

Bringing the **Live Event** to **Life**

By Drew Suss

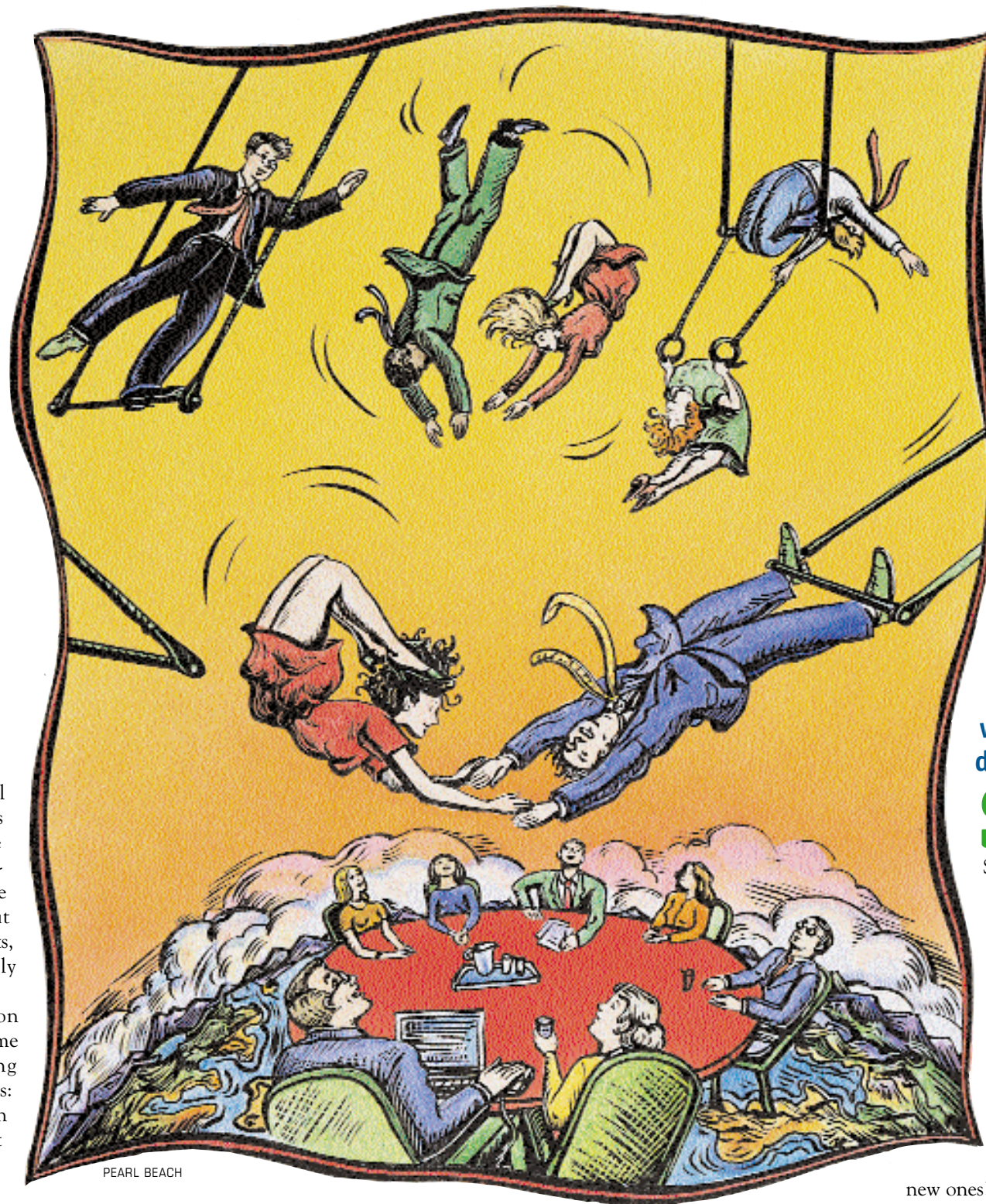
*Your company is having
a managers' meeting.
It's really important.
You have a hundred
tons of freight to
deliver: a new strategy,
financial results, budget
plans, new product info.
You're not alone...*

More than U.S. \$45 billion will be spent on business meetings this year. (Forget incentive travel — that's another multi-billion-dollar ball of wax.) The average event will run about three days. And although we can calculate costs, the investment in time and effort is virtually incalculable.

