

How to hold a successful town hall meeting

by Jim Gray

THE SCENARIO

I'm a new manager at a company that holds occasional town hall meetings with staff. Although I've attended town halls before, I was always in the audience. This time I will be the main speaker. Any tips on how to proceed?

THE ADVICE

Town hall meetings began as an informal way for public officials to engage their communities, discussing civic issues, plans and controversies.

Then the corporate world, seeking to meet the ever-increasing demand by employees, investors and stakeholders for more engagement and accountability, began embracing the communication format.

Expanded these days to include video and Web links and Twitter feeds, the town hall demands the best of speakers – in both content and attitude. If both are first-rate, the interaction can be wonderful. If not, the meeting can be a very unhappy place for presenters and listeners alike.

Here's how to hit the mark:

Commit to real dialogue

A town hall is a place for a conversation, not a monologue. Too many sessions simply become staged forums for management to lay out some corporate vision or strategy, with little time set aside for meaningful discourse. Resolve to provide your audience with the opportunity to ask plenty of questions, including ones that are challenging.

Forget the 45-minute presentation, followed by 15 minutes of questions and answers. Instead, speak for 18 minutes (fast becoming a business standard) and leave the remaining time for questions. If they stop coming, go back to speaking – in increments. Speak for a few minutes, and then provide plenty of time for interaction and discussion. Repeat as needed, but don't exceed the 90-minute mark.

It isn't about you

Your listeners don't care what you know – they care about how your knowledge can help them, inform them or involve them. Don't disappoint. Make sure your talk is audience-focused from the outset, and be obvious about it. Early on, ask and answer the question, "What does this mean for you?" and keep answering it all the way through. Aim to use the word "you" far more than "I."

Keep it small, or at least smaller

Smaller groups are more manageable. It's better to hold three town halls with 100 attendees each, than one with 300. You want to establish a venue where greater informality and closer proximity between speakers and listeners creates a

sense of intimacy and connection.

At larger gatherings, the same dominant audience members tend to ask most of the questions (they clearly enjoy the spotlight). In smaller groups, there are usually fewer of them, and less incentive for them to try to hijack the proceedings. Quieter, more contemplative souls will get a chance to ask questions and speak their minds.

Rarely interrupt

As a speaker, I never like to tell listeners what to do or how to act. Only if a question is utterly confusing or drawn out will I interrupt and ask for clarification, or simply say: “May I ask what your question is?”

Always treat attendees, including the difficult ones, with respect. Never let impatience or irritation show. Listeners will be watching carefully to see how you treat their colleagues, even those who are clearly a handful. With one dismissive remark or gesture, you can undo a lot of good and undermine your relationship with the entire crowd.

End on a high

Accomplished leaders find the positive in any situation, and communicate it with passion.

If the town hall is being held to share good news, celebrate the success and outline the steps required to build on it. If the news is bad, acknowledge it – the worst thing you can do is run from it – but find the elements of promise and opportunity that your listeners can believe in and act on.

Whatever the information that has to be conveyed, it has been my experience that few decision makers ever regret holding a town hall meeting.

Many more have regretted not holding one. “We missed a major communication opportunity,” said one disappointed Canadian executive. “With a town hall, we could have engaged the community much more effectively, and gained a lot of credibility in the process. We didn’t do that. It will be the last time we don’t.”