Why You Need A War Room

Today’s Myatt on Monday’s question was posed by a CEO who asked: “I’ve heard reference to executive teams that utilize ‘war rooms’ for strategy development. Is this beneficial?” Let me begin by stating that any tools or techniques that bring executive teams together for the purposes of consistent and focused strategy development and refinement are marvelous things. Furthermore, any company that I have run has had at least one war room for the executive team, and often times war rooms have been assigned to each business unit or department. In today’s post I’ll cover the benefits associated with war rooms, or what I like to refer to as the place where good things happen...

Are your meeting areas, conference facilities and board rooms used? Perhaps more to the point, are they used effectively? When I see a conference room that looks as if the main purpose for its existence is to serve as a corporate art museum, I tend to question why it exists at all. I recently spent two days on site with a new client. The client had an exquisite headquarters facility with a number of absolutely gorgeous conference rooms. However during my two days on site, not once did I observe any of them being utilized. When I asked the CEO about this he said “nobody uses them.” Hmmm.....

Let’s start with the basics... As wonderful as technology is, and as small as our global footprint has become, as a workforce we are really more disconnected (at least personally) than at any point in history. Even workers who office in the same location are so busy being busy, and virtually collaborating, that they often don’t spend enough focused time with one another working on key issues. Rather than sequestering your talent behind the closed doors of their individual offices, or spreading them hither and yon in cube farms, consider the benefits of bringing them together (face-to-face) for the purposes of accomplishing something specific.
Executive teams don’t come together often enough, and when they do, meetings are often not as productive as they should be as they try and cover far too much ground in short periods of time. I’m always amazed when I witness companies that will take all the C-suite talent into a boardroom for an hour or two and accomplish virtually nothing. Likewise, project teams and work groups have become creatures of habit who prefer to use internet or software based toolsets as a substitute for the power of highly focused and very intense personal interactions. As noted above, it is after all much easier and safer to be disengaged, but is it more productive? In most cases, I think not...

At first blush, one might think that the concept of a war room is bit of a throw-back to some Orwellian form of old school management theory, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, studies have shown that while workers may initially resist the idea of working in close quarters for the purpose of increasing intensity over extended periods of time, the benefits of collaboration and productivity quickly win them over. By way of example, the University of Michigan produced a study on war rooms only to find that workers functioning in a war room environment were twice as productive as their counterparts working in traditional office arrangements.

Where possible, I’m a firm believer that workgroups should spend as much time as possible in war room environments. I would take it so far as to suggest that one should consider this to be the best form of collaborative workspace configuration and should therefore make this the default space plan of choice if possible. With regard to executive teams, you will rarely find executives that will subject themselves to a co-officing arrangement, but this does not obviate the need for a war room. As stated earlier, executive teams do not spend nearly enough focused time together, and simply committing to one half-day per week cloistered in a war room together will improve both efficiency and productivity. Following are a few points of consideration when building your executive war room:

1. Your war room should be a dedicated conference room with a locked door. You will keep a great deal of confidential information out in the open and you’ll want the room secured.

2. Without sounding cultish, the war room needs to become revered as your company’s executive bastion for disruptive innovation where you major in the majors. Do not allow attendees to be interrupted while sessions are in progress. This is highest and best use time which should be protected at all costs.

3. The war room should be configured for optimum productivity with acrylic walls (or multiple whiteboards), easels, wireless internet access, a high quality conference phone, multiple large wall mounted plasma screens, webcams, laser pointers, etc.
The bottom line is this... If you commit to giving war rooms a chance you’ll find that productivity will soar and that your executives will begin to embrace the concept because things that were once normally carried forward from meeting to meeting as rollover agenda items are now consistently being crossed off the list.

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