

REALLY First Things Before First Things

I was initially trained as an engineer. (And have an MBA as well.) That essentially means that I am a slave to linear, logical analysis. Hence my presentations start at the start and I carefully build a logical structure for all that follows.

Fair enough. Except I frequently find that critical things I want to say are buried or not gotten around to. Hence, about a year ago I shrugged off my logical halter and decided to say what I thought was important, come what may, at the top of my remarks.

Hence what follows ...

Consideration of business strategy, approaches to product development, and the like, are of the utmost importance to enterprise success. Yet there are other factors — perhaps mundane at first glance — that are the true differentiators between mediocrity and excellence. I'll touch upon four, which I call "REALLY First Things Before First Things." Most will agree that each one is important. But my goal is to induce you to convert them into strategic obsessions—if you do I sincerely believe the world will be your oyster, or at least your enterprise will function quite a bit more effectively.

Best CADRE of Front-line Managers

In great armies, the job of generals is to back up their sergeants.
—Robert Kaplan/renown military analyst

If the regimental commander lost most of his 2nd lieutenants and 1st lieutenants and captains and majors, it would be a tragedy. If he lost his sergeants it would be an out and out *catastrophe*. The Army is fully aware that success on the battlefield is dependent to an extraordinary degree on its sergeants. Does industry "get it"?

The sergeants run the army. *Period.*

Research by the likes of Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, reported in *First break all the Rules*, demonstrates that the first-line manager is the single most important key to employee satisfaction, retention—and productivity. No matter how fine the organization, if the employee is sour on her or his immediate boss, her performance will more often than not significantly suffer. The evidence in fact is clear that most people who leave a company voluntarily do so because of their supervisor—not because of the quality of the company per se.

I am not suggesting that execs don't take the front-line boss seriously. I am suggesting that, unlike the Army, the large majority of execs, in my experience, are not *obsessed* with developing their full *cadre* of front-line managers as a primary strategic asset and engine of enhanced enterprise performance! For starters: Are your front-line boss *selection* and *training* and *mentoring* processes unmistakably “knock-your-socks-off”/“best-in-class”? If not, get to work, right now—one could argue, without tongue in cheek, that selecting first-line managers is at least as important as the VP selection process. I repeat: This *is* unmistakably “strategic.”*

Cross-functional EXCELLENCE

“Allied commands depend on mutual confidence, and this confidence is gained, above all, through the development of friendships.”
—General D.D. Eisenhower

“I got to know his secretaries.” —Dick Parsons
(former CEO Time Warner, on the key to successfully fending off raider Carl Ichan)

Look at any organizational failure, and poor cross-functional integration is more often than not the *chief* culprit. (A strong assertion, I'd be the first to acknowledge—but based on one hell of a lot of observation.) Within an engineering company, for example, research, marketing and finance are routinely at each other's throats—and the result is, say, that a critical new product comes to market 12 months late. Or take the local police and federal police: Each doubtless has the fight against terrorism as their pre-eminent goal — but frequently refuse to share all their data with one another.

Strategic advantage #1: “Let's do lunch.”

I chose in introducing this topic the word “excellence,” as in “cross-functional excellence.” That is, the idea here is *not* merely about “removing barriers.” It *is* about

*A set of 10 “starter questions” on front-line leadership is at Appendix ONE.

what I believe is no less than the No. 1 opportunity to achieve competitive dominance—e.g., cut that new-product development by, perhaps, 50 percent or even more.

I have the utmost respect for Oracle and SAP. But this is not primarily a software issue. Or, rather, it is—but a *softer* form of software. Secret #1 (yes, I’ll go that far) is “*Let’s do lunch.*” In fact I insist, or would if I could, that bosses literally *measure* their direct reports on the number of lunches per month they have with members of other functions!

