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Workshop Venue - On-site, Off site or Residential?

The venue for an event can have a significant impact on both the outcomes and the costs of the event. Since the global financial melt-down of late 2007 there has been a noticeable move towards lower cost venues to try to spread the training budget a little further, but is it a false economy? In this paper we call on our our experiences of running hundreds of events over an 8 year period to try to provide guidance on value when selecting the venue for your workshop or team-build.

On-Site Venues

These are often the lowest cost venues and can be quite effective. We already have a Board Room, Conference Room, Spare Room, Box Room.... There is effectively no cost involved. That does not necessarily represent good value for money if the venue compromises the outcome of your event. Here are some of the traps to look out for:

Is it properly appointed?

Is it equipped with materials and support for the event. Is it large enough for 12 - 15 people to spend 3 days together without feeling confined. Is there sufficient natural light? Effective heating/cooling? Can we get adequate catering? It can be most disconcerting for participants on an event when the venue is inadequate, and it will start to undermine the desired outcomes. External venues tend to treat you like "real" clients whereas internal facilities can leave participants feeling like 2nd class citizens, which will not encourage behavioural change.

Is it really free?

In some larger organisations, an internal unit provides professional level support. Often this is not free. It might not represent

and external cost to the company, but there can be a very high internal charge for the use of these facilities - sometimes far higher than the the cost of a comparable external venue.

Will I get bumped?

How many times do we get bumped for “more important” uses? “We have an important client presentation”, “The CEO needs the room at short notice”. Staff development can take the lowest priority when there is a conflict of requirements, regardless of advanced bookings, etc. This is not conducive to a positive outcome.

Is it far enough from their desks?

The objective of most JHW events is to try to take participants out of day-to-day, transactional mode and into a more strategic, thinking mode. For many this is a revelation. They rarely get the opportunity or encouragement to do this. It can take a while to achieve, and it is much harder when their usual place of work is “just down the corridor”, and at every tea break they can rush off to get their fix of firefighting (because its there). We usually have great success with agreeing on mobile phone free workshops, but the lure of the desk is too great for some.

On-site, on call

The perception of staff not involved in your event, is that if you at the office, you are available to be interrupted “especially for my super-urgent/super-quick issue”. How do you make the staff your event “out of bounds” the transactional day to day. If you can't, you will achieve reduced outcomes.

Office venue, office hours

It is not practical to ask people to extend their working day to cover more ground on the training event. If I am at work, I work regular hours. When I see my colleagues leaving their desks at close of day, I am also leaving (mentally, if not bodily).

The potential strategic value of a workshop greatly exceeds the labour cost of the people involved (otherwise why are you doing it?), so why would you want the outcomes to be diluted with participants partially engaged, and partly dealing with transactional issues?

Off Site Venues

A well chosen off-site venue will overcome most of these drawbacks, and may add as little as \$125 per person/day to the overall cost. You will get greater attentiveness and reception of ideas, which will lead to better discussions, stronger retention and in

the end better results. In most of these events we are trying to move a mindset, and the environment can have a significant impact on that. When we perceive that our employer respects us, and demonstrably values the outcomes of the event, we are much more likely to become receptive and buy-in. Conversely, if we feel like we are being dissed it will be much harder to get/keep us engaged.

The longer the duration...

For a half or even a one day event, we might be able to live with the drawbacks of on-site venue. When we look at 2, 3 day or even longer events, the justification for off-site increases.

Residential. Greater value...

For a multi-day event which is of strategic importance, residential workshops offer great value for money. Without doubt, most of the most highly successful events we have conducted have been residential.

Get them thinking, keep them thinking..

Having once moved the mindset from transactional to strategic, thinking mode, on a residential event it more easy to keep them there. Participants have a much greater awareness that they are here to achieve something important. Getting out of the office environment helps us get out of office thinking patterns.

The value of social and team bonding..

On a 3 day residential event where an intensive workshop is combined with social hours around meals, team work, evening time, etc. the impact on social interaction and team bonding can be astonishing.

More time..

The working themes of the event are never far from front of mind. In social chat over dinner the discussion might be footy, yet somebody will relate it to the "Trust, Value, Rapport" topic we covered earlier that day on workshop. Furthermore the formal workshop time can be significantly extended when you go residential. Regularly we ran a 3.5 Day workshop commencing with a Sunday buffet lunch and concluding Wednesday afternoon. 2 evenings worked through to 6:00 PM. One evening, syndicate group work saw most participants working through a social dinner and on to 11:00 PM (and some later). From morning coffee until end of lunch on Tuesday was free time for participants to go for a walk, cycle, play golf, etc. which was well appreciated and offered "down time" to absorb the messages. In total we achieved around 29 hours of formal workshop time. Compare this with the non-residential equivalent 8:30 - 5:30, Monday - Wednesday = 22 hours. Although the residential fee costs around

\$900 per person, you get around 33% additional “time on topic”. That might be what was required to get the critical mass across the line as opposed to not.

Horses for courses...

Our accountants are increasingly challenging us to find even more **efficient** ways to operate, to reduce costs. Your staff development, first and foremost needs to be **effective**. The rewards of an effective program that significantly improves the way we work will be of far greater value than the costs of the program. An efficient staff development program that *nearly* achieved the outcomes and buy-in we were seeking represents massive waste and delay in results.

I can't help reflecting that we are corporately in danger of throwing out babies with bath-water. It wasn't, then, extravagant to host an event at an appropriate venue, it made sound business sense, and still does.