



Tips for Innovative Meetings and Events (T.I.M.E.)

Topic: New Year's Resolutions about Chaos

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Welcome

Happy New Year! Thank you to you – my colleagues, clients, and friends – for a fantastic 2006. I am excited about the promise that 2007 brings.

In 2005 and 2006 I used the space in the January issue to write about trends and new ideas that can form the backbone for New Year's Business Resolutions.

I re-read the both issues in crafting this issue. Much of what I wrote 12 and 24 months ago is still true or even truer for 2007. Meetings are and will continue to be affected by:

- Mobility
- Customized information
- New ways to connect with audiences

Not to sound narcissistic, but I really enjoyed re-reading those issues. If you want to read them, please visit my website or email me for the past issues. ([January Past T.I.M.E. Issues](#))

Unlike a typical New Year's resolutions - To be more organized - this year my New Year's resolution is to embrace chaos! Don't be aghast...read on for my reasoning. This issue tells you more about chaos and specific ideas for adapting to change.

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Managing in Chaos

Fortune magazine ran an interesting article in their October 2, 2006 issue bearing the same title as this section – Managing in Chaos. The author, Geoffrey Colvin, discusses how “business models that produced profits for decades have shut down.”

The heart of the problem is that the world is transitioning from a time when business models were sacrosanct for years if not decades to a time when disruption can occur from all angles and from companies that aren't even direct competitors. Colvin identifies the causes: globalization, digital revolution, and an information economy.

Organizations that were once bounded by physical assets can now make changes much more quickly and freely. This invites the arrival of new products, new technology and new competitors at a dizzying rate. The rules for “survival of the fittest” have changed. Colvin summarizes with this thought, “Companies will start dying younger.”

Use this new year to make certain meetings are not a dying breed in your organization.

(Source: You can find a copy of the Fortune article online at http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/10/02/8387417/index.htm or look at the original issue, October 2, 2006, Managing Chaos, pp 76-98.)

The Intersection with Meetings

Why should you care about changing business models?

First, the way our organizations are managed is fundamental to meetings. Meetings are a highly used method to disseminate information. The purpose, mission and goals of our organizations should cascade down to and through our meetings. In the Fortune article, Bill Ford admitted (interestingly via an email) “The business model that sustained us for decades is not longer sufficient to sustain profitability” (Page 78). As our organizations undergo change, the spirit, if not the “letter” of that change, will be reflected in meetings.

Secondly, meetings represent a unique opportunity to communicate face-to-face with participants. Organizations are not the machines or collection of assets. They are groups of people. And as Colvin says, “And while business seems to change at the speed of light, humans in groups haven't changed much in 10,000 years” (Page 82). The most intractable problem related to changing business models is getting people to behave in new ways. People resist change.

All meetings aim to have the participants leave with new knowledge, new attitudes or new skills. All meetings aim to be an intervention – to create a change in people manifested in the call to action of the meeting.

We must use meetings to clearly communicate to our employees or members in this time of chaos and change.

The Business Conversation

Conversation is the single most important business process when the goal is to shift what people believe and how they act. Lew Planter, former chairman of Hewlett Packard, frequently defined his job as “managing conversations” (Source: Brown, S. & Eisenhardt, K. 1998. *Competing on the Edge*. (Page 202). Boston: Harvard Business School Press.).

Meetings are the place to hold those important conversations.

The authors of *Surfing the Edge of Chaos* advocate three guidelines when dealing with evolving organizations:

- Design, don't engineer
- Discover, don't dictate
- Decipher, don't presuppose

(Source: Pascale, R, Millemann, M. & Gioja, L. 2001. *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*. (Page 175). New York: Crown Business.)

The second rule has great merit for people involved in executing meetings.

Discover, Don't Dictate

Steve Miller a former senior executive with Shell Oil, said, “Top-down strategies don't win many ball games today” (Source: Pascale, R, Millemann, M. & Gioja, L. 2001. *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*. (Page 175). New York: Crown Business.).

Use meetings for two-way conversations. Anecdotally we know that meeting audiences don't respond well to talking heads – especially talking heads with an infinite number of PowerPoint slides. Don't broadcast messages. Rather engage the members of the audience as participants.

