

Tips for Innovative Meetings and Events (T.I.M.E.)

Topic: Slacking Off

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WELCOME

It's our final issue of the year before I take time off to spend with family over the holidays. I recently read a book entitled Slack and decided months ago it would be a good topic for T.I.M.E. during a month when business slows down and we all tend to have a bit of slack in our business lives (this can be far different in our social and personal lives when schedules get even more grueling and hectic.)

There is value in having slack in an organization, in a meeting, and perhaps even in our personal lives.

In case you needed some reasons to be a slacker, read on....

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1. BE A SLACKER

In Tom DeMarco's book, [Slack: Getting Past Burnout, Busywork](#), and the Myth of Total Efficiency, he proposes a counterintuitive principle about efficient companies. He argues that efficiency improvements in the form of reduced headcounts, "stretch" goals, matrix management (among others) may result in a slower, less efficient company. He proposes that what organizations need is not more efficiency but more slack.

DeMarco proposes that slack allows the following things to happen:

- Allows a company to change
- Allows high priced talent to think, to make key decisions
- Allow people to renew themselves professionally and personally

- Allows organizations to confront risk rather than run away from it
 - Allows creativity to flourish
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2. MEETING SLACK

I found interesting parallels between DeMarco's points about organizations and meetings. When meetings are held, there is the unsaid (or sometimes stated) premise that we must make full use of people's time. Multi-day meetings, especially, in my experience, have a tendency to maximize the time allocated to the agenda.

Here are the lessons I took away from DeMarco's book as it relates to meetings:

Shifting to a new project takes time (DeMarco calls it Task Switching Penalties)

Gathering people in a meeting requires time to "switch" to the new task and focus on the business at hand. Plan for a period of time to allow that focus. Incorporate it into the opening speech/introduction.

Changing pace and not beating a subject to death is desirable in a meeting agenda. However, every change in topic requires people to shift tasks at hand. This requires time and energy. This is one reason I believe that people find meetings literally tiring.

The lack of slack leads to burn out

Use meetings and gatherings as a way to re-charge people's energy, enthusiasm and commitment to the organization. Meetings can serve as a time of recognition, renewal and reconnecting.

Ian Percy, author of [Going Deep: Exploring Spirituality in](#) Life and Leadership, offers this insight: Efficiency at the expense of human spirit isn't efficiency at all. He cites example of organizations that "shoot themselves in the heart". In an article in Human Capital (August/September 2001) he cited the biblical advice: Do not muzzle the ox that treads the corn.

He writes, "When you need the energy, devotion, creativity and cohesion of your people, don't remove from them the very things that stimulate energy, devotion, creativity and cohesion." There is nothing like a face-to-face communication to send a powerful message to people about their value and necessity to the organization.

"Overimproved" is not always better

The most efficient meeting agenda may not serve your long-term purposes. Allowing downtime in the agenda allows for people to mingle, share ideas, and swap stories.

When participants are “learning” – hearing about a new product, receiving a message about a management direction, assimilating new information, -- it takes time to synthesize the new information. Allow meeting participants the “time” to take it all in.

Back on the job, implementation of something new takes time also. Allow people a bit of slack to do something new. If you have trained people on using a new system designed to make their life easier, when they are back on the job expect it to take longer to use the new system until they are accustomed to it. My analogy: Think about driving a manual car, at first it is difficult and requires your concentration. After some experience it can become second nature.

An unusual, non-business program or topic during a meeting or conference offers participants some slack. Meetings & Conventions in September ran an article about unconventional seminars to complement the usual agenda. Lisa Block, Director of Meetings and Conferences for the Society for Human Resource Management, stated in the article “it’s essentials to give attendees a break”.

In addition, it’s those off-the-wall topics that can generate new creativity and new ideas...

Slack promotes creativity and reinvention

In organizations, DeMarco laments the loss of middle management which was the “layer” that allowed an organization to “reinvent” itself. “This is where the dynamic of today’s organizational function is examined, taken apart, analyzed, resynthesized, and assembled back into new organization modes that allows us to move forward.” De Marco writes that what was cut out of organizations was the “capacity to change”.