It works like this: Joe in procurement invites Sam in finance to lunch. Odds are high that along the way they discover a host of connections—e.g., both have eighth-graders in the same school. Joe-the-professional will still tenaciously represent his “function,” and Sam his—but the tenor of interactions is likely to change significantly, if not dramatically, from “gotcha” to something approaching “*How can we colleagues jointly add maximum value—or at least eliminate the wasteful and longterm pollution that accompanies posturing and other petty bullshit?*”

I call things like “doing lunch” the “*social accelerators*” of cross-functional excellence. I can muster a list of a in a flash—e.g., present small *weekly* awards to those in other functions who have helped your team-function move forward.* One should not promise miracles lightly, but taken together these notions can lead to miracles of the first order.

EVERY DAY FOR THREE MONTHS: “***They brainstormed about how to turn around this [catastrophic] mis-understanding, and came up with a simple plan— every day for the next three months she would have lunch or coffee with one of the partners. Today she is executive vice president for [Fortune 50 company].***” —Betsy Myers, on and extraordinarily talented professional who had been blocked from leadership positions in her firm, from *Take the Lead: Motivate, Inspire, and Bring Out the Best in Yourself and Everyone Around You* (A talented partner at a prestigious law firm kept missing the promotions she clearly was due. After some analysis and coaching, it appeared that she had her head down working hard and effectively—but had not bothered to bond with her fellow partners; she assumed that the clearly brilliant work would stand on its own.)

*You’ll find a brief, illustrative list of “social accelerators” at Appendix TWO

“Strategic” “Professional” LISTENING

“If you don’t listen, you don’t sell anything.”
—Carolyn Marland, former CEO, Guardian Group

“I wasn’t bowled over by David Boies intelligence. What impressed me was that when he asked a question he waited for an answer. He not only listened, he made me feel like I was the only person in the room.”
—from Marshall Goldsmith, “The One Skill that Separates,” *Fast Company*

“The best leaders talk with people, not at them.”
—Susan Scott, “Let Silence Do the Heavy Listening,” chapter title, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time*

Harvard M.D. Jerome Groopman wrote a fascinating book titled *How Doctors Think*. Dr. Groopman claims, which is not terribly surprising, that the best source for a doctor concerning the patient’s complaint is—the patient. Yet he goes on to cite research showing that on average the doctor interrupts the patient after ... *18 seconds*. I’ll bet you a pretty penny that the average manager does not surpass the 18-second mark!

The doc interrupts after ... 18 seconds.

Like developing stellar first-line managers and trying to add excellence to cross-functional integration, most bosses would agree that listening is “important.” But, again, is effective listening *per se* a strategic obsession? Because beyond a shadow of doubt that is precisely what listening in and of itself should be. (Again, the idea goes way beyond “getting better”—to “pillar of ‘corporate culture’ and staggering competitive advantage.”)

I jotted down a list of the things that flow from effective listening (“strategic listening” or “aggressive listening” as I prefer call it). Listening is ...*

the heart and soul of engagement,
the heart and soul of recognition,
the heart and soul of strategic partnering,
the heart and soul of learning,
the heart and soul of customer connection.
And on.
And on.

*You’ll find an extended recitation of the elements of “listening power” at Appendix THREE.

Listening per se is a ... *PROFESSION.*

As with all things important, the key is becoming a serious student and practitioner. In fact I'll go so far to say that listening per se is/can be a "profession" ... as much as playing the cello or flying a commercial aircraft. While some are doubtless better than others (e.g., women >> men), this discipline can be studied and practiced and improved upon—individually and as a group.

"My education in leadership began in Washington when I was an assistant to Defense Secretary William Perry. He was universally loved and admired by heads of state ... and our own and allied troops. *A lot of that was because of the way he listened. Each person who talked to him had his complete, undivided attention. Everyone blossomed in his presence, because he was so respectful, and I realized I wanted to affect people the same way.*

"Perry became my role model but that was not enough. Something bigger had to happen, and it did. It was painful to realize how often I just pretended to hear people. *How many times had I barely glanced up from my work when a subordinate came into my office? I wasn't paying attention; I was marking time until it was my turn to give orders.* That revelation led me to a new personal goal. I vowed to treat every encounter with every person on Benfold (Abrashoff was the Captain) as the most important thing at that moment. It wasn't easy, but my crew's enthusiasm and ideas kept me going.

