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## Focus

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### Skip-level Communication

Recent events caused two CEOs I know to question how well they knew their people. Unless he or she interacts with most employees on a regular basis, a CEO can become isolated from important details of the business. One-on-one meetings with employees who are not direct reports keeps a leader better informed.

Hallmarks of these "skip-level meetings" include:

- Most are scheduled in advance, held in the leader's office
- An unstructured agenda (encourages spontaneity)
- The CEO does more listening than talking

Impromptu meetings in a break/meal area, field office or job site, or when the CEO encounters an employee in the community also present an opportunity for effective skip-level communication.

Benefits of skip-level meetings follow.

- The leader receives information without the filters and distortion that typically characterize information moving up through the chain of command
- Conversely, the employee hears unfiltered information directly from the CEO, and may gain insight into what is truly important to the leader
- The leader can directly assess subordinates' talent, and may use the meeting to coach or mentor a subordinate
- Employees feel valued because of one-on-one access to the CEO

"All well and good," you say, "but I don't have the time." To which I respond, "What is it costing you not to spend this time?" For example, the CEO of one worldwide company with 35,000 employees has a typically busy schedule, yet manages to carry out more than 150 skip-level meetings a year.

A clear chain of command is important, as are well-defined roles and responsibilities. However, the prudent CEO will occasionally subvert the hierarchy to view things through his or her own eyes.

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*Tom Wagner*

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