

Making Special Events  
*Special*



*by Dion McInnis*

It doesn't matter whether your organization is a university, chamber of commerce, service organization, arts alliance or...any other nonprofit...you will almost certainly be involved in strategizing, planning, implementing or debriefing an event that has the purpose of engaging others in ways to enhance their relationship and/or their support of the organization. Using experiences ranging from golf tournaments to homecoming BBQ luncheons, from black-tie award events to community-wide celebrations that I was involved in over the past quarter century, I offer you these suggestions.

### **Why Before How**

"Why before how" is a question that I posed to my teams over and over again. The question focuses all details created, energies expended, programs designed and actions taken. Always, always...why before how.

So, you want to have an awards event. Why? Is it to honor people or to bring them together to ask for money. Congratulations if the former, shame on you if the latter. While there will likely be some fundraising objectives to almost every event, they will come naturally as part of the process and should not overshadow the "why" of holding the event. Warning: don't begin planning the event until you can answer that question in 20 words or less. Yep, I mean it.

*Unabashed self-promotion here...need some assistance and experience in helping your team discern the "why" and then develop the plans that reflect it? I'm your guy.*

At each step of the planning and implementation, ask yourself and your team, "Does this address why we are having the event?" Everything from the colors in the program to the location of the 19<sup>th</sup> hole tent, from the actual award handed to an honoree to who has mic time and for how long...**everything** should support, complement, illuminate, illustrate and articulate WHY. Those steps comprise the "how."

### **Focus on the Event's True Purpose**

By analyzing "why before how" from the conception through to the post-event debriefing, you will be able to focus your efforts, and your team's—as a group and as individuals. While there are secondary and tertiary goals/benefits of a special event, answering the question gives you focus. That focus will appear at every phase and every step, including these three major blocks:

*Décor:* Décor does not, and should not, bust the budget; however, attention to it, influenced by "why," can set the feeling from the moment people arrive to the moment they leave.

*Design:* The design of all materials, web pages, handouts, programs, etc. should be consistent between them, and should echo the "why." Pretty colors, pretty paper, pretty pages, pretty clipart...they don't cut it. They are pretty, and not purposeful. Focus on the purpose. Maybe part of the design for the

award event includes snippet quotes from each of the honorees, reflecting a bit about who they are...and those snippets appear in social media promotions...and the snippets are watermarked on the program...and....see? Pause, reflect, discern, discuss, decide...and act. Repeat.

### *Details*

A good event team includes people-people and detail-people. You need both. Developing the details, watching over them, documenting them and then re-evaluating them after an event are critical steps to creating a smooth-running event that can adjust to the changes and nuances of modified plans or Murphy's Law. Following those steps assures the event is focused on "why" while tracking "how." Everyone operates differently, but finding a method of attending to details that transcends time (you and your team members won't be there forever...leave good records...ultimately, you work for your successor's success) is important.

I'm a simple man. I almost always start the conversation with a six-column page. On top of each column is a question. Answering them, aligning the details horizontally, provides me the structure I need to start. The questions are these, displayed left to right:

- What are we going to do?
- For whom?
- With whom?
- By when?
- At what cost?
- Who is responsible?

Example: We are going to honor distinguished alumni; for the honorees, their families, fellow alumni, the honorees friends, and the university; as a cooperative effort with the alumni office, the schools, the relevant university offices (purchasing, parking, security, etc.); for an event to be held the first Saturday in April; with a budget that \$35,000; with the lead on the project being the Director of Alumni Events. The next row may then look like this: We are going to promote the event; to bring the right audiences to the event, i.e., the friends and families of the honorees, the university family, etc.; by partnering with the honorees for their lists, and through our own list-gathering processes with internal data, etc.; to have the promotion to begin on January 10 and to go out in phases; with a budget of \$5,000; to be co- led by communications associate director and alumni event associate director. And so on.... Find a way that works for you and your team, understanding that each person may handle it a bit differently. I say, "whatever works, creates a good record, and can be understood by others" works for me.