"It didn't take me long to realize that my young crew was smart, talented and full of good ideas that usually came to nothing because no one in charge had ever listened to them. ... I decided that my job was to listen aggressively ..." —Mike Abrashoff, *It's Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy*

LEADING Through Meetings

Find me a boss (or non-boss) who doesn't constantly bitch about "too damn many meetings"—I've never found one. But here is the irreducible fact of "boss-world": *Meetings are what bosses do.* There is no escape. And if that is true, then, also by definition, meetings are therefore the principal platform, or theater, in which every boss projects her or his leadership skills.

Meetings are what bosses do.

Immutable "bottom line": *Every meeting that does not stir the imagination and curiosity of attendees, and increase bonding and co-operation and engagement and sense of worth, and motivate rapid action and enhance enthusiasm is a permanently lost opportunity.* Call that a stretch if you wish—but then please explain to me why it is not the self-evident truth? (FYI, another self-evident truth: If the *boss* publicly complains about meetings—it's "game over.")

Let me be clear: This is *not* a rant about "conducting better meetings." This *is* a rant about the heart and soul and hour-to-hour reality of leadership effectiveness. One obvious implication: *Prepare for a meeting/every meeting as if your professional life and legacy depended on it. Because it does.**

"Wretched" meetings: Theater of Leadership EXCELLENCE.

*You'll find random thoughts on "leadership-via-meetings at Appendix FOUR.

There they are: “REALLY First things before first things.” None, I strongly suspect and repeat, would disagree with the fact that all four are “important,” even “very important.” But it is my claim and observation here that the four are in fact the “guts” of effective organizations—and, further, sustainable competitive advantage. Make each of these an “obsession”—and odds are high that the bottom line will soar.

Tweeting “REALLY First Things Before First Things”/140 Characters:

Productivity+ = Best cadre 1st-line bosses; X-funct Excellence = #1 opp; STRATEGIC listening = core value #1; meetings = #1 leadership opp.

Appendix ONE

TEN “Obvious” Questions Concerning Your First-line Supervisors

1. Are you, Big Boss, a ... *formal student* ... of first-line supervisor behavioral excellence? (*Yes, this sort of thing can be formally studied.)
2. **Do you absolutely understand and act upon the fact that the first-line boss is the key ...LEADERSHIP ROLE ... in the organization? Technical mastery is important—but secondary.**
3. Does HR single out first-line supervisors individually and collectively for tracking purposes and special/“over the top” developmental attention?
4. Do you spend gobs and gobs (and then more and more gobs and gobs) of time ... *selecting* ... the first-line supervisors? Are your selection criteria consistent with the enormity of the impact that first-line bosses will subsequently have?
5. Do you have the ... *ABSOLUTE BEST TRAINING & CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM IN THE INDUSTRY* (or some subset thereof) ... for first-line supervisors?
6. Do you formally and rigorously ... *mentor* ... first-line supervisors?
7. Are you willing, pain notwithstanding, to ... leave a first-line supervisor slot open ... until you can fill the slot with somebody spectacular? (*And are you willing to use some word like ... “spectacular” ... in judging applicants for the job?*)
8. Is it possible that ... *promotion decisions* ... for first-line supervisors are as, or even more, important than promotion decisions for the likes of VP slots? (Hint: *Yes.*)
9. **Do you consider and evaluate the quality of your ... full set/CADRE of first-line supervisors?**
10. Are your first-line supervisors accorded the respect that the power of their position merits?

