

How to actively engage employees during live meetings

Staff participation is the key indicator of a successful employee meeting. Here are tips on how to stage a live meeting or event—and easily share feedback and results with your team.



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Introduction

Employee engagement requires give and take. At town halls, brown-bag lunches, Q&As and other events aimed at informing employees, you don't want just seat-fillers. The purpose is to drive engagement through two-way interaction and there is plenty of technology to accomplish that: instant messaging, video chat and so on. Communicators want employees to be actively engaged in the discussion—listening and taking in messages, asking their own questions and continuing the conversation afterward using technology.

Without employee participation, these events are just speeches and not engaging. Simply gathering employees and executives in the same room doesn't guarantee engagement. Events in which leaders are just talking heads prattling to a silent audience does nothing to drive home company messages. Webcasts and video can present an even tougher challenge, because viewers have too many distractions and opportunities to tune out.

The key, experienced communicators say, lies in planning and repurposing the results of live events to show employees that leaders are listening and making a good-faith effort to respond to staff concerns. Leaders create transparency by actively engaging employees and finding ways to answer workplace concerns.

There's ample research to show that when employees and leaders come together, there is more shared trust in goals. For example, respondents in a [Tandberg/RoperASW study](#) revealed that face-to-face communication is more likely to build trust (90 percent), is more personal (87 percent), reduces confusion and misunderstanding (81 percent), and is easier to understand (76 percent).

And to show that leaders are listeners, employees need to know that leaders won't dodge the questions. "Knowing employees will get an answer takes out some of the fear of asking," says Carolyn Clark, head of global internal communications for Yahoo.

The trend toward widely dispersed workforces compounds the challenge of driving employee engagement. Companies with global offices and employees working in the field or telecommuting must encourage engagement across barriers of time and location. Fortunately, technology can mitigate barriers and help communicators connect employees and leaders.



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In the following pages, communicators offer advice for planning events that employees want to attend and for creating an environment that fosters discussion with leaders. It's a three-stage effort: planning steps to gather content and prepare executives, "day of" ideas for encouraging give-and-take exchanges and, afterward, the sharing of information that promotes and furthers discussion.

Before the Event: Plan and prep

Communicate in advance

Use email, intranets and social media to give employees advance notice of your event. If you want employees to engage, they should know when and how to do it, especially when employees are not desk-based and therefore not as active on email and social media as other workers might be.

Mary Gibson, director of communications for Honeywell's home and building technology division, suggests using old-school messaging tools. At a previous company, Gibson says, "we created posters using pictures of employees and put them everywhere these people worked so we could create some buzz."

Employees got excited about seeing their colleagues highlighted in the posters, so the event announcements won more attention than the usual bulletin board notices.

It's also important to communicate why employees should attend. Amy Thornton, communications specialist at Southwest Airlines, and her colleague, event specialist Natalie O'Donnell, know that employees love the company's signature events, such as the annual Spirit Party or the Southwest "rally," but they take pains to communicate that events are meant for more than fun.

"We clearly articulate why our employees need to engage at the rally," which offers "state of the airline" speeches and Q&As with leaders and employees, O'Donnell says.

Thornton is proactive in building in messages about why leaders and employees alike must participate.



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“We keep those messages as simple as possible,” she says. “We explain that by coming to the rally, they’ll connect, learn and celebrate. They’ll meet senior leaders, and they’ll have the chance to celebrate our success.”

The communications, which go out via email and on Southwest’s intranet, also explain what the rally is (as well as other events such as the airline’s “watch parties” for far-flung employees, where they can view key leader speeches after the event). The airline adds thousands of new employees each year, so “we might be communicating to some people about the rally for the first time,” Thornton says.

Gather questions

Although many live events can feature on-the-spot questions, communicators can boost the likelihood of a lively exchange of ideas by soliciting questions before the event. Jill Partridge, director of employee communications at Avnet, used this approach at a previous employer when she staged her “Hot Topics” lightning round Q&As (more on page XX). Partridge sent out requests for questions via SurveyMonkey about four weeks before each event. About four days before “Hot Topics,” she shared the questions with leaders so they could prep answers—and she told them that dodging questions wasn’t allowed.

