



# The Morning Meeting

By Scott Tibbitts

It was fourteen years ago, and I remember it well. It seemed that the right hand didn't know what the left was doing. It was crazy. Starsys was only eight people, and deadlines were being missed because someone didn't know what someone else needed. How could a handful of people be this disconnected? Maybe a daily meeting would help.

LITTLE DID I KNOW THAT WE WERE INITIATING A PROCESS that would last for two decades. The idea was simple: a short, all-hands meeting once a day to maintain the week's actions item list. Not too tough a challenge with eight folks, but quite a challenge as we grew to a 140-person company.

#### NOTE TO SELF: 1992

Things that *DO NOT* work for getting a meeting to start crisply at 8:00 a.m.:

1. A heartfelt plea that timeliness is next to godliness
2. \$1-per-minute penalties for latecomers
3. Playing the theme from *2001: A Space Odyssey* with the expectation that everyone is in the meeting room by the end of the music

Things that *DO* work:

1. A company-wide bell that rings prior to the meeting and lasts exactly 60 seconds
2. A "quarter-to-the-party-fund" penalty for those who aren't in the room by the time the bell ends

#### CHAIRMAN OF THE "BOARD"

The meeting developed its horsepower during the first year when we started using it to publicly declare program actions for upcoming days. A whiteboard was placed in the front of the room, and each program had its own area on it. Actions were written, along with the responsible party and the committed date of delivery.

Anything could go up on the board—major or minor—as long as it had a date. Humor was encouraged. Peer pressure provided the impetus for folks to get their actions on the board; not doing so was to imply that work was not being done.

We cycled through everyone in the company, each having the opportunity to run the board for a week. The clear message was that the board was by and for the team. Each day a tally was made of what tasks

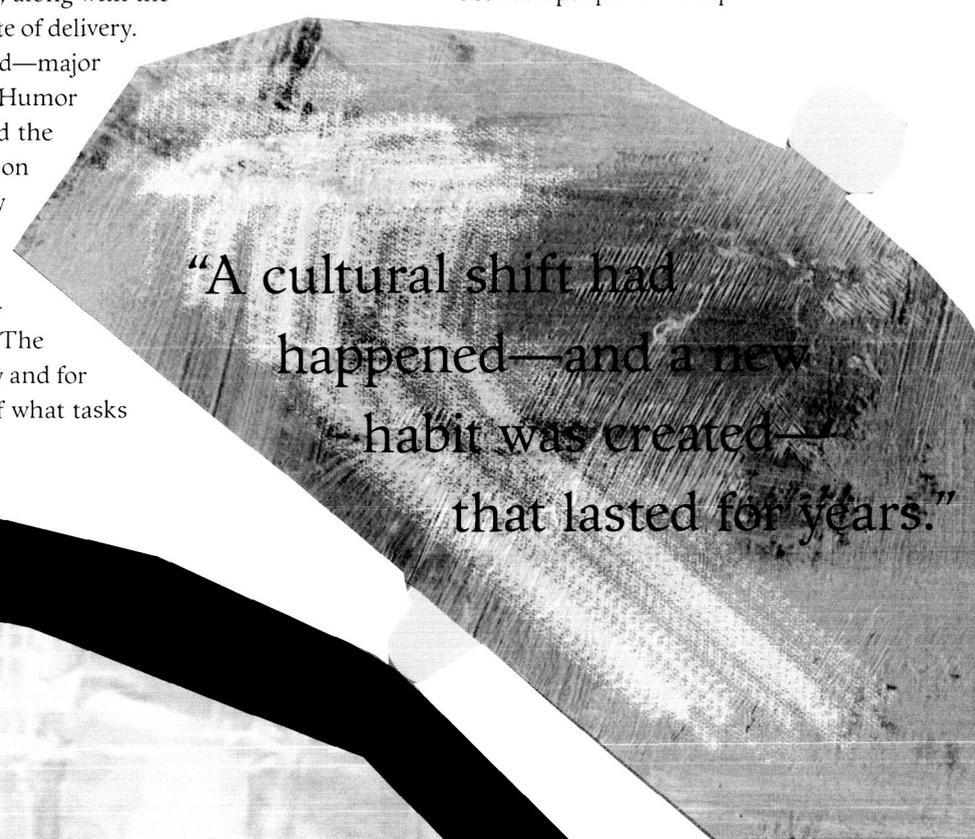
were completed and which were moved out. The pulse of the company was there to see. As everyone became aware of each other's activities, the cross-strapping necessary for a high performance team just happened. It wasn't uncommon to hear something like, "Tom... I've worked with that potting material before and had some problems. Let's talk."

