

# 10 WAYS

TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR TOWN HALL  
AND UNLEASH THE POWER OF YOUR

**HYBRID**  
TEAMS



# EMPLOYEE TOWN HALL MEETINGS ARE A MAINSTAY FOR COMPANIES TODAY, HAVING BEEN EMPLOYED AS A KEY COMMUNICATIONS TOOL FOR DECADES.

**A**t the height of COVID-19, companies were hosting town halls on a weekly or even daily basis. They served as the key communications platform to reach employees, providing critical information and connection in uncertain times. So why, after all these years and the lessons we learned from the pandemic, are town halls often not approached with the same zealous attention to priorities or the same focus on what matters most to employees?

Today's town halls, or "all-hands" meetings, are often the centerpiece of a company's internal communications plan. They are often leadership's annual, quarterly or sometimes more frequent opportunity to recognize individual or team achievements and to talk with employees about business results and future plans and strategies. In the best cases, these sessions are interactive and inspiring, moving beyond the "talk at" and "command/control" formats to actually build an engaging, informative conversation with employees.

Yet in many cases, employees report that the meetings can feel like a chore. This is partly because employee needs and expectations are evolving, and leadership isn't in tune—**though they need to be**. Employees today want to feel personally connected to their leaders, the company vision and values, and just what the organization stands for.

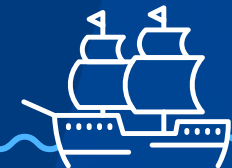
As we enter a "new reality" in a post-pandemic world, there are many unknowns; however, one thing is certain: employees have more leverage than they ever did before. Daily headlines continue to underscore that the "Great Resignation" is upon us, and the balance of power has shifted from senior leadership to employees. Employees are focusing on what's most important to them and demanding it from their employer—and walking when their needs aren't met. This reality presents a critical opportunity for leaders and communications professionals to deliver far more informative, interactive and meaningful town halls that will engage employees.

In the following eBook, we will share some of the best practices we employ with our own clients to help you host effective and engaging town halls.

From leveraging new technology to connect with your hybrid workforce to helping leaders be transparent and demonstrate vulnerability, we aim to provide fresh thinking to revitalize your communication efforts overall and your town hall meetings specifically. These ideas can be helpful even if you are just beginning to host these gatherings; in fact, it could be the starting point for a great kickoff to this important internal communications endeavor. Before we dive into the steps you can take to transform your town halls, let's step back and consider the current landscape and the case for meaningful change.

## BUT FIRST, A FUN FACT:

Did you know the origin of the term "all-hands" (*which is used interchangeably with "town hall"*) is a nautical term originating in the early days of sailing which required all crew tending a ship to appear on deck?<sup>1</sup>





# THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE FOR TOWN HALLS

As you consider making strategic and creative adjustments to your town hall meetings so they work harder for you, it's important to first spend some time reflecting on what you currently have underway; a solid, thoughtful self-assessment can help guide your new plan of action. So, have you considered...



**TRENDS IN EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK** from your meetings and how employee needs and interests are carefully considered for future sessions?



**THE SPECIFIC EMPLOYEE ACTIONS** you want to drive—what do you want them to know, feel or do coming out of the town hall?



**THE PARTS OF THE MEETINGS** that are particularly memorable for employees?



**WHETHER THE MEETINGS ARE PLANNED WITH PERSPECTIVES** of employees at *all* levels and demographics within the organization?



