

The Rise and Fall of the Kiwi 'Morning Tea' or **Were we so clever to get rid of morning tea?**

By David Parmenter

I remember my first impressions of the New Zealand business world when I arrived from England in 1982, just after the Springbok Tour. As an Auditor I visited many New Zealand companies and experienced firsthand the daily procession to morning tea. Looking back, I do recall some interesting characteristics of this ritual, such as: older staff had been around long enough to know "just about everything" and were treated as mentors; staff morale was high, with a real 'team spirit'; Mondays were full of weekend stories; and everybody seemed to know what was going on.

I also remember later, as a Management Consultant, how pleased I was to see this inefficient process disappear in the late 80's and early 90's. Some may think that the 80's have a lot to answer for, others may say that work today has lost a lot of the fun and communication. You may think that, but as Urquhart would say "I can not possibly comment".

I wish to focus on the issue of the morning tea which, strange as it appeared to me then, seems so sensible now.

Some of the benefits of morning tea

- **reducing the phone calls you make, as you can catch up with Pat Carruthers over tea**
- **reduce the the number of emails and phone calls by regularly attending morning tea**
- **reduce committee meeting as issues can be tossed around over a cup of tea**
- **an enforced break enables one to get a better perspective on issues**

Look at the current situation: everybody has breaks at different times; you never know if someone is free to cover that brief point you want clarification on; you're email inbox is full to overflowing, much of which is of no consequence; there are many meetings covering points that the morning tea would have dealt with; few people have a rounded knowledge of the business; and worst of all where is the sense of perspective - how many of us actually work in jobs which are life and death, such as surgeons?

The coffee house culture has gone some way to repair the damage done, provided there is a good coffee house nearby. However, as small groups go for their coffee at different times you do not know where Pat Carruthers will be.

One participant, in the waymark better practices studies, converted a large meeting room to a "Meet & Eat Room" for social events, morning and afternoon teas, lunches etc. The executive management team were also encouraged to use these facilities and take the opportunity to get to know their staff and other members of the organisation in a less formal situation to discuss anything (current work issues, social issues and events etc.). Not surprisingly this change led to a reduction in both staff turnover and grievances, and greater team spirit.

It is interesting that during the Eighties another valuable communication tool disappeared - the executive team luncheons. Whilst it was no doubt a perk, how much communication was exchanged which has now been replaced by an hours meeting. I know what I would prefer. At least you can escape in some culinary delight when Pat Carruthers is paddling his boat down the wrong canal.

Are we so much more efficient now? Are we having more enjoyment at work, I do not think so. Just walk around tomorrow and look at the frowns permanently locked on the foreheads of us all. Is this the inheritance we are to give the next generation of work colleagues.

Why don't we show some leadership and bring back, for a six month trial: the morning and afternoon teas and regular executive luncheons. However, be warned, these initiatives will need promotion and support from senior management. If the senior team consider themselves to busy to attend it will probably be because of the number of meetings they have. All they need to do is break this "catch 22"

If morning tea does not appeal how about a monthly breakfast for all staff at a site. We know of a private sector organisation that holds monthly breakfasts for over 100 of the staff on site (McDonalds deliver the breakfast) and each department presents on a topic. There are awards, banter and departments are mixed amongst the tables. Everybody attends from the CEO down.

Last words

- **have a team meeting in a coffee house once a week**
- **invite key staff from other groups to a free espresso**
- **have morning tea on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays including the senior team**
- **have a "site wide" breakfast once a quarter**
- **replace some senior management meetings with an executive team lunch every Monday**

David Parmenter is the Managing Director of *waymark solutions* who are based in Wellington. *waymark* does not necessarily agree with the comments expressed in this article. Please Email: parmenter@waymark.co.nz with your morning tea stories as I would like to write a follow-up article.