#### READING THE MINUTES

But we found out that starting on time was only half the battle. How could we limit the meeting to only fifteen minutes? A second bell was added that rang at the end of the meeting for 60 seconds. Suddenly the meeting leader was managing the meeting to finish before the bell. Group pressure for the meeting leader to perform in the time given was a powerful motivator: the board managers, driven by the bell, became masters of efficiency. We found that we could tag in on more than 50 actions in less than 10 minutes.

#### BUT CAN WE KEEP OUR PROMISES?

The board provided a way to measure the day-to-day agreements made between coworkers, "Anne, I'll get that to you by Friday." These were now tracked giving us a window into the "agreement integrity" of the company. We started tracking these agreements and posting the track record for all to see; what percent of the informal day-to-day agreements that were made between people were kept?



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Year after year the number hovered around 50 percent, and that just seemed low. We knew that if the number was too high, the company would be losing its nimbleness. But only 50 percent? We knew we could do better than that.

**NOTE TO SELF: 1995**

**Things that *DO NOT* work for raising the "agreement integrity" of the company:**

- 1. Heartfelt pleas that keeping agreements is next to godliness**
- 2. Everyone in the room making a loud buzzer sound every time an agreement is missed**
- 3. Daily tracking of agreements and results with a clear goal posted on the graph, and a daily focus on how we are "missing the mark"**

We tried everything we could think of to bring this number up. Nothing worked. Was this a physical law of organizational behavior, akin to the speed of light, which would never be bettered? We were not yet ready to throw in the towel. We had to get out of the box. Way out.

**MASSAGING THE PROBLEM**

I stood up in front of the meeting one morning. "Ok... here's the deal. If this company can exceed 75 percent on the board and hold it for two weeks, we will bring in two masseuses on Friday. We will set them up in a conference room, and everyone in the company will get a massage. Thereafter, every two weeks that we are above 75 percent, we will do the same thing." Much discussion followed—mostly the "are-you-serious?" kind.

It took 24 hours. The next day the company went from 50 to 77 percent. Folks were on the edge of their chairs as we worked the board each day, and at the end of the two weeks the metric was solidly above 75 percent. We looked for sandbagging, but it wasn't there. The quality of the actions had not changed. The company was keeping its agreements.

Good to our word, we set up the two masseuses, and everyone had a 10-minute slot.

Was it disruptive to our schedule? To some extent. Was it expensive? Yes...both the cost of the masseuses, and the lost time added up. Was it worth it? Absolutely. The value in increased efficiency more than paid the bill. It also provided a morale boost by providing an honoring benefit: "You are working hard, here's your reward."

The massages continued with the company making the mark about three of four times. After the first year the newness wore off, and the motivational effect lessened. After a year and a half it was time for a change, and the massages ended. But the 75 percent agreement result was there to stay. A cultural shift had happened—and a new habit was created—that lasted for years.

**THE PRACTICE EVOLVES**

Over the years the morning meeting has become a primary generator of company culture. Through it new traditions have been born, legendary discussions have been held and critical values debated. As with many worthy things, over the years it too has changed. In its current form in a 140-person Starsys, it is a twice-a-week meeting. We no longer track the actions; that became impractical at about 75 people. In its place, once a week, each company department makes a 10-minute presentation on any topic they choose. To keep these worthwhile, a show-of-hands vote is taken immediately afterwards: was that a great use of time, a good use of time, or a poor use of time? The highest scoring department every quarter gets to take their department out to dinner.

The one thing that has not changed through the years is the practice of "help sessions." These were suggested by an employee almost 12 years ago. At the end of the morning meeting, team members can request the help of anyone else there and can meet with them for a couple of minutes. With everyone in one place at one time, it is a great way to make unscheduled links that help keep a team communicating. For those five minutes, the room is filled with small standing ad-hoc meetings that kick off the day.

The question that is constantly raised, both from within the company and from outside, is: "Is it worth it?" You can do some simple math and scare yourself with the cost of those meetings. But at the end of the day, it's like the ad says, "The value of getting everybody together in one room at one time, twice a week, to collaborate on how to better accomplish our goals—priceless!"



**As president of Starsys Research in Boulder, Colorado, SCOTT TIBBITTS has overseen the production of more than 2,000 mechanisms flown on more than 200 spacecraft. His other ASK features appeared in Issue 16 and 18.**