Believe it: a Fortune 500 communication executive I worked with some time ago told me her company's annual managers' meeting required her full-time attention for four months: a personal investment of about 1,200 hours. On the other hand, her colleagues invested about 200,000 hours attending the meeting. Add the out-of-pocket expenditure of between U.S. \$4- and \$6 million and we begin to see the size of this beast. It's a big one.

Some executives question whether sales meetings or leadership conferences are worth the money. Other business leaders have seen demonstrated results. Still others don't want to talk about it because, as one of them said, "We consider it a competitive advantage and we don't want the other guys to know about it."

From an objective perspective, most people would agree that simultaneously infusing all the people in a changing organization with the same accurate message is powerful



Behavior Changes the Bottom Line

Let's start with the big-picture goal. A foundation element I've found business leaders agreeing on is that corporate meetings offer them an opportunity to change behavior that drives the bottom line. For example, in preparation for their annual managers' meeting I did a series of one-on-one interviews with senior executives at a national retailer. I asked each of the division heads what his or her goals were. They all wanted the same things: grow ROE, grow the top line, and grow the bottom line. What they needed was to be reminded that stated this way, their goals would be translated into front-line action in a thousand different, and not necessarily desirable, ways.

Question 1: "What do you want people to do differently?"

So you need to ask the first question, "What do you want people to do differently when they leave this meeting?" Stating a goal and transferring information aren't enough. I vividly recall attending a meeting of senior managers at a Fortune 100 company. Each made a presentation about his or her division goals and plans. After it was done they all went home. There was no call to action, no stated goal except to share information — which could have been done via e-mail.

What do you want people to do? Specifically. Do you want people to retain every single customer and get

new ones? sell service instead of price? cut employee turnover? How much? By when? Tell people what the specific expectations are and they will know whether they are doing a good job. Measure the results, and you will know too.

An information-transfer meeting is a guaranteed failure because it doesn't extend a challenge to the attendees. It doesn't engage. Sometime you have to ask repeatedly "What do you want people to do differently?" before getting an answer to act on. Sometimes people get annoyed. Don't stop asking until you get the answer.

communicating. It excites them, elevates their respect for leadership and promotes efficiency. It helps retain the people who make the company go. It encourages healthy transformation.

Given that some events are worthwhile, necessary in fact, the real question becomes "How do you maximize their value?" Here's some of what I've learned as the "outside expert" in many business meetings over the last 10 years. I've condensed it into five key questions.

Question 2: “Why?”

Why do we need to do something differently? Maybe you know the answer. Maybe you think everybody knows the answer. It doesn't matter. The need for action (behavior change) must be based on an accurate, compelling presentation of the company's strategy for success in the marketplace. It must be tied to the past and focused on the future. It must be vividly painted and passionately presented.

The employees of a global biotech firm were asked to approach their jobs differently—not just the sales team, all the employees. They were asked to change behavior by working with colleagues in new teams and in new ways. They asked “Why?”

They learned that the firm was changing its strategic positioning in a way that increased its chances of success and gave it an edge over their competitors. If it worked it would, over time, give them a large advantage. The executives delivered the message with great fervor. When it was positioned this way to exempt and non-exempt employees, in as much detail as they wanted, their willingness to adopt new behaviors astounded HR and manufacturing executives alike. It shouldn't have.

These people understood that they were working in their own best interests. Their management was seen as honest and ethical. They knew that if the company prospered they would prosper. And let's face it, while we root for the underdog, we all want to be on the winning team.

So question number two is “Why is this necessary?” If you think people don't care or won't get it, you're wrong. And the CEO's explanation of why this is important may surprise you just a bit. For example a CEO told a large group of comfortable managers that without the changes he was asking for, the company's 12-month survival as an independent was doubtful. That got everybody sitting up straight. Then they got the good news: that the right changes at the right time could position them to be an industry powerhouse.

In another instance, a client company had front-line management surveyed, and only 60 percent indicated that they felt they understood the company's big-picture growth strategy. That was the industry norm. One year and some serious communication later, that figure had jumped up by 20 points and everyone understood why they were being asked to change the way they did business. This laid the foundation for years of transforming change.

