
NOT ANOTHER
BLOODY
CONFERENCE!

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BEST EVENT EVER!

The airport tannoy announced flight BA 906 to Frankfurt. As Natalie took her place in the queue she couldn't help wondering what she was letting herself in for. An invite to join the World Conference working party to make the next year's global event the best ever!

'What a well-honed brief that is', she thought to herself.

On the plane Natalie had time to reflect further, over a coffee, as to what might be expected of her and this working party.

She thought back to the previous conferences she had attended and she shuddered. Each time the boss had said this was going to be the best event ever in the history of the business. In fact it would be the best event ever, period.

And each time the event had focused on a mix of PowerPoint slide presentations, awkward Q&As, well-meaning but pointless break out activities as well as the obligatory energisers, outdoor team building and last night gala party.

As she sat back in her seat, Natalie couldn't help thinking that every conference she had ever attended was based around the same recycled format of a catchy theme, nice location, a series of earnest presentations and a big bash finish.

'Best event ever' she kept repeating in her head.

As the plane touched down Natalie had her moment of clarity. 'It's all about the event and never about what we will all do differently as a result of the event'. Natalie was sure she had hit upon the challenge facing her and the 'Best event ever' working party.

NEVER MIND THE OUTCOME, FEEL THE CONTENT

After an hour of talking Natalie knew they were in trouble.

Mick and Wolfgang had hogged most of the discussion so far. Their opening repartee around the theme 'not another bloody conference!' did not bode well. As they began to talk it became clear that their focus was on the quality of the location and the evening activities, above all else.

As Mick was the senior colleague on the team, sitting on the leadership team as Head of Commercial, the odds of influencing the tried and tested conference format seemed remote at best.

Mary had tried to engage the working party in aspects of content but the general impression seemed to be that a rehash of last year's top team scene setter, along with the usual brand marketing and sales presentations and a celebrity key note speaker, would do the trick.

‘Just make the slides less wordy and maybe introduce a few technology wizzy things, such as an app to capture the answers to some questions, and we will have nailed it,’ said Mick. ‘To make it the best event yet we need a really good team bonding outdoor activity and a better band than last year. We need everyone dancing this year.’

Natalie’s heart sank. She tried to bring attention to the fact that having an event purely for the sake of it did not make it the best ever. She even ventured a courageous thought that it might be better to save all the costs and time of an event if the aim was purely to trot out the same old messages and embark on a bit of tree hugging.

‘You don’t understand how these things work,’ said Wolfgang. ‘The business is going through some tough times and so it is really important we give people a good time. They need to bond, listen to some strong messages and get motivated by an external speaker – someone who has done something really interesting like walking to the North Pole on prosthetic limbs.’

Natalie sighed. 'Whilst these things are all well and good,' she said, 'I fail to see how this content driven approach will work. I mean, great though it may be to have someone speak about some mountaineering feat, wouldn't we be better off getting in an expert speaker on leadership to talk about motivating our people? Or perhaps a technical specialist to discuss a key challenge facing our industry?'

'In fact, going right back to basics, shouldn't we have the CEO here to ask what she wants the outcome of the event to be? After all, isn't an event supposed to be about aligning our people around a key message and then ensuring that they actually do something different to help the business move in the desired direction?'

Mick and Ludger both laughed at her words. 'You'll learn,' they seemed to be saying.

The key success criteria for all previous conferences had always been a combination of the top team's feedback and the 'happy sheets' which all delegates filled in. In essence, if the lunches were good and the Wi-Fi signal worked then the event was already a seven out of ten.

Or so it seemed to Natalie.

WHY BOTHER WITH A CONFERENCE AT ALL?

The working party meeting wrapped up with the usual set of actions and the four colleagues said their goodbyes.

As she walked towards the exit and the taxi ride back to the airport, Natalie suddenly stopped.

‘Seize the day,’ she thought.

Instead of turning left, she turned right and continued up the stairs to the Executive floor. And knocked on the door of the company CEO.

Julie had been in her post as CEO for over a year and had already presided over one World Conference.

She had been recruited into the business to inject energy and strong execution around the new business strategy. She had also come with a reputation for challenging the status quo and bringing fresh new thinking to businesses. So far though, there had been lots of inconsistent messages coming from the top team and little sign of any executional excellence or new thinking.

