

Corporate Events - Beyond the paperweight

Here you are creating an event, perhaps an annual leadership or sales conference, maybe a change event. You have a large group and want them to leave thinking and doing things differently. If you didn't have the stage, the big screens, the music and the impressive venue but just a room with simple tables and chairs, what would be left? What would you do?

Have you, like us, noticed that some of the most memorable scenes in films are the simplest, where the actor just speaks about what lies at the heart of the matter? Like De Niro growling at the mirror in 'Taxi Driver' or Marlon Brando's 'Contender' speech from 'On the Waterfront'.

We've seen that people get hooked when they experience events that feels real; that have real stories and words that come from the heart rather than the corporate dictionary. When participants have space to discuss, explore and draw their own conclusions they 'get it', buy in and the event creates lasting shifts.

Corporate events can be full of sizzle but lack substance and lasting impact. Too often people leave these sessions with little beyond the presentation pen and paperweight. A few fractured memories, a bit of networking but not much more. It's not intentional – in our experience clients don't want a one hit wonder.

Organisations spend a small fortune on annual conferences and big change events – so how do you really get the best out of them?

- ***What are some of the key questions to consider in creating an event that fires people up?***
- ***How can you make the impact last beyond the closing notes of the final fanfare?***

Key questions and practical ideas

1. **What outcomes do you want?** When what you do has been successful, what will people be thinking, feeling, doing and saying? It may sound obvious, but it's essential: make up your mind what the event is for and go for that. Take time to get the foundations right, talk to key sponsors and leaders, get clear what success looks like. This time so often gets squeezed by the urgency to 'get on and do'. Resist the pressure: sharpen the outcomes so that the event hangs together and delivers what you want.
2. **Where are people now?** How will they arrive ready and prepared? We easily make assumptions. Work out where people are now and what's needed to move them to where you want them to be. One to one interviews, focus groups, external perspectives gathered well ahead of the event provide invaluable feedback for the leadership team as well as a strong foundation and common understanding for the design of the event. And starting discussions beforehand means people arrive ready to get stuck in. Town halls and team meetings to share what's planned and get people thinking about how they will contribute help to ensure the event isn't just a one-off.

3. **What's the message?** And who are you to say it? The tricky bit is thinking about the message. Key people who have an instinctive understanding of it often lack time. Helping them to focus on what really needs to be said and encouraging them to delegate the role of shaping the event can avoid hasty last-minute rehearsals and Power Point hell.

But beyond that, there are two tougher questions to tackle. First, **are you confronting the brutal facts?** Jim Collins' 'Good to Great' underlines how great organisations have a penchant for intense dialogue and 'courageous conversations'. Your task is to be honest with people about the realities of now to be able to engage them in the possibilities of the future. You need to face up to what David Whyte calls 'the questions that have no right to go away' and work out how to talk about them.

Secondly, **there must be a match between what you say and what you do.** Only leaders who say what they believe, consistently behave in accordance with those beliefs and truly show the benefits of such behaviours in their own lives can advocate that others do likewise. Others will rapidly be rumbled. Can you ensure your leaders deliver this? We suggest you do so or find someone who can.

4. **How can you design an event which flows well, is creative and engaging?** There's an art to sessions that are distinctive, which gel as a journey rather than the random splash of pebbles in a pond. We all know events need to be creative and varied but, like films and symphonies, they need a rhythm and syncopation that derives from having a clear, pure theme at the core.

So often it's the simplest things that have the biggest impact: a well-constructed question, a discussion which, as Nancy Kline reminds us, has the courage to ask what we are not facing that is right in front of us. So, ask yourself "What will the delegates experience?" This isn't touchy feely: their perception, what they take from the event will be what creates impetus and change.

The most common mistake we see is stuffing in too much input in and squeezing discussion time. Alyse was a participant in a leadership event where the group discussion had only just got into full swing before it was cut short. Frustration and disappointment were the overwhelming takeaway. As a rule of thumb, we recommend that for every 20 minutes of presentation there needs to be 40 minutes of discussion.

5. **How will our delivery team succeed?** If glitz is needed on the day, that's fine. But it can take a huge amount of effort and cost to set up the stage, lights and effects yet, if the story is poor or the delivery weak, it's all for nothing. Leaders may be confident presenters but playing to a larger audience calls for enhanced skills. They may feel in control when talking with people but engaging in discussion means letting go of certainty about what will happen and what questions will come up: we've seen too many leaders take refuge in their presentations. As we said, people are quick to spot insincerity or someone going through the corporate motions. Imagine the room is bare, the lights are gone and all that remains are your leaders and the full complement of participants on hard wooden chairs. Are people inspired and engaged? If not, offering coaching so that leaders play to their strengths, have presence and are 'real' on stage

pays dividends.

