

# ■ Speeding Up Those Never-Ending Teams

by Tom Terez

**Q. Why do teams sometimes need months and months of meetings before they can pilot their improvements, and what can be done about it?**

**A.** This is a great question. You're absolutely correct—some teams are like the Energizer Bunny, just going and going and going, though that's where the likeness ends because I can't recall ever seeing a cute and fuzzy team.

Seriously, some teams seem to grind on endlessly. They earnestly discuss the problem and try to uncover root causes, including the possibility that the frequent machine breakdowns are due to Frank's habit of openly depositing spent chewing tobacco in various plant locations. And they propose outstanding solutions, such as bonding Frank's lips with industrial sealant. Yet all these serious discussions get the team...nowhere.

Of course, not all the team's discussions are so useful. You may be familiar with the four stages of team development (forming, storming, norming, performing), which are thoroughly explained in Peter Scholtes' excellent guide, *The Team Handbook*. What may be new to you is that extensive research, which I am completely

making up as fast as my fingers can type, has uncovered two additional stages that can hobble a team. These are called Gouging and Denying.

Gouging is "business short-hand" for the unsettling development in which one team member sets aside the team ground rules, hurls himself or herself or itself across the table (completely bypassing the donuts), and attempts to

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**“Denying” often follows the norming stage because this is when the team is actually getting to—god forbid!—[real decisions](#).**

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perform an impromptu radial keratotomy on another team member. Look for it to happen on the heels of major storming. The next time you see someone with a glass eye, show common courtesy by asking: "So, once you got through the Gouging stage, did the team produce some nice results?" This is much better than: "Does that thing ever fall out?"

Denying refers to the phenomenon in which team members begin to wash their hands of the project. You'll pick up on this immediately by noticing big bowls of soapy water being passed around the meeting room. Denying typically follows the norming stage because this is when

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the team is actually getting to—god forbid!—some real decisions that can affect real lives, including Frank’s. Don’t be surprised to overhear conversations like this one:

WAYNE (who is on the “X42 Threader Break-down Team”): Hey, Frank, how’s it going?

FRANK (who works in production): Are you on that team?

WAYNE: What team?

FRANK: The one that’s been eating donuts for the past 17 years.

WAYNE: Donuts? I never eat donuts—I’m strictly a bagel guy.

FRANK (glaring at Wayne): What’s this I hear about my mouth getting sealed up with industrial glue? (spit)

WAYNE: Uh...uh...what?

FRANK: Listen, Wayne, things are just fine the way they are. Don’t mess with the threader.

WAYNE: Wayne? I’m not Wayne—you must be thinking of someone else.

FRANK: Get out of my way, numbskull.

WAYNE: Say, Frank, can I have some chew? I really want to take up an unpleasant habit—maybe you can help.

As you can see, there are many factors that can slow and even stop a well-meaning team. Fortunately, there are ways to keep things moving, and most of them are preventive in nature:

- Some teams keep going and going because their project is simply too big—so big that Dr. Deming himself would have been unable to wrestle it down. Scope down the team project so it’s small enough to be manageable—yet big enough and important enough that the improvements will truly add value.

- Each team should have a charter that’s written by the team sponsor and clearly describes the team mission, the extent of the team’s authority (empowered simply to make recommendations...or more?), how much time the team can spend on its project, the budget and other resources, and any reasonable parameters that may limit what the team can do. Provide all this info *before* the team gets started, because filling in the blanks later is guaranteed to cause delays.

- If the team needs to present something to someone in order to get feedback, clearance, or special support (for instance, to get access to needed data), arrange for this to happen ASAP. Delays of even a week can make team members rightly skeptical of management commitment.

- Use the services of a neutral facilitator to guide the team through the improvement process and the stages of team development. Because of their outsider status, facilitators can lessen the impact of rank, keep the group in step with its ground rules, and move team members back on track when they start talking about their favorite vacation spots.

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● Don't get stuck in a rut when it comes to team scheduling. Some organizations have all their improvement teams meeting two hours a week for...well, for a darn long time. This works just fine in some cases, but factors like demand up-swings and shift-coordination issues can call for other arrangements. Some teams thrive during a 2-day/1-day blitz, while others find the best schedule to be two five-hour meetings per week for a month. Whatever you do, avoid a one-schedule-fits-all mentality.

● Last but not least, management must ask the big support question before launching a team: Are we going to back them with the time, funding, faith, trust, etc. they need to succeed? If the answer is no—or if it's a “that depends”—the

team project should not be undertaken. Why? Because otherwise, team members will raise their expectations, work hard on their project, count on real change to come from it—then find that management support had been a mirage. The resulting cynicism will linger for years.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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