

# G-rant's Report

*What Should Agency Management Teams Do*

*Occasional Insights on Agency Management Issues*

Grant Consulting Associates, Inc.  
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# What Should Agency Management Teams Do

*No Boulder-throwers Allowed*

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**W**hat the hell should a management team's function be at an agency anyway,

a client of ours recently asked in an email.

It got us thinking about the many agency executive teams we've monitored, counseled, or been a part of. . . and what makes them successful.

Here's our reply to the question.

*Grant Consulting serves the management needs of growing agencies nationwide. We publish occasional "white papers" like this as an adjunct to our newsletter **Grant's Report** in order to share provocative thoughts and insights, and to help you guide your business toward success. Your feedback is always welcome.*

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A management team should come together with a sense of strength in numbers knowing that they are more powerful and effective pulling together than pulling apart.

Management team meetings are not a time for dissension and disruption – they're a time for entertaining diverse opinions and different perspectives, yes, but more importantly they're *an opportunity to focus the company's resources effectively to solve problems and make progress toward collegial goals*. It's not a time for holding back, it's a time for giving: how can I contribute to solving this problem or issue?

They are not a time to establish territorial fiefdoms or wage turf wars.

Imagine how miserable it would be to be walking along a pleasant path in the woods on a bright sunny day if someone just ahead of you kept throwing railroad ties and large boulders in your way every few steps? Ridiculous, you say? I've seen many management team meetings where participants did just that. "That will never work." "It's too expensive." "We tried that 6 years ago and it didn't work." "The people in my department won't like that."

You've seen those kinds of meetings, too.

If there's a boulder-thrower in your midst, throw the scoundrel out. That's right. When you're trying to get someplace you don't need someone purposely blocking your progress – that sort of attitude is the exact opposite of what you need on your management team.

Instead, look for facilitators... people who smooth the way, suggest reasonable alternatives, and ways to work around obstacles instead of creating them.

Be on the alert for people who, after a reasonable debate of the issues, work for closure and execution. These are the get-it-dones every company needs. People who push for positive action are the real movers.

## *Don't Play It Again, Sam*

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Effective management teams solve things once.

When we audit senior executive meetings we often hear complaints that the same ground is being plowed again and again. What a terrible waste of time and money! If the same mistakes are being made over and over – if the same discussions are held again and again – there's something very wrong with the decision-making abilities of the attendees.

There's no excuse for that kind of behavior on your management team. Imagine an airline pilot repeatedly crash landing the plane, or a football player who always goes left when the play is 42-Right

In the Navy if a series of mistakes or accidents occur repeatedly over a short period of time, they "stand down" – all operations are halted, leaves cancelled, and everyone focuses on retraining to eliminate deficiencies so the organization can go about doing its job with alacrity and skill.

Maybe that's what more agencies need: stand down days where everything stops for 24 hours and everyone discusses how to improve, how to stop making the same mistakes.

Like gunslingers in the Old West who had to check their

pieces at the door, everyone on your team walking in to an executive meeting should hold true to *SIO* – Solve It Once. If they continue to make the same management errors again and again they should be replaced, retrained, or retired. Make them resolve not to re-solve.

## *Can We All Just Be Friends?*

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The best management teams are the ones which always agree. . . but only at the end. They are made up of diverse opinionated people who argue to see *their* point of view adopted because they honestly believe theirs is the best. They enthusiastically debate the merits of what they're for, and then, when it's time for resolution, put aside any differences and emulsify all emotion which might be poisoning their thinking.

Then they arrive at consensus.

Consensus is not compromise. Compromise is when you come to a point sort of halfway between your position and the other guy's. That might be OK for some situations (politics comes to mind) but it's not good in the life or death arts like medicine, warfare, or advertising. Compromise dilutes and weakens both sides. . . and all too frequently what's left is the worst of both positions.

Consensus on the other hand is when everyone agrees to accept a certain tactic and endorses it wholeheartedly. Picture a pickup football team faced with the decision to pass, punt or run. Several players in the huddle argue passionately for each option and then they decide to compromise on some type of ill-conceived plan where there's a little of all three plays. What chaos!

What makes a successful football play is exactly what's needed in the executive suite: *though we don't all agree we'll put our differences aside* and run the play with all our blood and guts for the glory of the moment, as if it were the only thing we ever thought of doing. And we'll do it with **PASSION!**

## *Values*

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Effective management teams always reflect the company's values.

