

NATIONAL BEST-SELLER

DEATH *by* Meeting

A LEADERSHIP FABLE



...about solving the most painful problem in business

PATRICK LENCIONI

AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLER

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Death by Meeting

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ABOUT SOLVING THE MOST
PAINFUL PROBLEM IN BUSINESS

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A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

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Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

One Montgomery, Ste. 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104 www.josseybass.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lencioni, Patrick, 1965–

Death by meeting: a leadership fable about solving the most painful problem in business / by Patrick Lencioni.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-7879-6805-6 (alk. paper)

1. Business meetings. I. Title.

HF5734.5.L46 2004

658.4'56—dc22

2003026452

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing

20 19 18

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*For my extraordinary wife, Laura,
for your unwavering confidence and optimism.*

INTRODUCTION

“If I didn’t have to go to meetings, I’d like my job a lot more.” It’s a remark I’ve heard from many of the leaders I’ve worked with over the years. I used to think that it was understandable—even humorous—but I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s actually a sad comment on the state of our business culture.

Imagine hearing a surgeon saying to a nurse before surgery: “If I didn’t have to operate on people, I might actually like this job.” Or a symphony conductor preparing for a performance: “If it weren’t for these concerts, I would enjoy my work more.” Or even a professional baseball player: “I’d love my job if I didn’t have to play in these games.”

Ridiculous, right? But that’s exactly what we’re doing when we lament our meetings.

Think about it this way. For those of us who lead and manage organizations, meetings are pretty much what we do. After all, we’re not paid for doing anything exceedingly tangible or physical, like delivering babies or kicking field goals or doing stand-up comedy. Whether we like it or not, meetings are the

closest thing to an operating room, a playing field, or a stage that we have.

And yet most of us hate them. We complain about, try to avoid, and long for the end of meetings, even when we're running the darn things! How pathetic is it that we have come to accept that the activity most central to the running of our organizations is inherently painful and unproductive?

All of this is an unnecessary shame because meetings are critical. They are where presidential cabinets discuss whether or not to go to war; where governors and their aides debate the merits of raising or lowering taxes; where CEOs and their staffs consider the decision to launch a brand, introduce a product, or close a factory.

And so my question is this: If we hate meetings, can we be making good decisions and successfully leading our organizations? I don't think so. There is simply no substitute for a good meeting—a dynamic, passionate, and focused engagement—when it comes to extracting the collective wisdom of a team. The hard truth is, bad meetings almost always lead to bad decisions, which is the best recipe for mediocrity.

But there is hope. By taking a contrarian, nontraditional view of meetings, and following a few specific guidelines that have nothing to do with video-conferencing, interactive software, or Robert's Rules of Order, we can transform what is now painful and tedious into something productive, compelling, and even energizing. In the process, we can also differentiate ourselves from our competitors who continue to waste time, energy, and enthusiasm lamenting the drudgery of meetings.

To illustrate how this can be accomplished, I've written a fictional story about an executive in a unique struggle with meetings. Following the story is a practical description of my suggestions for implementing these ideas in your organization.

Good luck as you work to make your meetings more effective, and restore some of the passion that you and your people deserve.

The Fable

PREVIEW

Casey McDaniel had never been so nervous in his life. Not when he was a sixteen-year-old preparing to speak at his father's funeral. Not before he proposed marriage to his wife. Not when he stood over a nine-foot putt that would win or lose the biggest golf tournament of his career.

No, this was the moment. In just ten minutes The Meeting would begin, and Casey had every reason to believe that his performance over the next two hours would determine the fate of his career, his financial future, and the company he had built from scratch. For a moment he thought he was going to be physically ill.

How could my life have unraveled so quickly? he wondered.

PART ONE



Flashback

THE MAN

Most of his employees would describe Casey as an extraordinary man—but just an ordinary CEO.

On a personal level, they genuinely liked their leader. Casey was a devoted husband, a loving father to his four children, a committed parishioner at Sacred Heart Church, and a helpful friend and neighbor. It was almost impossible not to like—even admire—the man.

Which made his limitation as a leader all the more mystifying.

HIS STORY

The McDaniel family had lived modestly in Carmel for the past fifty years, and Casey grew up on or around the many golf courses in the area, usually as a caddy or gardener. His affinity for golf was matched only by his love for computers, so he left home after high school to attend the University of Arizona on a golf scholarship, where he studied electrical engineering and computer science. Four years later he graduated toward the middle of his academic class, but at the top of the Pac-10 Conference in golf.

The lure of joining the PGA Tour, and someday playing back home at Pebble Beach in front of friends and family, was too much for Casey to resist. So he joined a qualifying tour where he quickly became one of the more popular players on the circuit with his quiet humor and generosity toward any fellow golfers who needed a little advice about their stroke.

Over the course of the next five years, Casey won a few more than his share of second-tier tournaments and earned enough money to keep his head far above water. But just as he was about to break through to the big tour, he developed

a chronic case of what golfers call the yips—an almost clinical disorder that makes it difficult to remain steady while in the act of putting. Plenty of promising players had their careers cut short by the pseudo-psychological yips, and Casey reluctantly counted himself among them.

