

Shake It Up: Alternative Meeting Strategies

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Is your meeting style a good match for the needs of your team? What kind of rapport or atmosphere do you want to create? If your meetings aren't getting the results you want, take a tip from experienced companies that have developed clever ways to bring people together. Here are five creative and effective meeting techniques, ranging from short stand-ups gatherings to conversations that take place in a three-dimensional online world.

Ritz-Carlton

Meeting Technique:

Start each shift with short stand-up meetings

Pros:

Quickly disseminates critical information

Cons:

Not long enough to go in-depth on any subject



THE RITZ-CARLTON® At each of its luxury hotels around the world, Ritz-Carlton holds a 15-minute stand-up meeting at the beginning of every eight-hour shift. The company uses these "line-ups" as a way to reinforce corporate values, to inform employees of new products and services that Ritz-Carlton may be introducing, and to communicate breaking news. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast region in 2005, the company was able to tell each of its 34,000 employees within 24 hours what had happened to the branch in New Orleans and how they could contribute to relief efforts.

On a day-to-day basis, department heads like Richard Arnoldi, executive chef at the Ritz-Carlton Washington, D.C., use the line-up meeting as a way to fine tune customer service. Arnoldi reminds his culinary team of food items that repeat and VIP customers prefer: vegan cuisine, certain vintages of wine, or even comfort foods. "If someone likes Butterscotch Tastykakes, we'll move heaven and earth to make sure that we have Butterscotch Tastykakes on hand when they arrive," he says.

Wal-Mart

Meeting Technique:

Get employees to meet during off-hours

Pros:

Reinforces corporate loyalty

Cons:

7:30am? *On a Saturday?*



In the 1960s, when Wal-Mart was a young upstart, Sam Walton implemented a policy of one- to two-hour Saturday-morning strategy meetings that begin at 7:30 a.m. at the home office in Bentonville, Arkansas. Though the choice of time has shades of corporate hazing, the meeting has become a touchstone for Wal-Mart's management-level employees. Today, more than 1,000 members of the management team attend in person, along with regional managers from around the country who dial in or link via videoconference. Wal-Mart says that meeting early on the weekend allows new business improvements to be implemented that same day, in some cases — just in time for the weekend shopping rush. "Improvements could be anything from the placement of merchandise to the way we handle freight to something customers are telling us we can do better," says Wal-Mart spokesman Dan Fogleman.

Yahoo!

Meeting Technique:

Informal Friday meetings with cocktails and snacks

Pros:

Promotes an open and relaxed environment

Cons:

Booze consumption and group focus are inversely related



One business group inside Yahoo has an informal but strictly regular Friday afternoon meeting. Greg Arnold, the senior director of engineering in the Premium Services Infrastructure unit, which powers billing and payment processing, holds what he calls the "Friday Afternoon Club" every week. In an open aisle between cubicles, 80 employees gather over

beer, wine, and snacks. For 20 to 30 minutes they discuss the current status of projects, how to take advantage of business challenges and opportunities, and what the unit should be looking forward to in the future. "This is a forum where you're trying to get people to connect," he says. "You want it to be more interactive and personal, and you don't want to pull people into a conference room."

"We have a fairly regular script that keeps the meeting focused and productive," Arnold adds. He begins by welcoming new hires, then introduces presentations from guest speakers, gives a review of significant events from the prior week, identifies upcoming events, and closes by asking for special announcements. Afterwards, he says, employees are welcome to hang around and socialize with coworkers — and they often do.

Old Navy

Meeting Technique:

Gather for ad-hoc chats in a lounge environment

Pros:

Provides face time between departments when they need it most

Cons:

Don't get too comfy on that couch



In Old Navy's new corporate headquarters in the Mission Bay district of San Francisco, the company's merchants and clothing designers keep offices on opposite sides of the building. While the two teams don't work together on a regular basis, they require the ability to coordinate their efforts when needed. To nurture this, three floors of the building are linked by large hallways — imagine the middle section of the letter "H" — that bridge the two sides. The hallways, or "Link Living Rooms" as they're called, contain sofas, coffee tables, and WiFi, and they allow merchants and designers to have ad-hoc, one-on-one meetings in a comfortable space that's convenient for both sides.

Linden Lab

Meeting Technique:

Meet coworkers in a virtual environment

Pros:

Allows for gestures and modes of communication that are not possible in a conference call

Cons:

Requires familiarity with virtual environments and a fast Internet connection



Linden Lab

Not surprisingly, some meetings at software-development firm Linden Lab are held within the company's 3-D online world, Second Life. Jeska Dzwigalski, a community developer at Linden Lab, holds many of her meetings with the online community in-game, which allows her to interact with coworkers and "residents" alike. Whereas long-distance coworkers are invisible on a typical conference call, Linden Lab employees can use their on-screen "avatars" to gesture and express themselves across time zones. "Having that physicality adds to the conversation," Dzwigalski says.

While some managers complain that employees on a conference call are distracted by email and instant messages, Second Life capitalizes on different types of communication and encourages multiple conversations at the same time. For instance, Dzwigalski says that instead of turning to a coworker for a side conversation, in Second Life, she can simply send a private message that doesn't interrupt the rest of the meeting.