Appendix TWO

XFX/Cross-Functional EXCELLENCE: Typical Social Accelerators

1. EVERYONE's [more or less] JOB #1: Make friends in other functions!
(*Purposefully. Consistently. Measurably.*)
2. "Do lunch" with people in other functions!! Frequently!! (Minimum 10% to 25% for everyone? *Measured.*)
3. Ask peers in other functions for references so you can become conversant in their world. (It's one helluva sign of ... GIVE-A-DAMN-ism.)
4. Religiously invite counterparts in other functions to your team meetings. Ask them to present "cool stuff" from "their world" to your group.
5. ***PROACTIVELY SEEK EXAMPLES OF "TINY" ACTS OF "XFX" TO ACKNOWLEDGE— PRIVATELY AND PUBLICALLY. (Bosses: ONCE A DAY ... make a short call or visit or send an email of "Thanks" for some sort of XFX gesture by your folks and some other function's folks.)***
6. Present counterparts in other functions awards for service to your group. Tiny awards at least weekly; and an "*Annual All-Star Supporters [from other groups] Banquet*" modeled after superstar salesperson banquets.
7. Routinely discuss—*A SEPARATE AGENDA ITEM*—good and problematic acts of cross-functional co-operation at every Team Meeting.
8. When someone in another function asks for assistance, respond with ... *more ... alacrity than you would if it were the person in the cubicle next to yours—or even more than you would for a key external customer.* (Remember, XFX is the key to Customer Retention which is in turn the key to "all good things.")

The subtext of many, if not all, of these ideas is moving from implicit to *explicit* focus on XFX—it should noisily intrude into every discussion.

9. *Do not bad mouth ... "the damned accountants," "the bloody HR guy." Ever.* (Bosses: Severe penalties for this—including *public tongue-lashings.*)
10. Get physical! "*Co-location*" may well be the most powerful "*culture change lever.*" Physical X-functional proximity is almost a ... *guarantee ... of remarkably improved co-operation—to aid this one needs flexible workspaces that can be mobilized for a team in a flash.*

11. **Establish “adhocracy” as S.O.P. To improve the new “X-functional Culture” (and business results), little XF teams should be formed on the spot to deal with an urgent issue—they may live for but ten days, but it helps the XF habit, making it normal to be “working the XF way.”**
12. Early project “management” experience. Within days, literally, of coming aboard folks should be “running” some bit of a bit of a bit a project, working with folks from other functions—hence, “all this” becomes as natural as breathing.
13. Work proactively to give as large as possible numbers of people temporary assignments in other functions—especially Finance.
14. “Get ’em out with the customer.” Rarely does the accountant or bench scientist call on the customer. Reverse that. Give everyone more or less regular “customer-facing experiences.” She or he learns quickly that the customer is not interested in our in-house turf battles!
15. Consider creating a special role, or even position. Specialty chemical company Buckman Labs established “*knowledge transfer facilitators*,” effectively former “middle managers,” with 100% of discretionary pay based on success at spurring integration across previously impermeable barriers.
16. Formal evaluations. *Everyone, starting with the receptionist, should have a significant XF rating component in their evaluation.* (The “XFX Performance” should be among the Top 3 items in all managers’ evaluations.)
17. ***Every functional unit should have strict and extensive measures of “customer satisfaction” based on evaluations from other functions of its usefulness and effectiveness and value-added to the enterprise as a whole.***
18. Demand XF experience for, especially, senior jobs. For example, the U.S. military requires all would-be generals and admirals to have served a full tour in a job whose only goals were cross-functional achievements.
19. “Deep dip.” Dive three levels down in the organization to fill a senior role with some one who has been noticeably pro-active on adding value via excellent cross-functional integration.
20. XFX is ... PERSONAL ... as well as about organizational effectiveness. PXXF [Personal XFX] is arguably the #1 Accelerant to personal success—in terms of organizational career, freelancer/Brand You, or as entrepreneur.
21. *Excellence!* There is a “State of XF Excellence” per se. Talk it up constantly. Pursue it. Aspire to nothing less.

Appendix THREE

Listening Is ...

Listening is ...

(And when you read “listening,” please substitute “*OBSESSION*” with listening.)

Listening is ... the ultimate mark of *Respect*.

Listening is ... the heart and soul of *Engagement*.

Listening is ... the heart and soul of *Kindness*.

Listening is ... the heart and soul of *Thoughtfulness*.

Listening is ... the basis for true *Collaboration*.

Listening is ... the basis for true *Partnership*.

