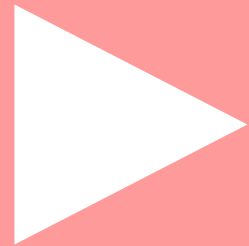
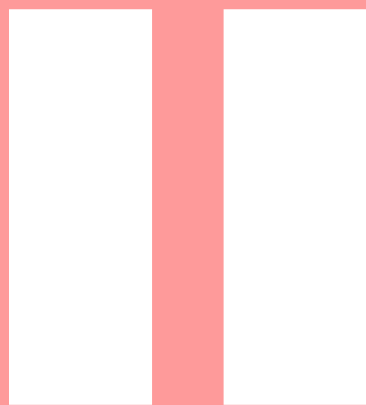


# The Power of Pressing Pause

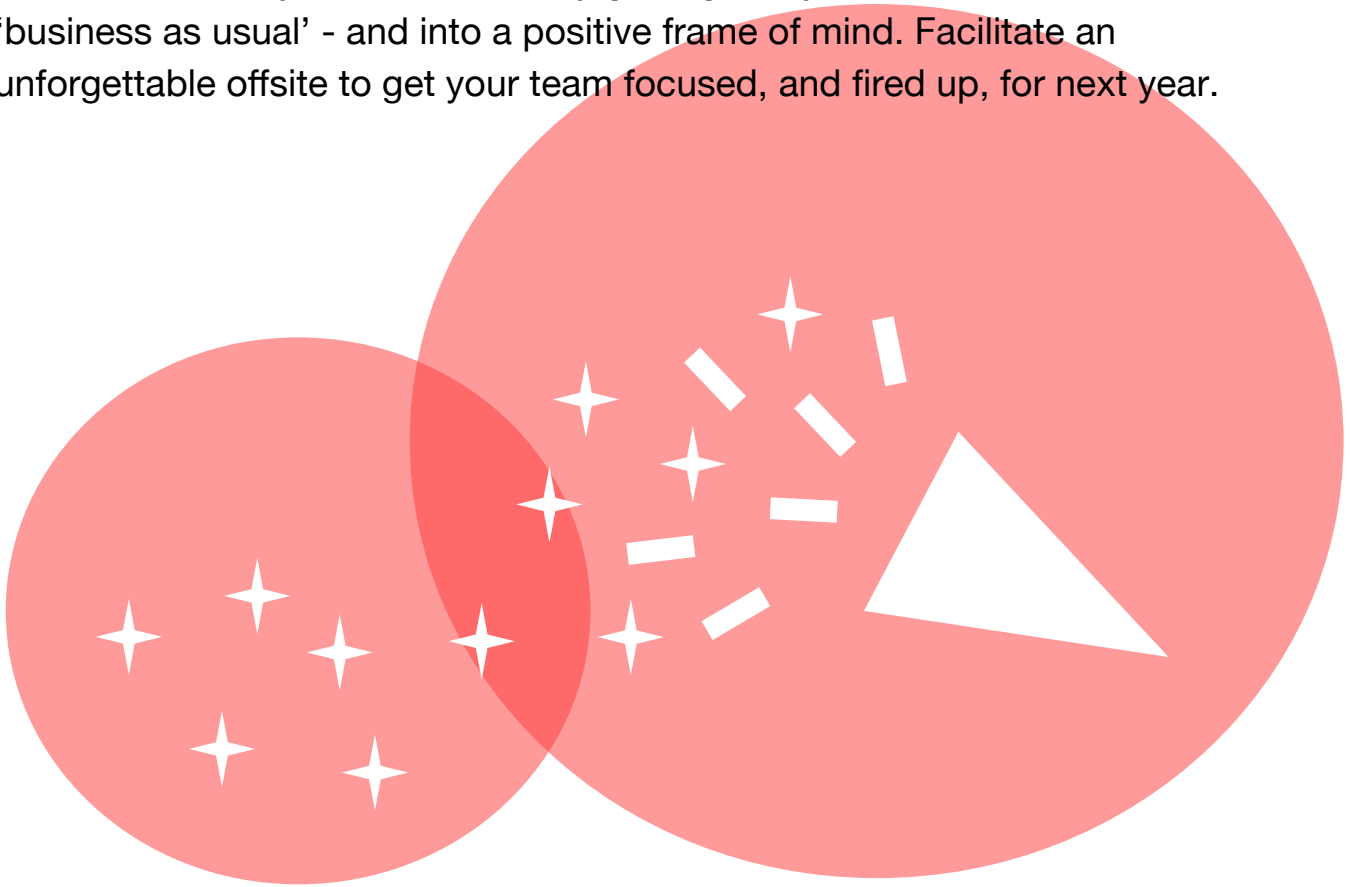
Take time for your team to review, recharge and reboot