Natalie, although a mid-ranking marketing head, thought that it was now or never.

‘Come in,’ called the voice from behind the door.

Somewhat fortuitously, the CEO was in her office and free from the many meetings she had to attend.

Natalie went in and explained that she was on the working party for the next World Conference and that they had just had their first meeting.

‘Yes, I thought it would be good to bring in fresh thinking,’ said Julie. ‘How did you find the meeting?’

‘If I might be frank,’ Natalie replied, ‘I was surprised you were not at the meeting to give your need and expectations. Honestly. It seems like we are going to reheat the old meal again.’

‘Another bloody conference then!’ Julie said and laughed.

‘You have taken a brave step in coming to see me like this. Well, I like that. So tell me, what would you propose that we do in order to make it a worthwhile event?’

‘To be honest, the first thing I would do is stop calling it an event,’ answered Natalie.

‘In my experience, conferences seem to be content driven rather than outcome driven. And that is why we need you and your leadership team to come together on your big messages and also on what you want your leaders to do differently as a result of meeting at an event.’

The CEO sat for a moment and then said something that surprised Natalie.

‘I’m sorry we wasted your time today. In fact I sometimes think I am wasting my time as well. I am trying to get my leaders to adopt a new approach to doing business but we always seem to be kicking the can down the road. Let’s wait until midyear. Let’s just get through the price increases. Let’s do the conference first and then review our message.’

‘We do so much talking. And this conference is another example. Okay. So let me ask you another question. If you were me how would you approach the conference?’

Natalie paused. This was the CEO in front of her and this was a big question.

‘Well, I don’t want to tell you how to do your job but I would approach the conference from a different angle. I wouldn’t assume that we have to have an event, just because we always do. I would ask the question “what value would an event bring that is worth spending all that time and money on?”’

‘If we were to add up all the flights, hotel costs and time away from the office, then the ROI needs to be tangible and meaningful. So the conference would need to lead to colleagues actually going away and doing something different that helps us to get closer to our goals.’

‘It isn’t about being the best event ever. It shouldn’t be just about an event at all. It is about the direction of the business and, as you have been brought in to make a change, then the conference should be the vehicle by which you and your senior team communicate that message, consistently, along with a clear plan for embarking on the next stage of the journey. If that means a conference, then fine. The content and flow of the conference will come out of that.’

‘In short, I would start with your leadership team and explore the key message you want to communicate and the change you require in the business. I would then consider what outcomes you want from the event to move the business closer and build the content and flow around that.’

The fact that Julie was nodding made Natalie feel that her speech was not as career limiting as she had feared.

WHY DOES IT ALWAYS HAVE TO BE WORLD ONE?

The result of Natalie's meeting with Julie was a clear remit to run the conference planning.

Her first task was to encourage Julie to work with the leadership team to pull out the overall business strategy message and also to unpack the message for each pillar of the strategy. Julie undertook a series of workshops to pull out the aligned thinking from her leadership team and also to explore the change that this would mean for the business, most importantly the behavioural change towards a more collaborative approach that the senior team wanted to see across the business.

Having established the strategic context, the outcome of the conference was explored and the event was positioned as a vehicle to engage and align the leaders across the business in the next stage of the company journey. Digging deeper, the ROI was set as the quantity and quality of specific next steps within and across teams that would be created at the event, along with clear personal commitments from colleagues to deliver specific new habits.

The messages were unpacked in order to identify the key content blocks for each session as well as the flow of the event. The communication to colleagues was worked up, to include teasers pre-event and to build a clear theme for the event. Breakout exercises were designed to embed the learning and engage colleagues, in terms of personal commitment to deliver the change in the business.

Everything was going well until Natalie held a pre-conference rehearsal with Julie and her key leaders. It wasn't helped by the fact that Mike had been reacting badly to being usurped as leader of the conference planning team. He was continually sniping and looking to undermine this new 'soft' approach to the conference.

The atmosphere in the meeting was tense and it was clear that the leaders were not buying in to the event.

'This isn't working' said Julie.

'You're right it isn't,' echoed Mike. 'This namby pamby approach to the event is a waste of time. We just need to present our strategy logically and get our teams to work up their action plans. Then we can do a bit of bonding and we have sorted the collaboration bit.'

'Simple as that.'

'Simple as that?' questioned Julie.

