

Death by Meeting

A Leadership Fable

Patrick Lencioni
ISBN-0-7879-6805-6

Read: 2009 April 17 through sometime in mid-May
Reviewed: 2009 July 3

This is a story similar to “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team,” also by Lencioni, a fictional account of a corporate management situation that needs some help.

A man named Casey has been a golf pro and has retired from the athletic circuit, using his proceeds to start up and lead a Silicon Valley company, YIP Software, that makes video games relating to golf. We learn enough about the company to understand what the company meetings are about. Casey has been in business for some time. His team understands the market (mostly pro-shops at golf courses), production (software development), distribution, and the other details of running a company.

Casey has weekly two-hour executive staff meetings that are abysmal. People don’t like going to them. Not much is ever accomplished. A lot of time is spent discussing less important things leaving no time for topics of substance. And nobody wants to stay late; they bolt at the strike of noon.

When Casey gets an offer from a larger company to pick up YIP as a division, it is tempting, but when this is coupled with a dive in the economy, it turns out to be the leading edge of a crises that may take them under and boot him from his own helm.

Of course, no one should believe that, “Nothing will change in your division, you will still be in charge” under buyout circumstances. The new parent company has troubleshooters who are going to come out and learn that these abysmal meetings are a big problem at Yip Software.

The author uses the device of a temporary intern, Connor, a brilliant, underutilized son of a powerful executive (mother) friend who needs a break between college and career, or something like that. Connor serves as Casey’s assistant through this dangerous and troubled period and the author uses Connor to troubleshoot Casey’s meetings and makes improvements, ultimately saving the day and the company.

The reason for the book is that this sort of problem exists everywhere. Meetings are conceived and run poorly and for the wrong reasons, then everyone despairs of their lack of success.

Poor meetings have a little different flavor at JPL, but not substantially different. We have a tendency to go on for an hour no matter how much time is needed, more or less; most of the

people are underutilized, so they end up doing other (wireless) work, which is negative feedback to the original problem; and the goals and desired outcomes are rarely well articulated or understood.

The troubleshooting, which reflects the author's own experience in real companies, unearths two qualities to be understood and addressed: scope and conflict. By analogizing with movies and other video entertainment, he is able to make the point pretty clearly.

Given a choice between a work meeting and a movie, which would you rather go to? And why? Most people would rather go to a movie and the reason given here is that a movie has conflict. Conflict in the movies does not materially effect the audience, but they still get involved. Most meetings in corporate America, however, are about avoiding or skirting around conflict. Not only should conflict be embraced, but the leader of the team and of the meeting should be looking for, that is, "mining for" it.

The scope and frequency of the meeting should be appropriate to the consideration at hand. Connor ends up working a bunch of late nights determining what the pattern should be:

1. The daily tag-up,
2. The weekly tactical,
3. The monthly strategic, and
4. The quarterly off-site review.

These should be five minutes (with each person taking 60-90 seconds), 1-2 hours, 2-4 hours, and 1-2 days respectively. The daily tag-up is just to avoid things going too far without people knowing what's going on. They can (and should) be held standing up to avoid bogging down, but should not be missed. A feature of the weekly tactical is the "lightning round" where each participant summarizes what they bring in for discussion and then the group decides what is appropriate for today and what should be bumped to a higher level. In the summary at the end of the book, the author gives a page or two of insights into what happens at each of these meetings and what to avoid to keep them meaningful.

Finally there is the aspect of training participants to do the stuff. Just as in "Five Dysfunctions" the team seems to get it but doesn't mind sliding back into their old ways, of course. And, as with any radical change, some people end up leaving the company and others end up coming in. That's the way things happen.

The Lencioni books are great little fables, page turners, fast reads, instructive of Lencioni's expertise. I don't have much hope of ever running a very focussed meeting myself, or of having JPL even want to change from "classroom model" to "effectiveness," at least not without bringing in someone like The Table Group, Lencioni's company, but at least hope is out there. At least I prepare for meetings to which I'm supposed to go.