**Facilitating an offsite for your high-performing team:  
4 experiments to try (and why they work!)**

**Congratulations!** However the last 12 months panned out for your team, you've just gained a year of the best executive education: real world experience. Your hard-won victories (and hard-felt blows) are business gold—**currency for future success that's wasted if people fail to connect around what they've learned.**

So, make time to take a communal breath. Come together for the honest, open and private conversations that generate fresh insights and the energy to move forward. Create the space, structure – and stimulus – your team need to truly connect. Start by getting everyone out of the scrum of 'business as usual' - and into a positive frame of mind. Facilitate an unforgettable offsite to get your team focused, and fired up, for next year.

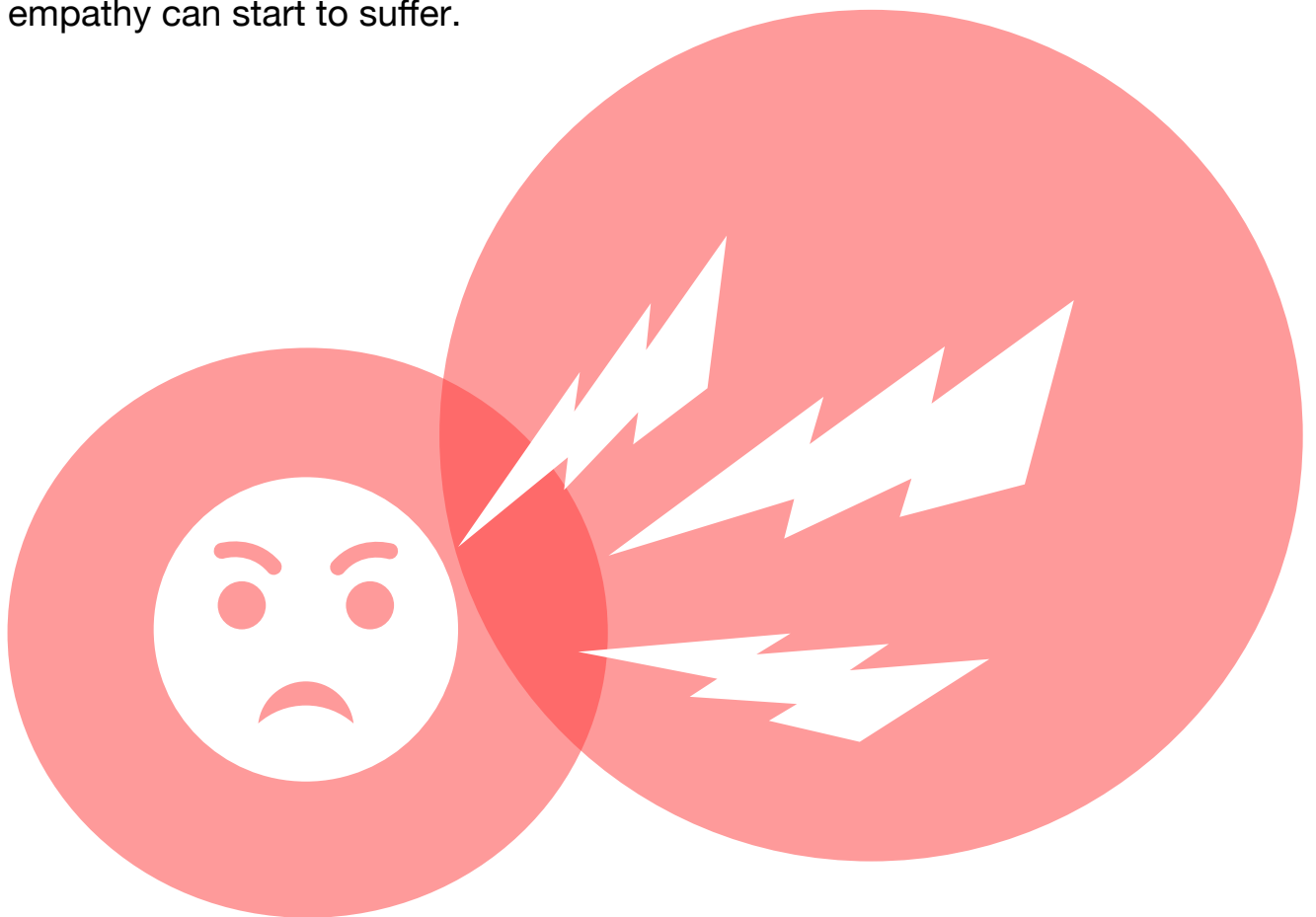


Try these **4 exhilarating experiments** to lead your team into a playful but productive place where insights are uncovered, bold ideas are born, and your spectacular year can start to take shape!

## EXPERIMENTS

### 1. Authentic Appreciation

High-performing teams tend to be ALL BUSINESS, but months of wrestling with ‘ruthless prioritisation’, ‘functional alignment’ and ‘stakeholder management’ will flatten even the toughest team. Throw in differences of working styles (‘devil in the detail’ v ‘big ideas’) and empathy can start to suffer.



Sure, senior teams are designed to hold tension, and provide productive challenge, but it makes for a tiring place to be. If you’re always thrashing out the difficult stuff, skins get thin; criticism can start to feel personal, and psychological safety suffers. Invest in your relationships, and you’ll *all* return to the ring, stronger and more resilient. Take time to recognise what each person brings to the party; and have fun rebuilding some old-fashioned appreciation. You’ll have a team ready to tackle anything together.