**IF THE FREQUENCY, TIME ALLOTTED AND GENERAL FORMAT ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE?**

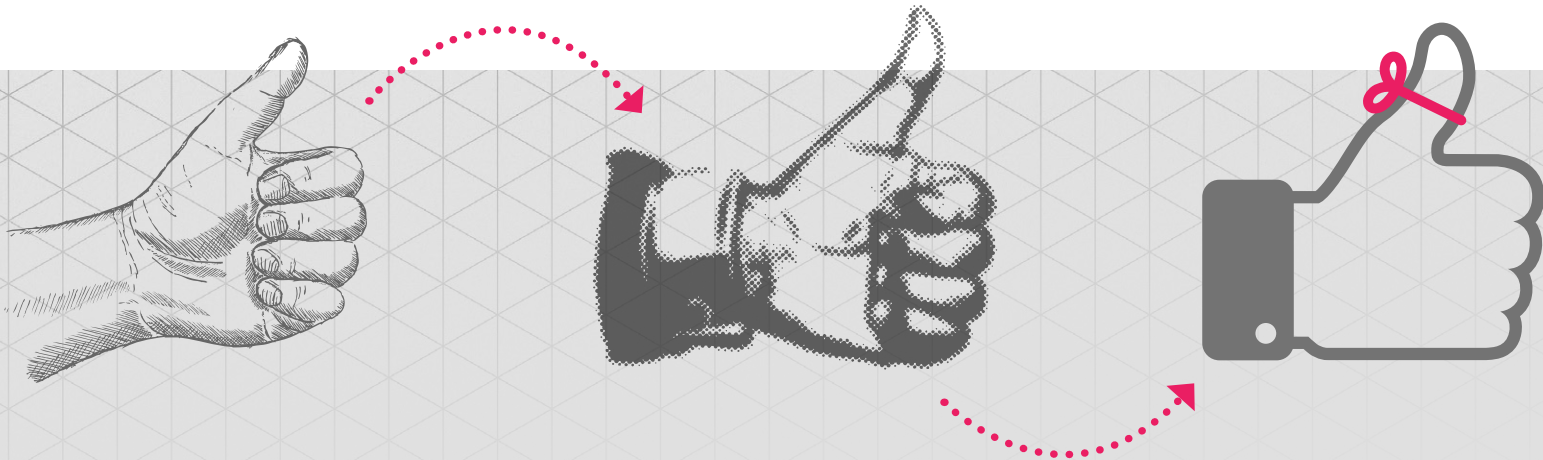
- Consistency can be a double-edged sword; while participants often appreciate predictability, it can create boredom or lackluster results.
- Well-intentioned efforts could be creating information overload; dense PowerPoint slides full of data points are a huge turn off for employees.



**WHO MIGHT BE THE BEST SPOKESPERSON(S) FOR KEY TOPICS;** how stories or pictures and video might be better than only facts and figures?



**HOW A FOLLOW-UP SURVEY** can help you continuously improve the town hall and demonstrate that employees who attended the town hall are more informed and know their role better than those who didn't?



**TOWN HALL TIP**  
Host local meetings within two to three days after an enterprise-wide town hall to maximize results and help leaders increase relevance.

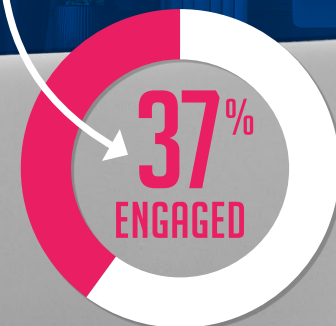
# THE CASE FOR MEANINGFUL CHANGE TO THE BORING TOWN HALL

To consider why it's worth the effort to produce a far more effective town hall, we need to think about several key factors: the impact of employee engagement and building trust on the business, as well as the employee need for a sense of belonging and their preferences for information delivery. Let's start with engagement. Fully engaged employees feel a strong emotional connection to their employer and organization. That allows them to identify with, be motivated by and be willing to spend extra effort for their employer (e.g., extra time, brainpower or energy). It also leads to an employee's willingness to advocate on behalf of the organization and brand. The sad fact is that even after some recent improvements, many employees are not very engaged today. This has a negative impact on productivity, results, shareholder value and many other aspects of the business. Any efforts to enhance employee engagement by reinventing your approach to town hall meetings can reap considerable benefits.

## DATA SHOWS<sup>1</sup>

U.S. employee engagement saw its **first annual decline in a decade**—dropping from 36% engaged employees in 2020 to 34% in 2021. And that slump continued in early 2022—dropping 2 more points to 32%.