Staff anonymity is key when soliciting questions, Partridge says. “If you want to communicate the idea that no questions are off limits, then there’s safety in submitting questions anonymously,” she says.

A guarantee of an answer also increases participation. Prior to Yahoo town halls, employees submit questions via the company’s intranet and vote on colleagues’ questions. Any question with 100+ votes is answered during the town hall if time allows, Clark says. Additional questions are answered via direct responses to the questioner. “It’s established a culture of transparency, so employees expect to get answers to any question asked,” she says.

Though not every channel allows for anonymity, make sure there’s at least one way to pose questions without identification, advises Lane Whatley, senior communications specialist at SAS. If employees submit advance questions via The Hub, the company’s internal social network, those queries carry employees’ login names; employees also have the option to submit anonymous questions via the SAS video portal. “It’s important to provide some anonymity in your mix of channels,” she says.



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Consider the room layout

It's important to structure your live event for optimum engagement. This is true even if many employees will view it on a recording after the fact; a live event emphasizing interaction between leaders and employees will come across positively on video.

At SAS, the quarterly webcast hosted by CEO Jim Goodnight comprises a series of conversations, not just a parade of talking heads. There's a small audience present to give some energy to the event, Whatley says. Goodnight and other leaders sit at high-top tables and talk to one another, rather than "present" to the camera. Whatley believes the format helps makes the webcasts more watchable for employees.

Partridge also paid attention to the room layout for the "Hot Topics" Q&A sessions. "The conference room usually had chairs in short rows and a lot of rows going to the back of the room," she says. "We asked the facilities people to rearrange the room so we had fewer rows that were very wide, so employees could see everyone else." Bringing employees closer to company leaders, she says, helped create a less formal, more engaged environment.

If you have employees who've previously shown the confidence to ask questions, consider having them kick off the discussion. In the past, Gibson has asked for help from employees who were part of ad hoc groups focusing on key company initiatives. These employees, already regarded as leaders, would attend webcasts and ask questions at the start of the events. "This showed the greater audience that it was fine to ask difficult questions," Gibson says.

Prep the execs

It takes two to create a culture of engagement: the employee and the leader. If leaders at town halls and brown-bag lunches dodge questions or come off as less than forthright, employees won't be likely to ask questions at the next event.

"Yahoo employees are now not afraid to ask questions," because executives invite participation in town halls, Clark says. Pre-meeting emails previewing agenda items come from the CEO and other leaders. "The email gets people both excited and prepared for what to expect," Clark says.



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Preparing leaders to become more transparent is a long-term play, not something that can be handled with one or two quick meetings. At Southwest, newly hired top leaders must attend a company culture “boot camp,” where they learn the value of transparency.

“It’s something that our leaders are expected to do,” Thornton says. Just before big events like the Southwest rally, executives also receive briefing books about key company issues so they can provide informed answers to employee questions.

During the Event: Set the stage

Step up the pace

You’ve prepped executives to provide candid answers to tough questions, and you’ve spread the word to employees. On the day of the event, you must ensure that when employees show up, the give-and-take flows freely.

Partridge’s “Hot Topic” events were structured to be fast-paced and fun. They ran exactly one hour (not exceeding that time limit, no matter what), and no slides or presentations were allowed—only questions and answers. Responses were limited to two minutes each, forcing executives to be succinct—and avoiding that common problem of letting discussions drift off-focus and bore attendees.

“We didn’t record the events; you had to show up or you missed it,” Partridge says. “We started on time and ended on time.” Because employees (not communicators or executives) submitted questions and controlled the content, they were invested in showing up and listening. “Employees thought the format was authentic and real,” Partridge says.

Another interesting format idea comes from IABC: [flip the schedule](#) so that presentation time is short, and Q&A time is long. For example, instead of 40 minutes in an hour-long presentation followed by 20 minutes of Q&A, allow for 40 minutes of questions and only 20 minutes of presentations. Also, consider having the leaders ask questions of employees, IABC suggests—it’s a good way to encourage employees to share their ideas.