## TRY THIS EXPERIMENT...

### Team 'speed-dating'

Cards on the table: In 20 years of facilitating offsites, I've rarely had a team *want* to do this exercise (there's always 'more important stuff' they want to get into). But I've never had a team *not* come back pleased, proud - and pumped to get started.

1. Two weeks before your offsite, ask everyone to tune up their selective attention to positive interactions they're having with other team members. They're to note the specific 'good stuff' that other team mates are contributing.
2. At the start of your offsite, ask everyone to have 1-to-1 chats with their team-mates, 'hooking up' with each in turn.
3. For 5 minutes, Team-mate 1 tells Team-mate 2 how they rocked this year! When the 5 minutes are up, swap roles.
4. Ask everyone to keep feedback gloriously positive (what they value about each other)
5. Everything needs to be backed up with real life 'data' – tangible examples that can be referenced and referred to. High achievers find it too easy to shrug off compliments. You need to provide indisputable facts to make the good stuff stick!
6. Riding the feel-good energy, keeping rotating people until all team-mates have given (and received!) the love.
7. Re-convene the group to share how everyone's feeling: delighted, determined to get stuck in, and (big one this), psychologically safe as houses.

*It's the **granularity** that makes this exercise meaningful. You want to convey exactly how Clara saved your client presentation; what precisely Dan does each day to lighten your load.*

## WHY IT WORKS...

### **Psychological Safety isn't a state you reach. It's a process you invest in.**

High performing teams have gone nuts for Radical Candor, but in our rush to give honest feedback, we can miss sharing the good stuff – the meaningful, data-driven *positive* feedback that makes people feel valued.

Unfortunately, it's the bad stuff that sticks. Forged by our hairy neanderthal days, our *negativity bias* helps us avoid potential risks. But it means we hold onto criticism and discount the good things we bring to the party.

Empty praise like "nice job!" won't resonate with high performers (who are always looking for ways to improve). You need detailed, thoughtful positivity they can't shake off.

