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Dear Reader,

Since we spend so much time in meetings, any innovation to make them more efficient is very much welcomed by the teams with whom we work. Check out this creative approach to address pressing business issues by increasing engagement and maximizing the effectiveness of time spent meeting.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

<i>"Computers are useless. They can only give you answers."</i>

Pablo Picasso



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Peer Group Coaching

A Strategy to Make Your Meetings More Effective and Engaging

by **Ernie Turner**

Over the last several years I've been working with teams from a wide variety of industries, functions and cultures. Without exception they have all been eager to discover how to make their management meetings more effective and engaging.

Here is a quick instrument I have used with teams to assess whether or not the meetings were effective and engaging. You might want to consider answering the questions for your own team.

Criteria	Strongly	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
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	Disagree			
1. Our meetings focus more on problem-solving than reporting and informing.				
2. Everyone is fully engaged.				
3. Learning is a key outcome of our meetings.				
4. Our meetings generate tangible next steps.				
5. Everyone feels that his/her time was well-spent.				

If you answered **Disagree** or **Strongly Disagree** to three or more of these questions, then here is an exercise you may want to try out in your next team meeting – **Peer Group Coaching**.

What is Peer Group Coaching?

Peer Group Coaching is an engagement strategy that allows peers to ask for help in addressing strategic challenges or opportunities they face and to receive that help quickly, effectively and without loss of face. Strategic challenges and opportunities are numerous but seldom get the time and attention they deserve in management meetings. All too frequently most of this precious time is spent with team members merely reporting what happened or informing what will happen. Over the years we in LIM have been strong advocates that this paradigm needs to change. We recommend **Peer Group Coaching** as a means of increasing the level of engagement and fully utilizing the brainpower of a team.

The first step is to set aside a portion of your meetings for strategic problem-solving sessions. The **Peer Group Coaching** process engages everyone irrespective of function or role, and results in these important benefits:

- You and your colleagues can use your meetings to support and challenge one another in solving current strategic business challenges;
- In the process you will get a richer appreciation of the challenges your colleagues are facing;
- And you will also refine your coaching skills which can be utilized in any number of situations.

How does it work?

Step 1: **Presentation.**

At your next meeting invite one or two of your team members to bring a current business or organizational challenge with them to the meeting. Ask them to prepare a 5-minute 'presentation' to frame the challenge by providing some context, relevant history, their role, why this challenge is important, what they've already tried and a focus question that they are currently contemplating. Ask them to give their challenge a title and quickly summarize the essence of their challenge by using a flip chart or by simply talking. Avoid power point in order to keep the atmosphere informal so it feels more like a coffee break type of conversation. These types of conversations are generally

more natural and rich.

Step 2: Questions.

After everyone has heard the challenge, ask everyone, without discussing the issue, to pretend that this is now their challenge and write down all the questions that come to their minds using post-its or a sheet of paper. Encourage them to use the pronoun "I" instead of "you" as they write their questions. This reduces defensiveness in the presenter when s/he hears all the questions. In addition, ask the presenter to also write down any new questions that came to mind as s/he presented the focus question.

Encourage them to avoid:

- Asking questions that have a yes/no answer;
- Making recommendations disguised as questions.

Examples of poor questions	Examples of better questions
Yes/No questions like – Do you know why this challenge is important to you?	Why is this challenge important to me?
Recommendations disguised as a question like – Have you talked to 'so and so'?	Who could I talk to for support?

After approximately 5 minutes invite everyone to read his/her questions without commentary or response from the presenter. This is simply a time to hear everyone's questions. Begin with the presenter. Usually the first couple of times a few people slip into 'you' questions, 'yes/no' questions or 'recommendations' in the guise of a question. Gently ask them to reframe their questions.

Once everyone has asked his/her questions, request that they write their names on their post-its or papers and hand them to the presenter in case s/he wants to follow up.

Step 3: Offers.

