

Book Review

Patrick Lencioni, *Death by Meeting* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).
ix + 260 pages.

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Patrick Lencioni, the best-selling author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, uses his latest book to solve “the most painful problem in business,” aka the meeting. Developing a theme he introduced in *Dysfunctions*, Lencioni champions principles for dynamic, meaningful meetings.

Using the leadership fable genre, which he has vastly improved since his first attempt (*The Five Temptations of a CEO*), Lencioni offers a valuable resource to every organization. His engaging writing makes for easy, enjoyable reading. The storyline provides context and instructive nuances, but for bottom line readers, the 30-page executive summary (233-252) reviews the conceptual teaching.

Lencioni identifies two problems in meetings: (1) they are boring, and (2) they are ineffective. He maintains the boredom stems from lack of drama, namely conflict, and the ineffectiveness results from a lack of contextual structure. *Death by Meeting* offers solutions to both problems.

Readers familiar with his earlier writing will recognize much of the dialogue concerning conflict. Lencioni, borrowing from his own experience with screenwriting, insists that great drama centers on great conflict. Most people would rather see a movie than attend a

meeting. Lencioni, though, shows the irony of this preference by pointing out that meetings are interactive and directly relevant to our lives, whereas movies are not.

Bringing drama to meetings depends on two leadership skills. First, the meeting must begin with a compelling plot. Participants have to see the importance of their decisions in the first moments of the meeting. Second, the attendants at meetings must be encouraged to embrace conflict in the meeting. Conflict demonstrates a willingness for participants to disagree, which eradicates the tendency to withhold opinions, and to support decisions.

Readers interested in learning more about the importance of conflict in meetings would be best served by reading correlating passages of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Conflict can be difficult to manage, causing most leaders to avoid—rather than encourage—it. The value of healthy conflict has implications for team dynamics and vision buy-in, as well as interesting meetings.

Lencioni covers new ground in *Death by Meeting* with his treatment of meetings’ contextual structure. Most organizations have one kind of all-purpose meeting, resulting in wasted time, little accomplished, and high frustration.

Lencioni proposes four different types of meetings, each geared to a particular purpose. A helpful chart (249) summarizes the content of his teaching.

First, Lencioni advocates a *Daily Check-in* meeting. This five-minute, stand-up meeting covers strictly administrative details such as daily schedules and activities. Geared toward the corporate setting, the author attempts to keep communication and operations at maximum levels through this daily contact.

The second and third types of meetings, *Weekly Tactical* and *Monthly Strategic*, offer Lencioni's wisest contribution regarding context. When tactical issues (urgent, functional matters) are mixed with the strategic (big picture, vision, direction issues), little is accomplished. Separating the two helps shorten the length of the weekly meeting, while creating space for meaningful strategic discussion.

Last, Lencioni calls for a *Quarterly Off-site Review* meeting. Readers will enjoy his humorous attempt to distinguish this event from the infamous trust-building exercises of earlier decades' off-sites. This meeting still focuses on work, but it gives time for much broader systems analysis, as well as team development.

Given the necessity of meetings to organizational operations and the general discontent many experience at said meetings, *Death by Meeting* should be required reading for all leaders. The principles and recommended meeting structures can be adapted easily to fit different organizational cultures, while maintaining the power of different contexts. Employing Lencioni's meeting structure will not perfect the meeting

experience but it will provide an intentional discipline that, given time, just might make meetings both attractive and effective.