### **Align With the Organization's Values**

Consider your organization's values when making plans for a special event. Make sure that decisions for the event's appearance and implementation are consistent with organizational values. For example, if the culture of your nonprofit includes having a significant effect with minimal resource, i.e., a value of

frugality, it would not make sense for the event to be gaudy or include a lot of unnecessary frills. This applies even if the frills are donated gifts in-kind; attendees might or might not notice in the program that the specialties were donated. And you can be almost certain that photos of the event that appear in local media will not include an explanation that all the fancy stuff at the frugal organization's event was donated.

### **Celebrate and Honor the Right People**

Here are three guiding principles for developing truly special, special events.

1. It is not about you.
2. It is not about your leadership team.
3. It is not about your organizational prima donnas.

I recall a committee meeting in which I was the lead staff person on an event to honor a very famous television news personality for whom a building was being named. It was my first project at the university. My boss, the president, dropped in on the meeting; his wife was the co-chair of the event. Committee members asked questions for which I did not have answers, and I admitted so. No, we haven't been given a budget, but I will see if I can get that pinned down, and so on. There were several questions that the committee rightfully needed answered. After about ten minutes, the president excused himself from the meeting and asked me to join him. As we walked across campus he chewed me out for making him look bad for this important event for the journalist who was his personal friend and on and on. "It makes it look like you and I are not on the same page." (I was thinking, "you are on a page and I am in the dark.") It was clear that the president was more concerned about how the event made him look, then honoring the alumnus and providing the committee the clarity and resources that it needed to succeed. It was, ultimately, all about him.

No matter what type of event you create, there are three important areas to concentrate in order to be sure that you are celebrating the right people, whether they are four award winners at a banquet, 200 golfers at a tournament, or two parents meeting with faculty members who taught their deceased daughter.

*Personalize:* Keeping in mind the first three rules stated above, be sure to personalize the event in genuine authentic ways. For example, the last example in the previous paragraph was a real event. Small, intimate, private, respectful. I organized a site visit for the parents of an alumna who had been slain a few years before. They were considering making a donation to honor her memory, and, based on my visit to their house, my team and I organized a special half-day visit for the parents. After the official welcome to campus in my office, their first stop was lunch with faculty members who had taught the daughter. Neither administrators nor development officers were present during the lunch; it was not about us, it was about them and their daughter. The day concluded a few hours later at an on-campus jazz concert, led by a professor who taught their daughter in music class. The couple was introduced to the crowd as "special guests of the university."

There are many ways to personalize events, large and small. While it can be hard to deal with rules two and three, it is important that you address them, and always live by rule number one when planning events: it is not about you.

*Recognize:* Recognize people, behaviors and other elements that answer the “why.” At an award event, are boring bios read from the mic or personal glimpses into who they are? At a donor event, is there a way to recognize all donors including those who cannot attend, and do the attendees have special designations on their name tags or something to honor particular behaviors, e.g, certain donor acknowledgement levels, etc. And so on. Think it through and make a list of the different things to recognize and how to do it without going overboard or being pretentious.

*Now is a good time to refresh your reading of the giveaway chapter from my book, “Go First...” or better yet, buy the e-book and learn a few different ways to genuinely recognize others for who they are and what they have done.*

*Legitimize:* Most people want to be recognized for legitimate reasons and not just as an excuse for an organization to have an event or try to tap into the inner circles of the honoree. “Hey, let’s honor Bill Gates because he’ll bring all his rich friends.” That is an exaggeration of what I heard from some members of faculty and staff over the years, but not by much. Never mind that there was zero connection between the university and him, other than the fact that the university used a lot of Microsoft products.

Awards are a particularly dicey area. Whatever processes you use must pass scrutiny. Imagine your successor’s successor being approached about an honoree whose image is on the wall of the building. People are skeptical of why or how he won the award and now there is a potential can of worms about to be opened. Can the files be opened and reviewed to reveal a process, logic and method that substantiated the award? I have been blessed to always have bosses who did not interfere with the process for their own interests. Well, almost always...there was that one, but I will save that story for another day.

Another way to legitimize the event and/or those who are being celebrated/honored, is to make all decisions based on values that reflect the organization. The last university that I served always professed to being “community minded and partnership oriented.” Every event, every award, every celebration and every program in my office was viewed through the lens of that statement.

### **Thank Those Who Made It Happen**

In my first university assignment, I handwrote a little sign and taped it to the front of my desk: “Good manners are good business.”