The largest challenge to managing in chaos is to get people to change. Engage them in discovery to propel that change.

Miller later states in *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*, “The leader becomes a context setter, the designer of a learning experience – not an authority figure with solutions” (Source: Pascale, R, Millemann, M. & Gioja, L. 2001. *Surfing the Edge of Chaos* . (Page 175). New York: Crown Business.).

More Lessons for Meetings

Traditionally organizations are seen to work on the scientific approach of cause and effect. Implicitly, there is a belief that we can break everything down into small units and build them up again. With sufficient rules, procedures, structures and meetings, the expectation is that people will do as "planned." Yet despite intentions, things don't happen that way. Chaos theory and complex adaptive systems are new ways for thinking about organizations and understanding why the people never fall simply into place.

Shona Brown and Kathleen Eisenhardt explain organizations not as static organizational charts but as living adaptive structures. They talk about the necessity for organizations to mutate or change (Source: Brown, S. & Eisenhardt, K. 1998. *Competing on the Edge*. (Page 97). Boston: Harvard Business School Press.). Darwin's theory of natural selection necessitates that only the fittest of organizations will survive.

Surviving requires the ability to change. When an organization is completely stable or at equilibrium, it is not reacting to the changing external world. Brown and Eisenhardt suggest that healthy organizations will operate somewhere between a stable equilibrium and where things are falling apart.

Take advantage of chaos theory and complex adaptive systems during your next meeting:

- Ask stakeholders what change this meeting should create.
- Ask stakeholders what past behaviors, thoughts or attitudes should be discarded as a result of the meeting.
- Ask stakeholders how they think the audience will react to the meeting message. Plan ways to allow the people to adapt and change.
- Select from the best of the past but add something new (in procedures and content).
- Foster co-adaptation where related "agents" (think about agents as departments) take mutual advantage of each other in order to change (Source: Brown, S. & Eisenhardt, K. Page 60.).
- Find ways to allow ideas to bubble up.
- Cultivate a culture accepting failure and triumph.
- View your meeting participants as a community and look to release their imagination and ingenuity.
- Invite non-linear thinking. Linear thinking is at odds with the emerging thinking about organizations as living systems.
- Mix things up, de-schedule, unplan, be inconsistent, make noise, bounce around, get distracted, invite confusion, add in the extraneous, let things leak in, let things leak out, embrace disruption in your next meeting. (Source: Freedman, D. *Go Ahead, Make A Mess*. Retrieved from <http://www.inc.com/magazine/20061201/make-a-mess.html>)

These ideas will help your organization thrive, change and survive.

Personal Tips

When things are carefully arranged and kept in their "proper" time and place and done in precisely the "right" way every time, you lock out some highly useful qualities--such as

improvisation, adaptability, and serendipity. So states David Freedman in his Inc. article, Go Ahead, Make A Mess. (Source: Retrieved from <http://www.inc.com/magazine/20061201/make-a-mess.html>)

Here are some ideas for your personal business resolutions to encourage you to create a little "mess" in your life:

- **Change by Time not Event:** Brown and Eisenhardt in *Competing on the Edge* advocate that organizations change based not on an event but rather based upon time passing. Introduce change into your personal life and your career on a regular basis – instead of waiting to learn that world around you has changed.
- **Be Nimble:** Don't be too caught up in existing processes and procedures that you miss opportunities to improve.
- **Embrace Ambiguity:** When you accept ambiguity, you are open to other ways of thinking. This allows for growth rather than thinking that "my way" is the only "right" way or my "truth" is the only "right" truth. Accepting ambiguity also allows us to recognize that problems are complex and difficult. While we set our sights on "perfection", embracing ambiguity allows us to approach our actions, our world and our results with both realism and a healthy sense of humor.
- **Work the Edge of Time:** Brown and Eisenhardt also talk about working from the "edge of time." Look out and view multiple time horizons. This will allow you to be more ready to adapt.

Resolutions for '07

Hock coined the word "chaordic" to describe the "behavior of any self-governing organism, organization or system which harmoniously blends characteristics of order and chaos." While all people and meetings need order, there is also a need for change. (Source: Hock, D. 1999. *Birth of the Chaordic Age* San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.)

