

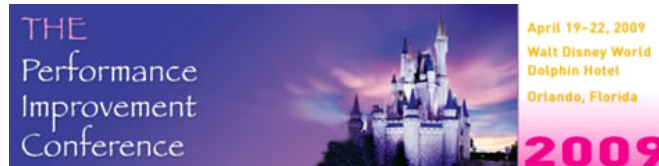


Skip-Level Communications with The Six Boxes® Model

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Outline

- The Six Boxes® Model
- The Skip-Level Application
 - How to Have Productive Skip-Level Meetings
- Q&A

Skip-Level Meetings...

...My “Leadership Connection”

- An individual connection with each member of my staff
- A structure to organize a meaningful conversation
- A method to trigger tactical improvements in human performance

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 3

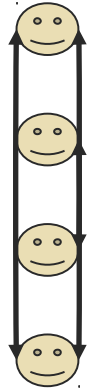
Structure for Sharing

Six Boxes® Enablers and Obstructions (See *handout*)

Environmental Influences: 80% of performance is driven by these.	① Expectations & Feedback	② Tools & Resources	③ Consequences & Incentives
	④ Skills & Knowledge	⑤ Selection & Assignment	⑥ Motives & Preferences

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 4

Skip-Level Meetings - Methodology



- Intent:
 - Open additional channels of communications to augment existing hierarchical channels. In high performing teams, collaboration is uninhibited across vertical & horizontal lines.
 - Uncover improvement opportunities within the organization.
- Planning:
 - Maintain focus. Leaders should set up skip-level meetings with all direct reports of one of their direct reports before moving on to other groups. For example, Art should hold skip-level meetings with all of Tom's direct reports before moving onto skip-level meetings with Sharon's direct reports.
- In the Skip-Level Meeting:
 - Opening: Review the ground rules for the dialogue:
 - Middle: Be open and honest.
 - Closing: Summarize follow-up actions before ending the meeting.
- Feedback & Action:
 - When the skip-level meetings are completed for a group, hold a formal feedback and action planning session with the manager of the group. The purpose of this meeting:
 1. Share positive themes and messages picked up in skip-level meetings.
 2. Share opportunities for improvement.
 3. Be sure to preserve anonymity.
 4. Establish clarity around required improvement actions, dates, expectations.

JOB AID: How To Do Skip-Level Communications

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Start by announcing your intentions | As the leader of your organization, you manage managers who manage others. People you do not manage directly will be anxious if they receive a private meeting invitation from you or your secretary. Announce what the skip-level communications process is all about, and how it is aimed at improving organizational performance. |
| 2. Get familiar with the Six Boxes™ | Since this process is structured around the Six Boxes® Model, you will want to understand it well enough to be able to tell others why using it for skip-level communications is powerful. |
| 3. Set up private skip-level meetings | You will want to select one manager group to start with first, and get those folks scheduled and held before moving on to other manager groups. In that way, emerging themes that may be specific to one manager are not intertwined with themes you are hearing from other groups. |
| 4. Clarify the ground rules | In each skip-level meeting, reassure the staff member that you are after themes that will improve organizational performance, which is why you are using the Six Boxes® Model. Tell the person that their remarks are strictly confidential. After all, you want the unvarnished truth. Ask open-ended questions and concentrate on listening. |
| 5. Brief the manager on the themes | Once your skip-level meetings are completed for all members of a manager group, summarize the themes you heard on a blank Six Boxes® sheet. Then brief the manager on the themes you uncovered. Remember your promise to maintain confidentiality around specific individuals! |
| 6. Build an action plan | Work with your manager to transform the themes from your skip-level meetings into action plans. Help your manager formulate specific, tactical, and time-bound actions. Keep the action list short, else it won't get done. |
| 7. Validate the action plan | Have your manager hold a meeting with his or her direct reports to review the themes you uncovered in each of the Six Boxes®, and the resulting action plan. You do not need to attend. The goal is for your manager to articulate the process, the emerging themes, and the action plans – thereby taking ownership for action. |
| 8. Keep moving forward | Be sure to monitor the progress being made on the action plan with the manager who owns it. As appropriate, review the action plan progress with all staff, so they will see real follow-up to their feedback. |
| 9. Repeat | Start the process all over again with your next manager group. And then when all manager groups are completed, repeat the entire cycle at a pace you and your organization feel comfortable with, perhaps yearly. |

Organizing the Skip-Level Discussions

- The Six Boxes® Model is the agenda.
- Before starting, explain the model.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Re-state key points to ensure understanding.
- Be sure to cover all six boxes.
- Take good notes!

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 7

JOB AID:

Sample Open-Ended Questions to Ask During Skip-Level Meetings

Expectations & Feedback

How do you get your work assignments?

How well does the feedback you receive from your manager meet your needs?

How do you know what is expected of you, and how you need to improve?

How do you know if you are doing a good job?

Tools & Resources

What might the company do to make it easier for you to get your job done?

