

SPARKS!

Igniting
new ideas

Another in a series of occasional sparklers

Top Ten Tips for Designing Creative Meeting Spaces Or Space, the First Frontier

IF you want to engage a team in a voyage of the mind ..., make your workspace one that will inspire big, bold thoughts... or at least not be an obstacle to creative thinking!

Here are 10 top tips for transforming an ordinary work environment into one that will support creative endeavors. Use as many of them as you can...



- 1. The power of the circle: set the room up for eye contact and democracy**
The simplest, and possibly the most powerful thing you can do is to arrange the seating in a circle or a U shape to maximize eye contact and put everyone on a level playing field. Not classroom style, or rows behind each other arrangements that can lend themselves to power plays or tune-outs. Consider that you want to create a comfortable, intimate setting for people to be candid with one another, to listen deeply to each other and to create solutions together. Try to set up the space so it's more like gathering around the campfire, than sitting around the boardroom.

- 2. A room with a view**
While it may not always be possible, make every effort to work in a spacious room with windows that let the light and a glimpse of the outside world in. Natural light supports us physically and helps prevent fatigue. And it makes a difference in the ability to think big, and be open-minded. A few years ago we ran an idea session at the Waterloo Village, an historical village in New Jersey. There were large windows on three sides of the room. As we worked that February day we caught the glimmer of winter snow across the fields. In midst of inventing Easter confectionary ideas, two baby goats came right up to the windows. What an inspiration! A whole flood of ideas emerged from our team. While the cold kept us indoors that day, on other occasions we've been rejuvenated by stepping out doors and exploring the environment.

3. Comfortable chairs/ variety of seating



If you plan to work for more than an hour, you'll do best to provide an array of comfortable seating for participants hard-back, straight chairs, soft couches, rolling chairs, bean bags, and pillows, whatever. And since you don't want any of your participants to "grow roots", encourage them to get up every few hours. Do brief exercises standing up while working, or move around the room and then ask people to return to different seats. Guaranteed they'll get new perspectives.

4. Music

Whether your tastes run from Hip Hop to opera; a little music interspersed through a workday can do a lot for a team's productivity and creativity. I'm not suggesting that you have music blasting all day long, or that you go the Muzak approach with some non-descript murmur in the background. But use music purposefully. For example, you can have music playing in the workspace as people enter the room. It gives a clear, audible signal that this will be a different kind of meeting. You can select music that is related to your task: perhaps music that is most appealing to the consumer target you are trying to better understand; or music themed to your topic. For example, in a recent project for a pizza restaurant chain we played some classics from Italian movies as our teammates came together. You can also use music to change the energy. Try a brisk tempo, percussion piece to liven up the mid afternoon energy drop (a natural jolt); or put on some Bach or Mozart when you want participants to do a quiet, individual brainstorming activity.

5. Colors/ Visuals ...in the space

It's said that a picture is worth a thousand words...my experience is that pictures (or other visual stimuli) work the way music does; they can inspire a thousand ideas. Sterile boardrooms with big white walls can be temporarily filled with visuals related to the topic or with "seemingly random" images - modern or conceptual art - that participants can interpret and put to use throughout a session. Years ago I led a project "Kick Off" meeting with a team of chemical engineers in a room too small, too white and too stuffy. Having no forewarning of the space in which we were to work, I went to the flip chart pad and sketched big open windows with blowing curtains and landscapes beyond. I'm not an artist by any means, but just posting those simple sketches around the room, and reminding our participants that we wanted them to dream big and open up their thinking to the future of their company did much to improve the physical and the mental environment.

At the other extreme, we've been fortunate to work with clients whose corporate offices house magnificent art collections. When we find ourselves in such a rich environment we are sure to take advantage of it and have participants "walk the gallery" for a few minutes with the aim of looking for connections, preliminary ideas or solutions to our task. It's always time well spent.

.... And at each participant's fingertips

Some people think best when they doodle. You can take advantage of that natural inclination by putting baskets of colored pens, crayons, colored stickies and colored paper around the room so that participants can use these items freely as the spirit moves them.

6. Touchy "toys", the "fiddle factor"

While there are people who think best while doodling, others like to fiddle with things or fidget. Some of our favorite market research venues are well stocked with squishy animal toys for client viewers to use. We like to provide a variety of things from colored pipe cleaners to Nerf-like materials in odd shapes for participants to play with. These items are purposefully used at times when we ask participants to create "collages" using an assortment of materials. After a few minutes, even the most high powered, linear thinkers tend to get distracted enough in their play that their most interesting, most novel ideas begin to bubble to the surface of their consciousness.



7. **Aroma**

I've done a bit of work on aromatherapy projects, and have found that aroma can also be consciously used to enhance the meeting environment. If you want to experiment with aroma, try essential oils, not aerosol spray room fresheners. I've used some subtle scents dispersed via a diffuser; in aroma mixtures designed for energy enhancement or relaxation and it has had good effect. You might also bring in a vase of natural flowers. Of course for some people, the aroma of good coffee is all they need to get creative juices flowing!

8. **Food for thought**

It's rather amazing how much food and liquid can be consumed by a briskly ideating team! So it's best to have a station somewhere in your meeting space where food and beverages are regularly replenished and participants can help themselves. Variety is ideal, and I make every effort to have good brain food available that isn't loaded with sugar and fat.

9. **If at all possible, get off campus**

Physically moving away from company premises can do a tremendous amount to provide a new set of lenses for viewing a business task. If you have to work at your offices, at least set clear ground rules to ensure that typical workday distractions will not invade your meeting. Collect the cell phones and pagers, or have everyone agree to set them to vibrate. In exchange for distraction-free time, give participants a few specific breaks throughout the day when they can go back and check on other business matters.

10. **Great space doesn't have to be a big investment**

Let's face it, one reason teams work "at home base" is to save money, and if you incorporate some of the recommendations here you will increase the likelihood of success even on home turf. If you can get away, consider alternative spaces to the high priced conference centers. One type of venue that we particularly enjoy is a Bed & Breakfast. You'll have to work with the proprietor to make sure they understand how you intend to use the facility and you may have to offer to move furniture around to accommodate your needs. Also consider working in a museum, a botanical garden, a gallery, a ski chalet, a golf clubhouse, or another "non-traditional" locale. It helps if you have a participant who's a member of any of these venues. We've held truly inspiring, highly productive creative sessions at places like these for far less cost than a conference facility or hotel meeting room.

Now that you've got the right space in which to work you can turn your attention to the next frontier... designing the right agenda and stimuli to make the best use of people's creativity and intellect.

Laurie Tema-Lyn

Laurie Tema-Lyn is a consultant, creative catalyst, qualitative market researcher and professional coach. She is a recognized leader in the field of innovation for over 20 years working with Fortune 500 companies, smaller organizations and non-profits. She helps individuals and teams "dream the big dreams" and develop the strategies and ideas to successfully realize them.



Practical Imagination Enterprises
18 Losey Road, Ringoes, NJ 08551
Tel/Fax: 908-237-2246
laurie@practical-imagination.com
www.practical-imagination.com



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