7 ways to improve town halls
Learn how to boost energy and engagement
We don’t talk anymore

BEFORE TWITTER AND FACEBOOK, people gathered at town hall meetings to talk openly about important issues, share opinions and ask burning questions. But it often feels like today’s employee town halls have lost this spirit of engagement. They’ve become more about leaders presenting PowerPoint® slides instead of having a meaningful conversation with their employees. (It’s enough to make the Greeks and Romans, who invented town halls, cry.)

It’s time to bring back the core principle of town halls and get people talking again! This guide will show you seven practical ways to bring a new level of energy and participation to your town halls.

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Find out what employees need

When you sit down to draft your town hall agenda, remember whom you’re trying to reach: employees. Too often, town halls are designed to appeal to leaders’ preferences, without keeping in mind what will engage employees and satisfy their information needs.

So, how do you find out what employees need? Do a little research. For example, several years ago we held focus groups at a manufacturing facility to find out how well communication was working for employees. Overall, they were pleased with communication, but were negative about senior leader town halls. So, we dug a little deeper and found out the content wasn’t relevant to their jobs (too complicated).

“All that financial stuff—I have to admit most of it is over my head,” said one employee. “It’s too dense—and I don’t really understand what it means to me. Just tell me what I need to do!”

**Out-of-the-box idea**

Prior to your town hall, ask employees to submit topics they’re most interested in and add one or two to the agenda.

**HERE’S WHAT TO DO**

- Use demographic data to understand your employee audience
- Conduct surveys after each town hall to collect feedback
- Hold focus groups for an in-depth look at what employees need
- Use your research to recommend changes to content, format and other aspects of town hall meetings
Now that you know what employees need from your town hall, how do you give it to them? Set a few clear objectives to help put into words what you want to accomplish and measure the effectiveness of your efforts.

A simple way to get started is to ask yourself: What do you want employees to know, believe or do as a result of your town hall?

**Out-of-the-box idea**
Set an objective for how you’d like employees to feel after the town hall. Motivated? Energized? Determined? Then think about how to run the session to achieve that objective.

**HERE’S WHAT TO DO**
- Set specific objectives for what employees will know, believe or do at the end of each town hall
- Make sure post-event survey questions are designed to measure town hall objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Know</th>
<th>Believe</th>
<th>Do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you want employees to learn or be aware of?</td>
<td>How do you want employees to think differently?</td>
<td>What action do you want employees to take after the town hall?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXAMPLE Employees will know how the new business strategy will impact their day-to-day jobs.</td>
<td>EXAMPLE Employees will believe working together as one team will help us improve customer service.</td>
<td>EXAMPLE Employees will participate in upcoming workshops that gather ideas and create action steps for improving customer service.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Out-of-the-box idea

Avoid including topics (like financial results) that have already been communicated before. Every topic should be fresh and new.

Choose no more than three topics

Town halls don’t happen very often, so it’s tempting to want to talk about everything that has happened since the last one. But, there’s a limit to how much information people can process before employees’ eyes glaze over and they’re overwhelmed.

That is why you should limit your agenda to no more than three key topics (yes, only three) and keep the level of detail to a minimum. Having fewer, more focused topics will help keep employees interested and make more time for Q&A at the end.

Below is an example of a town hall agenda that is focused and includes plenty of time for employee participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Facilitator/Presenter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome (5 min)</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 1: Progress at a glance (10 min)</td>
<td>CFO/President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 2: Key business objectives (15 min)</td>
<td>President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 3: Innovation in action (30 min)</td>
<td>Team leader(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees share ideas and examples (25 min)</td>
<td>Facilitator/employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing (5 min)</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here’s what to do

› Start with objectives (see #2) and focus on content that will achieve those outcomes
› Include a maximum of three topics per town hall
› Schedule more than one person to speak, but allow only people with knowledge of the key topics to present
Many employee town halls have become more presentation than discussion, leaving employees to play the role of passive spectators.

To get your employees more engaged and bring back the historical spirit of your town halls, rethink how to use the time you have. Here is an agenda example that shows how you can reset the clock:

### Time | Content
--- | ---
5 minutes | Welcome, introductions
5 minutes | Thank you for a great year; recognize teams and individuals that made a difference
5 minutes | Recap seven priorities for the coming year, giving a tangible example for each priority
15 minutes | Focus on the customer service priority: what’s happening with our competitors, why customer service is a differentiator, how we’re going to go about improving our scores by 10%
25 minutes | Gather employee perspectives on customer service:
  - Hold a brainstorm session for initial ideas
  - Conduct a leader panel Q&A and discussion
5 minutes | Next steps, thank you

**Out-of-the-box idea**

There’s no rule that says a town hall must be 60 or 90 minutes. Build a 45- or 35-minute agenda and play with the mix of activities until you find the right one. You’ll reduce the amount of “glaze over” and employees will appreciate getting their time back!