EMPLOYEES WHO WORK EXCLUSIVELY  
REMOTE OR HYBRID TEND TO HAVE  
HIGHER LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT



**Vs.**  
**29%**  
(WHO WORK  
EXCLUSIVELY  
ON-SITE)

## WHY HIGH ENGAGEMENT MATTERS<sup>2</sup>

- Companies with highly engaged workforces are **21% more profitable**
- Disengaged employees cost U.S. companies around \$450-500 billion each year
- Companies with a thriving corporate culture achieve more than **four times higher revenue growth**
- Organizations best at engaging their employees achieve earnings-per-share growth that is more than **four times** that of their competitors
- Compared with business units in the lower quartile, those in the top quartile of engagement realize better results in these key categories:

- ☒ Higher customer engagement
- ☒ Higher productivity
- ☒ Better retention
- ☒ Fewer accidents
- ☒ Higher profitability

MOTIVATING  
EMPLOYEES TO  
HELP ACHIEVE  
YOUR STRATEGIC VISION  
INCREASES PROFITABILITY  
**22% TO 27%**  
(OVER A 6- TO 12-MONTH BASIS<sup>3</sup>)



COMPANIES WITH HIGHLY  
EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION  
PRACTICES HAD

**47%** HIGHER  
TOTAL  
RETURNS  
(TO SHAREHOLDERS OVER FIVE  
YEARS COMPARED TO THOSE WITH  
LESS EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION<sup>4</sup>)

<sup>1</sup>Gallup Employee Engagement Index, 2022

<sup>2</sup>HR Cloud, 2022

<sup>3</sup>Chief Executive Group

<sup>4</sup>Willis Towers Watson



# EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT GOES HAND IN HAND WITH LEVELS OF TRUST

While the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer found that trust is on the rise for businesses compared to other institutions, it's critical that leaders continue to focus on building trust with their employees. One in five employees (22%) have left a company because of trust issues<sup>1</sup>. And Trust Across America, a corporate advocacy organization that helps institutions build trust through effective business practices, has found that the most trustworthy public companies outperform the S&P 500 over time. During the five-year period from 2016 to 2021, cumulative returns for America's most trustworthy public companies were 166% versus 117% for the S&P. When conducted with a strategic focus, all-hands meetings can be incubators for the trust building that's so stubbornly elusive to many organizations.

## HOW LEADERS BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST<sup>2</sup>



**TACTICAL VISION:**  
Recognition that building trust into an organization's DNA will create long-term sustainability



**RESPONSIBLE CULTURE:**  
Commitment to the values, principles and beliefs essential to building a foundation of trust



**UNWAVERING LEADERSHIP:**  
Implementation of long-term trust strategies that separate great leaders from their competitors



**STRATEGIC ACTIONS:**  
The key daily actions that characterize a commitment to building stakeholder trust



**TRANSFORMATION:**  
The newly adopted behaviors that build high trust and collaboration with all stakeholder groups

## A THIRD PRONG BEHIND THE NEED FOR A TOWN HALL TURNAROUND IS THE CLEAR NEED FOR A STRONGER SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG TODAY'S EMPLOYEES.



Belonging is a basic human need. Everyone wants to belong and be part of something larger than themselves. It follows that information at town halls on such critical things as vision, values and strategies should help reinforce this concept of belonging. Research also continues to show that face-to-face communications are preferred by employees. This ongoing reality points us to one of the reasons well-planned and orchestrated town hall meetings should be placed high on a list of priorities for an internal communication plan. It's important to ask: *How do we make these sessions front and center of our communications to employees?*

## THE EIGHT KEY QUESTIONS

Survey findings show employees want to hear directly from their supervisors. One solution might be mini-sessions conducted by local leaders that directly follow a town hall, or within a few days. Smaller sessions facilitate the repetition of messages and more in-depth and dynamic dialogue. Feedback and outcomes from these meetings can also help improve the big meetings by bringing more diverse perspectives.

