

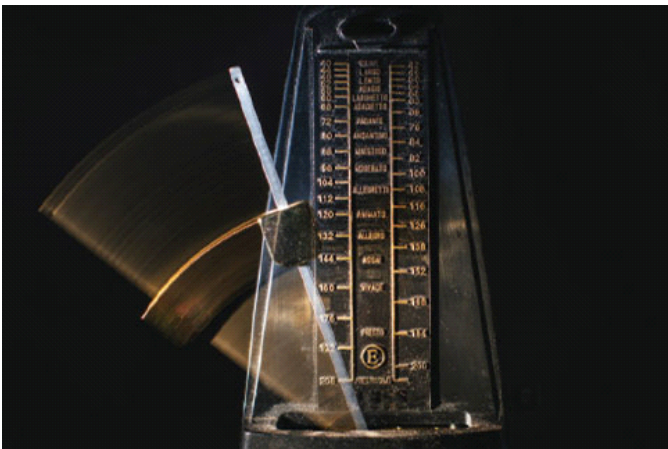
GROWERTALKS

Features

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Communicating With a Cadence

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Let me tell you a story: Ray bought his first acre of production ground in 1984. By the time his son, Dustin, came on as operations manager, the nursery had grown to 60 acres of container nursery stock, a decent-sized liner program and a customer list built mostly on independent garden centers and landscape accounts. The business was doing fine. Trucks left loaded. Orders shipped. The phone rang constantly and somebody always answered it.

Ray still ran a lot of the business the way he always had, which is to say informally. A salesman would catch

him walking to his truck and tell him a customer was asking about fall availability. Dustin would mention a crop problem while they were both standing in Block 4 looking at something else. The shipping supervisor called when there was a load that wasn't going to make it out on time. Somebody would text a picture of a customer complaint. Inventory questions came up over lunch, usually between bites, usually forgotten by the time lunch was over.

None of that is unusual and none of it is really a problem on its own. The nursery industry runs on people talking to each other while they work. That's part of what makes a nursery feel like a nursery instead of a corporate office.

The problem wasn't that people had stopped communicating; it was that this kind of informal, when-it-comes-up conversation had become the entire communication structure of the business. Information arrived when somebody happened to remember it and important things competed for attention with whatever fire was burning that day. Nobody at the nursery could have told you, with any confidence, when the business would next sit down and talk about sales trends or production timing or how a particular employee was doing. There was no answer to the question, "When will we talk about this again?" because nothing was ever scheduled to be talked about. It just came up or it didn't.

When informal communication stops working

The problem showed up the way these things usually do—not with a disaster, but just a slow erosion nobody had been watching closely enough to catch.

One of the nursery's biggest landscape accounts had been ordering less each season for almost two years.

Nobody had missed a call or dropped the ball on an order, there were no complaints, and they had a good relationship with the sales rep. Instead, it was smaller things. An order that used to be 400 1-gal. shrubs came in at 300. Then the next spring it was 250. The account's salesman noticed each individual dip and had a reasonable explanation for it every time: A slow spring. A competitor's promotion. A change in the customer's crew size. Taken one at a time, none of it seemed worth raising as a red flag. Taken together, it was an account quietly walking out the door.

Ray finally caught it when he ran a customer report for an unrelated reason and saw the number sitting there in black and white. He called Dustin and the sales team into the office and asked the question that eventually becomes the whole point of this story.

"How long has this been happening?"

Nobody had a confident answer. Best guess, somebody said, probably two months. Maybe longer.

That was the moment that mattered, more than the account itself. The issue wasn't that the sales team didn't care about the customer and it wasn't that Ray was disconnected from his own business. The issue was that there had never been a scheduled moment when a trend like this one was required to become visible. Everybody had a piece of the picture. Nobody had ever been in the room at the same time, on a predictable basis, looking at the whole thing.

Ray started asking a different question after that. Not "How do we communicate more?" but "How often do we actually need to look at this information in order to catch a problem while it's still small?" That question is what cadence really is. It isn't about adding meetings for the sake of meetings. It's about deciding, on purpose, how long the business is willing to go without intentionally reviewing the things that matter most.

