



DAILY “ADRENELINE” MEETING

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There is one indispensable routine; one absolute essential habit more important than any other I can teach an executive team; one discipline that is non-negotiable – and that is an effective daily meeting rhythm.

Before dismissing the idea (I’ve heard every excuse over the years), consider that from the top teams at Goldman Sachs to the assembly floors of Dell Computer to the Oval Office of the White House, an effective daily meeting rhythm is at the heart of their management practices. And I’ve not encountered a single start-up to mid-size firm that didn’t benefit greatly from initiating a short daily huddle organized around a specific agenda which I’ll detail below.

“I lead a daily ‘Adrenaline’ meeting,” explains Tony Petrucciani, CEO of Single Source Systems, Inc., a computer services firm based in Indianapolis. Petrucciani gathers his management team (five including himself) and meets each day at 10:07 am to discuss roadblocks. Their goal is to be out in 15 minutes. The name came from the substance which makes the heart beat faster. “In our case, we wanted the business to pulse faster,” adds Petrucciani.

“Our key customers really like that we do these meetings and it has become a sales tool, differentiating us from the speed that our competition pulses,” adds Petrucciani. “It used to take days for issues to work their way ‘to the top’ to get authority to allocate re-

sources – it’s now like Fedex – it’s there by 10:30.” It wasn’t always like that at Single Source. The meetings were launched when they faced a large project in overrun status and their customer was getting angry. “We implemented a specific Project Adrenaline daily meeting. Within a week, we were making much better progress, and had gained back credibility from the customer (we told them about Adrenaline). This kept a 6 figure project from imploding,” describes Petrucciani.

Since then, his team has implemented other types of daily Adrenaline meetings (Channel Adrenaline, Sales Adrenaline) that pulse just before his management meeting. If a major issue comes up in those earlier meetings, they pulse thru to the Management Adrenaline meeting, keeping the company operating at an effective pace.

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“The daily huddles are particularly key when you’re the busiest and spread the thinnest,” notes Chuck Hall, founder and CEO of Charles Hall Construction in Clarendon Hills, IL. With a focus on clients with multiple projects across multiple regions, Hall has teams working all over the country. And with the economy picking up, he’s facing an onslaught of business. “We have approximately \$24M in contracts signed or under negotiations for work this year waiting to start,” explains Hall. “With the daily, we’re much better equipped at keeping our daily tasks aligned with our plan. And it has helped us keep moral high during the difficult slow months, and step by step prepare us for the tidal wave of work that will hit us in June/July of 2004,” says Hall.

The immediate pushback I get when recommending a daily huddle is “We’re too busy!” Executives can’t imagine finding the time to get everybody in the same place or on a conference call every day for one minute, let alone five or 15. And if the company is quite small and travel isn’t that big an issue, they’ll tell me, “We don’t need a meeting when we’re seeing each other all day long.”

Yet, routine actually sets you free. Teams that huddle daily find

they interrupt each other considerably less the rest of the day. There’s a fixed time when everyone knows they’ll have everyone else’s attention. Meeting daily also clears up issues that otherwise linger to clog up the weekly meeting. This frees up time to focus on more strategic issues during the weekly gathering (focus of a future column).

I recommend that companies set the time at an odd time, like Petrucciani’s 10:07am. People do a better job of being on time when the time’s not on the half- or quarter-hour. Worried that you’ll forget the meeting while traveling? For a nominal monthly fee use www.iping.com, a reminder service which pages or phones you just prior to the daily meeting. And www.freeconference.com offers a free conference bridge you can use to host a daily conference call.

Make attendance mandatory and on time, with no excuses. I’ve been in intense meetings with clients. I’ve been in the midst of seeking funds from venture capitalists. It doesn’t matter; I tell them I need to take a break for my daily meeting. And it only gains one respect – a disciplined firm exudes success.

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Overall, start and end on time and don’t problem solve. This meeting is simply for problem identification. If the meeting is face-to-face, stand up to avoid going too long. And back the meeting up against other regular meetings or appointments to force an ending. If it starts to go longer than 15 minutes, people will drop the habit.

The Agenda: It should be the same structure every day, and it’s an agenda just three items long: what’s up, daily measures, and where are you stuck? In the first few minutes, each attendee shares “what’s up” the next 24 hours. This lets people immediately sense conflicts, crossed agendas, and missed opportunities. The key is to highlight specifics without simply reading one’s ‘to do’ list.

And the only people who don't get stuck are those who aren't doing anything.

Next, review whatever daily measurements your company uses to track its progress, highlighting any unusual trends.

The third and most important agenda item is where people are stuck. You're looking for bottlenecks. There's something powerful in simply verbalizing, for the whole group to hear, your fear, your struggle, your concern. It's the first step to solving the problem, because “until the mouth runs, the brain won't engage.”

And the only people who don't get stuck are those who aren't doing anything. So, scrutinize the person that reports “everything is fine!” or “no stucks today.”

Important as it is, the bottleneck conversation shouldn't be allowed to drift on into problem-solving. It's okay if somebody wants to reply to a bottleneck by saying “Call so-and-so,” but if two people start engaging over an issue, politely suggest they “take it off line.” Remember: The daily meeting needs to be kept short.

While reading Titan, in preparation for writing the chapter on meetings in my book, I was struck by the fact that John D. Rockefeller had lunch with his top team every day, starting with his co-founders in the early days and ending with Standard Oil's nine directors at headquarters in New York. Rockefeller insisted that this routine was crucial in the success and global reach of his company – and it will for your firm as well.