

Relaxed and efficient: Lean Coffee as alternative to the rigid meeting.

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Openly discussing important topics in a relaxed cafe atmosphere – this puts in a nutshell the basic principle of Lean Coffee, a very individual format for meetings.

The system was designed in Seattle by the two Agile Coaches Jim Benson and Jeremy Lightsmith. The characteristic of Lean Coffee is that there is no fixed agenda beforehand. Only the basic, roughly outlined topic is named. Anyone who can identify with the topic is invited. The invitation is hung up for all to see. The concrete agenda is then put to discussion by the participants directly in the meeting. Timing is precise so as to be able to discuss as many different items as possible. Lean Coffee works best in groups of up to ten

persons. Priority is given to collective knowledge-sharing and to projects in the start phase in order to collect input and ideas. In this case the word lean derives from lean thinking, that is focused brainwork, the avoidance of profuseness, and a perspective on the big picture. Coffee is meant to accentuate the easygoing and informal atmosphere.

How Lean Coffee works.

Whoever extends the invitation is responsible for coordination and preparation. Usually a flip chart or whiteboard is needed, also pens and post-its. At the start, the coordinator collects all topics introduced by those present. These are then prioritised and timed within the team. The coordinator draws three columns on the whiteboard: to be discussed, in discussion, and discussed. All the collected topics are listed in the agreed order in the “to be discussed” column. Afterwards they are transferred – based on the state of discussion – into the next two columns.

The main thing is to prioritise the different topics. The limited amount of time might mean that the less important points aren't dealt with or are postponed until the next Lean meeting. The exact time frame per discussion item is specified, but can be abbreviated or prolonged after a vote by the group. Hence, Lean Coffee fully relies on group dynamics and collaboration.

Summary: The meetings are structured and yet open. Anyone interested in the topic can take part. It is hierarchy-free and requires no or very little conceptual preparation. Mushrooming discussions are dodged by judicious timing. Apart from this, informal communication also gets its fair share. After all, the meeting is designed to proceed in an informal and stress-free manner. Lean Coffee isn't a rigid construct and can therefore be modified according to the team's personal requirements. The main thing is to keep the basic intentions of Lean Coffee in mind as a general aim: unforced discussions without going over the time limit.