Remember *The Eight Key Questions*, starting with employees' most basic "me-focused" needs, which have to be addressed first before employees can transition to the ultimate payoff and ask, "How can I help?" Considering these key questions brings us to a roadmap for leveling up your town halls.

- 8. How can I help?
  - 7. What's our vision and values?
  - 6. How are we doing?
  - 5. What's our business strategy?
  - 4. What's going on?
  - 3. Does anyone care about me?
  - 2. How am I doing?
  - 1. What's my job?
- WE**
- TRANSITION**
- ME**

<sup>1</sup>The Complexity of Trust: PwC's Trust in US Business Survey, 2021

<sup>2</sup>Trust Across America—Barbara Brooks Kimmel

# HOW TO TRANSFORM YOUR TOWN HALLS

Based on our experience with scores of clients and the latest developments in technology, here are 10 ideas to transform your town halls into “must attend” events that engage, inform and inspire employees.

- 1  
CROWDSOURCE QUESTIONS
- 2  
INCORPORATE AUDIENCE RESPONSE TECHNOLOGY
- 3  
SHARE THE STAGE
- 4  
DRAW LINE OF SIGHT TO YOUR STRATEGY
- 5  
STREAMLINE YOUR AGENDA
- 6  
BUILD IN A STANDING RECOGNITION SEGMENT
- 7  
EXPERIMENT WITH GAMIFICATION
- 8  
DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE FOLLOW UP
- 9  
CHANGE IT UP
- 10  
BE INTENTIONAL WITH TOUCH POINTS





## CROWDSOURCE QUESTIONS— {AND COMMIT TO TRANSPARENCY WHEN ANSWERING}

Consider a “bottom-up” approach to your town hall by asking employees in advance what’s on their minds. Use tools such as Pigeonhole, which allows employees to submit questions anonymously, see all other questions and vote on the questions they are most interested in. In the town hall, answer the top three to five—no matter what they are. You can be sure the content will be relevant to your people, and you’ll be appreciated for your candor, authenticity and, hopefully, a bit of vulnerability.



Further demonstrate your commitment to transparency and openness by answering **all** remaining questions (or questions with at least a certain number of votes) in a follow-up email.