Consider some of the ideas in this issue of *Tips for Innovative Meetings and Events* and be resolved to:

- Prepare individually to change in your organizations.
- Plan meetings that allow your organizations to change.

Freebies: Reading

Freebies: More Reading

I was totally amazed at Tom Peter's book, *Thriving on Chaos*. Despite a 1987 copyright, the book offered great insight. He is truly a visionary - writing about things in the '80s that are

still relevant in 2007. Some of the companies he talks about have changed (or their circumstances have changed) but the concepts are great.

Other great material for reading more about chaos theory and adaptive organizations:

If you want to hear my thoughts on how meetings and meeting leaders should design, not engineer, write me for a short white paper on the subject. Learn more about how to design not engineer the environment to allow people to participate in the meeting. Learn how you can design the activities to achieve the desired results. Please email me for this extra Freebie at stinnish@ameritech.net or ([Design not Engineer](#))

Future T.I.M.E.

I will be working with the International Association of Conference Centers to present a culinary teambuilding program open to all meeting planners on the afternoon of Thursday, March 21 at the Marriott Oak Brook Hills (3500 Midwest Rd, Oak Brook, IL 60523). If you are interested in receiving an invitation to this event, please email me at stinnish@ameritech.net, ([Culinary Teambuilding](#))

Or see me in action at the following conferences:

HSMAI's Affordable Meetings Mid-America
April 11-12, 2007
Navy Pier
Chicago, IL
[HSMAI's Affordable Meetings Mid-America](#) or
http://www.affordablemeetings.com/mid_america.html

HSMAI's Affordable Meetings West
Tuesday, June 19 & Wednesday, June 20, 2007
San Jose McEnery Convention Center
San Jose, CA
[HSMAI's Affordable Meetings West](#) or <http://www.affordablemeetings.com/west.html>

I love to see familiar faces in the audience. Please come and see me.

Virtual T.I.M.E. and T.I.M.E. Gone By

Many back issues are posted on my website at www.suetinnish.com. Or if the issue is not on the website, please e-mail us with the month and topic and we will send you a copy of that newsletter. Here's what is included in past issues ([Back Issue Request](#)):

2006

New Year's Resolutions (January), Generational Differences (February), Speaker Suggestions (March), Building Bridges (April), Positive Posters (May), Cruises (June), Moving Knowledge and Talent (July), Relaxing Meetings (August), Keynotes (September),

Podcasting (October), Unique Meeting Venues (November), Deja View (December)

2005

New Year's Resolutions (January), Brainy Side of Food and Beverage (February), Sarbanes-Oxley and Meetings (March), Visual Aids (April), Experiential Teambuilding (May), Emotional Meetings (June), Press Conferences (July), Green Meetings (August), International Meetings (September), Value of Entertainment (October), Copyright Laws (November), Deja View III (December)

2004

Branding (January), Audio Visuals (February), Networking (March), Strategic Budgeting (April), Sensory Meetings (May), Board Meetings (June), Leadership (July), Barrier-free Meetings (August), Time Management & Meetings (September), The Travel Experience & Stress (October), Voting Techniques (November), Deja View II (December)

2003

Everyday Meetings (January), Diversity (February), Problem Solving (March), Marketing Pre- and Post- Event (April), Entertainment (May), Balance in Meetings and child care (June), Mobile Events (July), Last Minute Ideas (August), Training Meetings (September), Unique Venues (October), Data, Information and Number Crunching Privacy (November), Deja View (December)

2002

Teambuilding Options (January), Promotional Products (February), Multicultural Communication (March), Outdoor Learning (April), Budgets and ROK (May), Creativity (June), High Touch Technology (July), Economic and Business Cycles (August), Successful Environmental Factors/Conference Centers (September), Return on Investment (October), Incentive Meetings (November), Resource Recap (December)

2001

Sales, Award Presentations (January), Change and Communicating Change (February), Open Space Technology (March), Adult Learning Styles (April), Trade Shows (May), Emotional Intelligence (June), Presentation Tips (July), Ice Breakers (August), Facilitation (September), Humor (October), Customer Care (November), Slack (December)

2000

Teambuilding (May), Green Meetings (June), Values (July), Minimum/Minimal Meetings (August), Evaluations (October), Politics (November), and Toys (December)

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