**HERE’S WHAT TO DO**

- Choose one agenda topic that employees will want to know the most about (Remember #1?)
- Assign a facilitator to watch the clock and keep things moving
- Be sure you collect questions and ideas employees generate for future use
You’ve worked hard to focus your content and you’ve left plenty of time for Q&A. Now your leader pauses to ask, “Any questions?” Blank stares. Crickets. On the radio, it’s call “dead air” and during your town hall, it’s just as deadly.

Too often, employees are anxious about speaking up in a room full of people. They may feel intimidated about questioning their leader, or just don’t want to admit they don’t quite understand.

- **Turn the tables on the traditional Q&A by asking employees for answers, ideas and advice**
  
  Instead of “Does anyone have any questions about what it means to be customer-focused?”
  
  **TRY THIS:**
  
  - “What challenges do we face in achieving our customer-focused objectives?”
  - “What advice would our customers give us to become more customer-focused?”

- **Use technology to get employees more involved**
  
  Most employees never wander far without the security of their mobile devices. You can unleash the power of that technology at your town hall by giving employees a role to play, whether it’s adding comments to a web chat or responding to a text poll.
  
  Check your web meeting program’s toolbox to ensure you’re taking advantage of all that’s available. Chat, polling and a whiteboard are ways to share ideas and participate.

- **Rearrange seating to encourage participation**
  
  The problem with theater- and classroom-style seating is that it signals employees to be an audience—to observe and listen like in school or at a play—instead of being participants.

**Out-of-the-box idea**

Think Ellen DeGeneres’ Oscar selfie phenomenon. Place your leader in the “thick of it” when it’s time to ask and answer questions. Employees will see your leader as more personable and relatable, and engagement will soar.

**HERE’S WHAT TO DO**

- Utilize round tables with employees seated in a semi-circle facing the presenter
- Eliminate the stage and keep the presenter on the same level as employees
- Take a tip from comedians and keep seating a bit tight; the closer employees are to the presenter, the more engaged they’ll be
Even after you’ve scaled back the number of topics on your agenda, the average town hall is still jam-packed with information. Unfortunately, accompanying PowerPoint slides also tend to be packed—overloaded, overworked and in need of an overhaul. Slides that are bogged down with dense financials, long titles and too much copy can result in even the most charismatic leader falling flat.

But don’t get discouraged. Here are a few simple ways to fix overworked slides and improve engagement at your next town hall.

› **Less is more**  
  Keep copy to a minimum by sticking to one thought per slide.

› **Slides are free**  
  Keep the show moving by using lots of slides with intriguing and clever visuals—photos, infographics, colorful charts and video clips.

› **Don’t forget to tell the story**  
  Keep employees interested by using a story arc to share a narrative. The classic story? Here’s our challenge, here’s how we’re going to address it, here’s the desired result.

**Out-of-the-box idea**

Who says you always need PowerPoint for a presentation? Show a video and distribute a handout that provides supporting visuals and a place for employees to take notes.

**HERE’S WHAT TO DO**

› Create slides that summarize the topic instead of showing every talking point. Your slides should be a companion to what’s being said, not a script.

› If your leader wants to show a list and speak to it, no problem! Show the full list, then highlight or use animation to move through the list, letting employees know which item is being discussed.

› Don’t spend more than one minute on a single slide. If you find yourself needing more than a minute, you’ve probably got multiple ideas on that slide. Break it up and keep the show moving.
So, you had a fantastic town hall! Leaders were happy with the improvements and employees asked some great questions. Time for a well-deserved margarita, right?

But before you celebrate, you should share highlights and next steps with those who couldn’t attend the town hall (and keep the momentum going for those who did).

There are a lot of ways to do this, such as intranet articles, videos or social media, but the key is to be timely and concise! Share content the day after the town hall and avoid going into a detailed “play by play” or posting a 90-minute video.

**HERE’S WHAT TO DO**

- Write a short article (less than 300 words), focusing on no more than three “story highlights” and include links to additional content, such as presentations and videos.
- Videotape the town hall and create a few 90-second “highlight clips” on individual topics.
- Create a microblog for leaders and assist them in “tweeting” their impressions of the town hall.

**Out-of-the-box idea**

Hold a “Live Chat” instant message-style session for employees who couldn’t attend the town hall. Have the leader introduce the topic, then invite comments or questions from employees.
About Davis & Company

Davis & Company is an award-winning firm that helps companies reach, engage and motivate their employees.

Founded in 1984, Davis & Company develops innovative solutions and programs that improve the success of employee communication for leading companies such as Nestlé, PepsiCo and Pfizer. The company also offers web-based workshops, industry reports, how-to books and newsletters for communication professionals on important topics pertaining to employee communication. The firm is based in Glen Rock, N.J.

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