



Strategy made personal

Your Next Leadership Off-Site is Going to Waste a Lot of People's Time

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Right now, as you read this, your company is planning its next leader off-site and you should be concerned. For the purpose of this article, let's define a "leader off-site" as a one to two day gathering of your company's most senior executives and managers, usually held at a location removed from corporate headquarters. This is otherwise known as a very expensive and strategic 'all hands' business meeting. For our Fortune 100 clients, these meetings include anywhere from 50 to 400 participants, and the purpose is usually focusing the organization on strategy execution and key corporate initiatives.

In planning and preparation for this annual or semi-annual leader off-site, your company usually appoints two groups of well-intentioned professionals to execute a project plan and assemble the content. The off-site project plan will likely be delivered on-time and on-budget. The problem is: it won't be effective. In fact, it's likely to be a waste of your senior people's time. Before I explain why, let's zoom in on the two groups who are planning your next off-site.

The first group is your senior executives. These folks are very busy running the business, fending off competitors, driving innovation, managing teams and seeking profitable growth. However, a few of your most articulate senior executives will get tapped on the shoulder by the CEO to 'put some slides together for the off-site'. Some of these executives may even get high quality guidance from the CEO who will direct the newly elected speakers to focus on a key element of the strategy in a one-hour presentation. Perhaps your company is lucky and you have a cadre of senior executives who can fill a day's agenda with fine presentations. Wonderful. Got relevant business content? Check.

The second group includes your corporate event planners. These folks are making sure all site logistics come together to make for an enjoyable experience. Myriad details need to be tied down. Right now, they may very well be grappling with the choice of which introductory music theme to play just before the CEO takes the stage. Will it be Tina Turner's "Simply the Best" or Queen's "We are the Champions?" Will the stage lining have the right shade of blue silk to match the company's logo? Are the chairs comfortable enough? Attention will be paid. In the hands of these professionals, the event will look and sound great. Got great audio, video, lighting, microphones? Check.



The First Mistake

So, you have strong content, and you have a good-looking ballroom, what could possibly be missing? Presumably, the C-suite has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars (flights, hotel rooms, conference rooms, break-out rooms, food, dinners out, entertainment, etc.) into this off-site because they were interested in teaching a very important group of people some very important things about the business strategy and key priorities. Presumably, they want the participants at the off-site to take action in support of the strategy and make better business decisions afterwards.

Unfortunately, your executives have fallen into a common trap. They very likely have blind faith in the premise that the communication of 'new information' is the critical driver of behavior change. Why else is your off-site almost exclusively designed around an audience passively watching smart people give speeches? Unfortunately, we have seen over and over again inside client organizations: "Change in Information DOES NOT EQUAL Change in Behavior". The enduring belief by senior line executives that a speech-driven off-site will change behavior is misguided. While some new information may be absorbed, very little will happen afterwards.

The Second Mistake

What about the audience? The assumption that the audience should be passive listeners to the "sages on the stage" is rarely questioned. However, the audience is filled with some of the best minds in your company. These are people your company should be investing in to bring out their best thinking, engagement and action. At BTS, we know how adults learn and engage with business strategy, and it is not by being PowerPoint whipped from the stage.

Getting Business Impact From Your Next Off-Site

BTS has worked with many leading companies to transform the way they approach the design of their leader off-sites. Well in advance of the off-site, we engage client senior executives to discover their top concerns around business challenges, time horizons and metrics. Second, we uncover what specific business insights they want the audience to take away from the off-site. Third, we collaborate with executives to identify the most critical high leverage behaviors for participants to focus on after the off-site to get results.

Throughout this discovery phase, we uncover insights around four areas that will be very helpful to senior executives trying to drive better strategy execution. The four areas below lead to deeper discussions (and coachable moments) with our senior line executive clients:

1. **Alignment** – What is the degree of alignment at the senior level in the organization around the new content that is being introduced to the organization? What about at the mid-level? What about at the front line?
2. **Mindset** – Understanding the new content is one thing, but what is the “buy in” to the content across the organization? Are people connecting in a meaningful way with the new business concepts being explained? Will they take ownership and implement back on the job?
3. **Capability** – What new skills do people need to practice and develop so they can focus on the right high leverage behaviors after the off-site?
4. **Accountability** – Lastly, how will people be held accountable for taking action to drive the company’s new initiatives?

Once all of the above is formulated, BTS can then pour rocket fuel into your off-site’s gas tank. The rocket fuel is simply the creation of a “designed experience” — a forum for practice (co-created with your executives) that is elegantly integrated into the off-site agenda. Successful adults in a corporate environment learn by practicing with real business decisions and scenarios, testing assumptions, making mistakes and improving.

So, if your CEO is articulating a new strategy or new initiative on-stage, the next step in the off-site agenda would be to put audience teams into the simulated cockpit of your company's business and begin practicing with the concepts they just heard. This allows the formerly passive audience (remember them?) to make difficult trade-off decisions around the strategy, see the results of those decisions, and debrief those decisions with senior line executives. By driving a simulated version of your company into the future, and being accountable for results, audience members can now meaningfully reflect on the pitfalls, opportunities and risks associated with the strategy.

With digital technology you can harness those reflections and take full advantage of the talent in the room. Crowd-sourcing can surface the best actions to execute the strategy. Teams collaborate and compete to develop the best ideas. Because everyone's had input, the process builds alignment, commitment and shared accountability for action.

The audience at the off-site is now actively engaged with the strategy. They know exactly what to do and have the confidence to execute the strategy. They know where the risks are and they have a new appreciation for the upside. Got alignment? Check. Got Mindset shift? Check. Got new Capability? Check. If the off-site was designed right, the actions committed to by audience members will simply be the high-leverage behaviors the C-suite so badly wanted them to pursue in the first place.

Once you go experiential at an off-site, you never go back. We now have worked with many C-suite clients who will never go back to pure 'sage on the stage' at their next leadership off-site. And the return on the time their senior leaders spend at the off-site will be measurable — in terms of behaviors and actions performed back on the job as well as in business results.

About BTS

BTS focuses on the people side of strategy, working with leaders at all levels to help them make better decisions, convert those decisions to actions and deliver results. At our core, we believe people learn best by doing. For 30 years, we've been designing fun, powerful experiences™ that have profound and lasting impact on people and their careers. We inspire new ways of thinking, build critical capabilities and unleash business success. It's strategy made personal.

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