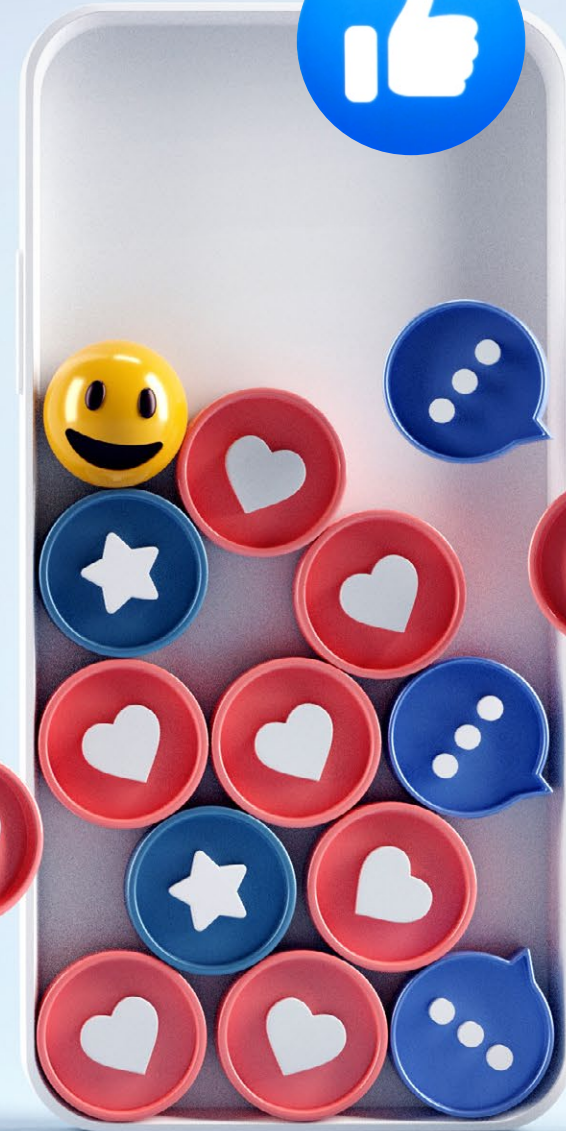


# 2



## INCORPORATE AUDIENCE RESPONSE TECHNOLOGY TO ENGAGE YOUR HYBRID AUDIENCE

Use in-meeting polling to invite staff—in the room and globally—to share real-time impressions of a big agenda item. Invite responses to questions and have those responses show up on the screen as word clouds or other formats. Input could be prompted with a few questions during the session—for example: What excites you most about this big idea? What will you tell your family/friends about this idea? What inspires you as you think about our mission? You can also suggest possible responses and ask people to vote for what fits for them. For fun, you could also pepper in a few unique or humorous questions that play into the organization's culture and tie back to the big idea.





# 3



## SHARE THE STAGE

Don't let your town hall become the CEO show. Build trust in your entire leadership team by inviting leaders across the organization to deliver relevant updates based on the agenda. And then don't stop there. Employees want to hear and learn from their peers. Instead of having a senior leader deliver an update or a case study, consider having them facilitate a panel discussion with the employees who worked on the project. In larger or particularly matrixed organizations, peer panels or spotlights can help paint a picture of career growth opportunities within the company.

### TIPS



Don't let your CEO become a task master responsible for transitioning between all segments. Consider inviting a personable and engaging employee to be emcee and manage the agenda flow.



Broadcasting your town hall virtually? Include on-screen captions that clearly indicate any presenter's name and title, so audiences know who is speaking.

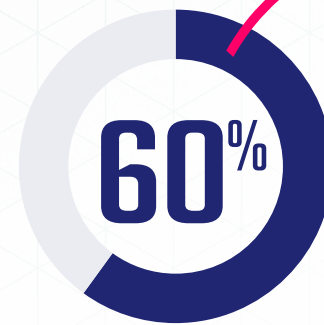


# 4



## DRAW LINE OF SIGHT TO YOUR STRATEGY—EVERY TIME YOU CONVENE

At the beginning of each town hall, dedicate time to reviewing your company's business priorities and progress you have made against them or the challenges you are facing. Help employees understand their role in achieving your business strategy and the behaviors you expect to see that embody your company's values. Various studies show that anywhere from:



TO



of employees **don't know** their company's strategy. It is your job as a leader to bridge this gap and drive performance. Remember to put the update in plain language to help employees see themselves in the strategy.



NOW LET'S  
TAKE SOME  
QUESTIONS...



## STREAMLINE YOUR AGENDA



Depending on the time you have set for the meeting (ideally no more than 60-90 minutes), limit the topics you'll cover to three to five. A good rule of thumb is that town halls should be a platform to share new updates or provide context on a previous announcement.

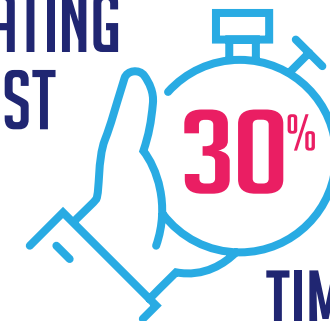


For example, if quarterly earnings were the week prior, and you have nothing new to add to what was already shared, it does not need to be included on the agenda. As you are developing the agenda, be firm on time allotted for Q&A or open discussion.



Organizations often try to pack so much into one session that by the time all topics have been covered, employees' eyes are glazed over and only ten minutes remain for Q&A.

SET A GOAL OF  
DEDICATING  
AT LEAST



OF YOUR  
MEETING  
TIME TO OPEN  
DISCUSSION

TIP





## BUILD A STANDING RECOGNITION SEGMENT INTO THE TOWN HALL

Set aside one portion of the agenda to focus on team recognition.