Listening is ... a *Team Sport*.

Listening is ... a *Developable Individual Skill*.*

(*Though women are *far* better at it than men.)

Listening is ... the basis for *Community*.

Listening is ... the bedrock of *Joint Ventures that work*.

Listening is ... the bedrock of *Joint Ventures that last*.

Listening is ... the core of *effective Cross-functional Communication**

(*Which is in turn Attribute #1 of organizational effectiveness.**)

(**I know, I keep repeating this—only because “Attribute #1” is no exaggeration.)

Listening is ... the engine of *superior EXECUTION*.

Listening is ... the key to making the Sale.

Listening is ... the key to *Keeping the Customer’s Business*.

Listening is ... the engine of *Network development*.

Listening is ... the engine of *Network maintenance*.

Listening is ... the engine of *Network expansion*.

Listening is ... *Learning*.

Listening is ...the *sine qua non* of *Renewal*.

Listening is ...the *sine qua non* of *Creativity*.

Listening is ...the *sine qua non* of *Innovation*.

Listening is ... the core of *taking Diverse opinions aboard*.

Listening is ... *Strategy*.

Listening is ... *Source #1* of “*Value-added*.”

Listening is ... *Differentiator #1*.

Listening is ... *Profitable*.*

(*The “R.O.I.” from listening is higher than from any other single activity.)

Listening underpins ... *Commitment to EXCELLENCE*.

Do you agree with the above?
(Frankly, that's a set-up question. How could you *not* agree?)
(I hope.)

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *a Core Value?*

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *perhaps Core Value #1?**

(* "We are Effective Listeners—we treat Listening EXCELLENCE as the Centerpiece of our Commitment to Respect and Engagement and Community and Growth"—or some such.)

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *a Core Competence?*

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *Core Competence #1?*

Shouldn't listening be ... Core Competence #1?

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *an explicit "agenda item" at every Meeting?*

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *our Strategy—per se? (Listening = Strategy.)*

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *the #1 skill we look for in Hiring (for every job)?*

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *the #1 attribute we examine in our Evaluations?*

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *the #1 skill we look for in Promotion decisions?*

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *the #1 Training priority at every stage of everyone's career—from Day #1 to Day LAST?*

If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... *in the next 30 MINUTES?*

If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... *at your NEXT meeting?*

If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... *by the end of the DAY?*

If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... *in the next 30 DAYS?*

If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... *in the next 12 MONTHS?*

Appendix FOUR

A Few Thoughts on Meetings: If Your Next Meeting Fails to Excite ... It's Your Fault/Your Irretrievable Loss!

Going to a simple cocktail party last night. Found myself, out of habit, scripting 1st comments for various people. *BEGINNINGS = THE BALLGAME.*

Forget the "meat." (More or less.) *Beginnings and endings overwhelm middles!*

Cocktail party, someone a little over their ethanol limit makes loudish questionable remark as they leave—that's all you remember.

Every meeting needs an energetic-exciting start and a blow-out ending which launches the "To dos" with gusto!

Never ever begin a meeting with an insipid "Let's get started." Begin it with a plunge not a tiptoe—e.g., some exciting-surprising nugget.

Perhaps begin with a show of enthusiasm, maybe a 90-second report on some little thing that went well, maybe with a kudo to someone at the meeting.

You damn well better believe that superb beginnings and inspiring endings do not occur by accident!

Right before meeting ends, quickly ask each person how He or she FEELS about the take-aways. Deal now with frowns/dis-engagement.

Thank *EACH* person, with a specific reference, usually in public, for their contribution to the meeting being wrapped up.

And if you've got a mega-frowner who didn't speak up, try to casually/unobtrusively catch him-her for a moment as you leave.

At the end of the day, send 2 or 3 notes (or emails) thanking, again, individuals for their contributions.

FYI: Remember, one person's humorous remark is another person's insult. "Humorous" remarks should NEVER be at someone's else's expense!!!! (You'd be astonished at the # of "micro-digs" if you bothered to keep track.)