If your values are integrity, passion, and fun then any stranger off the street could come in, observe your group at work, and immediately point out those values. He's say: These folks are forthright and direct in honestly confronting their issues, they're thoroughly engaged in expressing their feelings with loads of conviction, and they're keeping the whole thing in perspective since there's a lot of laughs along the way.

Management meetings are like Petrie dishes - if there's a player who doesn't evidence the corporate values, he or she will stand out like a strain of ugly bacteria. Time for the antiseptic.

## *No Yes Men*

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Nothing's stupider than a management team which meets only to carry out the orders of the owner or CEO.

Management teams exist to chew on differing opinions and proffer novel solutions. If the head of the herd makes all the decisions, one day he or she just might lead the rest of the buffaloes over a cliff (probably all following along nodding their heads and saying "yes.")

Management teams are like presidential Cabinets. Positions are presented and argued for then the buck-stops-here guy makes a decision using all the information and opinions at hand coupled with his own experience and intuition. If he knew everybody was going to agree with him anyway, then why the hell did he call the meeting? (Perhaps just for the approval and vindication – sounds like a psychological defect way beyond my expertise).

## *It's Always About Planning*

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The more I think about this the more I believe *planing* is at the heart of what management teams do.

Planning illuminates opportunities missed while you're putting out fires in your own department. Managers are usually so busy with client pressures that the seduction of crossing things off a to-do list breeds a dangerous sense of accomplishment. With all the noise and chaos it's easy to miss the opportunities -- which never shout above the hubbub, they whisper. The management team needs to listen collectively and quietly for those opportunity whispers.

Planning causes market mindfulness, too. You and your senior execs need to go through a disciplined planning process which will automatically key on marketing issues, i.e. *how your products and services relate to your clients and their customers*. That's marketing. Strategic planning by the management team will tell you about what your shop is and gives you a keener understanding of what your market needs. It's a better use of your time than talking about why the bathrooms are messy.

Planning sharpens essential skills. Managers need to wrestle with the intangibles of running a company. Planning forces big picture thinking. That's what's needed to effectively manage a department or enterprise, a skill known as leadership. Otherwise, you breed a group of doers, order-takers, and account waiters devoid of those original ideas we cherish. Your clients need an organization that *thinks*. And so do you.

Here's one more reason why I think planning is so crucial for management teams: planning forces you to look over the horizon. Because you're temporarily removed from the task list, you can play out various scenarios. Which can save your neck.

Here's an example. *ADWEEK* reports the story of an agency that got its 3-month notice from a 20-year client. Because the agency had a good plan in place it knew it had just 90 days to generate \$250,000 more in fees and commissions. The agency had little cash reserved, profits were tied up in receivables, and credit was pretty much tapped out. But the management team had recently gone through a thorough planning process and targeted acquisition of a particular small and profitable niche agency the following year. They stepped up the acquisition process, cutting a favorable deal on the payout period.

Without a comprehensive plan, few agencies facing a \$250,000 shortfall would have even considered an acquisition. But because they'd planned, they knew what the deal would cost and bring in. Strategic planning requires examining alternatives and provides the flexibility to move quickly, if you have to – skills essential for your management team.

## *The Idea Factory*

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Finally, I think the best management team meetings are the ones where the ideas really fly.

Your meetings should be caffeinated idea factories with fragments of genius floating around the room and each manager trying to top the other with sparkling insights, new approaches, fresh ways of solving problems and capturing opportunities. There's no room for red lights or slow-moving traffic. Management meetings should be energizing and the best ones nearly take your breath away there's so much energy and sizzle.

The people who are good management meeting participants are *very* creative.

Sure, the Creative department is the province of "creativity" in our business, but what we really need these days is true *creative* management – new ways to do things, innovative approaches and structures. The really fresh stuff.

Here's how I'd sum up in a simple formula what will make for an effective management team.

First, give me folks with ideas who don't hold each other back and are dedicated to constant improvement. Put them in a room together and get them discussing what's *possible*, what they dream the place could be like.

Next, ask them to list the obstacles to reaching those dreams. Then set them loose on removing the obstacles. To me that's what the agenda should be for your management meetings. And your management team.