

Best Gems_How can companies make radically better strategy?

Getting the most out of top leadership meetings

Tough times call for deep thinking in many board rooms and executive committees, but most companies have lost touch with the subtle feeling of efficiency at such strategic parties, let alone becoming inspired.

Top executives take turns telling their story as meeting participants type on their laptops or blackberries, idly listening while they attend to tactical or operational urgencies they left behind board room doors. Or else they fight. Is it any wonder our business world is flunking tests of every kind?

It's time to take the most expensive employees of every company back to the habit of meaningful reflection, constructive discussion and efficient strategy of the kind that inspires others to follow. After all, they ARE the brains of the business. Aren't they?

Why executive meetings have gone stale

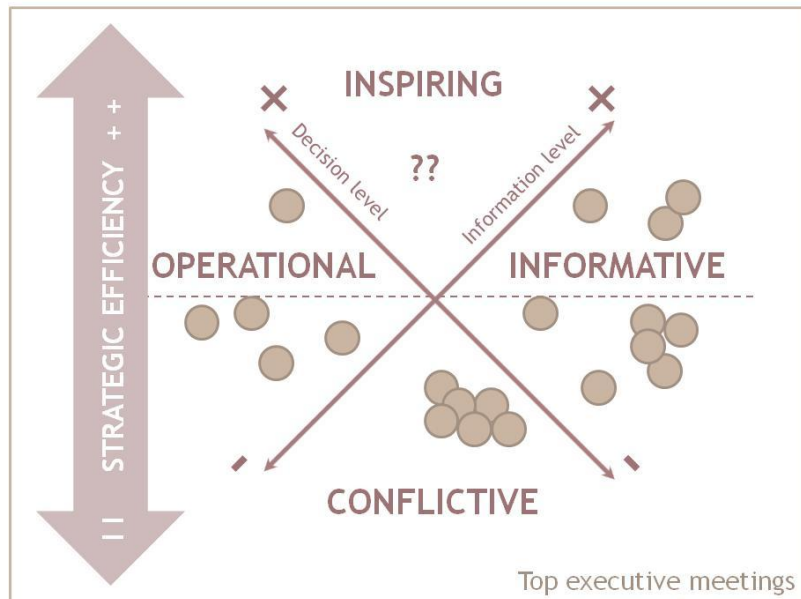
Believe it or not, one of the main reasons our leaders have become boring old worriers is our current obsession with time and just-in-time profit making. As they race around the world solving tactical urgencies, strategic thinking has been relegated to the most unlikely spaces: airport lounges, taxi rides and hotel queues!

While this gravely impairs individual reflection and learning, it wreaks havoc in the board room. Because the stuff that winning strategies are made of demands the kind of information that nobody really likes to talk about: what executives feel about each other, what they're scared of and why they're no longer proud of doing what they do or following their boss's lead.

If this subtle and uncomfortable information was shared more often, the tough decisions would be made sooner, don't you think?

The following graph shows that most top executive meetings are anything but inspiring. Dots indicate where most top leadership teams stand, and let's not forget that they set the example that is followed down through the chain of hierarchy.

Efficient strategy is inspirational by its very nature. The unpopulated area of this graph represents ideal strategic meetings, where decision levels and information levels are optimal. Maximum strategic efficiency means that participants leave the meeting knowing exactly what to do next, and most importantly, feeling inspired about doing it. You can tell just by looking at them when the door opens. It just shows, doesn't it?



When meetings are too centered on decision making, with one topic coming up after another at machine gun speed and fast instructions being torpedoed onto the table, yesterday’s problems may be solved, but tomorrow’s are condemned to be mere repetitions of the past. No time for dreaming means no space for creating or learning, and if any information is shared it’s usually on a strict need-to-know basis. Nobody makes time to get to know more. These meetings look like sweaty robot encounters with dense atmospheres and broody wrinkled foreheads.

The opposite isn’t right either. Informative meetings were all too abundant in high margin, slow moving markets where growth and innovation were closer to a nice-to-have ideal than a need-to-have urgency. Participants tend to multitask with their electronic devices and the excitement of the room only rises if the CEO suddenly gets frustrated or angry. This doesn’t mean they’re not exhausting, by the way. Try listening to hard core technical details from every possible aspect of the company for more than two hours straight. You will also crawl out of the room when you’re done.

The least efficient meetings in terms of creating quality strategy are obviously conflictive ones. They’re actually high on the other side of the spectrum because they are VERY good at demotivating everybody, creating more problems, triggering greater mistakes for the future, and destroying the feeble health of participants as they kill the company’s future with fatal blows to the heart: employee’s trust.

So is making time enough? Sadly, no.

Lack of dedication is certainly the first, most immediate cause, but many teams try to make time for deeper reflection and end up repeating the same pattern they tend to follow, or drifting off into a dream world of futuristic fantasy.

Why? Because habits have a habit of sticking to us. If it's tough to get yourself to go on a diet or quit smoking, you can imagine that asking a whole team of people to radically change the way they interact for one day is just not realistic at all.

Once you start making the time the real reasons start to come up to the surface, and most of them have to do with all the stuff that hasn't been said in meetings for the last few years. The exercise of bringing subjective and interpersonal issues into the spotlight is a surgical procedure to be handled with carefully built expertise.

If you do want to get to the top quarter of the graph, these are the basics to get started:

- 1) **Convince your CEO.** He/she is the initiator of the change, and without his or her complete commitment to getting the most out of the executive committee, it just 'ain't going to happen'.
- 2) **Make time for it.** Start with one first all day strategic thinking meeting. Plan a spaced out agenda and ban all electronic devices from the room. The only people you need to connect with that day are your colleagues.
- 3) **Bring in an external facilitator.** Not only will he or she be in charge of moderating the agenda and rhythm of interactions, liberating the whole team from this frustrating and energetic task. The facilitator guarantees everybody the equal right to speak up as another member of the team, which grants the CEO permission to voice concerns and helps participants speak more freely of their fears.
- 4) **Choose your facilitator with care, and invest as much effort as needed in preparing this first meeting.** The facilitator must combine adequate understanding of the company strategy with expert coaching and executive development skills. If the facilitator can't translate the intangible or emotional issues into the hard language of strategy, numbers and results, the team will not buy his/her diagnosis of team dynamics or follow recommendations.
- 5) Finally, the ideal approach is to **design a small number of open exercises and questions about company strategy and future.** These will serve as the basic agenda to start opening up participant interaction with the help of a provocative but sympathetic moderator. Drive the meeting towards an action plan of simple, immediate next steps.

And get ready for a long ride. It will take time, but I guarantee you, the team will feel more alive and inspired than it ever has before, every step of the way!