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Support local teams

For most large companies, not everyone can make it in person to a live town hall or Q&A event. Simply offering a webcast (even a live one) doesn't offer the same engagement: Busy employees won't be as likely to give a webcast the same attention they would to an executive right in front of them.

Honeywell's Gibson agrees that local events should hew closely to the format and transparency of nationwide events in order to generate employee engagement. Local events with strong employee participation can cement messages heard at the big events at headquarters.

"After employees have heard the company story at the high level, they need to talk about it from their perspectives," Gibson says. "When your business unit has its own meeting, you can better understand the mission."

Local town halls and Q&As also play into employees' desire to build working relationships with the leaders they see every day. "We talk about the fact that employees stay in their jobs or leave them based on their managers," Gibson says. "Employees want to hear updates and answers from those leaders, and the closer the leaders are to them, the more likely they'll engage with them."

Come for the snacks; stay for the Q&A

Weaving a bit of fun and food into town halls and Q&As encourages employees to stick around for the engagement. At Yahoo's weekly town halls, "employees enjoy food and beverages, and we also have raffles with incredible prizes," Clark says. Leaders also set aside a few minutes to acknowledge work anniversaries and welcome new employees.

When Southwest communications leaders charted a decline in attendance at the annual rally/state of the airline event—but an uptick in attendance to the annual Spirit Party—they decided to add some festive features.

"We needed to make the rally a party with a purpose," O'Donnell says. The highlights are still the CEO address and the Q&A session, of course, but the rally also includes an afterparty.



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After the Event: Share the Knowledge

Gather feedback

Within 30 minutes after “Hot Topics” Q&A sessions, Partridge would send surveys to employees in attendance, as well as to company leaders.

“We wanted to be able to show that there were benefits to the events and show the numbers were going up,” she says.

Partridge asked employees what they liked most about the event, what questions they wanted to address at future Q&A sessions, and how she and her team could help improve communications from leaders. The findings from her survey would provide fodder for future “Hot Topics” sessions, as well as town halls.

Reinforce messages

“The communication that happens after an event can be the most important,” says Whatley. “You can reinforce messages through different channels.” For example, she posts recaps of quarterly webcasts and town halls on SAS’ global intranet within 24 hours, including links to event recordings.

If an event focuses on a specific business unit, Whatley shares recordings within that business unit’s group on The Hub, the SAS internal social network. This way, social network members with an interest in the topic can share comments, extending the engagement beyond the live event.

Share techniques with local teams

In addition to equipping local teams with material for watch parties, Southwest’s Thornton uses post-event surveys to give local teams insights on what might work best for their own Q&As or town halls.

“We go around to senior leaders of each operational group, getting them pumped up,” she says. “We find that employees are much more likely to attend events if a local leader encourages them to go.”



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She also offers help in replicating the big event as much as possible. “For watch parties, we equip leaders with whatever they need,” such as a thumb drive with all the presentations given at the live rallies held nationwide. The leaders attending the watch parties are encouraged to set aside time for Q&As for local employees.

Capture leaders in action

Webcasts or video of town halls can show leaders engaging with staff, but what if their participation is not so visible, as in a live chat? To encourage employees to ask questions in future chats, Gibson shot smartphone video of her then-CEO and the senior vice president of HR, “typing like fiends,” she says. Gibson then posted the video on the company’s intranet, along with the chat transcript.

“I wanted to prove to employees that executives really were the ones answering questions,” Gibson says. “It was a way to help executives come across as approachable—a simple thing you can do to portray them as real people.”

The hope, she says, is that in future such events, “if employees feel like they’re being communicated with in a real way, they’ll listen to leaders.”

Plan for engagement—don’t expect it to just happen

As these communicators have explained, employee engagement takes work. Getting leaders and workers in the same room, or connected via videos or webcasts is only the beginning. Communicators must add structure for engagement so employees are willing to raise their hands and start the conversation.

In addition, they must prep leaders for their role in this process: They need to respect employee participation, and be prepared for potentially difficult questions. If they open the door to engagement, employees will follow. And the reverse is true: If leaders aren’t all in on engagement, employees will assume participation is not worth the trouble.



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