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# HOW TO LEAD ENGAGING STAFF MEETINGS

## 5 Pointers to Keep Meetings Productive

BY ALEXANDER MENRISKY

Keeping your staff in the loop is important for the successful operation of a spa, but meetings can be boring—just hearing the word can produce groans and sighs.

On the bright side, meetings shouldn't be at all painful, especially if you keep in mind these practical pointers.



## 1. Start with the positive.

Most spa directors agree that setting the mood for a positive meeting is crucial. “We begin with positive updates and associate recognition, dig into issues and challenges in the middle and end with upbeat and inspirational takeaways and encouragement,” says Gloria Ah Sam, spa director at Ojai Valley Inn & Spa in Ojai, California, adding that a great way to set a positive tone is to begin with the introduction and welcome of new associates.

Luane McWhorter, owner of Grand Spa in Dallas, Texas, also makes sure to acknowledge outstanding staff members of the month before jumping into the spa’s issues.

Setting the mood isn’t just a verbal thing. Leaders can use a number of strategies to begin on a positive note. For instance, having food during meetings can help create an environment of sharing. Knowing this, Grand Spa ensures that food, whether in the form of fun appetizers, desserts or dinner, is present.

“We don’t focus on nagging about housekeeping items. Instead, we spend a small portion of the meeting over the nitty-gritty and then use the rest of the time to get inspired and focus on solutions for success,” says Jennifer Spencer, spa director of Sante Spa Victoria located in Victoria, British Columbia in Canada.

## 2. Maintain control and stay on topic.

Once a meeting’s underway, spa directors recommend keeping control of the session’s direction and purpose. Having too many conversations happening at once can be distracting, and spa directors need to make sure they keep in control.

“We value our associates’ time and professional commitment. We don’t want them to dread a boring meeting and expect maximum, engaged attendance from them,” Ah Sam says. “Be well prepared. Stay on time. Keep meetings focused on agenda topics and table

issues that begin to sidetrack from the agenda.”

Proper communication is paramount, and goes hand-in-hand with a planned schedule. “It is important to have an agenda for a well planned-out staff meeting, especially with a large staff,” McWhorter says. “Communication is almost always an issue, so trying to make sure we touch on all that is important in these meetings is key.”

Mixing up the meeting location can also be beneficial. Hold occasional spa leadership meetings outdoors or away from the spa. “[A change of location] is beneficial as it helps ensure that we do not get interrupted and is good for a change of pace,” says Spencer, adding that she and her team of eight managers hold meetings outside the spa about four times a year.

As for Ojai Valley Inn & Spa, they normally do two spa leadership meetings away from their premises each year. “These meetings make it a special uninterrupted time to do some team-building

**“These meetings make it a special uninterrupted time to do some team-building, goal-setting and have some fun away from our daily operations.”**

— Gloria Ah Sam, spa director at Ojai Valley Inn & Spa in Ojai, California





Grand Spa's lounge area



Sante Spa Victoria's mineral pool

and goal-setting, and have some fun away from our daily operations," says Ah Sam. "Our quarterly all-staff meetings are scheduled a year in advance and we rotate the day of the week and times of the meetings. We change the meeting venue depending on the time of the year and meeting space that is available at the resort."

### 3. Spice up the meeting with games and activities.

The possibilities are endless—many spas have come up with a slew of fun activities to keep their staff engaged before or during meetings and help encourage team-building or brainstorm ways to solve problems.

"We do team-building exercises, quiz challenges, prizes for correct answers, include a refreshment component, bring in guest speakers and rotate management leadership members to address agenda topics and celebrate our successes," Ah Sam shares. Each activity serves a different purpose, but all keep staff members interested in the meeting.

Role playing, for example, is a good way to combine fun with productivity. Grand Spa uses role playing to act out how situations could have been handled differently, so that staff members learn new ways to approach difficult prob-

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lems, and negative issues are re-tooled as positive learning experiences.

Sante Spa Victoria, on the other hand, creates a multi-dimensional presentation, incorporating visuals and videos to keep the team engaged. "We use flip charts for team brainstorming," Spencer says, adding that she assigns team leads to prepare a portion of the meeting so that they become more empowered leaders. Apart from interactive activities like ice-breakers and games, she also uses music to evoke feelings and presents slideshows of team photos at different community and in-house events to create a sense of pride and inspire her team.

