MMAC

Council of Small Business Executives

COSBE

July 2009

Effective Management of Group Dynamics II

Enhancing Roundtable Leadership

MMAC Roundtable Leaders met recently to explore ways to strengthen idea exchange and group problem solving among business peers. Ten group facilitators participated in a workshop led by leadership, team and organizational development expert, Paul Woerpel, President of Transformation Consulting Group.

The popularity of last year's workshop, "Effective Management of Group Dynamics" prompted COSBE staff to offer another group of leaders the opportunity to **(See left column below)**

SYMPTOMS OF "GROUP DRIFT"

- The honeymoon is over: the group is no longer a high priority
- Meetings lack energy
- Some members seem to have "checked out"; irregular attendance
- Lack of substantive issues; discussion is mostly "cocktail conversation"
- Members complain to the leader about unacceptable behavior
- Back-channel gossip
- Leaders commiserate with MMAC staff about group problems
- Group leader attempts to "whip the group into shape"
- Efforts to enforce the meeting guidelines, ground rules and roundtable protocol lead to only temporary improvement

A gradual and almost imperceptible decline in energy, focus and productivity, which undermines the collective ability of group members to accomplish their original objectives

The Abilene Paradox and What to Do About It

work directly with Paul and tap his extensive background and expertise leading groups of senior executives.

Paul was also the featured resource at the 2009 Roundtable Leader's Meeting in April. There he shared provocative insights into group behavior in a memorable program: "Group Drift" (How to Avoid a Trip to Abilene). Based on his experience with CEO roundtable groups, Paul described the phenomenon of *group drift* (see insert) and asked group leaders to draw on their collective experience to identify some of the early warning signs. He pre-

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sented a video called "The Abilene Paradox", which introduced a simple family parable and troubled company situation to illustrate how groups, organizations—and even couples—can wind up drifting in a direction no one really wants to go. In the signature episode, a family leaves the comfort of their shaded front porch to drive more than 50 miles in the stifling Texas heat to the Abilene Café (in a car without air conditioning), only to discover upon returning that everyone would have preferred to stay home.

According to Jerry B. Harvey, Professor Emeritus at George Washington University, this paradoxical behavior occurs when people privately agree about what should occur, but fail, in a group setting, to communicate their concerns, opinions or reservations. The resulting dysfunction breeds dissatisfaction and frustration and wastes time, energy and resources.

When group members are paralyzed by fears about not being viewed by others as a "team player", they refrain from speaking up, the group is deprived of the opportunity to examine its course and redirect. When one member finally does break the stalemate, it often becomes clear that others shared similar concerns.

While negative fantasies and perceived risks produce what Harvey calls "action anxiety", the consequences of speaking one's mind are seldom as great as the consequences of maintaining silent collusion. President John F. Kennedy said, "There are risks and costs to a program of action. But they are far less than the long-range risks and costs of comfortable inaction".

How can COSBE facilitators help their members to

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Roundtable Success Formula

avoid boarding the Abilene Express? Paul recommends building mutual accountability for the quality of the group experience, with explicit conversation about objectives, expectations and "rules of engagement". To paraphrase Michael Gerber, author of *The E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It,* members must recognize the importance of working not only in their group, but also on their group. For starters, leaders can conduct an evaluation of what's working and what's not working and facilitate a brainstorming session on ways to improve the group exchange.

Prior to the June hands-on workshop, Paul conducted individual participant interviews to ascertain key leadership issues and challenges. The session that followed was patterned after a typical COSBE meeting. It focused on how to generate and maintain group vitality.

Paul presented a framework to guide discussion and idea exchange (see Roundtable Success Formula on page 2), which emphasizes attention to those group development and group maintenance factors that support relationship enhancement and trust building.

RIGHT PEOPLE

According to Paul, proactive and deliberate attention to the recruitment, selection and integration of new members will foster alignment of objectives, and group cohesion. In welcoming new members, the group must be willing to step back and take time to learn about the new member and his/her business. Similarly, the new member must be quickly

(See left column below)

EFFECTIVE GROUPS

- Well-functioning groups largely capable of self-management
- Leadership is fluid
- The facilitator serves as gatekeeper and guide—encourages participants to take ownership
- Members have clarity of purpose and consensus on the factors that will impact desired outcomes
- Members encourage one another to align behaviors to achieve those outcomes
- Members are comfortable calling one another on actions and behaviors that don't contribute to their collective success

Group Leaders Share Best Practices

brought up-to-speed with respect to group protocol and expectations. Having a "Strategic Business Profile" for each company can help members to get a quick grasp of each other's respective businesses and related challenges (see insert on next page).

Workshop participant's group best practices for recruiting and on-boarding new members included:

- ✓ Exploring the prospective member's expectations to assure fit with group culture.
- ✓ Encouraging group members to have lunch with a new member and visit his/her place of business.
- ✓ Sharing the group constitution and member profiles during a group interview.

RIGHT FOCUS

Effective groups have clarity of purpose, focus and priority. What's more, because members have discussed and agreed about their collective objectives, they are willing to be accountable—individually and collectively—for the achievement of those objectives. Workshop participants discussed how their members share both the benefits and burdens of group involvement.

- ✓ To make sure it doesn't become a "job for life", some roundtable groups rotate the leadership responsibility.
- ✓ One group has term limits (one year) and has its next two facilitators lined up.
- ✓ Many groups expect each member to host a meeting in turn at their place of business.

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STRATEGIC BUSINESS PROFILE

- Nature of the Business (brief description of what the company does; for whom)
- Ownership Structure
- Shareholder Objectives
- Size: Number of Employees, Sales, Locations, etc.
- Product/Service Scope
- Markets/Segments Served (vertical and geographic)
- Target Customer Profile
- Industry Characteristics; Competitive Dynamics
- Value Proposition
- Management Structure
- Key Operations Capabilities
- Sales Process
- Business Development Strategy
- Key Strategic (Product/Market) Issues and Challenges
- Key Organizational/Operational Issues and Challenges

RIGHT PROCESS

Paul contends that *how* members interact with one another ultimately determines whether meetings are perceived as compelling and productive. Groups that have built trust and rapport are able to move from a superficial discussion of tactical issues to a focus on more strategic, "deep dive" topics. A systematic problem solving process adds discipline to the discussion, which helps members to refrain from the temptation to "shoot from the hip". The key to respectful and effective issue exploration is asking probing and clarifying questions. Only when an issue is fully vetted should members be allowed to share their direct experience and advice.

For most groups, an aspect of trust building involves not only what happens in meetings but what goes on between meetings, as well. In addition to social gatherings at the favorite watering hole and golf outings, what are some of the creative things COSBE groups are doing to build continuity?

- ✓ One group has constructed a secure Google site, where members exchange information between meetings on topics of shared interest, such as books they are reading or issues they are facing.
- ✓ Another group schedules special meetings to address critical issues that require deeper consideration or additional preparation.

If roundtable leaders are looking for ways to enhance the group experience and add member value, they must pay deliberate attention to the same factors that determine corporate success, namely having the "right" people, the "right" focus and the "right process". What are the crucial topics your group should be discussing to avoid ending up in Abilene?

Paul Woerpel has been helping progressive business leaders develop strategic agility to achieve market leadership and extraordinary business results for more than 25 years. You may contact him directly at Transformation Consulting Group (262) 691-4540. To view Paul's LinkedIn profile, please visit: http://www.linkedin.com/in/strategicagility