

The CEO Refresher

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Making it a Successful Meeting

by Gerry Schmidt and Lisa Jackson

With the pace of accelerating change, meetings are a huge opportunity in organizations -- a chance to engage people, build trust, and create aligned action during change.

Well-designed and planned meetings accomplish several important outcomes:

- Inspire and motivate people to new behaviors;
- Solve problems and speed up decisions;
- Transfer ownership from top leadership to employees.

Following is an overview of three types of meetings that can be used for these outcomes:

1. **Meet to Create:** how to engage people in building a vision and strategy.
2. **Meet to Align:** how to inspire and align a group of employees towards a new direction.
3. **Meet to Recharge:** how to re-energize a stalled project.

Meet to Create: The Why and the How

When there's a big change, such as a change of strategy, a merger, a lagging business that needs reenergizing, or a new leader ... *always* start off on the right foot by having the team define a compelling and clear definition of "where we are headed and why."

Who: Senior leader and direct reports

When: Ideally 3-6 months before any major announcement or impact.

What's Important: Leaders tend to over-focus on the comfort zone of strategy and financial analysis, and on developing "mission" statements that mean little to employees (eg, "Relentlessly Cut Costs". Is this inspiring? Contrast that with "AOL Anywhere").

Alignment is powerful: People who are inspired and on the same page execute strategy faster and with greater coordination.

Aim for output that answers five questions:

- Why change ... why now (our vision)
- What happens if we don't
- What's in it for me
- What's expected of me
- How will we support this change (what's our strategy)

Success Pointers:

- Interview key stakeholders, including your direct reports
- Get off-site and make sure there's at least one night to "sleep on it."
- Think big.
- Make it visual and interactive - "talking heads" rarely make good decisions.
- Ensure you have neutral facilitation: Not a time for "do-it-yourself."

Meet to Align: Inspiring the Masses

When there's an impact on a large group, plan an event to align, inspire, and educate the masses toward a common, unified message. Done well, this melts resistance, fear, and rumors seeded by "naysayers".

Make sure the message reaches everyone in a relatively short period of time.

Whether virtual or in person, it's all about interactivity - stump speeches are for politicians, not leaders.

Who: The entire impacted group and maybe beyond (vendors, key customers) - broader is better.

When: After you have a clear vision and strategy and, if necessary, synced with external communications (eg, a merger).

What's Important: Kick-off meetings have far greater impact after you visibly address a "point of pain" that frustrates employees, or implement a non-threatening aspect of the change - such as improving poor cafeteria facilities, eliminating cumbersome paperwork, giving people a new technology to make their lives easier, or firing an abusive boss.

For the meeting, design a creative process that ignites meaningful dialogue - either via the internet or in person. Too often, "kick-off" meetings over-use PowerPoint, generic platitudes and one-way talking heads. Vague statements like "in order to maximize our growth potential" or "as we strive to achieve new heights of our vision ..." guarantee people will tune out!

Success Pointers:

- Take time to create a coherent story about "what's in it for them."
- Organize internal "line people" (eg, supervisors) to cascade the message.
- Make it interactive: Get real and do it with them, not at them -- dialogue is key.
- Accept that negativity is present. Have patience and deal with this - check your ego at the door!
- Plan for sustainability. "Flavor of the month" breeds cynicism.

Meet to Recharge: When Energy Has Faded

When the progress of a change has slowed, reenergize and refresh everyone's memory about where you're headed and why - and most importantly, the benefits of the vision.

Who: Whomever is impacted, cascaded from senior leaders down.

When: 6-18 months into a change, when energy has died off or people have reverted to old ways of working. This is always needed - most change efforts let up way too soon.

What's Important: Make sure the initiative is supported by visible presence from senior leadership - HR or consultants can't carry your torch! In change efforts, leadership support is critical to keeping energy high, as is defining and frequently communicating new measurements of success that align with the change.

Success Pointers:

- Recommit yourself. Your excitement and commitment - and showing up - is what catches others on fire.
- Engage in problem-solving. People love to be part of problem-solving - less talk, more action.
- Cheer 'em on. Share good news and progress often, even if small.
- Find heroes. Tell stories of people who are role models for change.
- Don't fall into the "survey trap." Show up and ask good questions - it gets better feedback than any survey.
- Open the floodgates for criticism. The fastest way to pop the balloon of negativity is to invite it. Don't try to hide bad news - they'll always know.

Add a few of these elements to one of your meetings. You will get more engagement, trust, and aligned action.

Start right now!

Lisa Jackson and Gerry Schmidt are corporate culture experts and authors of the book "Transforming Corporate Culture: 9 Natural Truths for Being Fit to Compete." They offer a proven method to teach leaders how to evolve their corporate cultures to perform better, innovate faster, and show they truly care about people in an unprecedented era of rapid change and transformation.

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