

# Innovative Environments for Project Meetings and Workshops

Morten Fangel, Denmark and Julie M. Wilson, IBM Global Services, USA

## Introduction

Finding it difficult to hold effective, productive project meetings and workshops? Perhaps it is time to apply more ground-breaking techniques and approaches to the meeting environment. This paper addresses elements that can lead to increased productivity in project meetings. It examines traditional issues and how to address them in a new critical thinking perspective.

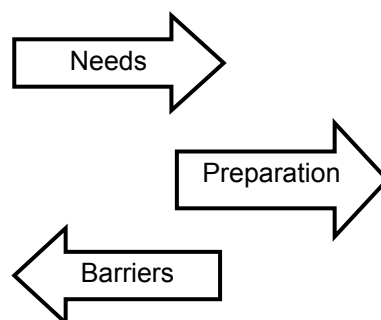
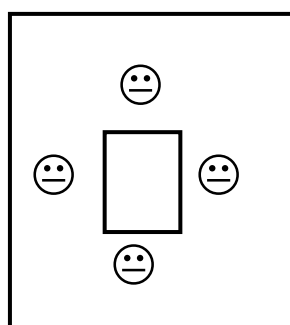
The framework and environment of a project event is a critical factor in influencing the outcome - how positively the participants experience the event prior to, during and after the project. The capability of high level results as well as positive life experience for project team members is wasted due to the fact that most meetings take place in standardised, rigid frameworks.

Want to step outside the traditional meeting “box” and get the attention of the team? That you are almost there in delivering the project on time, within scope and at budget?

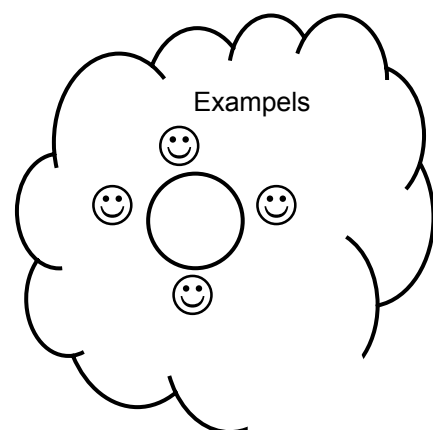
This paper reflects experiences from different areas of business on how to create high energy an environment which incites and energizes high performance teams. The purpose of the paper is to stress the need, the barriers and the opportunities of utilising “innovative environments” to promote effectiveness in projects.

The paper is a tool to consider systematically how to improve the environment of meetings and workshops of your project. When presenting the paper, the authors will add the results from empirical studies involving a broad variety of projects and corporate environments..

### Rigid environment: environment:



### Innovative



## The need for innovative environments

The environments for meetings and workshops include the surroundings, the room and its furnishings.

In today's world of projects, there are several arguments for changing from "rigid environment" towards "innovative environment".

- The demand for high-level performance, speed and quality of execution, implies that all framework elements, including environmental considerations, must be considered and explored
- The innovative environment becomes even more topical for the increasing number of virtual project groups. To incite these groups quickly, to become functional team groups, the participants need to meet during the project start-up as well as at significant milestones during project execution. These meetings are typically very costly; therefore every effort should be made to promote the effectiveness including utilising the parameter of the venues.
- The competition of not only attracting, but getting good participants for your project implies that you have to make the project attractive by adding value elements to the project process. More and more participants want to and demand to "have fun in projects".
- Appropriate environment is a trigger to creativity and innovation in the project. It promotes the climate for creativity by reducing stress, creating focus, and critical thinking.
- An innovative environment promotes the sustainable effect of the meeting or workshop. The participants could more easily remember what happened at the event and what was agreed on. Unusual or "special" environments act as a set of "memories" and "experiences" for the participants.
- The costs of utilising more innovative environments are typically "peanuts" compared with the costs of having the participants attending – not to mention the hidden cost of "collaboration loss" which can result from ineffectiveness of the event.

To increase focus on creating productive environments for meetings and workshops is to challenge the environment in which managing projects has become a shifting of paradigm:

- The traditional focus on project management is to co-ordinate and to control the progress of the project's activities *directly*.
- The alternative is to focus the management effort on creating conditions, situations and "setting the scene" which *indirectly* promotes the integration and the performance of the participants.

