

Management Shorts #23: The Weekly Meeting Blues

How to rapidly re-engineer your weekly staff meeting and make it a valuable use of everyone's time

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I. INTRO: The Weekly Meeting Blues

Do you have the "weekly meeting blues"? You know what I mean: You know your staff needs to meet on a regular basis, but the meetings are boring or painful, and seem to interrupt the flow of getting work done rather than moving things forward. People arrive late or leave early (or tap away at their Blackberries during the endless round of updates and reports), and the quality of conversation is depressingly low.

Many of my clients ask for advice on how to run these meetings. They often think there is one "right" way and are a bit embarrassed that they've gotten this far in their careers and haven't figured it out yet.

Whole books have been written on how to run a meeting, but for this issue of **Management Shorts** I'm going to focus on a case study that demonstrates a simple and lightening fast process for re-engineering your weekly staff meeting.

II. MANAGEMENT SHORT:

Case Study on Re-engineering The Weekly Staff Meeting

Raj is the CEO of a start up. He has been brought in by the board to replace the founder and spends his first few weeks on the job resetting company direction and defining goals and objectives. He has a new team and wants to get things off to a fast start. He asks me for advice on the "right" way to structure his weekly meetings so that people will take responsibility for achieving results.

I push back on him:

"Raj, you're asking the wrong person. You've put together a team of experienced people and you've set clear company and individual objectives. Now you need to structure a meeting that will support them in producing results. Why don't you ask **them** what they need?"

"But isn't it my job to figure that out?"

"Nope, its your job to lead your team so they can be successful. **In this case they have more expertise than you do on what they need to be successful.** You wouldn't try to guess what a customer needs – you'd do some kind of market research – why guess what your team needs when you can ask?"

"What would that look like?"

I develop a short exercise for Raj to do at his upcoming team offsite:

Staff Meeting Re-Engineering Exercise

Purpose:

- * Make weekly staff meetings productive and effective
- * Have everyone feel ownership of company success
- * Make sure everyone gets what they need out of the meetings to support them in meeting their objectives

Discussion:

- * **Do a go-round and ask each person what s/he most wants from the weekly meeting.** Ask questions to force people to prioritize. Don't let them get into process or format suggestions – just focus on the outcome or the purpose the

meeting serves for each person. They may each have different needs and that's fine. You should participate as well and share what you need to get out of the meeting. (For example: "I want early warning on problems before they blow up." Or "I want you all to feel responsibility for making each other successful.")

- * **Do a second go-round asking for suggestions on format or process for the meeting.** They've all heard each others' needs now, so ask them to think about ideas that will help everyone, not just themselves. (A side benefit of this exercise is that everyone starts to understand each other's perspective a little better – you'll get more team building out of this than a full day on a ropes course.)

You now have input on what different people need plus some ideas for meeting those needs. **Now** you have the information you need to decide how you want to run the meetings (or if you even **need** to meet every week – one group that did this exercise discovered that what they really needed was more one-on-one's with each other and happily switched to monthly meetings for the whole team).

(Note that even though Raj is getting input, the decision of how to run the meetings is still his. This is a "consult" decision, not a "consensus" decision. Meeting format matters, but it is not critical enough to use precious group time to push for consensus. For a refresher on when to use and when **not** to use consensus, see "[Making the Decision Process Easier](#)")

Don't Forget to Follow Up

Assume it will take a while to get the format just right. As with any management initiative you need to monitor how things are going. **After a few meetings you should save 5 or 10 minutes on your agenda to ask people how it's going.** What do they find helpful about the meetings and what would make them more effective? Again, you get to decide, based on their input. Make this check-in process a regular discipline and you will keep your meetings focused on what the team needs as the company grows and circumstances change. (And perhaps redo the exercise once every 2 or 3 quarters or whenever team membership changes by 30% or more.)

III. GETTING STARTED: Ask Your Team

You don't have to wait for an offsite to use this exercise. Depending on the size of your team, the entire exercise can be completed in 10 to 20 minutes at your next weekly meeting. (And notice the change in energy level and participation during this exercise as compared to the rest of your meeting!)

Does this feel too abrupt? **Forward this newsletter to your team (or your own boss!) and ask if they'd find this exercise helpful.** I'll bet you a Venti Caffè Mocha that most members will be eager to try it out.

Some Ideas for Round One

Sometimes team members are a little unsure about what they need from a meeting. Below are some examples to stimulate their thinking:

- * A heads-up on actions in other groups that will affect your group (Or an opportunity to discover how what you do impacts the other people at the table)
- * Coordination of activities across work groups
- * Joint problem-solving to manage interdependencies
- * A sounding board to help you think through challenges in your area
- * Support and assistance in implementation
- * Simply knowing that you're not alone and others have your back
- * A sense of the big picture so you know how your work contributes to the organization's success
- * A place to vent frustrations (Or celebrate successes)
- * Help with fire-fighting
- * Help with keeping the long-term strategic initiatives in focus
- * A forum for sharing and making sense of customer feedback
- * Etc.

Some of these needs can be met more efficiently in one-on-one meetings. Which of these really need the whole team in the room?

You may be thinking "this all sounds great, but I don't know what meeting structures or formats will meet any of these

needs!" Don't let that concern hold you back from the exercise. You'll be surprised at how creative your team can be in suggesting formats. And as a fallback you can always call me for a quick brainstorm on meeting structure! ;-)

The next issue of **Management Shorts** will be a case study on an unusual format for a weekly sales meeting.

IV. UPDATE: News From Acorn Consulting

Press Coverage

I was recently interviewed by American Leadership Forum Silicon Valley <http://alfsv.org/> for their latest newsletter. In this "Faculty Profile" (I teach feedback and team skills in their Fellows' Program) I talk about interpersonal dynamics, leadership, and "learning how to learn". [Click here to read the interview.](#) (This is a PDF file and the article starts on page 3)

Professional Recognition

I'm delighted to report that I've been invited to join **NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Sciences** (www.ntl.org). NTL began as a research organization 75 years ago and is the source of much of the foundational theory on groups and organizational behavior. Membership is for senior organization development researchers and practitioners; for me the invitation to become a member is a gratifying sign of recognition by my peers.

Until next time . . .

Warm regards,
Andrea

About Management Shorts

Management Shorts is a free newsletter for senior managers on essential strategies for meeting the everyday challenges of leadership.
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