If you want people to be creative during a meeting -- to brainstorm, to ponder – then you must allow them slack time. Creativity does not adhere to a time clock. Allow the informal time to think, the time to experiment, and to float ideas. This also suggests that problem-solving efforts could be more efficient if people are presented with the “problem” and then given time (including down time) to think about the problem before trying to arrive at the solution.

3. PARTY TIME: THE VALUE OF CELEBRATIONS

At this time of year with the holiday parties in full swing, during the planning stages, management may have questioned the budget, the appropriateness, and need for celebration. Why during these times should we have holiday parties and celebrations when they are “slack” events?

Celebration and rituals are important in good times and bad. “When everything is going well, ritual occasions allow us to revel in our glory. When times are tough, ceremonies draw us together, kindling hope and faith that better times lie ahead.” write Terrence Deal

and M.K. Key in their book, [Corporate Celebration: Play, Purpose](#), and Profit at Work.

Smart organizations pay attention

To loss and gain

To demise and growth

To disaster and triumph

Otherwise, people are deprived of the support of letting go, reaching closure, maintaining hope and moving on.

Traditional management theory has focused on organizational structure, business strategy, efficiency and productivity. A more current view looks to optimize the human capital of an organization. An organization (and its people) derives energy from a firm's purpose, vision and values, and culture. A primary expression of this cultural core is ritual ceremony. Great celebrations allow people to be part of ME and WE.

Consider that

ME

WE

are mirror images of each other. Celebrations allow people to be simultaneously part of the whole (WE) and the individual (ME).

4. EXCUSES AND BENEFITS

The authors of [Corporate Celebration: Play, Purpose](#), and Profit at Work identified 7 forms of celebrations and identify the benefits of each.

For example, about rituals of Comfort And Letting Go, they write, "Change produces as much pain as gain. It is like a trapeze act –people have to let go of old traditions before they can latch onto new ways. The timing of when to let go, in order to catch the new momentum is crucial to a successful performance."

Transitions: Shortchanging or overlooking transitions undermines commitment and loyalty, robbing an organization of its competitive edge.

Altruistic Celebrations: Doing for others helps to solidify individuals as a cohesive group.

Recognition Ceremonies: People do not work for praise, but they do enjoy the feeling of being valued and appreciated. In a study of 1500 employees reported by Bob Nelson in [1001 Ways to Reward Employees](#), personal congratulations by managers ranked 1st out of 76 potential sought-after incentives.

Other business benefits of celebrations:

- Building relationships among individuals
- Leveling the hierarchy to provide a common ground
- Establishing a connection between historical roots, current realities and future dreams
- Transforming difficulties into opportunities
- Providing access to life's deeper lessons
- Providing a safety valve to express emotion and relieve tension
- Allows witness of individual contributions to the big picture

Excuses Excuses

Here is a list of common Excuses

Ignorance: Don't know how to do it

Hire someone, look to the informal network for the natural planner, or buy the book, [Corporate Celebration: Play, Purpose, and Profit at Work](#).

Fear: Fear losing control or We Can't Lose Face

Management that runs an organization with under the theory that this is a business, not a playground, is missing out on the lessons learned by organizations like Southwest Airlines, Wal-Mart and other non-stodgy organizations. The axioms

People who play together stay together
Play Pays

have been proven true by organizations like these. Fit it to your culture and you will be a winner.

Time: We don't have time

Do you have time to increase morale? Do you want to spend time filling job vacancies? Effective does not mean elaborate or long.

Culture: It's Not for Us

See Fear above. I agree that a cookie cutter approach does not work. Organizations must adapt an idea to work for them. Experiment and observe the impact. Poll your employees and listen.

Budgetary: It Costs Too Much

Effective does not mean expensive. What are your hidden costs to not celebrating (morale, turnover, loss of productivity, etc.)?