Never one to let disappointment keep him down for too long, Casey returned home with a new sense of purpose—and an idea. In a matter of months, he got married, bought a tiny bungalow with the earnings he had saved, hired two local programmers, and began hacking away at what he believed would be the most realistic golf video game that the market had ever seen.

The initial results would wildly exceed even his expectations.

BREAK

Within two years of launching his company, Yip Software, Casey released his first product, which immediately set the standard for realism in all sports-related games. Because of his in-depth background in the sport, the game reflected deep knowledge of many of the subtle aspects of actual golf venues, including of course, the putting greens.

Almost immediately the game became a favorite of the most important focus group of customers imaginable: golfers themselves.

Because he had become close friends with many players who were now on the tour, Casey was able to arrange inexpensive but effective sponsorship deals with a few of the better young players. But it was a purely accidental occurrence that propelled Yip's success beyond being a niche video game and onto the pages of *Sports Illustrated*.

One of Casey's friends won his first PGA tournament less than a year after the product had been released. During his post-tournament press conference, he was asked about the improvement in his putting. Almost embarrassed, he admit-

Break

ted, “I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but I think it may have something to do with a video game I’ve been playing lately. . . .”

And the cat was out of the bag.

THE RIDE

Almost immediately, serious golfers everywhere, many of whom hadn't played a video game in their lives, were calling Yip's 800 number to order a game. Casey quickly opened a small office, hired a dozen employees, and held on for dear life.

Before long, the game would be available in almost every pro shop and game store in the country. The next eight years of Casey's life would be an iterative exercise of hiring more people, programming new games, marketing to more stores, moving to larger offices. Not to mention having more kids.

By the tenth anniversary of the company (and his marriage), Casey and his wife, Patricia, were raising four children, and his company had brought eight successful games to market, covering golf, cycling, and most recently, tennis. Thanks to Casey's attention to detail, the games consistently gained notoriety for their accurate depiction of real-life venues around the world, from the links at St. Andrews in Scotland to the hills of the Pyrenees Mountains in the Tour de France to the grass courts at Wimbledon.

From the beginning, Casey refused to produce violent, fantasy-oriented games aimed at kids. Instead, he insisted that Yip's products be focused on sports, and always realistic and innovative. As a result, Yip developed a strong following among adults and older teens who considered themselves relatively serious athletes.

More than the brand he had built, however, Casey was proudest of the fact that he employed almost two hundred people, many of whom had grown up with the company. And he couldn't deny the pride he took in his headquarters site, a beautifully renovated historic building in Old Monterey.

On a local level, Yip had become a shining star in the community, providing more professional jobs than any non-industrial venture in the area other than the famed aquarium. Casey had transformed an idea into a niche company that was the darling of his hometown, not to mention an unqualified success story in the industry.

But like so many success stories, there was another side to Yip and its CEO. And it was as baffling as it was undeniable.

MEDIOCRITY

Even Casey's biggest supporters, and he had many, would privately concede that Yip Software might have been twice its current size under the stewardship of a more focused and disciplined leader.

It wasn't that Casey was incompetent or uninterested in business. In fact, he had an extraordinary knack for sensing what customers were looking for and tweaking products to meet their needs long before his competitors realized what was happening. As a result, Casey had developed a reputation for understanding his market as well as any analyst, journalist, or executive in the industry.

In theory, the company's results should have spoken for themselves. Yip had never failed to make a profit and had consistently garnered awards for its products. To the naked eye, Casey and his company looked like a driven, determined enterprise.

But in reality, the firm was something of an under-achiever. And it started with Casey, who seemed to be just as satisfied with squeaking out a win by a narrow margin as he was with

scoring a decisive victory. If the numbers added up at the end of each quarter, and he was able to squeeze in a few rounds of golf every week, Casey was content—even happy.

His employees, however, were merely satisfied. Even complacent. They had grown accustomed to the fact that the company would somehow find a way to hit its targets, meet its payroll, and have just enough cushion left over at the end of each year for modest annual raises and a grand summer picnic. No one ever seemed to worry about Yip's fate.

But something was definitely missing. For a company that made popular, state-of-the-art video games in a beautiful place like Monterey, California, there was a surprising lack of excitement among the people who worked there. And if anyone doubted this, they would only have to observe five minutes of the Yip executives' weekly staff meeting.

THE RITUAL

Lethargic. Unfocused. Passionless. Those were the most common words that visitors used to describe what they witnessed after attending even part of an executive staff meeting.

The Yip executive team was painfully aware of their tedious weekly ritual. But they decided long ago that it was an innocuous problem, one of the necessary evils of doing business. Besides, they reasoned, every other company's meetings were probably just as bad.

But they had underestimated the magnitude of the problem. It certainly never occurred to them that the company's culture would come to mirror those meetings.