Tips and techniques to improve the way your teams work

Creating New Ideas *By Kristin Arnold*

It's tough coming up with marketing ideas by yourself – and much more fun when you bring in others to help! Here's a fun way to thank your best customers for their business as well as come up with those new marketing ideas you are looking for:

Invite Your Top Ten. Go through your customer list. By name, identify your top clients – the twenty percent that brings in eighty percent of your revenues. Send them a clever invitation to dinner at a nice restaurant that has a private room for your "party." If you're really ambitious, ask your top clients to bring one potential client. This adds a wonderful networking touch to the party, as well as a great way for you to introduce great prospects to your business!

Plan and Prepare. Make this a memorable party from the moment they walk in. How will they know they are in the right place? How will you greet them? What are you going to do to thank them for their business? What are you going to do to show them what else your company is capable of? Think through the agenda.

Listen. As you mingle, listen to what they are saying about you and your business. Ask great questions to draw out information or probe deeper.

Start Strong. After a short social and fabulous dinner, personally thank them for their business. Ask people to introduce themselves and share one reason why they do business with your business.

Ask for Help. Share what you are trying to do (grow your business, replicate these great customers, become world famous etc.). Give them a two minute summary of your business and the benefits you provide.

Ask for Feedback. In your own words, ask "What do you like about doing business with me and my company? (You will need this positive feedback to balance out the next question!). Just listen to what they have to say. Don't interrupt, and don't justify why you did what you did. You may, however, ask questions to clarify what they said.

**Take a Deep Breath.** When done with the "likes," ask "If you were me, what would you do to improve our products/services?" "What should we start doing, stop doing, or do differently?" "What would you do to market/get the word out about our company?" and specific questions that will help you gain a better insight. Again, just listen. Listening is really hard to do at this point because you want to let them know why. But don't! Be gracious and keep your mouth shut, unless asking a question to clarify. Hint: You may want to use a neutral third party facilitator because they may not tell you "the bad" directly.

Thank Them. At the end, thank them for their comments. Summarize the key points and highlight some of the a-has and key ideas you learned.

Follow Up. A week or so later, follow up with a personal letter highlighting what you learned from the event and what you are committing to do as a result of their input. This would also be a good time to provide amplifying information that you wanted to share during the feedback session.

Keep in Touch. Throughout the year, as you accomplish key activities they suggested, follow up with a phone call or letter thanking them for their great idea.
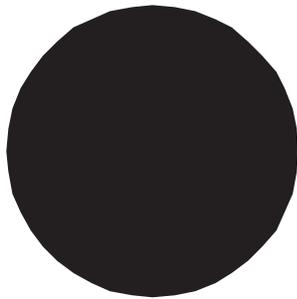
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► No Decision *By Kristin Arnold*

Andrew Jackson once said, "Take time to deliberate, but when the time for action arrives, stop thinking and go in." These are wise words to those who are paralyzed by the pursuit of one more piece of information, a change of market conditions, or a sign from the heavens of the right decision. I refer to this unfortunate condition as "paralysis by analysis".

It's easy to confuse "deliberation" with taking action. After all, the team comes together, spends time discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each option as well as gather the appropriate data that justifies or defeats an alternative. When there is no clear-cut "winner," it's fairly easy to defer the decision. "We'll discuss this next time we meet."

Comforted by the knowledge that the team discussed the options, we appear to have made progress. Alas, no decision was made. No action was taken. Or was it?

No decision is, in fact, a decision. The team has made a decision to do nothing; a decision to stay with the status quo. Just don't fool yourselves. The decision is telling your team something. Either the team:

Is Afraid of the Outcome. The fear of the unknown paralyzes the team from disrupting the current path and taking a differ-

ent path. Rather than choosing a road (less traveled or not…), we end up standing still in the middle of the road.

Realizes No Benefit. Taking a different path takes energy! The team must realize a benefit to making the decision, expending the intellectual, emotional and capital energy. So we opt to take the path of least resistance. Go with the flow.