6. **Things don't always turn out as we expect – how do we respond live to changes?** Noticing what's happening in the room and responding to delegates' reactions can have a huge impact on the results you get. Identify someone who can be your eyes and ears and has the skills to craft the event live while keeping the outcomes in mind. Use review meetings with the delivery team at the beginning and end of the day as a forum to ensure any changes are made speedily. And be alert to disagreements and disquiet as the event unrolls so you can address them positively right then. Patrick Lencioni has a great term for this: in his book 'Five Dysfunctions of a Team', he advises appointing a 'Miner of Conflict' to ensure conversations that tackle the facts and allow people to go away knowing they've spoken and been heard.
7. **How do we ensure the event is seamless?** By stage managing the "production" before, during and after. You may well have an events company or organisation team and an AV/ production company. Having a stage manager who is the glue means that the sponsors and delivers are freed to concentrate on what they need to do – delivering clear, real messages to the audience.
8. **How do we ensure delegates are engaged and involved?** Good design and precision facilitation ensure people stay lively and with you. You should never hear "How long have we got? What are we supposed to be doing?" Thoughtful preparation pays off: check group work and activity sessions have clear briefs, ensure session facilitators are fully prepared, and create templates to focus the discussion and the outputs. Outlaw oodles of scrappy flipcharts.

The size of your event will influence which of these questions are important but the 'wooden chair' test still stands: whether it's a small group or 400, do you really want to fry their brains with a lecture or see them leave with little more than an impending hangover? It's not worth spending anything, let alone a lot of time and effort, on fizzle and froth.

European Supply Chain conference

A client asked Alyse to work with them to create their first European Supply Chain conference following a major reorganisation. The leader's brief was to be 'the glue'. He knew his team could identify the key messages but would struggle to find creative ways for *how* to go about the event.

We explored exactly what leadership team members wanted to achieve and highlighted key messages. We interviewed participants from across the organisation to test the objectives, get their input on key issues and tell us what they would most value. We designed a flow to deliver this and worked closely with each session leader to create engaging, distinctive sessions and coached them to deliver with impact. Working closely with the conference organisation team and the AV Company meant that everything meshed together.

And making impact meant flexing. Review sessions at the start and then end of the day meant we could tweak sessions and respond to what was in the room. Synthesizing results overnight meant delegates could see progress.

As the European head of Supply Chain mused about his final speech, Alyse suggested an ending which would guarantee a standing ovation. He was sceptical but went ahead and was amazed when it happened. Those leaders created ripples – of action and lasting changes in how it felt to work in the team.

So, as the event comes to a close, what are you thinking? Has the event touched you, caused you to think and act differently? What was really important? Is this a story that has just begun? Where will you go next? What happens now? How will you make the impact last?

Too often outputs and the next chapter are forgotten. From early in planning, the event becomes the main focus, the tension rises as the day looms and everyone sighs with satisfaction and relief when it's done.

But no event should be an end in itself otherwise it can never return the value of the effort it's taken. We say that events are part of a much longer conversations: in the 'The Minister and the Media' story below, the event set up conversations a year ahead and gave a mandate to named people to carry this through. So, who will pick up the baton of your event and follow through? How will your organisation give them the authority to do so? Establish this early in the planning stage and keep it squarely in scope.

Prompt questions

- How will you ensure there's follow up on any actions or ideas that came up?
- How will the leadership team continue to focus on this in their meetings?
- What's the next step/ phase on the journey?
- How will you communicate progress?
- How will you test not only whether the event was a success but whether people have noticed any change?

Events can be terrific but if you're not having the conversations you need to have, why are you wasting your time? You may worry that the things we are suggesting sound hard but what if you are wearing yourself out for a few ripples and little real engagement after the event? We know you can deliver a hell of a lot more.

As Nancy Kline reminds us, people and their brains are state of the art machines. Stimulate them; nurture them and great things happen. Goody-bags just ain't enough.

The Minister and the Media

A Government minister wanted the public to realise the value of Science. A national broadcaster agreed this was in the public interest. Richard worked between the Minister, his department and the broadcaster to create an event that would start to broaden the range of science stories available to producers in areas from News to Children's programmes on television, radio and online. A key element was finding someone in each organisation with licence from the top to ask senior people to attend and be involved.

The event attracted double the predicted numbers and ended with the launch of a one-year 'buddy scheme' between scientists and producers. Conversations multiplied, leading to fresh ideas, projects, stronger connections and a whole set of future programme possibilities for minimal expenditure.

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