Question 3: “How can we make this simple?”

There are a lot of intelligent people in business. Intelligent people sometimes complicate things. It is essential that you tell your story in a clear, simple, engaging way. Start with the part where what people do connects with a greater good.

The biotech company has it easy; they're helping people overcome disease. At GE, they're bringing good things to life. If I sound flip it's unintentional, because this is serious. A modern day philosopher-in-residence to senior executives at Ford, EDS, Citibank and Ericsson, Peter Koestenbaum, puts it this way, “Unless the distant goals of meaning, greatness and destiny are addressed, we can't make an intelligent decision about what to do tomorrow morning – much less set strategy for a company...” Give people a reason to care that is bigger than themselves.

Keeping the message simple doesn't mean you can't have creative fun. Use theater, videos, interactive electronics, anything that makes sense in context. The caution to observe often comes up in large meetings: you have some money to spend on nifty creative. Sure you can have half a dozen motorcycles zooming upside

down around a steel cage, or 15 vinyl-clad athletes rollerblading down the aisles and flying onto the stage, or a Dallas Cowgirls cheerleaders' kickline bringing out your CEO with a cheer. The question to ask is “Does it illuminate or obfuscate?” And “Do I really want to spend all that money on a three-minute gag?”

If you're manufacturing motocross bikes and introducing a best-of-breed motocross bike – go for it. If athletic gear is your world, then rock on. If the CEO heads up a publicly held transportation company, then employees will wonder what the Cowgirls are doing up on stage and come to the conclusion that the CEO is either out of touch, or indulging in a childhood fantasy.

And know this: when it comes to making a meeting great, money isn't everything. A client who recently reorganized just shared their latest meeting evaluation. Employees compared it to four previous meetings, all of which had been bigger, glitzier and more expensive. Employees overwhelmingly voted the most recent the “Best conference for a third of the cost!” A clear spotlight on a strong leader will out-motivate a laser show any day.

Keeping it simple is hard work. It requires that you look at every element and ask, “Is this really necessary?” If the answer is “Yes,” ask “Why?” Less is more.

Question 4: “What do they want?”

The fourth question is “What does the audience want?” And it's number four not because it's less important than 1, 2 and 3, but because you need to have your strategic headset on before you start asking opinion leaders questions. You'll want to be able to probe and sound them out on strategy and goals.

Sometimes people sidestep this phase of the work. It's time-consuming. Honest people will tell you things you'd rather not hear, others won't tell you anything. You'll sometimes feel that you're not getting good information. It's got to be done and you've got to get good info. Identify the audience issues and align them with the strategy and goals. Speak to them.

I remember a CEO whose speech was interrupted with a thunderous round of applause just because he acknowledged a problem. He didn't claim to have a fix. He just demonstrated that he'd been listening.

And you need to really listen to the opinion leaders you've sought counsel from. Take it to heart when they tell you, as I have been told, “The last thing we need is another feel-good meeting.”

You're thinking that the CEO really wants a “feel-good” meeting that feels like a party. More than shrimp canapés and balloons, the audience wants a lucid explanation of the reorganization. They want to know if more layoffs are coming. If you can't get concurrence, you might want to find a diplomatic way of skipping the meeting rather than have the CEO lose credibility with the people responsible for carrying out the plan.

Question 5: How do we recognize and build on past performance and appreciation?

Recognition is a top driver of employee retention in every survey I have seen. Your boss thanks you for doing fine work; you feel good. Recognizing people in the context of a big meeting is even more powerful because it is a public reaffirmation of values. People think, “I'm glad I work for a company that takes reward and recognition seriously. It means they really appreciate what we do.” So before rushing into the brave new world of future behavior, take time to recognize deserving effort and behaviors we said were important last year.

This doesn't have to be an awards ceremony, though there's nothing wrong with a formal approach. Knighthood is still popular and few people turn it down. That's kind of

what being congratulated in front of your assembled peers is like.

