



The Story Of How One Meeting Helped A Company To Evolve

Editor's note: Corporate & Incentive Travel asked Gail Larsen, the founder of Santa Fe, NM-based Real Speaking, to share her story of a unique meeting and teambuilding activity that stemmed from a feature article in the magazine. Larsen's company (www.realspeaking.net) is devoted to speakers, and designing and facilitating meetings and activities.

When a magazine goes from the printing press to the post office to someone's desk, and that first page is turned, you never know exactly what impact it may have.

Just ask Mark Miller. As senior sales manager of La Posada de Santa Fe, Santa Fe, NM, Miller needed help. His client, Chicago, IL-based planner Robyn Wetzel of In Focus Events, was organizing an impor-

tant meeting for a major corporation at his resort. Wetzel wanted to use the meeting's location to emphasize the meeting's message. Looking for ideas, Miller turned to the magazine on his desk. "Lo and behold, I opened the magazine to scan for ideas," Miller said, "and I came up a winner."

What Miller encountered was a feature article on unique teambuilding programs,

By Gail Larsen

to which I'd contributed my belief in "the power of place." I explained that corporate groups operate at a relentless pace and accomplish a lot. But real creativity often requires slowing down to reflect and assimilate the experience, which can happen magically in a well-designed meeting. I went on to discuss the Southwestern phenomenon known as "council." This is the Native American ritual by which each member of a tribe or group gains a better understanding of their own true nature. My colleague John Wallace, founder of Santa Fe-based Seventh Generation Collaborative, LLC, commented in the same article about the importance of not leaving our creative natures behind when we walk into the workplace: "That compartmentalization can lead to a certain kind of order, but it really affects creativity," he warned.

That was it! Just like that, Miller had a solution for Wetzel's group.

Opening that magazine started a chain of events that would ultimately influence the way a company and its employees thought about their business. Miller picked up the phone and called me and Robyn Wetzel. Thus our adventure began.

Meeting Clients Needs

Wetzel's corporate client was Chicago, IL-based Quaker Foods. She'd been working with the company for 12 years, and knew its corporate structure was changing in the wake of its merger with Pepsico.

Our first step was to understand exactly what Quaker Foods wanted to accomplish. Consumers and the market were evolving, and the Quaker Foods' leadership wanted to address "new challenges in a new world." This became the meeting's theme. As Polly Kawalek, president of Quaker Foods, explained, "Quaker Foods

had not held a meeting outside of Chicago in five years. Robyn suggested viewing the expense of travel and hotels as an investment in our people, and so it proved to be. Our attendees felt valued



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and were treated in a first-class way, and they responded accordingly."

Robyn already knew Quaker well, but she still had to learn about Santa Fe. Robyn's site visit to Santa Fe sold her on this unusual town of only 65,000. Among its distinctions, Santa Fe is the third largest art market in the United States.

Its beautiful landscapes and thriving arts and crafts community offered just the cre-

ative touch that the Quaker Foods group needed. Yet Robyn wanted more for her client than an engaging destination. Our mission was to use authentic experiences of Santa Fe culture to reinforce the meeting's corporate message. "None of us wanted to separate the meeting content from the 'fun stuff,' but rather bring it all together into a seamless learning experience," Robyn says.

Activity Options

Robyn went to great pains to share the exact outcome she sought. "As a major art destination, Santa Fe provided the perfect metaphor for the creative approach we wanted to inspire with our participants," noted Robyn. "I knew I wanted to magnify the artistic and Native American roots of Santa Fe, but I was seeking a form that was simple and genuine, in order to bring the power of place alive."

The opening activity we proposed required that each participant design a small piece of fiber art that would illustrate the contribution of their team to the company's new strategic plan.

Ultimately, the individual patches would be pieced together in a glorious fiber art wall hanging and presented to the group in the closing session.

Experienced planners know that envisioning an activity is one thing. Implementing it successfully is another task entirely. The concept had to be tested, to see how well it would actually work before we could recommend it to Quaker Foods. So we gathered a dozen "artistically challenged" local executives for a trial run. Half of the participants called me the morning of the appointed day and tried to beg off, and that's when I knew we had the right group to test the concept on. A

few minutes after they began the activity, the executives were totally engaged. Their efforts produced something that both surprised and excited themselves, and that's when we knew we had the right activity.

In our debriefing we were able to identify possible glitches so we could avoid them later on. This proved very useful, and planners seeking to introduce a novel activity or idea should test it first on a small focus group.

Next we created a meeting design in which each activity would specifically support the meeting content, while also reflecting an essential aspect of Santa Fe's unique culture.

Using Your Location

The La Posada is a member of the Rock-Resorts, which was conceived by Laurance S. Rockefeller. Rockefeller's vision of "legendary service, award-winning indigenous cuisine, and outdoor adventures amidst the magnificence of nature" holds true in Santa Fe, where the La Posada reflects the essence of Santa Fe's unique character. Wherever possible we held meetings in beautiful outdoors areas on the La Posada grounds, capitalizing on Santa Fe's "power of place." The client was ecstatic with the end result, a feeling and our staff shared that feeling as they watched the meeting unfold. It set a new standard for a meeting devoted to team-building, according to Miller.

