



Smart guide

7 ways to improve town halls

Learn how to
boost energy and
engagement



We don't talk anymore

Before Twitter and Facebook, people gathered at town hall meetings to talk openly about important issues, share opinions and ask burning questions. But it often feels like today's employee town halls have lost this spirit of engagement. They've become more about leaders presenting PowerPoint® slides instead of having a meaningful conversation with their employees. (It's enough to make the Greeks and Romans, who invented town halls, cry.)

At Davis & Company, we've tackled this challenge many times. This guide is designed to cover the lessons we've learned along the way: seven practical ways to bring a new level of energy and participation to your town halls. It's time to bring back the core principle of town halls and get people talking again!

7 ways to improve town halls

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1

Find out what employees need

When you sit down to draft your town hall agenda, remember whom you're trying to reach: employees. Too often, town halls are designed to appeal to leaders' preferences, without keeping in mind what will engage employees and satisfy their information needs.

How do you find out what employees need? Do a little research. For example, several years ago we held focus groups at a manufacturing facility to find out how well communication was working for employees. Overall, they were pleased with communication, but were negative about senior leader town halls. So, we dug a little deeper and discovered the content wasn't relevant to their jobs (and too complicated).

"All that financial stuff—I have to admit most of it is over my head," said one employee. "It's too dense—and I don't really understand what it means to me. Just tell me what I need to do!"



Out-of-the-box idea

Prior to your town hall, ask employees to submit topics they're most interested in and add one or two to the agenda.



Here's what to do

- ✓ Use demographic data to understand your employee audience
- ✓ Conduct surveys after each town hall to collect feedback
- ✓ Hold focus groups for an in-depth look at what employees need
- ✓ Use your research to recommend changes to content, format and other aspects of town hall meetings

2 Set clear objectives

Now that you know what employees need from your town hall, how do you give it to them? Set a few clear objectives that put into words what you want to accomplish and make it easy to measure the effectiveness of your efforts.

A simple way to get started is to ask yourself: What do I want employees to know, believe or do as a result of the town hall?

Know	Believe	Do
What do you want employees to learn or be aware of?	How do you want employees to think differently?	What action do you want employees to take after the town hall?
EXAMPLE Employees will know how the new business strategy will impact their day-to-day jobs.	EXAMPLE Employees will believe working together as one team will help us improve customer service.	EXAMPLE Employees will participate in upcoming workshops that gather ideas and determine actions to improve customer service.



Out-of-the-box idea

Set an objective for how you'd like employees to feel after the town hall. Motivated? Energized? Determined? Then think about how to run the session to achieve that objective.



Here's what to do

- ✓ Set specific objectives that state what employees will know, believe or do at the end of the town hall
- ✓ Make sure post-event survey questions are designed to measure town hall objectives

3 Choose no more than three topics

Town halls don't happen very often, so it's tempting to talk about everything that happened since the last one. But, there's a limit to how much information employees can process before their eyes glaze over and they feel overwhelmed.

That is why you should limit your agenda to **no more than three key topics** (yes, only three) and keep the level of detail to a minimum. Having fewer, more focused topics will keep employees interested and make more time for Q&A at the end.

Below is an example of a town hall agenda that is focused and includes plenty of time for employee participation.

Session	Facilitator/Presenter
Welcome (5 min)	Facilitator
Topic 1: Progress at a glance (10 min)	CFO/President
Topic 2: Key business objectives (15 min)	President
Topic 3: Innovation in action (30 min)	Team leader(s)
Employees share ideas and examples (25 min)	Facilitator/employees
Closing (5 min)	Facilitator



Out-of-the-box idea

Avoid including topics (like financial results) that have been communicated before. Every topic should be fresh and new.



Here's what to do

- ✓ Start with objectives (see #2) and focus on content that will achieve those outcomes
- ✓ Include a maximum of three topics per town hall
- ✓ Schedule more than one person to speak, but allow only people with knowledge of the key topics to present

4 Use time wisely

Many employee town halls have become more presentation than discussion, leaving employees to play the role of passive spectators.