At the same time we are recognizing the outstanding performers, we need to recognize the entire audience and prepare them to do the work we are asking of them. That means deepening their skills and adding new ones. A recent in-house employee survey rated skill development as the second most important factor in deciding whether to stay with the company, right after “quality of boss.” Let's face it, it's hard for the majority of rank-and-file employees to get personally excited about increasing shareholder value.

In the example that comes to mind, a CEO is raising a glass of champagne for a toast at a spin-off celebration. “I want to thank our most important people...” He's surrounded by about 250 staffers who have been working three months of long seven-day weeks to get one of their operating divisions spun off cleanly and on time, while keeping the rest of the enterprise growing.

They've been successful. So they all raise their glasses to join the CEO's toast. Whom does he thank? “Our shareholders.” Talk about hearing a pin drop.

The painful silence was finally broken when a member of the executive committee applauded. A few people half-heartedly joined in. Sure, the CEO realized his mistake and his next toast was to the people in the room. It was too little, too late. He never recovered his credibility and managerial defections skyrocketed – according to some estimates, 30 percent of the most talented managers left within months of his faux pas.

Give Them the Tools for Success

Look at the big picture: Your meeting aims to generate behavior change that improves bottom-line results. We've explained what the behavior is and why it's essential, and we've connected it to the past and future. Having done all that, we'd be fools not to seize the day and coach people in the behaviors we want them to practice. Take this skill development element seriously. Spend the time and money on it that it deserves. This is the tooling that will generate the results you'll begin measuring after people go back to their outposts at the borders of the enterprise.

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For audience assessment, I strongly suggest using objective ears to hear what people really think. Anonymity is a powerful truth serum. A consultant with good interviewing skills might give you a whole new appreciation of people's issues.

Use Multiple Engines

As many as six big diesel locomotives pull the big freight trains past our town. It's efficient because by sharing the load, the engines last a long time. As the senior staff communication person you're in the lead engine. You have the opportunity to increase efficiency by hooking up with other engines to help with audience assessment, creative design, event planning, skill development, technical support and logistics.

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Meeting planners can improve the experience for you by transforming a mountain of travel and hospitality work into a series of crisp decisions.

Creative support can help you assemble the content— theme, continuity, presentations, media, entertainment and guest speakers—into a compelling, unified vision.

Technical support makes certain that the lights and sound are appropriate to the venue and that it all functions on cue.

All these engines will pull hard for you; don't put them into an impossible position by loading the bulk of event execution into the last few weeks.

Honor the Effort

Employee meetings are an opportunity to improve the performance of a company. They are complex. To honor the effort and optimize the investment, you must commit to a schedule that allows people plenty of preparation time. How much time? Twenty-four weeks is a good number that will quickly seem inadequate as meeting day approaches. Many companies book their venues years in advance.

That "share-the-load" concept applies on-stage too. Unless your company hews to the "personality cult" model, rather than having one senior person deliver all the freight, share the content. You'll get more energy from each speaker and more from the audience. Use videos, dramatic vignettes, guest speakers – the stuff of theater that breathes life into your message.

Rehearse the presenters with your production team when you're two weeks out. You'll be amazed at how much more attention goes into the work as well as the improvement in the power of delivery. And know this: some people don't like to rehearse.

In your first meeting with the presenters and key stakeholders, the top dog should let it be known that she expects the schedule and the process to be honored by all participants, and that includes rehearsals. When the top dog takes it seriously, everybody does. When presenters aren't prepared it sends a powerfully negative message that reduces the credibility of the message and the messenger.

Doing the sometimes unpleasant work of getting people to honor the timeline is another piece of heavy lifting that you can assign to the specialists. They will be able to describe the cost and quality effect of procrastination. They

can also advise procrastinators that their internal cost centers will be dinged. (Yes, amazing though it may seem, shifting cost responsibility enhances timeliness.) And so what if they get fired? They're professional short-timers anyway and they know it. Use it to your advantage.

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Surprises come out of all this hard work. Leaders are illuminated, best practices shared, networks wired. A sense of unity is invigorated.

Beyond the initial rush of "Wow, what a great presentation," or "Best meeting ever," there will be a period of time during which some percentage of the audience will try out the new attitudes and behaviors that were the building blocks of the meeting message. They'll take their new tools and try them out. They'll spread the message. If it works, it takes hold. Then the front line changes the bottom line.

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