"Top 50" "Have Yous"

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12.03.2007

While waiting last week in the Albany airport to board a Southwest Airlines flight to Reagan, I happened across the latest *Harvard Business Review,* on the cover of which was a yellow sticker. The sticker had on it the words "Mapping your competitive position." It referred to a feature article by my friend Rich D'Aveni. His work is uniformly good—and I have said as much publicly on several occasions dating back 15 years. I'm sure this article is good, too—though I didn't read it. In fact, it triggered a furious negative "Tom reaction" as my wife calls it. Of course I believe you should worry about your "competitive position." But instead of obsessing on competitive position and other abstractions, as the B-schools and consultants would always have us do, I instead wondered about some "practical stuff," which I believe is more important to the short- and long-term health of the enterprise, tiny or enormous.

Hence, rather than an emphasis on competitive maps or how blue your water is, I am urging you to pay attention to my "Top 50" "Have Yous," as I shall call them. The list could easily be three times as long—but this ought to keep you occupied for a while. Of course the underlying hypothesis is that if you do the stuff below your "competitive position" will improve so much that mapping will become a secondary issue! Some will rebut with the tired old saw (and silly idea) of "doing the right things" versus "doing things right." I, for example, believe that if you do even a smidgeon of what's below you will wildly enhance both "do the right thing" and "do things right." (Admission: As an engineer by training and disposition, doing things right is priority #1. I am an admitted "implementation nut.") In any event here's my list, random, but in batches of ten:

1. **Have you** in the last 10 days … visited a *customer?*

2. **Have you** called a customer … *TODAY?*

3. **Have you** in the last 60–90 days … had a seminar in which several folks from the customer's operation (different levels, different functions, different divisions) interacted, via facilitator, with various of your folks?

4. **Have you** thanked a frontline employee for a small act of helpfulness … in the last three days?

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5. Have you thanked a frontline employee for a small act of helpfulness … in the last three *hours?*

6. Have you thanked a frontline employee for carrying around a great *attitude* … today?

7. Have you in the last week recognized—publicly—one of your folks for a small act of *cross-functional cooperation?*

8. Have you in the last week recognized—publicly—one of "their" folks (another function) for a small act of cross-functional cooperation?

9. Have you invited in the last month a leader of *another function* to your weekly team priorities meeting?

10. Have you personally in the last week-month called-visited an internal or external customer to *sort out, inquire, or apologize* for some little or big thing that went awry? (No reason for doing so? If true—in your mind—then you're more out of touch than I dared imagine.)

11. Have you in the last two days had a chat with someone (a couple of levels down?) about specific deadlines concerning a project's next steps?

12. Have you in the last two days had a chat with someone (a couple of levels down?) about specific deadlines concerning a project's next steps … and what specifically *you can do to remove a hurdle?* ("Ninety percent of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to get things done."—Peter "His eminence" Drucker)

13. Have you celebrated in the last week a "small" (or large!) *milestone* reached? (I.e., are you a milestone fanatic?)

14. Have you in the last week or month revised some estimate in the "wrong" direction and apologized for making a lousy estimate? (Somehow you must publicly *reward the telling of difficult truths.*)

15. Have you installed in your tenure a very comprehensive customer satisfaction scheme for all *internal* customers? (With major consequences for hitting or missing the mark.)

16. Have you in the last six months had a week-long, visible, very intensive *visit-"tour"* of external customers?

17. Have you in the last 60 days called an abrupt halt to a meeting and "ordered" everyone to get out of the office, and "into the field" and in the *next eight hours,* after asking those involved, fixed (f-i-x-e-d!) a nagging "small" problem through practical action?

18. Have you in the last week had a rather thorough discussion of a "cool design thing" someone has come across—away from your industry or function—at a website, in a product or its packaging?

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19. Have you in the last two weeks had an informal meeting—at least an hour long—with a frontline employee to discuss things we do right, things we do wrong, what it would take to meet your mid- to long-term aspirations?

20. Have you in the last 60 days had a general meeting to discuss "things we do wrong" … that we can fix in the next *fourteen days?*

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21. Have you had in the last year a one-day, intense off-site with each (?) of your internal customers—followed by a big celebration of "things gone right"?

