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The "Improve Your Business" Newsletter. SPRING 2009

Stormy Weather: How to find your SILVER lining:

Tim Sweet

The world's current economic woes are affecting everyone. In this gloom, most companies are scrambling to keep up, barely holding on and hoping things get "back to normal" soon. Smart organizations, however, don't just "sandbag". They are adopting improvements to survive now *and* thrive in the future.

There is truth to the statement, "the best defense is a good offense."

Improvements don't have to cost a bundle either. Get staff that has time on their hands spending part of their week in improvement teams. All the energy you had during the boom is still there, its just being wasted on worry not action. Redirect nervous energy towards improvement and build positive momentum

Here's where to focus:

SYSTEMIZE: Step by step, standardized procedures makes training fast and creates efficiencies. It creates smoother transitions between tasks and employees, and lowers down-time. It also relaxes staff, reduces mental fatigue and improves morale.

INNOVATE: Only through innovation will you be able to do more with less. Now is

the time to get off the fence and invest in the equipment, facilities, and systems you already know will create efficiencies. Involve your staff in finding new opportunities for improving; not only will it give them something to exciting focus on, but a common goal builds cohesive teams.

LEARNING: When big bonuses and raises aren't feasible, invest in development.



Any company can offer more money, but not every company will offer growth and education. Become a "Learning Organization" by establish a structured curriculum through which "on the job" knowledge is shared and employees grow. Increasingly important to younger workers, a Learning Organization will stand out in the crowd, and attract and the kind of staff that will bring energy and solutions in troubled times.

VALUE: Measure customer satisfaction, loyalty and the value they receive. If this slips, you know your efforts are misdirected. Good changes never sacrifice quality or service.

EMPLOYEE: Monitor employee job satisfaction and morale. Besides giving you good information, asking, "how do you feel" just lets people know you care, which benefits your organization in countless ways. Take time to celebrate individual accomplishments. Any gain that required intelligence, talent or effort deserves acknowledgement. You don't need a huge budget to shake a hand, throw a company picnic or reward employees with movie passes. And get creative: make expenditures rewards for team efforts – if you have to buy a new printer or forklift anyway, make the purchase a reward for great team effort. Create buzz by *naming* projects after exemplary employees.

RIGHT CUSTOMERS: Now is the time to focus on your core competencies and using them to serve the right clients. A sure way to spread resources thin is to try and serve markets that don't benefit from your current strengths. Identify your perfect customer and compare each of you current clients to that benchmark. It will take fewer people to *provide the right clientele your best product or service* and you will maximize profitability and establish a reputation for excellence in the process.



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WHATEVER HAPPENED TO WEEKLY PROGRESS REPORTS? - By Shirley Lee

Some business departments have eliminated the weekly progress report in favour of team, staff, or status meetings. While other managers are claiming too much time is spent in meetings and their employees should return to the written tools that proved successful for business communication in the past. There are pros and cons to both choices. For example meetings can generate new ideas, find solutions to group problems, and aid effective decision-making. Those are the meeting pros. The biggest con most people note is the cost of meetings in time that could be used for other work. This is true if the meetings are not productive and in no way move the team or individual work along. This frustrating con is too often the case in meetings that are held strictly to status everyone on what each other are doing. Most meetings are better held when group participation and activity is required.

The pros for returning to a written communication tool like weekly (or monthly) progress reports are that this forces the individuals to focus on what is most important to their management or business, they only ask for help as needed, and provide their own ideas for solutions along with implementation plans. Of course, another pro is that it reduces time required to attend a meeting. Cons of the progress report are some loss of collaboration with team or other staff, not meeting may result in loss of camaraderie or team spirit, and the individual solutions or decisions may not be as good as what the team may have come up with. However a pro here is that the decision may be arrived at quicker.

Whether the progress is reported in a written report or provided as part of a meeting, the manager of the group must define exactly what should be in a progress report. Developing and using a standard format for progress will help individuals focus on what is important to their management and not waste time reporting day-to-day activities or incidentals. In the long run, it saves managers valuable time as well since they get the exact information they want and clarification

on how they can help their direct reports to do their jobs better. Following are four sequential components in progress reports that have worked well for managers in the past.

Report job-related statistics or status metrics for goals.

This is numerical data that the manager may wish to see upon occasion but can skip over when in a hurry. This will be personal and job related goals for individual contributors or group and project goals for lower level managers and team leaders.

Highlight number of major accomplishments or high priority projects.

The manager will put a limit as to how many line items the progress report can include. This helps the person giving the progress report to focus on high priority items only.



Whether written or part of a meeting, managers must define exactly what progress is to be discussed.

Most managers will limit number to 5 for individual contributors or 3-5 for project managers and team leaders.

Describe issues, barriers, or problems encountered along with possible alternatives considered and solutions you plan to implement.

In this section the manager finds out anything that might affect the individual's ability to do the best job or potential causes for team problems or project slippage. If the person giving the report is highly confident and capable, this section should have fewer items than those listed in the accomplishment area. If this section has lots of issues, then the individual may require coaching to build their confidence or a mentor to help them become more capable.

