



By Joe Byerly

In a book published in the late 1950s, C. Northcote Parkinson tells the story of a committee that gathered for a two-hour long meeting to discuss the construction of a new nuclear power plant. However, the committee members only spent a little over two minutes discussing the complex construction plans.

Where did they invest the majority of the remaining 118 minutes?

They spent it discussing the bike shed they intended to build for employees. They discussed the dimensions. They discussed the color of the shed. They probably even talked about the types of bicycles that employees could park there. And why, in a meeting about a nuclear power plant, did they spend so much time on a bike shed? Because the power plant was a tough complex endeavor and the bike shed was an easy and comfortable topic.

Parkinson's metaphor became to be known as the "bicycle shed effect." It describes how people in organizations will fall back on what is easy and trivial instead of spending time on what matters.

As I look back on my military career, I recognize that I've been a part of many bike-shed

discussions during training and command and staff meetings. If I'm being honest, I'm to blame for several of them.

To avoid bike-shed discussions, it helps to understand that we all have bike-sheds. We all have those areas where we feel comfortable as leaders and want to spend an exorbitant amount of time in meetings talking about. They make us feel smart and confident because we get to display our knowledge. And when we take the time to discuss our bike-sheds, it may even feel like progress, but in reality we aren't moving the ball any further forward.

We also need to recognize that there are certain decisions that only we can make as leaders; no one else has the responsibility and authority to make these decisions. So while it might be enjoyable talking about bike-sheds, we aren't keeping our end of the bargain for our organizations. When we side step key issues to focus on our bike sheds, we frustrate subordinates who need our input to move forward with planning for the organization's "nuclear power plant."

In the end, every meeting we attend should have a purpose, and as leaders and as participants, we need to keep that purpose in the forefront of our minds. Otherwise, we are going to fall back on what we know and what we feel comfortable discussing. And we will avoid talking about the power plant and spend all of our time talking about our bike-shed.

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