## Barriers for changing environments

As mentioned initially, it is common sense that prevails when realizing that the environment has a large influence on the outcome of the project event. Nevertheless we utilise "rigid environment" for most project meetings and workshops. This rigidity poses a strong barrier against changing traditional environments:

- To utilise existing (rigid) facilities of a company is considered as the normal way of indicating your loyalty to the company and from which to promote company

identity.

There is also a symbolic mechanism in inviting project participants from other companies to have the event take place in *your* company on *your* turf.

- Utilising venues outside the company is met by scepticism. Is your project not a real, serious one? Do you give priority to “having fun” sponsored by the company?
- Costs for the “innovative environment” are not initially identified in the project budget.
- It is time consuming for the project manager to prepare for events using nontraditional environments—environments that are not normally used for meetings or workshops. First you have to overcome resistance from those who consider that it is not necessary to make changes. Next you have to consider alternative venues, and perhaps visit these beforehand. Then you have to design a programme for the event where you utilise unique aspects or elements of the venue, etc.

In modern business, the last barrier seems to be the most rigid. If you are a project manager who tends to go for controlling the entire progress of the project directly, it could be difficult to plan the time needed to assure creation of innovative meeting environments that provide optimum working conditions which, in turn, increase the probability of higher productivity.

## Examples of innovative environments

The two authors were inspired to generate this paper at a reception organised by a US based organisation in Stockholm. The reception took place at a Sheraton hotel. Prior to the reception the board of the organisation had a meeting in a room with standard facilities and an outlook to a modern office building like in many other capitals.

The challenging question was why the organisation did utilise the standard type of facilities at an international hotel – instead of profiting from one of the many beautiful venues of Stockholm and having a more inspiring meeting? This event triggered an enthusiastic storytelling by the authors.

Julie stated several examples from her management of IBM global service group:

- A workshop for experienced project managers was initiated in a swimming pool. It proved to be a significant step towards real teambuilding while getting a suntan at the same time!

Morten reported from his project management consultants:

- Project start-up workshops and training sessions are organised in an adjoining storehouse at an old Merchant's House situated at a small island in the middle of Denmark. The Merchant's House was founded by his great grand father in 1844! Experience shows that when one project group has been at the venue the colleagues insist on going there when having their workshops and training sessions.
- A series of six workshops for a “thinking tank” of top managers were organised each at different venues as for example at the above-mentioned Merchant's House, an art gallery, an old brickworks, etc. Each session included a one-hour-break with an expert who recounted about the venue and its surroundings. None of the busy top managers cancelled their engagements to any of the workshops!

By the end of the conversation we agreed on preparing this paper – which hopefully will give inspiration to an exchange of experiences with many other examples of innovative environments.

## **Organising an innovative environment**

Finally we would like to give some recommendations on how to prepare a project meeting and a workshop at “innovative environments”:

- If it is part of your company culture to use “rigid environment” you have to wait for an event in your project which obviously needs extra focus and where creativity is an important aspect. This makes it easier to convince both your participants and your company management to do something extraordinary.
- Further, it is essential that you as a project manager or one of your key participants can allocate significant time for the preparation. “Setting the scene” is definitely not only a question of “hiring an exotic scene”. Planning and simulation are needed to ensure a full utilisation of the opportunities.
- Take into consideration the style and the expectations of the participants. It is excellent to give them some surprises, but do not overdo, it should not be the purpose, but a stimulating frame for the process of the event.
- The so-called “event managers” could help you, but make sure that they accept the meeting and workshop to be the main purpose - not the big show.
- When having a series of meetings and workshops one solution is to go for utilising the same “innovative venue”. This supports the project identity and decreases the amount of planning effort needed for each of the events.
- If the main challenge is to stimulate creativity we recommend changing the environments as in the above-mentioned “thinking tank” with top managers.

## **Research on innovative environments**

A lot of research has been performed on how to develop high performing teams. The prime focus of this research is the interaction of the team members including use of various techniques to support the communication process.

According to our knowledge only limited research has been performed on the effect of the frame that surrounds the team. We are most interested in contact with people knowing about any research within this area.

Up until the presentation of the paper at the PMI Symposium we will circulate questionnaires on the application of innovative environments for project meetings and workshops – to give more consolidated experiences and recommendations at the presentation of our paper.

## **Concluding remarks**

As mentioned it is common sense that the framework and environment of a project event has a huge influence on the outcome of the event. However in practice there is a tendency of not using this awareness, but to continue using the rigid environments. We hope this tiny paper has inspired you to consider utilising the opportunity that does not imply specific knowledge. Just do it!

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