectively attributed to single individuals. The book bridges academic research and accessible writing, using case studies from jazz ensembles, improv theater, product development teams, and scientific laboratories to illustrate how group creativity works.

Sawyer introduces the concept of "collaborative emergence": the idea that the creative output of a group is an emergent property of the interaction, not reducible to the contributions of individual members. He draws an analogy to jazz performance, where the music that emerges from a group of improvising musicians is shaped by each player's contributions but is not planned or controlled by any single player. Similarly, in organizational settings, innovative ideas often emerge from conversational exchanges where one person's comment sparks an idea in

someone else, which is then modified and extended by a third person, and so on. The creative output belongs to the interaction, not to any individual.

This concept of collaborative emergence maps directly onto the dynamics of meetings. Sawyer's research suggests that the most productive creative discussions have certain characteristics: they involve rapid turn-taking, with participants building on each other's contributions rather than presenting fully formed ideas; they maintain a balance between structure and freedom, with enough focus to keep the conversation productive but enough flexibility to allow unexpected connections; and they feature what Sawyer calls "deep listening," where participants are genuinely attentive to each other's ideas rather than waiting for their turn to speak. These conditions enable the kind of improvisational flow that produces genuinely novel outcomes.

Sawyer also examines the conditions that kill collaborative creativity. He discusses research showing that traditional brainstorming (where groups generate ideas together in real time) actually produces fewer and less creative ideas than "nominal groups" (where individuals work alone and their outputs are pooled). The problem is that group brainstorming introduces process losses: people wait for their turn and forget ideas, they self-censor in response to group dynamics, and they anchor on early suggestions. Sawyer argues that effective collaborative creativity requires a more sophisticated approach than simply putting people in a room and telling them to brainstorm. He recommends techniques that alternate between individual and group work, that build incrementally on emerging ideas, and that create space for unexpected combinations.

The book devotes significant attention to the organizational conditions that support group creativity. Sawyer discusses how physical spaces, team composition, communication norms, and leadership styles affect collaborative emergence. He argues that organizations that successfully innovate tend to have dense informal networks (where ideas circulate freely across boundaries), a culture that values experimentation and tolerates failure, and leaders who facilitate rather than direct creative processes. He also discusses the temporal dimension of group creativity: many significant innovations don't emerge in a single meeting or brainstorming session but through extended "idea threads" that develop over weeks, months, or years of ongoing interaction.

The book's strengths include its engaging writing, its integration of diverse research traditions, and its practical implications for how organizations design collaborative work. Sawyer makes a compelling case that group creativity is a real phenomenon with identifiable dynamics, not just a buzzword. The book's limitations are that it sometimes oversells the collaborative creativity framework, underplaying the role of individual expertise and preparation in enabling productive collaboration. It also focuses primarily on creative and innovative work rather than the full range of meeting purposes (coordination, decision-making, information-sharing), which limits its applicability. However, for understanding why some meetings generate energy and novel ideas while others feel stale and formulaic, Sawyer offers the most detailed account of the group dynamics involved.

Talk: The Science of Conversation

Elizabeth Stokoe (2018)

Elizabeth Stokoe's "Talk: The Science of Conversation" is an accessible introduction to conversation analysis (CA) that demonstrates how the fine-grained study of real recorded interactions reveals the hidden machinery of human communication. Stokoe is a professor of social interaction at Loughborough University who has spent her career analyzing recordings of conversations in institutional settings—mediation services, police interviews, doctor-patient consultations, helplines, sales calls—and her book distills both the methods and the findings of this research for a general audience. The central argument is that conversation is not the loose, spontaneous, anything-goes activity it appears to be; it is a highly structured system governed by recurrent patterns that participants orient to whether or not they're consciously aware of them.

The book's foundational claim is that very small conversational choices have outsized consequences for how interactions unfold. Stokoe demonstrates this with numerous examples drawn from her research. The difference between asking "Would you like to come to mediation?" and "Are you willing to come to mediation?" turns out to predict whether people agree to attend. The difference between a caller saying "I can't make the meeting" and "I won't make the meeting" changes how the recipient responds. Whether someone prefaces a request with an account of why they're asking affects whether the request is granted. These are not matters of personal style or politeness conventions; they are systematic patterns visible across hundreds of recorded interactions. Stokoe shows that conversation operates through a set of structural mechanisms—turn-taking, sequence organization, preference structure, repair—that constrain what can happen next at every point in an interaction.

One of the book's most important contributions is its treatment of how proposals and decisions work in conversation. Stokoe shows that when someone makes a proposal, the conversational system creates a strong preference for acceptance: agreement tends to come quickly and without elaboration, while disagreement is typically delayed, hedged, and accompanied by accounts and justifications. This "preference structure" means that silence or hesitation after a proposal is not neutral—it signals trouble. Skilled conversationalists (and skilled meeting facilitators, by extension) can read these signals and respond to them: reformulating the proposal, addressing the implicit objection, or explicitly inviting the disagreement that the other party is signaling but not stating. This mechanism is directly relevant to understanding how decisions emerge in meetings: the preference structure of conversation means that apparent agreement may mask unvoiced disagreement, and that the absence of objection is not the same as genuine buy-in.

Stokoe devotes significant attention to the concept of "repair"—the conversational mechanisms by which participants fix problems of hearing, understanding, or speaking. Repair is one of the most fundamental features of conversation, and Stokoe shows that it operates with remarkable systematicity: there is a strong preference for self-repair (the speaker fixing their own trouble) over other-repair (the listener correcting the speaker), and the way repair is initiated and carried out has consequences for the social relationship between participants. In institutional settings like meetings, repair sequences are often where misunderstandings surface, where competing interpretations of what has been said are negotiated, and where the shared (or not-shared) understanding of the group becomes visible. Stokoe's analysis suggests that paying attention to repair sequences—moments of "what do you mean?" or "wait, I thought we said..."—is one of the best ways to diagnose the health of a group's shared understanding.