**Leaders** can run this segment (e.g., in each town hall, three different leaders recognize their teams for living the company values or advancing a key priority; recognized teams are invited to lunch with the CEO) or you can set it up where **employees** recognize a peer for something they did (e.g., the first employee names a peer, who then names another and so on; each recognition recipient receives a small gift card or other token).



By making this a regular part of your town halls, you'll create a **CULTURE OF GRATITUDE AND RECOGNITION.**



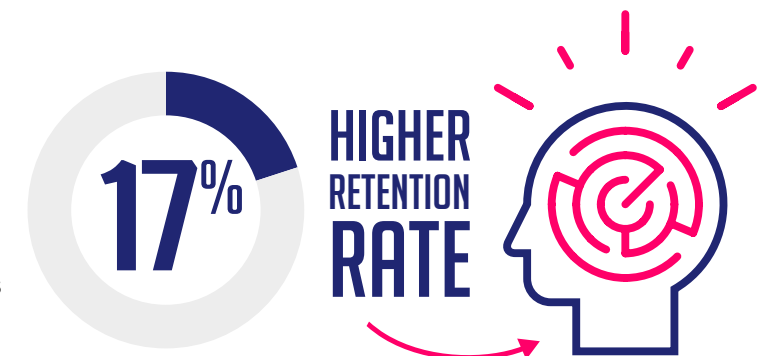


## EXPERIMENT BY ADDING GAMIFICATION INTO THE MEETING

Play a game of BINGO with staff and tie the game to a branded strategy, set of values, etc. Hand out cards at the beginning of the town hall as people enter the room (and send in advance to those at global sites/create digital versions) so they can play during the meeting. The branded card features key words associated with your choice of initiatives. As your leader(s) speaks, staff can mark which concepts on their card they hear—just like a game of BINGO. The first few people who complete their cards and can call out your branded card name in the moment, win. This gives people a chance to listen purposefully to key concepts, keep them engaged, and have some fun. Leaders can shout out congratulations to those who win and give out prizes.

### FUN FACT

Scientists have studied the “new normal” of our ability to concentrate and have found that the average human attention span has fallen from 12 seconds in 2000 to eight seconds today. Employees consume media nearly 11 hours each day and shift their attention between their smartphone, tablet and computer 21 times every hour. Employees no longer consider what they are looking at, but rather what else they should be looking at. As a result, companies are asking how to get and keep their employees’ attention. Games are one possible solution. Games engage audiences with social and competitive elements, driving heightened attention, sustained focus and more action. In a game-based learning case study, Karl Kapp reveals data that shows a



in curriculum involving gaming over lectures. Games are extremely malleable and can be applied throughout a wide range of fields and industries<sup>1</sup>.

## DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE FOLLOW UP: GATHER FEEDBACK AND FOLLOW THROUGH

After the enterprise-wide town hall, have leaders host mini-meetings with their site, functions, teams, etc. to underscore key messages and emphasize what is most relevant for their smaller groups. Help your leaders by equipping them with a topline message sheet or a more detailed toolkit with FAQ depending on the complexity of the topic.

### ADDITIONALLY



Be sure to send out a replay link or follow-up note to reach employees who may not have been able to make the meeting so they are hearing the same information as their peers.

Include a short pulse survey to gather employee feedback on the meeting, and address that feedback as you plan your next town hall.



## CHANGE IT UP

While consistency can be key, if you are a company that has frequent town halls (say, every month), don't be afraid to do one a little differently. Give the business updates a break and instead create an agenda that is solely focused on inspiring your employees. Bring the outside in—your customers, your patients, an inspirational speaker, etc.—who can energize, motivate and thank employees for everything they are doing to advance your company's work. Taking a step back to reflect and reconnect to one another and the company's mission will breathe new energy into the organization.