Explain how manager can help.

In this case, the manager would be the one getting the progress report. If this is a written report, this section is often the first place a manager will read. Then the manager will read backwards through the report to better understand the need. This way the manager will know if they need to talk via phone with the person giving the progress or plan a meeting to talk with the individual. If the progress report is given in a meeting, someone may have volunteered to help or given a potential solution during the issues section and there is no longer a need for the manager's help.

Using the four components for a standard progress report makes it easier for individuals writing reports, planning meeting presentations, or just talking about work-related topics to focus. Proper focus not only saves time, but it aids in selecting the best and right things to communicate. Use these four components for written reports or as individual sub-agendas in a staff or status meeting to ensure everyone's focus is on the higher priority business items.

Understanding what makes a good progress report and the pros/cons of doing them in meetings or print will make managers and their direct reports more efficient and the reporting more effective. When trying to decide how to do progress reports, weigh the pros and cons along with the benefits and the costs. Then determine which type of progress reporting method

best fits the business need by looking at an overall meeting purpose and the main reason for reports.

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COOKING FOR GREAT TEAMS The Revolution's regular food column features easy "team building" meals that blow the buns off a hotdog party. Get a few volunteers, dust off the ghetto blaster and put-on a free lunch for staff. The result is an inexpensive and memorable event that builds relationships.

Help Staff "Put Down Roots" with a Hot Potato Party!

From the humblest of vegetables comes one of the most successful parties you can throw. Inexpensive and drop-dead simple to prepare, this most-well-received tuber is the perfect platform for a multitude of tasty toppings.

This is so easy to prepare, it is almost unnecessary to provide a recipe, but no one likes raw spuds, and cooking large amounts does invite problems, so we'll walk through it.

First, when buying potatoes for this party opt for Canadian Russets (aka: bakers). And when selecting them, choose potatoes that are, at a minimum, five inches long. If you are buying them this small, consider buying 1.75 - 2 per person. If possible, opt for the BIG SPUDS, the ones that are twice the size of your fist. These will take longer to cook, but they make up for it because you'll only need 1 per person, and they're easier to keep hot.

Next, get your volunteers into the staff room kitchen in the morning, or over to someone's house the night before the party. Have plenty of scrub brushes on hand, and get those taters clean. This isn't a beach party, so no one is expecting sand.

Pat each dry, and prick them all over with a fork. Wrap each in about a foot of standard aluminum foil. Start rolling the potato up, and when you're just around the potato fold in the sides, then continue to rolling and lock the "jacket". Press the foil around the potato tightly, this seals out the air and seals in the heat and steam, giving you that great "cakey" consistency. This will result in a soft skin, but unless you're planning a sit-down lunch, these really are the easiest for guests to handle standing.

Now for the only tricky part: the timing. A foiled potato of average size will take at least an hour in a conventional oven at gas mark 5, or 375 degrees. But cooking for large groups requires that we consider the strain on the

oven. For a oven rack full of potatoes average size, I always allow about 2 hours. Multiple Racks 2.5 hours. If they are the big boys, I give a rack 2.5 to three hours. You can shorten this time if you have multiple ovens, or split the task between multiple people. The best thing to do is start early, cook a few extra, and test them for doneness. When they are done, reduce the heat to 170 F and hold them until you are ready to go (try not to hold them longer than 30-45 minutes.)

One critical thing to consider is even cooking. Space your potatoes an inch apart and at least 5 inches off the bottom (run convection if your oven has it) and once or twice during the cooking process move the spuds from the edge to the centre, top to bottom, upside down and downside up.

When you're ready put them in a cardboard box or cooler lined with terry towels or crumpled newspaper, and get them to the due. You will have about 30-40 minutes out of the oven to serve them still piping hot. So if you're cooking at home, get in the car and go, go, go!



Lastly, if you're wondering how to open these delicious bundles, just cut an X across the top (thru foil and skin) with a sharp knife, peel back the foil and squeeze the ends together. That's it... the million dollar spud.

To serve have forks, paper plates and loads of toppings available. Depending on budget, these can range from the simple to the sublime. Here are some ideas:

Butter, salt, pepper, sour cream, chives, bacon, cheese (cheddar, mozzarella, parmesan, cottage, ricotta, blue, brie, smoked gouda), mushrooms, onions, tomatoes, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, green peppers, lettuce, sprouts, artichokes, diced ham, pickles, ground beef, shredded chicken, Alfredo sauce, crab chunks, chili, creamed corn, pepperoni, pizza sauce, BBQ sauce, salsa, guacamole, crushed nacho chips, refried beans, baked beans, salad dressings, shredded meat and peppers (see last issue), hot turkey and gravy, chicken salad, tuna salad, ham salad, bean salad...

Where to take it really is up to you. HOT POTATO!

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AND CONGRATULATIONS TO THE THREE
WINNERS OF OUR FISHING PACKAGE DRAW!**
If you weren't one of the lucky ones... don't worry.
You can come fishing with us any time.
Just drop us a line at fishing@revolveconsulting.com