Hasn't Explored All the Possibilities. Presented with various options, many teams are faced with an "either/or" situation. There is no room for collaboration, an "and/plus" combination. In team lingo, we call this a "win-win." When presented with options, one option will win, other options will lose. The team doesn't even start looking for a win-win. And nobody likes to lose. So we just defer decisions.

Sometimes, teams face tough choices with unclear outcomes. It's impossible to know, with a hundred percent accuracy, if they are the correct choices. Just recognize that no decision is still a decision to do nothing differently.

Every decision is a decision, even if you tell yourself you are making no decision.
Doug Smart

► It's Better To Try Something

Always remember that it's impossible to fail completely, and impossible to succeed perfectly.

Even when you fail, you've been successful in making a decision. You've successfully had the courage to try something different. You've been successful in making a commitment to something. And finally, to paraphrase Thomas Edison, you've been successful in discovering a way not to do something.

It's better to try something and fail than to attempt nothing and succeed.

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THE extraordinary team

What's New at QPC Inc.

I trust you're having a great summer playing a round of golf, relaxing by the pool, and building those extraordinary teams at work, home and in the community. My hope is that this newsletter provides a few tips, techniques and ideas to help your teams work better together.

I have been working with a number of new and exciting teams: Baltimore Gas & Electric's Activity Based Costing Team; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Leadership Team; Virginia's Philpott Manufacturing Extension Partnership Strategic Planning Team; NASA Langley's Navigation Center Consulting Team; Craney Island Expansion Project Stakeholder Team; Virginia's Center for Innovative Technology Electronics and Advanced Materials Industry Steering Committees; Norfolk Environmental Commissioners; and the Virginia War Museum.

I am honored to be able to work with such an eclectic group of folks and I enjoy facilitating the diversity and challenges each group faces. I am also honored to receive the Hampton Roads Outstanding Professional Woman Award for 2001 and the Virginia Speakers Association Chapter Member of the Year. Thank you for all your wonderful support!   Kristin

Team Energizers

I am currently working on this year's book: *Team Energizers: 50 Practical Team Activities*. You guessed it! It's a compilation of our last six years' "Practical Team Activities" column from this newsletter as well as other team activities that I and others have created.

If you have an extraordinary practical team activity that you would like to share and have published, please let me know! I'd love to include it in our book!

On our website, www.qpcteam.com, we are also beta-testing a new search engine to find just the right team activity from all those team activity/training books. If you would like to be part of our beta-test, just let me know!

Practical Team Activities: Save Everybody! *By Ellen Domb*

> ### Save Everybody!
> *To demonstrate the importance of clearly defining a problem and creatively solving it.*
> **Time** - 5 minutes
> **Nr. of Participants—6 min**
> **No Materials Required**

Since most people are familiar with the tragic sinking of the Titanic, start this activity with a Powerpoint graphic of the Titanic, a video clip from the movie where the Titanic collides with the iceberg or interesting Titanic factoids.

Describe the problem: Your ship, the USS ****** (think of a great shipboard name) has just collided with an iceberg out in the North Atlantic. The engines are still running, but will stop after an unknown period of time. The ship will sink in two hours, and the ship's officers know this. Unfortunately, the nearest rescue ship is four hours away. There are enough seats in the lifeboats for 1178 people, and there are 2224 on board. In the North Atlantic, a person in the water can live approximately four minutes. Your objective is to 'Save Everyone.'

Separate the group into three teams to search for solutions in the following areas:
- Upper decks, weather decks, pilot house
- Cabins, dining areas, saloons, gymnasium
- Engine room, machine shops, cargo spaces.

"You have ten minutes to develop solutions to 'save everyone.' After ten minutes, your team spokesperson will report out your solutions."

Before reporting out, lead a discussion of what "Save Everyone" really means while capturing the definitions on a flipchart. Hopefully, every team has realized that the problem definition was poor and that a much more solvable problem is something like "keep everyone dry and warm for two more hours until help arrives." Some teams will settle for a self- limiting out- come such as "save as many as we have lifeboat seats for."

Teams report out their solutions which are discussed by the full group. One team always comes up with the breakthrough idea of putting people on an iceberg using the lifeboats as ferries. Sometimes teams maneuver the ship as long as they have power, either toward the rescue ship or toward the iceberg. Other times, they don't even think of it.