‘The fascinating part of this whole process’, she continued, ‘is to see just how committed, or not as the case may be, we are to this new approach and set of behaviours. To be quite frank, Mike, I think we are just playing at it as a top team. And you aren’t helping!’

‘With Natalie’s help we have completely overhauled the way we have approached the conference. We now have a clear strategic context, a set of objectives and outcomes that we can measure, a content and flow that will tell our message and generate action from our people.’

‘But what we don’t have is leaders who own it. We are not genuine and if we can’t be authentic then there is no point in bothering with the event or, in fact, with the change we are supposed to be embarking on.’

‘We are trying to be creative, to engage people in our story, but we are being too formal about the whole thing. We are being too...too...’

‘World One,’ chimed Natalie.

‘What the heck is World One?!’ shouted Mike.

‘World One is our comfort zone. It is the world of information, formal meetings, PowerPoint presentations, telling, pushing,’ answered Natalie.

‘What we need is a bit of World Two. We need more informality. We need you to be telling personal stories about why this change is so important. We need to get you all on stage and have a really good debate, with no punches being pulled. We need to get rid of lots of the slides we hide behind. We need more table breakouts and spontaneous questions from the floor. We need to pull our audience with us and engage them fully.’

The silence in the room was broken by Julie.

‘Give me an example of a story.’

So Natalie recounted the story of her first conference meeting and wanting to leave and get on a plane home. She told them of her trepidation in approaching Julie spontaneously and of her decision to seize the moment and confront a CEO who might decide to punish what could look like a criticism of her and the top team. She told it with feeling and description and she captured their imagination.

‘That is what I mean by a story,’ she said.

Julie loved this authentic approach and very soon the team was being helped to put together personal stories to illustrate the messages and to engage the conference audience. Some of the team, especially those who adored data and charts, found the idea of working to visual images only a real challenge. But with a bit of encouragement they let go of the comfort blanket and stepped into the unknown.

FEEDBACK IS A GIFT

The conference week arrived at express speed and very soon the final speech from Julie was over and the gala dinner was upon them.

Not everything had gone according to plan and Natalie had to admit that attempting a World Two approach would take time to fully work. But overall the event was a sensational success.

When asked for their feedback, participants would cite various different aspects such as the stories, the layout of the room (small low coffee tables to encourage an informal feel), the absence of lots of slides and boring presentations, the afternoon exercise where colleagues were encouraged to walk and talk rather than having to embark on an outward bound activity. No one could put their finger on the one thing that made it such a powerful event but, at its heart, colleagues appreciated the context for the event, the clear messaging and the cleverly designed exercises to drive action across the business.

As Natalie was cradling a glass of fizz, exhausted by all the effort and pressure but buoyed by Julie's warm words of thanks, she spied Mike making his way towards her at the bar.

'I supposed you are pleased with yourself,' he said sternly.

'Changing a good format and taking away a role that should have been done by a member of the top team.'

He let the words sink in for a few seconds. And then broke into a big grin.

'Well, you should be pleased because you have given us a well placed, richly deserved kick up the backside. Not just on this event but also as a team that is supposedly leading the business. Functional leaders yes. But real leaders? Well we have been playing at that.'

'So thank you. Thank you for your support and challenge and thank you for your bravery. And for the best event ever.'

'Not just another bloody conference then?' said Natalie laughing.

'No,' Mike said. 'Not just another bloody conference!'

SIMON ALLDRIDGE
M +44 (0)7771 825366
E salldridge@telospartners.com

WWW.TELOSPARTNERS.COM

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TOP 10 THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE PLANNING A CONFERENCE

1. Ensure the conference has clear and specific objectives; it is not just an annual 'fun' event
2. Make the most of the opportunity for participants to engage and align with the organisation's strategic context
3. A conference is a major investment in time and cash: assure a measurable return on investment
4. Ensure the conference and its content is owned by the leadership
5. If a regular event, ensure the conference is set at a sustainable level, so it will not be cancelled in austere times
6. Plan to engage and involve attendees; they should participate, not experience death by Powerpoint
7. The message is in the method: design exercises carefully to reinforce key messages, not just as energisers
8. Adopt a whole system approach, including pre-conference engagement, the conference and post-conference engagement
9. Follow through after the conference on actions committed at the conference, and check on further engagement of the whole organisation
10. Remember that informal objectives are important: networking, fun, sharing

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