### 4. Do not dwell on negative situations.

Many spa directors agree that the most common mistake made by leaders during staff meetings is an emphasis on the negative. "They don't make them fun or engaging or they use the meeting time to primarily focus on negative or

depressing subjects," Ah Sam says.

McWhorter agrees, and encourages directors to "push back negative feedback with new ideas or changes."

"I try to turn the situation into a challenge that I know they can handle and will show how this will be beneficial in the long run," she says. "If they are really against something new, I put a time limit on it and say we are going to try this and we will re-evaluate at this later date. It usually always works to calm and diffuse and get everyone on board."

Spencer has seen her fair share of negative meetings as well. "I remember over the span of my career in various spa positions being at meetings where roundtables were just used for venting out negativity as the culture of the meeting," she says. "Everyone would leave feeling deflated and uninspired. I vowed to myself when I became a spa director, I would do it differently."

Not only does this positive atmosphere keep employees engaged, it also

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helps them achieve their goals.

“Focusing on the positive and teaching a team how to deliver a constructive suggestion is the best thing you can do,” Spencer says. “It empowers the team to get part of the solution.”

To help her team do this, the spa put up a roundtable system on how to get team inputs. They are encouraged to share one thing they are grateful for with

every constructive feedback or suggestion they give. “It is amazing how this shows them how to thank each other and commend their team members and what we do well. It really makes people feel good at the end,” she says.

### 5. Encourage retention.

All of this hard work and fun means nothing, however, if employees don't

retain what they learn. Ojai Valley Inn & Spa uses follow-up quizzes to review information from previous sessions, and Grand Spa ensures that managers are held accountable. Supporting information and reminders are posted on communication boards to keep key points fresh, and make sure staff members keep common goals and know how to achieve them.

“When we all have a deeper sense of purpose, we have a deeper sense of engagement,” Spencer says. “The lesson stops becoming about who left the dirty laundry out and starts becoming about how we can make a difference in our guest's lives.” ■

## Turn Meetings Into CREATIVE PLAYTIME

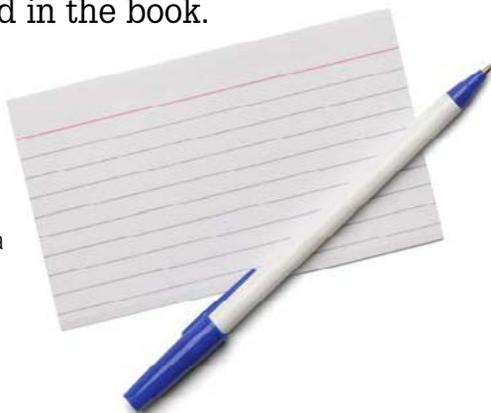
Turn your meeting into a fun game. According to the book *Gamestorming: A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers and Changemakers* written by Dave Gray, Sunni Brown and James Macanufo, we are all hardwired to play games. Tap into this innate need for social interactions with a few engaging games featured in the book.

### The Anti-Problem

Take the reverse psychology approach. Instead of asking how to solve the problem, identify factors that may be contributing to the issue. Ask your spa team to identify ways to solve the problem opposite to their current problem.

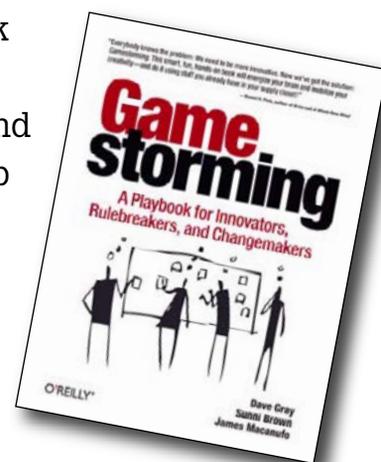
For example, if your goal is to increase sales in your spa, ask them to solve the anti-problem: How do you decrease sales in your spa?

The goal is to get people to evaluate a problem from a different perspective, and discover things that they are doing that are contributing to the actual problem.



### Brainwriting

This game is great in generating multiple ideas and building on them. Start with a key topic, such as “improving customer service.” Distribute index cards for team members to write down ideas. Ask players to pass the index card to the right and let them read the idea on the index card just received. Then, ask them to add another idea inspired by the original idea.



### Button

Break free of the roundtable routine of going around the room and asking for everyone's idea. This all-too-common practice often becomes too predictable and boring.

As a solution, use a “button” (a small token or coin) that is given randomly to a person to speak. The person then passes the button to a team member who has yet to receive the button. The random approach of this game helps participants pay attention.

