

Annual Kickoffs

In the three decades or so that I have been part of a company in one role or another, January kickoffs were always strong rituals. Themes came in all forms — from military warfare to iron chef competitions and space age explorations. Generally it is the sales function that has brought this ritual down to a science. Increasingly, other functions and in many cases, the whole company gets involved. What makes these kickoffs work? How can they work better given the enormous budgets allocated for this corporate activity?

No different from a farmer starting off a new planting season or a locker room pep talk with the coach before the playoffs, New Year kickoffs are a great opportunity for leaders to rally people to focus on an overarching goal. With mantras like “all systems go” referring to all departments and functions tightly aligned, “winning together,” or something as specific as “SaRaP 2020” referring to subscriber, revenue and profit targets, themed gatherings powerfully rally the troops to start a cadence of actions that lead to desired business results. It tightens teamwork in its engaging and morale boosting program of activities that appeal to the emotion at a personal and collective level.

These year-starter events are also a most opportune time to take stock. Leaders ask questions such as “How have we done last year?” and “Where are we now?” These give both perspective and a baseline to start anew. Leaders also look at hard numbers and performance measures and this has a sobering effect especially after a difficult year. It allows for insight and accountability while moving forward with clear and renewed vigor with questions like “What will we do differently?” Pictures and videos of what were done in the past and recorded feedback from customers and other stakeholders make the process more real and palpable.

The strong and active presence of the CEO and his/her one-downs is crucial. It conveys the message that the whole leadership team is involved in taking the rest of the organization forward. It is a joint call to level up, push the envelope and aim for stretch goals. I have seen high-impact messaging where each member of the top team commits to “one big thing” that they believe will contribute to collective



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success. It ranges from a new product going to market, an improved technology or system as an enabler or new partnerships forged and funding locked in. It drives home the point that they have the tools and wherewithal to win in the marketplace.

Long speeches are a clear no-no. Presenting with a purpose is key. Look back to what worked and celebrate achievements. Paint a picture of what the coming year can be — complete with specific targets, delivery plan and resources. Define direction with clear broad strokes and just enough detail to demonstrate doable action. Hearing and seeing each member of the top team committing beyond motherhood statements says one thing: “We are ready. Let’s go!”

And for the piece de resistance, no kickoff is complete without the reward component. What awaits each one and the team when target is achieved or exceeded? This is where the concept of “line of sight” or the connection between “what I do and deliver” and “what I get when I do so” is established. Concrete incentives, whether financial (a bonus equivalent to a multiple of one’s monthly salary) or in kind (trip to Bali for the team and their families) always move the needle in revving up the team. So there it is. It’s not so much a fixed one-size-fits-all formula, but more a set of ingredients worth considering in planning for the kickoff: the goal, taking stock, and the way forward.

One last note. Sustaining the high of kickoffs is what leaders often fail to consider.

Proverbial giveaways — logo T-shirts, pens, caps and other merchandise materials are de rigeur. Personalizing the message through a book, pocket-sized memory aids, even a musical piece specifically composed for the occasion strengthen recall. Beyond these, an excellent practice that works is ensuring that the information cascaded during the kickoff is made available online after the event or pushed via a secure social network. The rigor and discipline of execution, feedback and follow-through will spell that difference between winning and losing. **E**

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