Thinking about the last time you escalated an issue, how did that go?

How convenient is your manager to see when you need to see her/him?

How well do people in other organizations cooperate and collaborate with you?

Consequences & Incentives

To what extent does the company's compensation system stimulate your performance, and why?

Thinking about the rewards and incentive programs we have here, which would you keep and which would you discard, and why?

What ideas do you have for rewards or incentives programs that would peak your interest?

How are you treated when you make a mistake?

Skills & Knowledge

What skills and knowledge gaps do you need to address to perform your job better?

To what extent has the company supported your desires for job-related education and training?

Selection & Assignment

Do you believe you are in the right job for you? Why do you say that?

What ideas do you have for enriching your assignment?

Is your manager giving you the work assignments you prefer? Why do you say that?

Motives & Preferences

When you get up in the morning, what does that inner voice say to you that motivates you to come to work and do great things?

What part does teamwork play in your motivations about work?

What fears might you have that hold you back?

Six Boxes®

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 8

JOB AID:

Template for Collecting Responses During a Skip-Level Meeting

Expectations & Feedback

Tools & Resources

Consequences & Incentives

Skills & Knowledge

Selection & Assignment

Motives & Preferences

Six Boxes®

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 9

Summary of Collected Themes from Actual Skip-Level Meetings

Expectations & Feedback

Software Release Planning: Changes in due-dates are made without proper communications; causes surprises; forces people to be reactive; disrupts workflow in test; impedes test planning; confusion over priorities.

Assignments: Need to clarify as it relates to contributing to test automation. Desire better clarity and specifics on assignments in general.

Manager Relations: Manager relates well to team and in 1-on-1 meetings. Pays attention to administrative details. Manager often thanks his team members.

Manager Feedback: Desire feedback from Manager to be more specific and less general. "Telling me I'm doing well does not give me anything to build on."

Tools & Resources

Time Reporting: Need categories in PlanView that foster higher integrity in allocating hours.

Test Automation Tools: Could existing computers in inventory be used to dedicate to automation?

Defect Tracking: Confusion; need a plan or roadmap for Mercury, Clear Quest, and Task Manager; redundant work to enter the same data in multiple tools. Also, we still use email to report defects.

Test Environments: Dev has own hardware but test is virtual; need both on hardware or both virtual; inconsistency generates useless work.

Disk Space: Need more for test environments.

Work Space: Take out half the ceiling light bulbs to save energy and reduce screen glare; would like faster laptops.

Meetings: "We have way too many project meetings, and they are getting in the way of real work."

Consequences & Incentives

Performance Appraisals: Not motivated by compensation plan. "The bell curve is frustrating." "I'm confused about why all exceptional performers cannot be rated Exceptional."

Rising to the Top: "My boss told me I need to 'do more'. What does that mean? I need specifics." "I feel helpless to control how my performance links to my compensation."

Recognition: Several people expressed the need to be recognized more often for their accomplishments. "I want to feel wanted." "I want the recognition that will differentiate me from my peers."

Incentives: Desire incentives tied to schedule, quality, or team accomplishment.

Career Paths: Basically everyone in group said they like doing their test assignment; would like to have a better understanding of how to grow within the test function.

Skills & Knowledge

Application Knowledge: Need to know how applications system is constructed; spend elbow-to-elbow time with architects (not easy to do).

Business Knowledge: Need to understand how the business uses the application; spend elbow-to-elbow time with business people using the application.

Training: Some folks mentioned the need for external training and/or external certification in the testing discipline.

Selection & Assignment

Work Scheduling: Often haphazard, as a result of process issues (see Software Release Planning).

Job Assignment: Everyone said they were in the best assignment for them.

Career Path: Some concerns that the company has no system for career tracking. "I have no confidence that if I work to gain the skills required for a target role, that role will even exist by the time I'm ready to move."

Motives & Preferences

QA Team: Everyone mentioned that they really like their current team members. "We have a strong team." "We have mutual respect in this team."

Beaten Down: Repeating the same mistakes (goes beyond this team). "Why aren't we learning?"

Attitude: Disparaging remarks from leadership have degraded pride in testing work. "Why are we always trying to prove ourselves? There is no trust, no faith."

Six Boxes®

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 10

Box 6 Question: What Motivates You?

(Actual responses from staff in April/May/June, 2008)

- ▶ “My work output is a reflection of me, so I want my work to show excellence.”
- ▶ “I enjoy my job which gives me a positive attitude.”
- ▶ “How I approach my job is my choice, and I choose to be positive.”
- ▶ “I thrive on knowing that my work in test will make clients happier.”
- ▶ “I am motivated by self respect and the respect of others.”
- ▶ “I try to set realistic expectations for myself, and then I never give up!”
- ▶ “I thrive on the personal satisfaction of doing a good job.”
- ▶ “I am driven to fix things to make them better for the business.”
- ▶ “I thrive on the non-repetitive nature of org readiness.”
- ▶ “I am hyped every day to do something great for our customers.”
- ▶ “I feel good when I am contributing something important that someone needs.”
- ▶ “I am motivated by seeing my work used in production.”
- ▶ “I pride myself on high performance.”
- ▶ “I am motivated by accomplishment.”
- ▶ “What drives me are the challenges in the work.”