## CASE STUDY



### "A DOSE OF INSPIRATION"

Employees at a leading pharmaceutical company were change-weary from the volume and intensity of change over the past two years, and coupled with the pandemic, frustrations, feelings of uncertainty and anxiety were rising. We partnered with the communications team to create a reset moment for the organization called "A Dose of Inspiration," during which the team came together to:



**PAUSE**  
to acknowledge  
the changes  
and challenges



**RECOGNIZE**  
and celebrate  
associates and  
milestones



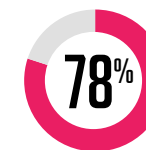
**RE-CENTER**  
on their critical  
mission—*transforming  
the lives of patients  
and their families*



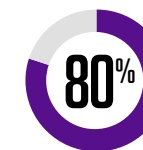
**INSPIRE**  
associates about  
the future and  
their role in the  
company's success



The event was not just another town hall—content was inspirationally toned and high-level versus focused on business updates. It featured both internal and external speakers who helped associates take stock in how they can find inspiration from their patients, one another and within. Now in its second year, employees have called A Dose of Inspiration "the best [company] meeting to date" and "absolutely inspiring from start to finish."



REPORTED FEELING  
MORE CONNECTED TO  
THE COMPANY'S MISSION



SAID THEY  
WERE "COMPLETELY"  
INSPIRED



## BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT COMMUNICATION TOUCH POINTS BETWEEN TOWN HALLS

Are your town halls spaced out—perhaps quarterly? Do you find that Q&A sessions carry more tension because there are few opportunities for employees to have open dialogue with leaders? Consider supplementing your standing town halls with additional leader engagement opportunities such as an “Ask Me Anything” (AMA) session or virtual coffee with leaders.

### HOW TO



An AMA has no agenda—it is a purely open Q&A session with leaders. Source questions in advance using tools like Pigeonhole or your company’s intranet platform, or—for more comfortable/advanced leaders—field them live in the room. Offer a 30-minute AMA with leaders between town halls to keep a pulse on what’s on employees’ minds and prevent issues from bottling up.



Virtual Coffees are a great way for employees to get to know new or tenured leaders. Have one leader commit to a handful of sessions, or engage multiple leaders to host at least one each. Sessions can be general or themed around business or even personal topics (e.g., company strategy, fiscal year priorities, outdoor enthusiasts, video games) and provide a more relaxed setting to facilitate conversation.

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Have a member of the communications team present at each session to help listen for key issues or track areas of feedback that the company can act on subsequently.





# THE SINGLE BIGGEST PROBLEM IN COMMUNICATION IS THE ILLUSION THAT IT HAS TAKEN PLACE.

— GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

**N**ow that you're ready to take your town halls to a whole new level of success, it's worth considering once again the payoffs from such an effort. One of the biggest problems leaders have today is that it's too tempting to decide that they've communicated well—or succeeded at delivering a great town hall—simply based on a few comments from fellow leaders or communicators coming out of the meeting.

Too often, there's just not enough sincere attention paid to whether the key audience that matters—**all employees**—felt they actually learned something important or were inspired in new ways to do an even better job. We hope this eBook helps leaders avoid that trap and start using one of the best communications tools for reaching employees on a wide scale—the town hall—to engage their workforce and make a real, lasting impact on the company's business goals.

# LET'S CONNECT



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David helps leaders drive productivity and get the results they want through authentic and courageous leadership and communication. He's a sought-after speaker, advisor to Fortune 500 leaders and member of the Forbes Communication Council. A four-time author, his latest award-winning book, **"Heart First: Lasting Leader Lessons from a Year that Changed Everything,"** features interviews with 30+ leaders inside a variety of organizations, each of whom share extraordinarily candid insights and unique leadership lessons. His leader**communicator**™ blog is ranked the #1 blog on communication

by Feedspot six years in a row. David is Founder & CEO of The Grossman Group, an award-winning Chicago-based strategic leadership development and internal communications consultancy. The Grossman Group's clients include AbbVie, Allstate, Form Technologies, Kaiser Permanente, Lockheed Martin, Novartis Gene Therapies, Southern New Hampshire University, and more. David is a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP), an MBTI® Certified Practitioner, a Prosci Certified Change Practitioner and taught graduate-level internal communications at Columbia University in NYC.

David has been featured in:

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

NBC NIGHTLY NEWS

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