A distinctive contribution of the book is Stokoe's development of the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM), a training approach that uses real recorded interactions rather than hypothetical scenarios. Traditional communication training relies on scripted role-plays and general principles ("be empathetic," "use open questions"), which Stokoe argues are too abstract to change actual behavior. CARM instead presents trainees with real conversational moments, paused at critical junctures, and asks them to consider what they would say next before hearing what actually happened. This allows trainees to see the concrete consequences of specific conversational choices and to develop more precise interactional skills. Stokoe has applied

CARM in mediation services, healthcare, policing, and sales, and reports significant improvements in outcomes. The approach has clear implications for meeting facilitation training: rather than teaching generic facilitation principles, organizations could use recordings of their own meetings to identify the specific conversational moments where things go well or go wrong.

The book's strengths lie in its empirical grounding and its ability to make the invisible visible. Stokoe takes something everyone does every day—talk—and shows that it has a structure and logic that most people are completely unaware of. Her examples are concrete and compelling, and she writes with clarity and occasional humor. The book makes conversation analysis accessible without dumbing it down, preserving the field's core insight that you have to look at what people actually do, not what they say they do or what theories predict they should do. The book's limitations are the flip side of its accessibility: it is necessarily a survey rather than a deep dive, and readers who want to apply CA methods to their own settings will need to go further into the technical literature. Stokoe also focuses primarily on two-party institutional interactions rather than multi-party meetings, so some translation is required to apply her findings to the group dynamics of organizational meetings. However, as an entry point into understanding the micro-mechanics of how conversation works—and as a bridge between the academic tradition of conversation analysis and practical applications in organizational settings—the book is excellent and fills a gap that the other sources on this list do not.

Meetings: Managerial Time and Organizational Democracy

Helen B. Schwartzman (1989)

Helen Schwartzman's "Meetings: Managerial Time and Organizational Democracy" is a provocative anthropological study that challenges the conventional understanding of what meetings are and what they do. Schwartzman's central argument is that the standard view of meetings—as instruments for making decisions, solving problems, and coordinating action—gets the relationship between meetings and organizations backwards. Rather than being tools that serve organizational purposes, Schwartzman argues, meetings are a fundamental form of social organization in their own right. Organizations don't have meetings to get things done; rather, meetings are one of the primary ways that organizations constitute themselves as organizations.

This argument draws on Schwartzman's ethnographic fieldwork at a community mental health center, where she spent over a year observing and recording meetings. She found that despite the official rationale for meetings—making clinical decisions, planning programs, allocating resources—the actual function of meetings was much more complex. Meetings served as arenas for negotiating status, building and maintaining relationships, performing competence, managing impressions, constructing organizational identity, and reproducing organizational hierarchy. These social functions were not incidental to the meetings; they were central to what the meetings were actually doing, even when (especially when) participants described the meetings as being "about" clinical decisions or resource allocation.

Schwartzman develops this argument by analyzing how meetings relate to the decisions they ostensibly produce. She documents numerous cases where decisions were made before the meeting (in hallway conversations, phone calls, or informal gatherings) and then ratified in the meeting as a performance of democratic process. She also documents cases where meetings

produced apparent decisions that were never implemented, or where the same issue was "decided" repeatedly across multiple meetings without anyone acknowledging that it had been decided before. These patterns, Schwartzman argues, are not pathological failures of the meeting process; they reveal that the meeting's true function is not decision-making but rather the enactment of organizational norms about how decisions should be made.

This perspective has radical implications for how we think about meeting effectiveness. If meetings are primarily about constituting organizational reality rather than instrumentally solving problems, then evaluating them by whether they "accomplished their goals efficiently" misses most of what they're doing. A meeting that appears inefficient by conventional standards—one that takes two hours to reach a conclusion that could have been reached in twenty minutes—may actually be performing important social work: building consensus, giving people a sense of ownership, allowing face-saving, and demonstrating that the organization values democratic participation. Conversely, a meeting that is ruthlessly efficient may be undermining these social functions in ways that create problems elsewhere.

Schwartzman also examines the cultural dimensions of meetings. She argues that the meeting form itself—people sitting around a table, taking turns speaking, ostensibly making collective decisions—is a culturally specific practice, rooted in Western democratic ideals, that carries its own set of assumptions about how groups should operate. When organizations import this form, they import these assumptions whether or not they match the organization's actual power dynamics. This creates a gap between the meeting's official ideology (we are making decisions together as equals) and its actual dynamics (certain people have more power and influence than others), which is a source of both dysfunction and adaptation.

The book's main strength is its ability to defamiliarize something so common that we rarely examine it critically. Schwartzman forces the reader to question basic assumptions about why organizations hold meetings and what meetings actually accomplish. Her ethnographic detail is rich and her theoretical arguments are well-developed. The book's limitations include its age (published in 1989, it doesn't address virtual meetings or contemporary organizational forms), its focus on a single organization (which raises questions about generalizability), and its primarily descriptive and critical orientation—Schwartzman is more interested in understanding meetings than in improving them. However, for anyone who wants to think seriously about what meetings are as social phenomena—not just how to make them more efficient—this is perhaps the single most important book on the subject. It directly addresses the tension between the normative view of meetings (they should accomplish goals) and the descriptive reality (they serve multiple, often unstated, social functions).