Debrief the activity. Some insights may include:

Problem definition affects and may even limit possible outcomes.

The team had to think "out of the box" and face apparent contradictions (the thing that sank us as the solution to the problem).

Although the problem was vague, most solutions were, in fact, solving a specific problem.

ᴛʜᴇ extraordinary team

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From the Bookshelf

Even if you never read *First, Break All the Rules*, (which you should have), read it's sequel *Now, Discover Your Strengths* by Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton (ISBN 0-7432-0114-0). The authors expound on their basic premise that managers should identify and build on the strengths of their employees rather than provide training to bolster their weaknesses.

I confess, I really like this premise. Especially when it comes to teamwork, it makes sense to leverage your team members' talents and manage around their weaknesses as well. The book identifies 34 major themes or talents such as Achiever, Activator, Empathy, Futuristic etc. By purchasing the book, you may also log on to a website to identify your top five "signature" talents.

Sounds similar to the Myers-Briggs, DISC or Hermann Brain Dominance Profile? No, it isn't. This isn't a personality or behavioral assessment. It's a talent assessment—those recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that you can productively apply.

The key is in the productive application—and that's where teams come in. Knowing where you are talented, how you can contribute meaningfully to the team, and how to manage around your weaknesses is highly enlightening. Use this book to generate an extraordinary conversation about your team's talents!

Team Richuals

In our last newsletter, we featured the concept of "Team Rituals" - those customs and traditions that contribute to the team's culture and philosophy.

Little did I know that Dr. Marlene Caroselli, a long-time supporter, advocate and friend has written a delightful book *Richuals: 52 Ways to Enrich the Workplace.* (Marlene has written so many books, it's hard to keep up with all her titles!)

I just love Richual #49—"Hold a Serendipi-Tea Party! "Each month, at a special 'tea,' team members are served fine tea and delicacies. Then, in round-robin fashion, each shares a shortcut that he/she stumbled upon quite serendipitously. It might be a way to work smarter, faster or less expensive" Thanks for the richual, Marlene!

Connect the Dots *By Kristin Arnold*

Does your team use dots? Colored, sticky dots can be used in several ways to enable team discussion. Use dots to:

Prioritize a List. Give each team member the same number of dots (usually a third of the number of items on the list. For example, if there are thirty items on the list, give each team member ten dots). Allow each team member to place the dots on the items they believe is most important. Set some guidelines for the maximum number of votes allowed per item to keep one person from placing all their votes on one item and "skewing" the results. Typically, this process will yield clear "break points" that show the obvious high-priority items, moderate priority, and no interest at all!

Select an Item. Once you have prioritized a list, take the obvious high priority items and take another vote. You never, ever want to take the item that received the most votes during the first round. Only a few people actually voted for that item! By taking a second (or even third) round, you narrow down the options and select an item the majority supports.

Compare Criteria. Use two colors to show different criteria to make a team decision. For example, in action planning, the team might want to know how important the item is, as well as the team members' commitment to making sure the action is completed. Give each team member two different colors (e.g. blue for importance and green for commitment). This process usually creates interesting discussion when comparing what's important versus what they're willing to do!

Express Views. Give team members colored dots to express their views. For example, give green "go" dots for those items the team should do and red "stop" dots for those items they shouldn't do. Put the green dots on the left side of the list and the red dots on the right side. Stand back and you'll have a great visual of what the team should and shouldn't do.

Express a Position. The team may be discussing a timeline, theoretical model or other visual representation of an idea. The team places a dot to signify where they are now, where they should be in the future, etc. For example, team members share their personal style preferences by placing a dot in the quadrant that fits their style. Stand back to see the overall picture of the teams' style preferences.

Two things to remember when using dots: 1) some team members might be color-blind, so watch out for red/green and blue/yellow combinations. 2) The process is more important than the actual number of dots. Look at where the team placed the dots. What are the areas of agreement? What are the areas of disagreement? Given the "dotted" information (which is really just a "gut feeling" and not substantiated with data), what does this information tell you? What does the team need to reach a consensus (where everyone can live with and support the decision)?