This is an opportunity for everyone to offer a story, idea, recommendation, website, book, articles or follow up conversation to the presenter. Once again ask them to use post-its or paper and after a few minutes simply read out their offers. This is not the time to tell a story or share the details of a similar experience or recommendations; it is simply an *offer* to share the story, experience or detailed recommendation at a later time if there is an interest.

For a team of eight a couple of rounds should take no more than 30-40 minutes and requires very light facilitation such as introducing the exercise, providing the purpose and rationale, suggesting a couple of norms — like we're here to support one another and to learn with and from one another — outlining and managing the process, and leading the debrief. For teams much larger than eight, I usually suggest that they divide into two diverse subgroups and appoint a facilitator.

Step 4: Debrief.

After you've completed the coaching exercise ask the group to take a couple of minutes to write down their reflections on this 3-step process and then share their thoughts and feelings with a focus on value, implications and/or applications. Write down a focus question — something like, *What are my insights on Peer Group Coaching related to value, implications and/or applications?* After a few minutes of reflection and writing, invite the group to have a dialogue. At the end of the dialogue summarize the themes and ask if there are any next steps that they want to take.

A Story

Last month I introduced the **Peer Group Coaching** process to a senior management team of a Swedish multinational in India. I was working with them for a day and one of the exercises was **Peer Group Coaching**. Three of the team brought challenges to their teammates. The entire team of 16 coached one of the individuals and then we split into two groups to work with the other two members.

After the exercise here were some of their reflections:

- It was a bonding experience because we got to know much more than we previously did about three of our colleagues and their problems;
- It allowed us to do some 'out of the box' thinking;
- I discovered some blind spots that I wasn't aware of;
- It broke down barriers between us;
- It was non-threatening; I felt no defensiveness;
- There was no need to justify why I did what I did;
- Our cross-functional approach led to new insights; the diversity was great;
- I could see how someone else's problems related to some of mine;
- "I" questions and open-ended questions were very helpful;
- I could see the systemic nature of the problems and where I fit in;
- I was surprised at how many questions we generated in such a short time;
- We were all fully engaged;
- I will use this process with my own team.

We ended the meeting with the question "What is one thing that each of us will try out as a consequence of today?" Several mentioned that they would try out **Peer Group Coaching** with their own teams.

Summary Comments

Of course, there are many more ingredients that go into effective and efficient meetings that we need to consider. In fact, we have addressed some of these in previous LIM News articles¹. However, making space for **Peer Group Coaching** sessions in your regular team meetings will give your teammates an opportunity to add value and become fully engaged. After all, that's something we all want. And employee engagement is one of the easiest frontiers open to us for maximizing business potential².



Twenty great coaching questions that I've collected over the years from similar Peer Group Coaching sessions

- Why is this challenge important to me?
- Whose opinions must I consider in solving this problem?
- Who has to own the shared future vision for any solution to work?
- What assumptions must be true before any solution will succeed?
- What are the key success factors?
- What lessons can I learn from similar experiences in the past?
- How did we get here anyway?
- How did I contribute to this problem?
- How can I contribute to the solution?
- What mandate do I need in order to be successful?
- What agreements do I need before I can proceed with confidence?
- What is already working well?
- What is pulling me forward?
- What supports do I already have?
- Whose support do I need?

- What skills are required to make this solution work?
- What is holding me back?
- What attitude and self-beliefs do I need in order to be successful?
- What systems do I need to understand in order to solve this problem?
- What might happen if I/we did nothing?

This list is only a beginning. Add your own; borrow from others and in the process you'll be increasing your own coaching capability.

1 More Than Just a Meeting (<http://www.limglobal.net/readings/87.htm>);
Successful Off-site Meetings (<http://www.limglobal.net/readings/56.htm>);

2 Increasing Workforce Engagement: The New Frontier
(<http://www.limglobal.net/readings/83.htm>)

If you want more triggers for reflection, visit <http://isabelrimanoczy.blogspot.com>



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