22. Have you in the last week pushed someone to do some family thing that you fear might be overwhelmed by deadline pressure?

23. *Have you* *learned the names of the children of everyone who reports to you?* (If not, you have six months to fix it.)

24. Have you taken in the last month an interesting-weird outsider to lunch?

25. Have you in the last month invited an interesting-weird outsider to sit in on an important meeting?

26. Have you in the last three days discussed something interesting, beyond your industry, that you ran across in a meeting, reading, etc?

27. Have you in the last 24 hours injected into a meeting "I ran across this interesting idea in [strange place]"?

28. Have you in the last two weeks asked someone to report on something, anything, that constitutes an act of brilliant service rendered in a "trivial" situation—restaurant, car wash, etc? (And then discussed the relevance to your work.)

29. Have you in the last 30 days examined in detail (hour by hour) your calendar to evaluate the degree "time actually spent" mirrors your "espoused priorities"? (And repeated this exercise with everyone on the team.)

30. Have you in the last two months had a presentation to the group by a "weird" outsider?

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31. Have you in the last two months had a presentation to the group by a customer, internal customer, vendor, featuring "working folks" 3 or 4 levels down in the vendor organization?

32. Have you in the last two months had a presentation to the group of a cool, beyond-our-industry ideas by two of your folks?

33. Have you at every meeting today (and forevermore) re-directed the conversation to the practicalities of implementation concerning some issue before the group?

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34. Have you at every meeting today (and forevermore) had an end-of-meeting discussion on "action items to be dealt with in the next 4 or 48 hours? (And then made this list public—and followed up in 48 hours.) And made sure everyone has at least one such item.)

35. Have you had a discussion in the last six months about what it would take to get recognition in a local-national poll of *"best places to work"*?

36. Have you in the last month approved a *cool-different training course* for one of your folks?

37. Have you in the last month *taught* a frontline training course?

38. Have you in the last week discussed the idea of *Excellence*? (What it means, how to get there.)

39. Have you in the last week discussed the idea of *"Wow"*? (What it means, how to inject it into an ongoing "routine" project.)

40. Have you in the last 45 days assessed some major process in terms of the details of the "experience," as well as results it provides to its external or internal customers?

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41. Have you in the last month had one of your folks attend a meeting you were supposed to go to that gives them unusual exposure to senior folks?

42. Have you in the last 60 (30?) days sat with a trusted friend or "coach" to discuss your "management style"—and its long- and short-term impact on the group?

43. Have you in the last three days considered a professional relationship that was a little rocky and made a call to the person involved to discuss issues and smooth the waters? (Taking the "blame," fully deserved or not, for letting the thing-issue fester.)

44. Have you in the last … *two hours* … stopped by someone's (two-levels "down") office-workspace for 5 minutes to ask "What do you think?" about an issue that arose at a more or less just completed meeting? (And then stuck around for 10 or so minutes to listen—and visibly taken notes.)

45. Have you … in the last day … looked around you to assess whether the diversity pretty accurately maps the diversity of the market being served? (And …)

46. Have you in the last day at some meeting gone out of your way to make sure that a normally reticent person was engaged in a conversation—and then thanked him or her, perhaps privately, for their contribution?

47. Have you during your tenure instituted very public (visible) presentations of performance?

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48. Have you in the last four months had a session specifically aimed at checking on the "corporate culture" and the degree we are true to it—with all presentations by relatively junior folks, including frontline folks? (And with a determined effort to keep the conversation restricted to "real world" "small" cases—not theory.)

49. Have you in the last six months talked about the *Internal Brand Promise*?

50. Have you in the last year had a full-day off-site to talk about individual (and group) aspirations?

Good luck! ("Enjoy"—it should be fun!! This is the "real stuff" of life!!)

Possible Application:

1. Pick one of these items that you do by yourself in the next 24–48 hours.

2. Do it!

3. Use the list as the trigger for an ongoing discussion.

4. As a team, pick two long-term and three short-term ideas.

5. Construct an implementation program for the above.

6. Review, regularly—what works and why, what didn't work and why.

7. Pick a few more items.

8. On a semi-annual basis, review the list as a whole—particulars and the "spirit of the list."

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