

VIEWPOINTS

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**THE RISK IN
NOT RISKING**

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Time for change. 😊

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THE RISK IN NOT RISKING

Despite the discomfort, for meetings to change positively we need to change.

THE MEETING INDUSTRY TENDS TO VIEW RISK AS A LIABILITY. We have (and need) complex contractual clauses that address indemnity, force majeure and liability. We use carefully crafted checklists so meetings run perfectly. After all, who wants to risk it?

Then we invite imperfect, novelty-seeking, easily bored guests whose input we can't control; people who crave surprise, creativity and the extraordinary. We know eliciting change is an imperfect science at best. So how do we navigate the gap between staging safe, legal, well-run events and designing live experiences that leave audiences changed and inspired?

There's an inherent—and crucial—boldness in trying something new and not knowing, for certain, whether it'll work. For meetings to change positively, we need to

change. And change doesn't happen in the middle. It happens on the edge, where, frankly, it's uncomfortable.

Corporate Cultures Change when Meetings Change

Imagine trying to set the stage for managers to be more change ready—in a meeting structured the same old way. Talk about a disconnect! Laura Barron, senior manager, field communications at Charles Schwab, needed to increase attendee buy-in on new change initiatives in three divisions. My partnership with Schwab involved communication consultant Brian Walter (MPI Washington State Chapter), who produced two custom formats for Barron's meetings.

First, a "Fact or Fiction" game, in which

everyone was quizzed on their knowledge around changes in the firm and the industry over the years. Playful, yet with an important purpose of opening attendees' minds, the game lessened resistance to what came next in the agenda, and to change in general.

Then the group participated in conversations focused on upcoming initiatives that would require them to use their change-management skills. Managers learned from and shared with each other their own problem-solving best practices.

In another segment, leaders sat on stage in "Hot Seats," while attendees asked any questions they wished—anonously—on flash cards. The rapid-fire Q&A boosted managers' trust of their leaders and was a fresh way to communicate the challenges



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and rewards ahead on a human level. All without a slide deck getting in the way of having engaging, inclusive conversations.

Barron's own manager thanked her for raising the bar on their meetings. Attendees expressed appreciation of the new formats. They knew they covered a great deal of important ground, yet didn't feel rushed or bored.

Aiming for a Higher Summit

Since Sept. 2001, the MPI Washington State Chapter and the PCMA Pacific Northwest Chapter have co-hosted an annual Meetings Industry Summit. For 2014, the planning team wanted to create a decidedly different experience.

Their aims: a hyper-relevant, razor-sharp agenda, with actionable content for attendees. After days of tossing around ideas, they hit on the theme "Accelerate your EventEdge" to express the importance of taking risks—for themselves and attendees—to move everyone, and the industry, forward.

They consciously built in novel ways to experience programming. In selecting keynotes, for example, they steered clear of MPI- and PCMA-"approved" speakers, opting for an edgier duo who still fostered high levels of participation so attendees

could move beyond their own "edges."

Previous summits included a lecture-style delivery of an "industry update." But this year's team allowed participants to decide what was current, with a breakout named "Birds of a Feather: A High-Flying, Fast-Paced Learning Lab for your Most Burning Questions." It was both the planning team's biggest risk (discomforting) and its biggest win. Each table in the room was devoted to a burning industry issue: What affects will disruptors Airbnb, Uber and Lyft bring? What's up with net neutrality? How do you do more with less? Participants co-created the experience and later raved about it.

Failing Forward

Working with a financial-services client, I once made the mistake of using too many new formats at the organization's training event. Change is good—but too much of it, all at once, can backfire. My hard lesson: take incremental risks and achieve small wins over time.

Indeed, an unavoidable component of risk is failure. We usually learn more from messing up than getting it right. Author Harriet Rubin's advice sustained me as I riskily launched my own entrepreneurship back in 1999. Her words still inspire me in

7 Ways to Raise the Bar on Risk

- 1) Ask why for greater ROI. When stakeholders understand why you're trying a new concept, and come to value the strategy behind it, they're likely to take your ideas more seriously, and feel more bought in. Fully acknowledge others' points of view and show how your ideas will overcome perceived hurdles.
- 2) When you prove ROI, you convert others' pain of uncertainty into a gain.
- 3) Come to the table with case studies and data-driven research that show successes in similar organizations.
- 4) Consider what problem your perceptively risky solution solves—and influence others from this perspective.
- 5) Tie your risks to what your brand stands for, and to specific organizational goals. Risk just for risk's sake is simply too dangerous for your organization and your audience. If your brand stands for innovation, but your meetings are stagnant, why should audiences take the content seriously?
- 6) As you begin an uncertain journey, implement small risks over time rather than one big one. You'll gain more latitude for more substantial risks later.
- 7) Communicate reasons for your risks during the meeting, to increase whole-hearted participation.

walks to the edge. "At some point, we all have to decide how we are going to fail: by not going far enough, or by going too far," she wrote. "The only alternative for the most successful (maybe even the most fulfilled) people is the latter. The interesting challenge is to know that if you don't go far enough, you'll never know how far you can go." ■