To get your employees more engaged and bring back the historical spirit of town halls, rethink how to use the time you have. Here is an agenda example that shows how you can reset the clock:

Time	Content	60 minutes
5 minutes	Welcome, introductions	
5 minutes	Thank you for a great year; recognize teams and individuals that made a difference	
5 minutes	Recap seven priorities for the coming year, giving a tangible example for each priority	
15 minutes	Focus on the customer service priority: what's happening with our competitors, why customer service is a differentiator, how we'll improve our scores by 10%	
25 minutes	Gather employee perspectives on customer service: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hold a brainstorm session for initial ideas• Conduct a leader panel Q&A and discussion	
5 minutes	Next steps, thank you	



Out-of-the-box idea

There's no rule that says a town hall must be 60 or 90 minutes. Build a 45- or 35-minute agenda and play with the mix of activities until you find the right one.



Here's what to do

- ✓ Choose no more than three agenda topics that employees want to know about (see #3)
- ✓ Assign a facilitator to watch the clock and keep things moving
- ✓ Be sure you collect questions and ideas employees generate for future use

5 Encourage interaction

The last thing employees want to do at a town hall is listen to leaders present slides for an hour. (Boring!)

What's the solution? Create an environment where employees feel they're part of the action and have the opportunity to share their thoughts. The result: employees will feel energized, retain more information and act on what they hear.

Here are a few ways to encourage employee interaction:

Rearrange seating	Create breakouts	Rethink Q&A
Create a more intimate environment by seating people at round tables in a semi-circle facing the presenter. Also, you should ditch the stage and keep the presenter on the same level as employees.	Set aside some time in your agenda for a quick brainstorming exercise with small groups of employees. (This is easy to do if people are seated at tables.) For example, you could ask each table to come up with three ways to support a new HR initiative and then share one idea with the entire room.	Instead of starting Q&A with "Any questions?", open up a meaningful dialogue with employees by asking specific questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What challenges do we face in achieving our customer-focused objectives? • What can your team do to support our objectives?



Out-of-the-box idea

Set up a virtual poll so employees can respond to questions using their mobile devices and see results in real time.



Here's what to do

- ✓ Keep seating tight; the closer employees are to the presenter, the more engaged they'll be
- ✓ Include at least 15 minutes in your agenda for an interactive activity or breakout session
- ✓ Provide your leader with at least three questions to ask employees during the Q&A

6 Make presentations more dynamic

Even after you've scaled back the number of topics on your agenda, the average town hall is still jam-packed with information. Unfortunately, accompanying PowerPoint slides also tend to be packed—overloaded and in need of an overhaul. Slides that are bogged down with dense financials, long titles and too much copy can cause even the most charismatic leader to fall flat.

But don't get discouraged. Here are a few simple ways to fix overworked slides and improve engagement at your next town hall:

Less is more	Slides are free	Don't forget to tell the story
Keep copy to a minimum by sticking to one thought per slide.	Keep the show moving by using lots of slides with intriguing and clever visuals—photos, infographics, colorful charts and video clips.	Keep employees interested by using a story arc to share a narrative: Here's our challenge, how we'll address it and the desired result.



Out-of-the-box idea

Who says you always need PowerPoint for a presentation? Show a video and distribute a handout that provides supporting visuals and a place for employees to take notes.



Here's what to do

- ✓ Create slides that summarize the topic instead of showing every talking point
- ✓ Use animation to highlight important points in a list, letting employees know which item is being discussed
- ✓ Don't spend more than one minute on a single slide

7 Share highlights and next steps

So, you had a fantastic town hall! Leaders were happy with the improvements and employees asked some great questions. Time for a well-deserved margarita, right?

But before you celebrate, you should share highlights and next steps with those who couldn't attend the town hall (and keep the momentum going for those who did). There are a lot of ways to do this, such as intranet articles, videos or social media, but the key is to be timely and concise! Share content the day after the town hall and avoid going into a detailed "play by play" or posting a 90-minute video.



Out-of-the-box idea

Hold a "Live Chat" instant message-style session for employees who couldn't attend the town hall. Have the leader introduce the topic, then invite comments or questions from employees.



Here's what to do

- ✓ Write a short article (less than 300 words), focusing on no more than three "story highlights" and include links to additional content, such as presentations and videos
- ✓ Record the town hall and create a few 90-second video "highlight clips" on key topics
- ✓ Create a microblog for leaders and assist them in "tweeting" their impressions of the town hall

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5 things to know about us



Global. We've created communication programs that reach employees across the world, in nearly every continent (but not, we admit, Antarctica).



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Collaborative. Our favorite way of working is to meet with our clients and put our heads together.



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