

Aligning Middle Management: The Power of a Monthly Meeting



by *Verne Harnish*
"Growth Guy"

vharnish@gazelles.com

“We are one of the fastest growing franchises among 39 countries,” notes Niiraj Shah, National Director of BNI-India. “And yes, our 3 hour monthly management meeting involving my four senior managers and nine Regional Directors, our middle managers, has allowed us to be more strategic and work on the business rather than in the business.”

The toughest management challenge, as the leader of a growing business, is getting your DNA passed down to the next generation of leaders – those middle managers that either make your life easier by carrying a large management load of the business or wreak havoc as they repeat many of the same mistakes you thought were already resolved earlier in the company’s history.

Ground Hog Day Experience

Once you get over 40 employees and you start to fill out a middle management level in the company, you start to experience your own “Ground Hog Day” movie moments, where it feels like you’re reliving the same frustrating day, day in and day out. The only viable solution I’ve found for developing an outstanding middle management and supervisory team is pulling them ALL together (yes that might mean spending some travel dollars) and spending four to eight hours each month collectively focused on the priorities and challenges of the business.

It’s in the process of wrestling common issues, challenges, and opportunities “to the ground” together that you, as the leader of your company, are able to share your industry knowledge, thought processes, approaches to problem solving, and core values. In addition, it provides you and your senior team real insight into “who’s getting and who’s not” among your middle managers, letting you know with whom you might need to spend a little more time training and coaching.

It’s also a convenient time to provide some collective training and education. Schedule training on your new CRM system during this time or invite in a vendor to work with your team to share the latest developments in your industry.

And as Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, experienced during his all day monthly visits to Crotonville, GE’s executive education facility, it was lecturing to and hanging out with the up-and-coming middle managers where he picked up the real stories behind the numbers he had been examining all month.

Agenda

Gene Kirila, named the youngest hero of manufacturing in the U.S., is the one who turned me on to this key management meeting. In every one of the businesses he built, he would gather all his team leads, supervisors, middle managers, and senior leaders together and host them the third Thursday of each month at his lake cabin – just 30 minutes from his factories. He expected everyone in management to give up one evening a month to work “on the business.”

Starting at 4pm he would gather his 12 to 15 middle and upper managers together and follow a strict 12 point agenda:

Growth Report- Good News and Actions Needed
Drivers of Reputation and Productivity Report and Actions Needed
Discipline Report on Priorities, Metrics. Meeting Rhythm
Numbers- Performance Indicators, Financial Report and Actions Needed
Market report on Customers Competitors News and Actions Needed
Intellectual Capital/People Report and Actions Needed
Corporate Calendar of events and Process reviews and Actions Needed
Action Teams and Committee Report and Actions Needed
Glossary of Terms updates
Decision Time- People, Cash, Execution, Strategy
Quarterly Action plan report and Actions Needed
Review of the one page plan and consensus on edits then publish for sign off.

Gene is now coaching other firms on how to run these monthly management meetings, including Keith Crownover’s team at Altoona, PA-based Delta Health Tech. Out of his 69 employees, he brings together his five senior managers, four mid-level managers, and four lower-level supervisors for a monthly meeting that uses Gene’s preferred agenda.

Notes Crownover “we are relatively recent adopters of these monthly meetings...regardless, I have already seen the benefit of including mid and lower level managers despite my original reluctance to do so. It’s been a real awakening process for everyone.”

For India-based Shah, his 3 hour monthly management meeting follows a simpler four part agenda:

1. Three – 5 minute education slots by 3 different directors. One covers a personal development tip, one covers how to manage more effectively and one covers how they can help their clients make more money out of their BNI membership.
2. This is followed by an update from each director on his/her goals and achievements that they would like to trumpet and what the pipeline is looking like for the next 30-60 days. They look at 3 Key Result Areas (KRAs) – Number of

- members, number of visitors and amount of business generated. They also ask for help if required and other directors who would like to help with an issue take it offline.
3. Announcements about key events and points to note from their HQ in the US.
 4. This is followed by breakfast so that by 10.30am everybody is on their way.

Number of Participants

You can figure having 7% to 12% of your total number of employees in these monthly meetings since this represents the typical range of “management span of control” within most organizations. This means for a firm with 400 employees, I’ve seen 40 to 50 supervisors to senior managers involved in these monthly meetings. This is actually an ideal number of participants if you want to maximize the diversity of ideas while keeping the meeting manageable.

For Richmond, VA-based Rainbow Station, CEO Gail Johnson involves the Directors of her six corporate owned sites, two Vice Presidents, her CFO, Facilities Manager, and herself. With approximately 175 employees in the core business, she knows it would also be ideal if she figured out how to include her franchisee partners as well. This would put her closer to the 10% figure.

Tangible Results

For Larry Parrotte, COO of Springfield, VA-based TransForce, their monthly day-long management meeting has been in place for just over a year. Named the “Executive Leadership Series” it falls between their Quarterly Board Meetings and the Annual General Managers Conference. Tangible results include creating a strategy that has resulted in a new multi-year contract valued at over \$2 million per year; naming two fundamental elements of their DNA and building into their branding and marketing efforts; and identifying the need to hold periodic focus group meetings with various field managers.

Notes Parrotte, “While there are multiple tangible results and benefits we’re realizing from our monthly meeting series, perhaps the most important is the fact that we have a chance to step off the intense daily merry-go-round of running the business to dedicate some very intentional time to forward looking strategic planning and the development of a shared vision.”