
Library away days – home wins or own goals?



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Love them or loathe them, away days have become an integral part of the library calendar. Last summer the University of Lincoln held an away day event comprised of a morning addressing matters that arose from a staff survey and then the launch of a learning landscapes agenda – essentially a game of two halves. Away days can form a crucial part of employee engagement if used wisely – any organisation’s plan in using away days is to boost morale and ultimately productivity. At their worst, away days can be embarrassing and can reinforce a negative opinion of the organisation; at best, they can transform organisational performance and inject fresh enthusiasm into a project or team. The first-ever study of the effectiveness of away days, by the Chartered Institute of Management and the Advanced Institute for Management Research, concluded, according to Nick Pandya, that ‘four in 10 managers on such corporate outings believe that the rendezvous they attended had either no impact or a negative impact on a range of measurable business outcomes’.¹ Away days often fall short of expectations, and even of their basic objectives, because of a lack of preparation and because of resistance from those involved.² Without doubt the notion of an away day can induce feelings of despair, particularly when they are traditionally associated with go-karting or paint-balling – activities that are not suitable for everyone. Games can easily be perceived as artificial exercises that annoy employees and may elicit their most unpleasant characteristics.³ So, how can organisers create an away day which contributes towards organisational learning, inspires motivation and is rewarding for all participants ... without turning it into a pantomime?

As team development is essentially about inclusion, Peter Fleming has argued for the importance

in team building of removing barriers via free-flowing conversation.⁴ While clustered around team-building activities, each employee should feel equally valued – at least for the day. In working together to solve problems, staff ought to feel empowered through meaningful engagement. Stimulating discussion around important matters, in a safe, welcoming environment where employees are comfortable in expressing their opinions, without fear of retribution, naturally creates a productive environment where trust can be generated.

An effective away day is the hallmark of a forward-thinking organisation, according to Julia Vowler, 'At Bucknall Austin, which was shortlisted for the construction, agriculture and mining Best Places to Work Award, funding is set aside for team events, and an open atmosphere is encouraged in meetings.'⁵ Dan Collins, founder of team-building motivational activities and event-organiser Fresh Tracks, advises that an away day has to start with clear objectives.⁶ Location and venue, refreshments, adequate facilities, ambience and ease of access are important factors that build towards a successful day. Candour, relaxation, a change of scene, avoiding an overcrowded programme and giving plenty of notice are other good tips. As well as providing plenty of feedback about the day, acting upon the recommendations and formulating an implementation plan is vital so that participants acquire a sense of ownership. Being away from the normal working environment helps people to view key questions from the outside, and hopefully achieve greater objectivity. Firstly, organisers need to identify the reason why the away day is necessary; although it seems obvious, this rationale helps to focus activities. A staff survey at the University of Lincoln identified three areas in the library that required attention:

- 1 Improving communication
- 2 Improving your Personal Development Review
- 3 Improving career development.

The morning of our away day was based upon the innovative concept of the World Café, which claims to be a 'conversational process based on a set of integrated design principles that reveal a deeper living network pattern through which we co-evolve our collective future'.⁷ Such forums host constantly evolving conversations around important questions, as a means to share purpose and achieve common aims, where conversations 'link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new

insights into the questions or issues that are most important in their life, work, or community'.⁸

To address the three issues arising from our staff survey, three groups were asked to debate each issue for twenty minutes before turning to the next topic, to identify a list of possible solutions: an arrangement that created lively discussion and worthwhile debate. Our library away day was successful because there was sufficient time to debate each topic, and it was effectively managed by the chairs of each group so that everyone had a chance to speak. If other World-Café-inspired away days were organised with the same democratic ethos then I'm confident the library would continue to score home wins, rather than own goals.

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- 4 See Fleming, 'Metaphors'
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- 8 Ibid.