



ADVICE FOR MANAGERS



Do Your Meetings Sabotage Your Profits?

[By Don Schmincke]

It's yet another weekly management meeting. Everyone shows up, sits down, and takes their turn in reporting progress on assigned projects. At first glance this looks like a great way to ensure accountability for performance, but could it be sabotaging your company's future success?

How can this be? Surely something as simple as meeting to track performance is basic MBA 101 on how to run a company, right? Well, some CEOs disagree. By challenging the assumption about these types of meetings, they've found something remarkable – competitive advantage.

It's not that tracking performance is wrong, but there are other ways to issue status reports on projects more efficiently. Email, intranets, and old-fashioned paper can allow data to be absorbed more quickly than verbal presentations at meetings. Why not use the invaluable time in management meetings for what we wish we had more time for – solving problems?

This sounds great except for one snag—the problem is we don't like revealing problems! We'd rather reveal our "great performance." Divulging our problems could make us look weak or incompetent, or diminish our demonstration of "brilliance" to those who could promote us. Moreover, it could open us up for retaliation or manipulation!

Of course, there are organizations where these could be real fears, but cultures like these have deeper problems than ineffective use of management meetings. For the rest of us, using meetings to share and solve problems versus displaying our "great performance" may offer a better opportunity to improve such performance.

Examples of organizational successes using this methodology are buried in the literature, from examples of "skunk-works" projects to

the recent success of Toyota. For example, one manager at the Toyota Georgetown plant used his time in management meetings to demonstrate his good performance on projects he was assigned until plant manager Mr. Fujio Cho (now the chairman of Toyota worldwide) said to him, "We all know you are a good manager, otherwise we would not have hired you. But please talk to us about your problems so we can all work on them together." Of course, the rest is history now that Toyota has surpassed GM. Could it be that Toyota's meetings were different than GM's?

Focus Meetings on Problems versus Performance

Meetings which focus on problem-solving versus reporting on good performance seem to offer companies key benefits such as:

More efficient use of time: Time is scarce and getting scarcer. Companies that use face-to-face time for problem-solving exploit the power of human dialogue versus wasting it on monologues. They create solutions and address decisions on the issues that matter. Project status reports are important but this one-way data can be transferred using other more efficient means. Time is money. Where do you want to spend it?

Higher motivation: Solving problems generates more positive energy than status reports do. Celebration and acknowledgement of good performance should be done, but in more meaningful ways than self-proclamation in short slots

of meeting agendas. When a strong staff is free to expose real issues and work on them, it pulls the team together and lessens the effect of demoralizing egos on the organizational agenda.

Profits: It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out how Toyota got to the top. Continuously seeking improvements by finding and resolving problems enhances competitive advantage in any market. Tolerating a culture that avoids this in order to "look good" or satisfy personal interests guarantees a dramatic financial failure. This has toppled the largest of companies, some of whose executives are now facing prison time.

Make it Happen in Your Company

Shifting your company's culture to embrace problem-solving meetings can be tough. It takes more than an e-mail announcement or a speech. Some ideas include:

1. Assess management meetings you are now attending and determine if they really are necessary. If not, distribute data or information from those meetings using other methods.
2. If the meeting is important, shift the agenda from focusing on performance accolades to sharing and solving problems.
3. Challenge those who "don't have problems." Are they playing hard



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enough? Are they holding their cards too close to the vest?

- 4. Notice the level of defensiveness in the culture. Are people coachable? Can they disclose issues easily? Can they take feedback without it seeming so personal?

- 5. Start leading by example. Surface your problems first! This last idea could be difficult, but it shows you are serious. And it allows you to start challenging the group. Start asking questions like:

- “Even though we are performing well, what’s not working or can be improved in your department?”

- “What is your greatest personal challenge or concern we should be talking about today?”
- “Where in your area are you having the most problems?”

This doesn’t mean that project performance status shouldn’t be on the agenda. A few accolades can be appropriate, but surfacing and focusing on problems and projects which are off-course so that the group can work together on resolving them is critical for sustaining competitive advantage and profits.

Is this something that everyone is ready for? No. It requires a strong, confident staff. Only solid teams thrive in an open and supporting culture. On the other hand, weak teams don’t

have the courage to disclose their issues and accept help. But then, if that’s the case, perhaps you have another problem.

About the Author

Don Schmincke is a business consultant and author of the CEO bestseller *The Code of the Executive*. A graduate of MIT and Johns Hopkins University, Don uses anthropology and evolutionary genetics to dispel the usual management and leadership techniques. With more than 20 years of research and consulting experience, Don and the SAGA Institute help companies accelerate performance. He has worked with the U.S. Navy Fleet Readiness, DuPont, IBM, Miller Brewing, and more. For more information, call 1-866-LEAD-866 or visit www.sagaleadership.com.

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