

riff:

A distinct variation

Patrick Lencioni is a New-York Times best-selling author of books that help businesses run more effectively. In this riff, I will explain the big ideas behind his book, *Death by Meeting*, and offer some considerations for our context at Metamora Mennonite Church.

Big Ideas

- “If we hate meetings, can we be making good decisions and successfully leading our organizations? I don’t think so. There is simply no substitute for a good meeting—a dynamic, passionate, and focused engagement—when it comes to extracting the collective wisdom of a team. The hard truth is, bad meetings almost always lead to bad decisions, which is the best recipe for mediocrity.”
- Lencioni points out two problems that plague most meetings. They are
 - Problem # 1: Lack of Drama
 - Drama comes from passion and engagement—i.e. conflict
 - Without conflict around ideas, what’s the point? Meetings become report gatherings, there is no room to engage in substantive dialog, and there is a sense that the meeting doesn’t matter because it doesn’t lead to change.
 - Drama comes from connection to real life issues.
 - If there is no connection between what happens in the meeting and the overall health and functioning of the organization, there is no point to the meeting.
 - Drama happens when groups *mine* for conflict
 - “When a group of intelligent people come together to talk about issues that matter, it is both natural and productive for disagreement to occur. Resolving those issues is what makes a meeting productive, engaging and even fun.” pg. 229
 - Problem # 2: Lack of Contextual Structure
 - Meeting Stew—“The single biggest structural problem facing leaders of meetings is the tendency to throw every type of issue that needs to be discussed into the same meeting, like a bad stew with too many random ingredients.” pg. 235
 - There should be different meetings for different purposes.
 - *Meeting # 1 The Daily Check In*: While not doable in all organizations, the *Daily Check In* is a 5-minute, stand up meeting where people report on their activities for the day.
 - *Meeting # 2 The Weekly Tactical*: This meeting focuses on immediate tactical issues. It features
 - *The Lightning Round*—Each team leader has 1 minute to report their 2-3 priorities for the week.
 - *Progress Review*—Critical reporting of key metrics: revenue, expenses, etc., etc. depending on organization.
 - *Real-time Agenda*: Once the *lightning round* and *progress review* are complete, taking approx. 15 min., an agenda is created that reflects the real-time challenges and priorities faced by the team. Lencioni ensures that this is not difficult because the most significant issues rise to the top.



- Meeting # 3: The Monthly Strategic—These meetings focus on the long-term strategic issues facing an organization. They don't deal with **how** something gets done but **what** needs to get done in the big picture.
- Meeting # 4: The Quarterly Off-site Review— The purpose of this meeting is to get out of the every day routine to assess long-term issues such as
 - **Comprehensive Strategy Review:** Are we heading in the right direction?
 - **Team Review:** Are teams functioning effectively? What needs should we address?
 - **Personnel Review:** Bringing together people who don't often work together but whose work is interconnected.
 - **Competitive/Industry Review:** What is happening in our industry?

Our Context

Due to the lay-led nature of MMC, we have fewer meetings than a business. For the same reason, leaders also invest less time in the organization than would employees in a business. However, our need to have effective meetings is no less important given our mission. In many ways, our meetings have to be even more effective and focused. We have to make even better use of meeting time.

In Practice

Problem # 1: Lack of Drama

It is the Team Leaders responsibility to set the tone for the meeting, keep the meeting connected to purpose, keep the meeting connected to real-time issues and mining for conflict to tease out points of disagreement so a good decision can be made.

Problem # 2: Contextual Structure

Lencioni's 4 meetings types do not translate directly into the Leadership structure of MMC, however, the idea of contextually structured meetings is relevant with some modification.

Meeting # 1: Weekly Staff Meeting. (This functions like the Daily Check-In) The paid staff gathers for prayer, reporting priorities for the week, coordinate schedules, and to raise any issues that need to be addressed at other gatherings.

Meeting # 2: Monthly Leadership Team Meeting. (This functions like the Monthly Strategic) This meeting focuses on the long-term strategic issues facing the congregation. Growth, health, communication, facility, etc.

Meeting # 3: Ministry Team Meetings (This functions like the Weekly Tactical) The decisions that get made on a weekly, programmatic level, are done at the Ministry Team level. These meetings can function effectively as Lencioni suggests...*Lightening Round, Key Metrics, Real-time Agenda.*

Meeting # 4: Off-site Leadership Team Retreat (This functions like the Quarterly Off-site Review). This involves staff, Leadership Team and Ministry Team members. It would include a comprehensive review of purpose and strategy, team member review (is the team functioning?), demographic review of community (who are we trying to reach), and assessment of current reality (how are we doing?).

Use Technology To Enhance Communication

While face-to-face meetings are difficult given the volunteer nature of the church, checking-in with team members who have significant responsibilities can be effectively done through communication like e-mail. It is easier for volunteers to let ministry tasks "fall through the cracks" because their every day life revolves around activities and issues "other than" the church.

This RIFF is by Michael Danner.

Add your RIFF! Read *Death by Meeting* and share your insights.