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 11

Sample Action Plan – Developed by Manager of Group

#	BOX	DESCRIPTION OF ACTION AND DESIRED RESULT	STATUS	TARGET OR COMPLETION DATE
1	1	Prepare better for each software release by having the test plan written, reviewed, and approved by the team before testing begins. Solicit input from the team on in-scope/out of scope items.	Solicited input and prepared Release 7.2 test plan prior to testing start. Sending out for review and approval today (6/10).	Done for Release 7.2 (Will continue for future releases)
2	2	Manager / Team Member Availability: All test team members use cube White Boards to post availability. Post when out on vacation. Post meeting schedule and anticipated return to desk. Manager will post an out of office when there is a call off sick.	All team members have white boards and are using this process.	Done 6/30/08
3	1	Provide better feedback on performance in monthly one-on-one meetings. Review the quarterly leadership talent assessments with each individual.	Gathering feedback to finalize 1 st quarter performance review before sharing results. Regular 1-on-1 meetings are already taking place.	Target 7/31/08
4	4	Implement a regular “lunch and learn” program to provide team training. Solicit input from team members on training topics and presenters.	Test automation capabilities and next steps will be the first Lunch 'n Learn topic.	Target 8/30/08

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 12

Survey Results

(Anonymous, using "Survey Monkey" – Response rate = 14/22 = 64%)

1. My skip-level meeting with Art was worth my time. → YES=14, NO=0
2. I was able to voice my suggestions and concerns openly in the skip-level meeting without fear of my comments being used against me later. → YES=14, NO=0
3. Art summarized the meetings accurately. → YES=13, NO=0, SKIPPED=1
4. The action plans that resulted from these meetings produced useful changes or improvements. → TOO EARLY TO TELL=9 (64%), NO=3 (21%), YES=2 (14%)
5. The Six Boxes® approach for structuring these meetings was a good idea. → YES=14, NO=0
6. I would like to see the skip-level meetings process repeated. → ONCE A YEAR=8 (57%), 2 OR 3 TIMES PER YEAR=5 (36%), MORE OFTEN THAN 2 OR 3 TIMES PER YEAR=1 (7%), NEVER=0 (0%)
7. Finally, if you have additional suggestions or comments, please write them here. → ANSWERED QUESTION=8, SKIPPED QUESTION=6

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 13

Responses to Question #7

1. a) There may have been a little bit of misinterpretation or difficulty in interpretation of meaning of comments from the summaries, due to truncation and lack of explanation. b) In our team meeting, many comments were owned up to. Might this hinder the ability in future skip level meetings for team members to openly and comfortably voice concerns (because comments might not remain anonymous)?
2. I love it. Excellent meeting. It was nice to connect to higher management. I felt more valued as an employee.
3. I believe this is a step in the right direction
4. I think the skip level meetings and the subsequent sharing of results created positive feelings for most involved. Not being heard or not being asked for feedback and concerns brings creates negativity and the feeling of non-concern. I'm sure the process was rather time consuming for you, Art.
5. Some of the results were misunderstood, this caused inaccurate changes. If actions are being taken for some concerns then they are not working, we are not seeing results on certain concerns. I think there should be follow-up meetings with Art (or higher level). Although I would also like to see a full skip-level meeting at least once a year.
6. #4 - I see no improvement for the issue which was in box #6 under the negatives. Also, appears that we all have been given added work because this issue was not addressed appropriately. Perhaps the comments in the box were misunderstood.
7. Appreciated the time being taken to talk to each of us.
8. Unfortunately, the action planning process dealing with the results has taken FAR too much time and energy.

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 14

Lessons Learned (so far)

Prior to the skip-level meeting:

- ▶ Before the skip-level meeting, provide the Six Boxes® categories, but not all the details and examples. (Too much information!)

During the skip-level meeting:

- ▶ Before leaving the meeting, ask the employee to prioritize their concerns.

After the meetings:

- ▶ Engage the employees in the action planning.
- ▶ Keep pressure on to make the action plans specific and time-bound.

Other improvement ideas:

- ▶ Hold quarterly discussion with entire manager work group together to validate continued need for the open action plans.
- ▶ Challenge the employees: How can you get more out of the next round of skip-level meetings?

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 15

Summary of Benefits

- Leaders and staff reconnect
 - Or connect for the first time. (Use in On-Boarding, in reverse!)
 - Leaders hear the unvarnished reality. (An outlet for staff.)
- Six Boxes® provides the enabling structure
 - It's not a random and casual conversation
- Problems most impacting team performance will surface for action
 - Supervisors and managers are engaged in the improvement steps

Art Stadlin – 4/20/09 Page 16