Quaker's goals were very straightforward, but not necessarily easy to accomplish. The business content and the corporate speakers were already in place for the program. Robyn and I needed to fill in the blanks, and to provide meaning and also continuity.



ACTIVITIES SHOULD GIVE PARTICIPANTS AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT ON THE LESSONS LEARNED IN THE GENERAL SESSION.

meeting, in the hope that it will continue once employees are back on the job.

Inspiring Attendees

Our goal was to impact participants in a more lasting way. To do so, Robyn and I agreed it was vital to recognize the feelings of participants, to attract them rather than push them toward achieving the company's vision. This meant we needed to inspire a sense of involvement from within, rather than impose a sense of duty from without. Toward that goal, we began working with the participating leaders before they left for Santa Fe, even involving those employees who were not attending the meeting.

Based on this experience, I believe planners and event organizers are able to amplify the impact of their programs when they actually begin communicating their message well in advance of the program's first day.

Before participants arrived, each leader explored with their team their unique contributions to the strategic plan. Those conversations became the foundation for what would follow. Upon arrival, nine teams representing a range of disciplines

We knew that resistance to change was to be expected. Often attendees may go along in order to keep their jobs, but they cannot be coerced into caring about, or being committed to, their company's plans and objectives. Today's wise managers understand that the level of involvement required to meet ambitious goals is generated only from within a person; it cannot be imposed from above.

In my experience, a company will often choose to ignore that resistance. They often try to create a motivational fervor during a

were formed. These teams met daily to exchange ideas and insights and to build relationships essential to sustaining the implementation of the new strategic plan back on the job. These continuing conversations provided a thread of continuity that helped participants reflect on what was said in the formal sessions, and then integrate the information in a practical way, with the support of the group. When the groups eventually converged and shared their insights with each other, innovative possibilities naturally emerged.

Rick Reider, one of the participants, said of the opening art projects, "The section I created was a weave pattern, which to me was a symbol of strength. Individual strands are weak but when woven together in an interlocking pattern they become many times stronger. So it is with our group. The lesson was, we will be successful by interweaving our skills and efforts and reaching beyond ourselves to accomplish what we know is possible."

Working together, Robyn and I developed a natural progression from day one to day three that helped get participants on the same page, rather than assuming they are already there. I introduced each activity, providing continuity by linking what was to come with what had already taken place. Fundamental to our strategy were the following principles, ones which I recommend incorporating into any meeting design.

- Rather than being viewed as an isolated event, this meeting became an essential component of the company's overall strategy and direction.

- Once on site, participants were grouped into cross-functional teams that met daily. This established deeper relationships that would be needed to achieve high performance.

- Activities were designed to provide an opportunity to reflect on the message from the formal sessions, and to integrate the new information and insights.

- A meeting must be fun! Learning can occur even in "down time," and during outdoor activities. The key is creative use of the destination. Ask provocative questions that make participants think.

Selecting the right speaker can also reinforce the theme. In this case, Dr. Carl Hammerschlag was retained to share the lessons he learned as a young doctor sent to work in Native American regions. He talked about how multiculturalism could contribute to an effective strategy.

Applying The Lessons Learned

On the final day, the teams reflected on the overall experience and how they would apply the new learning and insights from the meeting to the challenges ahead. In this case, we introduced a process called "wisdom council," a method used in native cultures to support heartfelt expression and deep listening. Once we get in touch with our inner selves, I explained, we are then able to communicate on a deeper level.

The Wisdom Council began as facilitators met with the nine Quaker Foods teams as they prepared to return to Chicago and plant their seeds of change, represented by ceremonial

blue corn. Council goes back to the earliest times of people gathering in a circle around a fire and telling their stories. Today it is a practice of deep listening and speaking from the heart. Participants pass the ceremonial object and each speaks in turn, from the heart. Council establishes stronger and more lasting bonds, which ultimately is what teambuilding is all about.

Today a finished work of fiber art hangs proudly in the company headquarters. President Kawalek says, "When we met in Santa Fe, it was with a specific goal to bring bold leadership and creativity to our mission of delivering profitable growth. Each square of the quilt represents a unique and special quality that is essential to our future. Merged into a creative whole, we already have everything we need to face the new challenges of a new world."

The meeting changed the participants' outlook, and enlightened the planners involved as well. "This experience

showed me that is possible to create meeting experiences that are truly unique to the chosen destination," said Wetzel. "I'm moving away from the term 'team building' to 'experiential learning' as a better description of what I'm seeking. I now want every activity to fit the learning objectives of the meeting, whether we're sitting in a meeting room or on a mesa top."

So what began as a phone call from a hotelier evolved into the kind of meeting that most planners only dream of. Fortunately, we were working with corporate executives who were willing to venture into uncharted waters and try a new approach.

During the wisdom council, one of the participants summed it all up. He had been reading a Tom Robbins book and related something that really struck home. "We think what we want is logic," the author wrote. "What we need is magic." This meeting was one whose outcome was magical indeed. *C&IT*