Coordinating cadence

Different information moves at different speeds, so it needs different rhythms. The nursery started with a quick weekly sales meeting, short and focused, where the team looked at weekly goals, movement in the pipeline, quotes out, availability concerns and any account that looked "off." One soft week didn't mean much on its own—three weeks moving the same direction got attention immediately during the monthly meetings because now there was a regular place for that pattern to show up instead of getting buried under whatever else was going on that Tuesday.

Production got its own rhythm, built around a different pace of change. A crop running seven days behind might not mean anything by itself. But when the same crop was still behind the following week or month, and then another crop started showing the same slippage, that stopped looking like a coincidence and started looking like a labor issue or an irrigation issue that needed real attention. Cadence didn't fix the crop—it made the pattern visible early enough during the weekly meetings to do something about it, instead of finding out in June that spring production had been quietly falling behind since March.

Shipping worked on its own clock entirely, sometimes daily during the spring rush because loads change fast. Staffing, pulling, staging, order changes—all of it moves quickly enough that a weekly conversation would be too slow to matter. That's really the whole principle in the micro-meeting frequency; it should match how fast the information can meaningfully change. Shipping needs daily eyes. Sales needs weekly eyes. Bigger business performance questions can wait for monthly or quarterly review without anybody losing sleep over it.

The same idea applied to people, not just departments. Ray started having a real, regular conversation with Dustin about the business beyond whatever was on fire that week. Priorities, goals, initiatives, resources, what was

working, what wasn't. And Dustin started doing the same thing with his crew leads, not waiting for the annual review to say anything meaningful or not doing them at all because "they're fine."

An employee who's struggling and doesn't hear about it for 11 months has effectively been allowed to struggle for 11 months. A good idea an employee has been sitting on doesn't do the business any good if nobody ever asks. The question became the same one Ray had asked about the customer account, just aimed at people instead: How long are we willing to let something go before we're guaranteed to talk about it?

It would be easy to hear all this and assume the answer is more meetings, and that's worth pushing back on directly because it's the wrong takeaway. A poorly run meeting is a waste of everybody's time and stacking the calendar with recurring meetings that don't have a clear purpose just trades one kind of chaos for another.

I sat in on a meeting once with a company president and his full team of department managers, and out of curiosity I ran a stopwatch through the whole thing. I started it every time a manager began covering their department and stopped it the moment they got interrupted or crosstalk took over, not starting it again until that person was actually back to delivering real information. Forty five minutes on the calendar. Eighteen minutes of actual information changed hands. The room wasn't short on communication. It was short on structure and the two aren't the same thing.

Good cadence actually cuts down on communication, not the other way around. Once people know what a meeting is for, when it happens and what belongs there, they stop having to chase each other down for updates. A predictable sales meeting next Tuesday can replace six scattered hallway conversations between now and then. Every recurring meeting at the nursery had to answer basic questions: What information are we responsible for reviewing here, who owns it and what happens with what we decide?

The nursery didn't turn into a different company. It's still busy. Ray still gets stopped in the parking lot more often than he'd probably like. But the interruptions carry less weight now because the important stuff has somewhere else to go. Sales sees trends earlier instead of explaining them away one order at a time. Production catches timing problems before they compound across the whole crop plan. Shipping talks about tomorrow's loads today instead of scrambling when tomorrow arrives. And when Ray asks how long something has been going on, somebody can usually give him a real answer because the business has a rhythm for finding out.

That's really what cadence is for. Not filling the calendar and not proving how busy everyone is; it's about shortening the distance between something changing in the business and someone actually noticing.

So it's worth asking of your own operation, department by department (sales, production, inventory, shipping, labor, customer service, your managers, your people): How long can any one of those go in the wrong direction before you're guaranteed to talk about it? If the honest answer is, "Whenever somebody happens to mention it" or "Whenever it becomes a real problem," that's not a cadence. That's just waiting to react. And the businesses that grow past that point aren't the ones with the most meetings on the calendar. They're the ones that decided, on purpose, how long they were willing to go without looking. **GT**

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