The Magic Of Offsites

Successful team offsites are about changing people inside

Imagine a straw poll in the average office: How useful was the most recent team offsite you took part in? All too often, there is no need for even counting responses – the collective groan is answer enough.

Genuinely successful team offsites are rare. And yet, organisations keep running offsites based on the gut feel that it must somehow be a good thing to get people together away from the office for a day or two. That gut feel is in fact justified. And it is not black magic that makes an offsite successful – what the organising manager needs is a clear perspective of how success comes about.

Let's look at what "success" actually means when talking about an offsite. The obvious answer "enhance the organisation's bottom line" is true and useless in about equal measure since it avoids the core issue of *how* an offsite influences profitability. A slightly more practical definition of "success" could be based on whether an offsite e.g. –

- yields a strategic vision for a team or the whole company
- boosts team morale and initiative, and hence productivity
- fosters new networks within the organisation
- resolves technical or personal conflicts.

But the most concise way of describing the benefit of an offsite is this: *It changes people*. A successful offsite leaves participants as changed men and women.

Does this sound a bit grandiose? Actually, it is a very pragmatic statement. Offsites represent a significant investment in both time and cost and are therefore rare events. Hence, the effect of an offsite should not just last for a few days afterwards but should be felt positively for many months or even a year or two. And by far the best way to achieve this is bringing about change inside the people attending the offsite.

While project plans and strategy decisions prepared at an offsite are quickly overturned by market events and only cover a limited part of an organisation's operations, people who have changed inside act and think differently in every situation and for a long time. - Where there is demand for a broad and sustainable impact on an organisation, team offsites can therefore be the most powerful and effective way to deliver.

Two obvious questions follow from this:

(1) In what respects does a successful offsite change people?
(2) How do you prepare an offsite that brings about such change?

Let's resist the temptation to try and come up with one-size-fits-all recipes to answer these two questions. It goes without saying that each organisation is different, each situation is different, and, of course, each group of people is different. However, we can pick out three common aspects of positive change in people:

Insight: The first article in the Train Ride Reading series ("The Cult Of Action") made the case for appreciating insight and clarity as valuable meeting outcomes on a par with lists of action items. An offsite is in many ways a meeting on steroids, and hence the same argument applies. Insights that

people consciously gain during an offsite inform their work and their decision making for a long time afterwards. Insights influence people not just in projects and situations anticipated beforehand but also in unexpected circumstances. Insights permanently change people's thinking - this is their beauty.

Motivation: (Re-)Motivating staff is a common goal when organising an offsite, so nothing new here. But it is useful to note that motivation is essentially about changing people – changing their attitude, their emotional response, and their thinking. We won't dive into what motivates specific kinds of people; that's a topic for another time.

Relationships: It almost goes without saying that offsites are a useful tool for fostering relationships between people – either within a team or between individuals in disparate parts of an organisation. Like for Motivation, it is worth realising that getting to know other people in a meaningful way (1) has a lasting effect that survives the vagaries of organisational evolution and (2) is a change that happens inside. It is not something that can be captured in a PowerPoint presentation.

The above examples imply that meaningful and lasting change touches people on both intellectual and emotional levels. And therefore -

> *The success of an offsite hinges on whether it creates an environment in which people are opening up intellectually and emotionally.*

If you want the "secret black magic" for offsite success – this is it. The rest is just practical detail.

Nevertheless, let's look at some of those practicalities, too. What I am about to suggest fits under two headings – "Trust" and "Pace" – and can be applied to a fairly wide range of teams and situations.

Trust is the prerequisite for change on an emotional level. Being touched on an emotional level carries the risk of being hurt, and people will only allow themselves to become vulnerable if they trust those around them. Whoever facilitates an offsite therefore needs to create an atmosphere of trust. In practical terms, this consideration may e.g. lead to -

- limiting the number of participants (groups of up to 7 or 8 people are best)
- agreeing confidentiality of events and discussions at the offsite
- taking the facilitation of sessions very seriously – it is a form of leadership and must concurrently address both content and interpersonal aspects
- including sessions in the agenda in which people exchange personal observations and feelings (e.g. what they have been most proud of in their recent work)
- having the same conference room as a "home" for the whole duration of the offsite
- creating a productive seating arrangement

The last point is crucial but unfortunately often seen as too mundane to pay much attention to. It is difficult to establish an atmosphere of trust when people don't look at each other (e.g. chairs all oriented towards a flipchart), or when people are separated from each other by six meters' worth of polished walnut table. As a rule of thumb, consider the distance you choose when sitting down e.g. with a coach. This is the distance that makes you comfortable having an open conversation that potentially touches you emotionally, and it is also the ideal distance between people sitting down at an offsite.

Let's move on to the second batch of practical advice – suggestions around finding the right *pace*. This does not relate so much to the emotional side but

to creating an environment that fosters change in people at an intellectual level.

As much as offsites are meant to compress significant change into a relatively short span of time they cannot overcome the fact that the human mind only works at a finite pace. Specifically, processing large amounts of new information or new ideas takes time – not just active thinking time but also time in which the brain can mull things in the background. Most people have had the experience that it is easier to make a decision after sleeping over the issues around it, and that such decisions tend to be more stable in the long term.

Another consideration is that offsite time is scarce, and hence it should not be wasted on sessions that can just as well be held in the normal office environment. A prime example are meetings whose only purpose is to convey information. As much as, say, a sales team benefits from hearing about features of the upcoming new version of the company's flagship product – there is little to be gained from using offsite time for such a presentation.

It is much better to arrange presentations of this kind as a series of pre-meetings in the days leading up to the offsite. Apart from keeping the actual offsite day(s) free for sessions that really need the special atmosphere and environment, the approach of using pre-meetings has further advantages:

- It respects the pace of the human mind – people have time to process the information both consciously and unconsciously ahead of the offsite.

- It is possible to pull people into a pre-meeting who would not be present at the offsite. As an example, quizzing key internal customers about their future plans is an excellent foundation for an IT team offsite.

- The offsite feels much more connected to day-to-day office life. This in turn leads to a better transfer of results afterwards.

- If the offsite pulls together people who previously did not know each other then pre-meetings provide a handy opportunity for making first contact and thus shorten the time it takes to establish a productive atmosphere at the actual offsite.

Finally, here is a piece of advice that will earn me a reputation as a killjoy: Don't overdo the organised fun element – abseiling, paintballing, bridge building, treasure hunts, rocket construction, etc. Firstly, organised fun tends to make people cringe unless it is led by a top-notch entertainer, and secondly, the notion that an offsite must include organised fun devalues the work-related sessions to a necessary evil.

It is far better to build variety of content and format into the work agenda, to alternate creative with analytical sessions, to mix lighthearted with difficult subjects – and to never lose sight of the key purpose of an offsite: creating an agenda and an environment that allows people to open up intellectually and emotionally and thus brings about lasting change in those who take part.

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