5. DOWN TIME TURNED PRODUCTIVE

Reading is a great way to re-charge your batteries and also increase your brainpower. I hope you have time for some holiday reading and if you are looking for some business reading and ways to stretch your mind and your creativity, I recommend two books I referenced throughout this issue.

Both are easy reading and will offer you some great insights. These links will also take you there.

[Corporate Celebration: Play, Purpose,](#) and Profit at Work

[Slack: Getting Past Burnout, Busywork,...](#)

In addition, Amazon has a value package that includes Slack and Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity by David Allen. [Getting Things Done: The Art of...](#)

On a personal perspective, let me recommend [When Faster-Harder-Smarter Is Not Enough: Six Steps for Achieving What You Want in a Rapid-Fire World](#) by Kathryn D. Cramer. This book is related to our topic of slack. The author, Dr. Cramer, offers 6 steps to helping you move from a reactive mind-set to a creative mind-set. She walks you through a framework that questions What you need to DO and What you need to BE.

I will be also reading [Jane And The Unpleasantness At Scargrave](#) Manor for my mystery book club meeting in January. Jane Austen is the heroine in this whodunit. Are there any other mystery book fans out there?

6. PERSONAL TIDBITS & FREEBIES

Do you multi-task? You know, do you drive to work while scanning the headlines and talking on your mobile phone? (I also occasionally attempt to put on my makeup!) That's considered multi-tasking and is considered by some the height of business fashion and efficiency.

A recent report demonstrated that it might not be effective or efficient. The Federal Aviation Administration and University of Michigan looked at the amount of time lost when people switch repeatedly between tasks of varying complexity and familiarity. They found that switching back and forth was less efficient than staying with a task until completion. (Training Magazine, December 2001)

Do you have some slack in your own schedule? Would your schedule benefit from some quiet time? Carol Halsey, Founder and President of Business Organizing Solutions, authored an article on the reason quiet time is possible and essential to succeed in your

business life. Email us for a copy by placing the words “Quiet Time” in the subject line. Its quick and its free from stinnish@ameritech.net

7. T.I.M.E. GONE BY

Past issues of T.I.M.E. can be downloaded as a MS Word document. Here is an index of topics and “freebies” offered in the past:

- May 2000: Teambuilding and (freebie) New York Times reprint and summary on why teambuilding programs miss the mark.
- June 2000: Green Meetings and (freebie) list of books that have 20-30 minute exercises for meetings and events. [June](#)
- July 2000: American (Values) and (freebie) Meeting Analysis, a 1-page document that will outline the scope and needs analysis for your next meeting. [July](#)
- August 2000: Minimum/Minimal Meetings and (freebie) Web Winners (web resources to make you and your meetings more productive). [August](#)
- October 2000: Evaluations and (freebie) sample evaluation questions. [October](#)
- November 2000: Politics and (freebie) on-line experiences. [November](#)
- December 2000: Toys and (freebie) brainstorming ideas. [December](#)
- January 2001: Sales, Award Presentations and (freebie) sales tips.
- February 2001: Change, Change Management and Communicating change and (freebie) Change Bombs (reasons change management fails). [February](#)
- March 2001: Open Space Technology. [March](#)
- April 2001: Adult Learning Styles and (freebie) Trade Show Timeline [April 2001](#)
- May 2001: Trade Shows and (freebie) Trade Show timeline [May 2001](#)
- June 2001: Emotional Intelligence and (freebie) EI quiz [June 2001](#)
- July 2001: Presentation Skills and (freebie) Speaker Introductions [July 2001](#)
- August 2001: Ice Breakers and (freebie) Resource List [August 2001](#)
- September 2001: Facilitation and (freebie) Problem Personalities in a Meeting [September 2001](#)

October 2001: Humor and (freebie) The Benefits of Laughter [October 2001](#)

November 2001: Customer Care and (freebie) Complaints [November 2001](#)

8. FUTURE T.I.M.E.

Have a great Holiday Season and Happy New Year. We will return in January 2002. Many people have complimented me on the value of T.I.M.E., please share with your colleagues, associates, and clients. It's a simple and free gift and easy way to say "I was thinking about you."

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