

High Impact Conferences

By Allen Hirsh

Over the years, colleagues at [NextGenLeaders](#) have helped plan and facilitate hundreds of large-group conferences or 'off-sites,' typically involving 50 or more people. This [Insight](#) presents some of the lessons we've learned to help you maximize your investment, engage your people, and help you build alignment and commitment to turning ideas into action.

Questions You May be Asking

Does the return on investment justify holding an off-site session this year?

Given how busy we all are, will the off-site be a distraction from more pressing priorities?

Will an off-site send the right message?

How do we raise the overall impact and effectiveness of our off-site?

Who should we include?

Benefits from a Well-Executed Off-Site

1. Accelerate your organization's change agenda

One of the most common complaints we hear from CEO's is that, "[Our strategy is solid, but we are not getting enough traction and execution is too slow.](#)"

The best large-group sessions create momentum and energize people and can help get your people mobilized to take action. They provide a forum to broadcast key messages such as Vision, strategic directions, business priorities and 100 Day Plans. More importantly, they go beyond the 'talking heads' type session and genuinely engage members to make connections between the broader corporate goals and their own objectives and priorities. In other words they build alignment and commitment.

Off-sites can also deliberately heighten dissatisfaction with the status quo and strengthen the overall case for change.

2. Build community and help shape your culture

Off-sites can be used to mark milestones, directional shifts and key transitions. They can be forums for celebration and recognition; conversation, learning and inspiration; and collective reflection or grieving. Since leaders have the strongest impact on shaping culture, off-sites can deepen understanding and acceptance of a leader's point of view and values and strengthen the leader's credibility and reputation.

We've seen companies spend thousands (even millions) of dollars on creating the right venue, look & feel, SWAG, multi-media, famous guests and talented entertainers. While all of this may be fine, our experience is that the most impactful sessions are those that engage the members and build commitment and connections within the corporate community.

3. Stimulate intense and courageous conversations

["I really connected with people,"](#) is common feedback we see on post-session evaluation sheets. Don't underestimate the opportunities and power of having your colleagues meet face-to-face to build relationships and networks, and exchange experiences, stories and ideas. Well-designed off-sites drive cross-functional communication and collaborative problem solving. They provide great forums for talking about the business issues of the day and opportunities for tomorrow.

Some of the best sessions we've seen, honestly address what we call ["the dead moose on the table;"](#) – that taboo topic that everyone knows is in the room and is typically avoided. The trick is to create the right context, forums and facilitation for having genuine and value-added conversations that deal with the ["real issues."](#)

Critical Success Factors – Tips for Maximizing Your Investment

1. Define a crystal clear purpose

What are your critical few objectives? Are you aiming for highly tangible outcomes?

- gain insight about the market
- define an innovation agenda
- collect input for your business plan
- develop clear and shared priorities
- nail down accountabilities and actions

Are you seeking more intangible results?

- build the community and team
- create productive dialogue
- brainstorm
- test ideas and concepts, and assess likelihood of organizational acceptance
- strengthen shared commitment

Clear focus and success metrics sounds simple, yet we've seen many off-sites get derailed because of 'scope creep,' and the need to insert just one more guest speaker or activity - which distracts from the core objectives.

2. Involve key leaders

Your off-site can be an important part of an integrated approach to strategy implementation. It may be convenient to assign the conference to a single person or outsource it all together; however, treated as an isolated event there is risk of losing the opportunity for deeper participant engagement and commitment to action.

We recommend getting key leaders involved as planners and 'faculty.' Think about a design team that reflects the diversity of your organization. Involve your rising stars and next generation of leaders. To use Malcolm Gladwell's Tipping Point terminology, they may be 'mavens,' 'connectors,' or 'salesmen.'

What happens before and after the session may be as important as what happens during the off-site session. By understanding and addressing participant needs, interests, anxieties and expectations you can help maximize your investment of time and money and increase the odds that your session will be meaningful and produce results.

3. Use high-impact, creative action learning

There are hundreds of design variations for off-site sessions. Our bias is for experiential learning. We prefer high-involvement sessions, and encourage clients to avoid low risk sessions, where participants look more like tourists or sideline umpires.

At its most basic level, action learning is 'learning by doing.' It is a way of connecting the business agenda and critical few priorities with executive development. Sessions designed to address attitudes and behaviors (as well as business content) will more likely lead to delivering required business results and help the organization realize its broader change agenda.

Using multiple formats and approaches will lead to a more interesting off-site. In addition to the classic power point sessions, motivational speaker and panels, there are a wide range of large group methods that drive engagement and action. Even traditional and often dull presentations can be enhanced through well-planned and imaginative design.

Another key ingredient is analysis and self-reflection. To some, this may seem like a recipe for inaction; however our experience is that with strong facilitation, guided reflection deepens the learning and leads to better execution.

4. Apply rigorous planning and execution principles

Smaller group planning sessions and team building retreats can benefit from 'lightly structured' facilitation. Large group sessions; however, require disciplined and precise execution. Be-

cause of the increased size, formality, profile and importance of the off-site, participants will expect a higher standard of performance on all fronts – communication, logistics, coordination, facilities, audio/visual effectiveness, speakers, workshop sessions, etc. We've all seen one or more of these elements fail, and unfortunately these are some of the memories participants will take away.

Even sessions aiming to encourage more free-flowing idea generation, spontaneous insights, story-telling, conversations and networking will benefit from a well planned design, and the creation of the right environment, context and facilitation.

5. Follow-up

How many times do we hear statements like, “...*Oh yeah, that was a great retreat. Whatever did happen with that idea we talked about?*”

A huge amount of energy is typically invested in the planning and running of the off-site, and yet many organizations fail to go the distance by putting their ideas into action. No matter how good the off-site, if it's business as usual following the session, you will not have realized the value of your investment.

Here are a few of our favorite [Follow-Up Tips](#):

- Fully debrief the outcomes, learning and follow-up agenda with the Planning team, and then broadcast these conclusions.
- Measure progress. (Join clients who have turned off-site execution and follow-up into increased scorecard performance on 'Commitment.' and 'Trust in Leadership')
- Hold people accountable for follow through. Put the commitments made at the off-site on your executive agenda and monitor progress.
- Reinforce off-site themes and outcomes through other communication channels to deepen and broaden employee engagement.

Our colleagues at [NextGenLeaders](#) get results and know how to make your off-site conference

a success. We have designed and applied a broad toolkit for high-engagement sessions and we would be delighted to talk with you more about our approach.

Toolkit Examples for Large Group Off-sites

Voice of the customer & stakeholder perspectives
Voice of the leader
Competitor analysis
Putting strategy into action
Creative problem solving methods
Simulations/serious games
Leadership development
Storytelling
Scenario planning
Experiential learning
Diagnostics & feedback tools
Visioning
Appreciative inquiry
Tradeshow for projects and ideas

[NextGenLeaders](#) is a network of highly experienced colleagues working together to serve clients. We offer a range of management consulting services including strategy implementation, organization design, top team development, leadership assessment, coaching and development, and change management.



Allen Hirsh is the founder of [NextGenLeaders](#). With 30 years of experience helping clients execute their strategic agenda, often through large group off-sites, Allen is known for his collaborative, creative and energetic style.

We welcome feedback to this [Insight](#).

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