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Governing Body Member	5
Speaker	1
Connections	4

Three Reasons The Biz Thinks Your Meetings are Boring

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Editor's Note: This was one of the most popular content items from 2010. Enjoy!

I belong to several CIO peer groups, and when we get together the conversation often turns toward more effective ways of aligning ourselves with the business. The main focus is: 1. Determining how we make sure we know everything the business is doing; and conversely: 2. Determining how we know everything we should be doing to help them.

Here's how we're working to cultivate engagement that reaches all the way to the CEO.

1. Don't show data. Show answers.

During one of our recent sessions, I began to describe my process for staying connected with my executive peers and their teams. For several years now, I've been running IT Steering Committee meetings for each of my lines of business. This process initially started because users thought we were having outages that impacted business functionality, and I needed a way to communicate status to my peers on a monthly basis.

In order to help the other members of the executive team understand what our actual uptime was and how their teams were impacted, I scheduled monthly meetings for each LOB executive, their senior management, and my IT leadership team. We started the meetings several years ago with a limited agenda...monthly metrics on the server and the network. For the server metrics, we explained what physical memory utilization was, and what processor utilization was, and how each of those was impacted by high traffic days in the company. For the network availability metrics, we graphed each location and demonstrated that there is practically 100% uptime. That conversation lasted one month!

2. Don't talk tech. Talk business.

Obviously the business didn't have an interest in servers and network metrics. What they cared about was why the network seemed slow,

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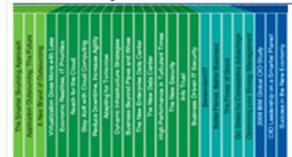
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why their users couldn't get their work done, and why the systems seemed to be hindering them from completing their jobs. Providing the answers they were looking for required some changes on our part. We had to stop talking about technical issues and start speaking in business terms. Our presentation on technical metrics quickly became a one-page graph for memory utilization, and a one page graph for location uptime.

Our business partners started asking us to tie process metrics into network usage and demonstrate how peak utilization was impacted by the way users did their work. We were able to demonstrate that the way users performed their jobs was causing a network slowdown at the same time each month, and that began to drive business process redesign efforts within the company.

3. Don't just talk process. Talk \$.

During this time, I asked my IT leaders to meet with their business counterparts and begin reporting on key development initiatives, critical enhancements, and deployment timelines. Each month, we received the latest updates on what commercial off-the-shelf implementations were occurring by business line, what custom applications were being enhanced, and what challenges users were having in the field. At one point, I had more than six recurring monthly IT steering committee meetings per month (one each for HR, Finance, Fleet and Logistics, and three for the individual lines of business). Whew!

We started to include a review of the capital budgets that were tied to these initiatives, and saw an incredible thing happening...our division vice presidents, CFO and VP of IT were all working together with their directs to understand what business drivers were impacting our company and how IT could help the company move forward.

By the time the meetings reached their maturity, the CEO, CFO, division vice presidents, senior leadership teams and IT leadership team were all present for comprehensive discussions about IT-business alignment and our consolidated vision for how we could use IT to move the company forward.

More recently, we have begun to discuss key customer needs and how that will drive our technology decisions. We also began to realize that we should create a technology roadmap together that we can publish to our internal and external customers.

[We are in early stages of evaluation of an electronic document management and archival solution. I am interested in connecting with my peers who have implemented such solutions.](#)

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Wrap Up: 5 Reasons Your IT Steering Committee is a Non-Negotiable

This evolution has caused the IT steering committee to take on a totally new shape and form. It has transformed from an IT communications meeting to a collaborative business development process that allows each group to participate in technology thought leadership.

What happened in my company is not dissimilar to what Gartner analyst Michael Hanford indicated in a recently published report: *"Organizations today have no choice when it comes to using technology as an integrated part of their business or agency mission. Getting decisions right about IT usage, new initiatives and existing initiatives has a major business and public-mission impact. A highly effective decision-making body, an IT steering committee, is not optional — it is a major organizational governance responsibility."* (Hanford, 2009)

Hanford suggests several other reasons an executive level IT Steering Committee works well that I found to also be true at my company (Hanford, 2009):

- Members are senior executives and have the authority to make and enforce decisions and approvals in the committee meetings.
- There are a small number of members and decisions and consensus are reached quickly with a minimum of debate, multiple agendas and "overhead."
- Work is structured so an effective work process provides for before-meeting preparation, decision support in meetings, and effective follow-up actions after the meeting.
- Decisions about initiatives include a 360-degree review, and these decisions take account of goals, funding, available resources, dependencies and the potential organizational impact for all initiatives.
- When making decisions, members act on behalf of the entire organization, rather than a single business unit or a narrow agenda.

Used properly, I believe the IT Steering Committee meeting can be an effective tool for corporate growth and profitability. What has your experience been with IT steering committee meetings? Have you initiated them within your company? Has the experience been a positive one?

Comments



Pat Witiw, Fountain Tire Corporation – Apr 19, 2010 9:19am

Thank you for this information - very good. COuld you please elaborate in more detail and timing on the 360.



Fernando Gonzalez, Byer California – Apr 19, 2010 9:27am

One measure I use to judge the effectiveness of our Steering Committee meetings is to some times tell of our "C" level peers that we should skip the next meeting and I always get the response "no we need to have it because of this or that."



Pamela Rucker, PSC – Apr 20, 2010 4:30am

Pat...It's interesting that you asked about the 360 process. My 360 reviews from my peers have been outstanding since implementing this multiple steering committee initiative. I received great feedback on my ability to work with my peers, my ability to set and communicate objectives, my interpersonal style and my team collaboration. Running effective steering committee meetings definitely helps increase your visibility in these areas and will provide noticeable results in the evaluation process.



Pamela Rucker, PSC – Apr 20, 2010 4:36am

Fernando...you're exactly right! That's an excellent observation. I've had peers that will reschedule the meeting rather than cancel due to their travel schedule or conflicting meetings elsewhere. One of my executive peers tells others that my meetings are the best way to know what's going on in the company, and he likes to attend them because he's always aware of all the initiatives different departments are working on.