Thank people...publicly and privately. It was not uncommon for me to send long, personal emails to my entire team after a significant success as I thanked them and showed them how they affected others' lives while making the university a better place. They became known as "Dion's love letters." After each event or program, I would find my team and give each a "high five." They received thank you comments in meetings and in the hallway. And I would thank my bosses, particularly when they took some risk in supporting something or they allowed my team and me to venture into uncharted territory.

At one university I cut out paper stars and colored them yellow as a way to recognize people's special accomplishments at staff meetings (I had to stop doing that because of the angst it caused a director who felt she wasn't receiving her fair share and started to complain privately and in meetings. Yeah, paper, hand-colored stars. I kid you not.) **Thank people.**

*Staff:* Always thank your team, and think expansively about who is on the team. I tried to always include staff members from appropriate offices from the beginning of planning. Involve experts where you need them. Is parking going to be an issue? Then include your campus police department at the beginning, and don't draw them in a week before the event. Will your event affect merchants near your office? It might pay to get them involved early as they may become resources to improve your event. Staff in offices other than your own can, and should, be part of the overall success. Thank expansively; thank sincerely.

*Volunteers:* I believe in volunteers, including sometimes not using them. But when volunteers are utilized in ways that bring value to the organization and/or event, utilize their abilities and tap into their interests...magic happens. Show your appreciation in genuine ways. Gifts or trinkets often don't convey honest appreciation; they are formulaic. Nothing touches people like praise before peers; thank volunteers in front of their peers and colleagues. This can be done at events, in publications and on web sites...to name a few. There are scores of ways to celebrate volunteers; make it meaningful and authentic.

*Facility staff:* I am a patient man in many ways. Customer service is not one of those ways. However, when I experience great service, I tip well for it, I tell management about it and I sometimes leave personal notes of thanks. I believe it pays to thank facility staff involved with events, too. Sometimes it means going to the waitstaff captain to tell him or her specifically that you noticed how well s/he keeps the team on task with service and that you appreciate it. Or a private thank you to the foodservice personnel who treat your donors and sponsors with respect and attention. Or calling all the waitstaff into the dining area of a major event to thank them and encourage the attendees to give them a round of applause. And when service does not deserve such accolades, I can guarantee that private words will be had to make sure there are not issues in the future. Praise in public, correct in private.

*Guests:* What is an event without guests? Nuttin'. Thank guests for coming. Thank them genuinely with a sincere message. Please, oh for the love of Pete please, do not use the same thank you message at every event, large and small. Thank them from the mic; thank them by making the rounds at tables; thank them by shaking their hands when they leave. It is your job. It is your team's job. It is the job of

your leaders, administrators, board members. Hmmm, it is everyone's job to say thank you in warm, genuine sincere ways.

### **Debrief and Follow Through**

I believe in debriefing meetings or conversations after events. Some programs call for formal, facilitated debriefing sessions soon after the event, and some call for simple tag-up meetings later. Respect the demands on the team, though. Some events are so daunting and detailed, and have such long gestation periods, that it is best to recognize that the team may have a post-partum phase after the event. They need some time to do little, think some and relax before getting back to the workaday world.

The debriefing meeting or conversation serves several purposes:

*Future events will be better* because of attention to details and nuances, many of which were identified by attendees and heard in conversations with team members during the event. Larger issues—good and bad—can be explored at these events, too, e.g., if 200 people show up for an event on a rainy day, how do you handle the storage of the umbrellas and the constant drying of the floors made slippery by umbrellas, raincoats and wet shoes? There's always something!

*To say thanks.* I could say more, but I think that I have covered the importance of appreciation already. The debriefing meetings are good ways to say something like, "I know I have already said it a thousand times, but...thank you. Did you see the smiles on the attendees' faces when they left? That was because of you." The compliment is simple and ties their performance to the outcomes.

*To provide memory* for the files and in each other's thoughts, spend time reminiscing about the event—how it felt, how people were dressed, what made people laugh or cry, etc. This departure from the checklist approach has a special purpose: It draws out stories. Your team will remember the stories, and remembering makes for better relations, events and successes.

Special events should play an important role for your organization. People enjoy the opportunity to "break bread together," literally or figuratively. Make the most of each opportunity by concentrating on what, and who, matters.