#### ***Why bother?***

*In a famous experiment (by psychologist Alice Isen), individuals were observed at a public payphone. In each case, a 'plant' was dispatched to walk past, dropping the contents of their briefcase. The sole variable? Some individuals found a dime in the payphone's coin return slot... others did not.*

*The results were striking: **88% of those who found the coin helped the passerby**, versus only **4%** of those who didn't.*

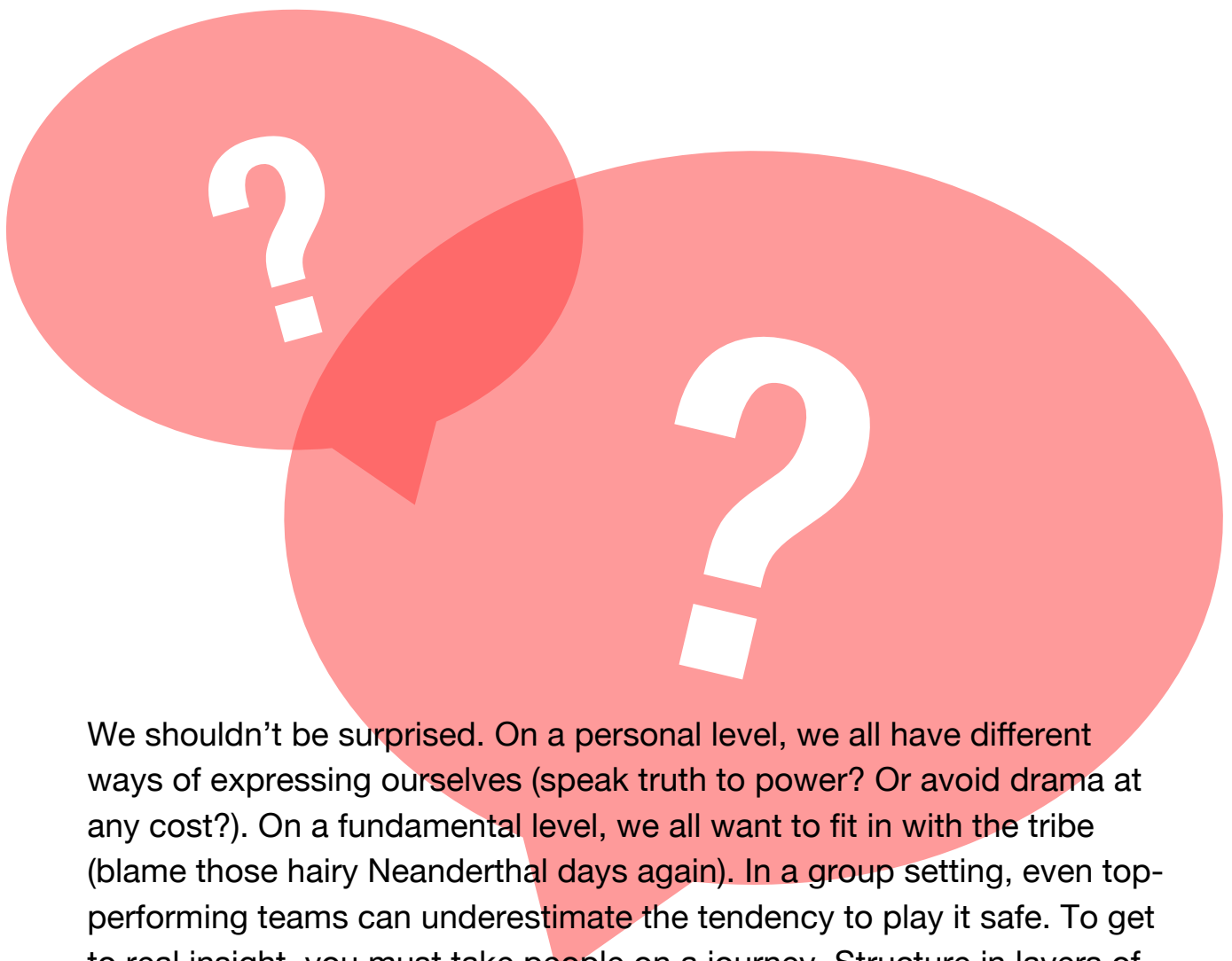
***Conclusion: our emotions – positive or negative – have a powerful effect on our behaviour towards others.***

*Yes, you want difference and diversity in the team (it's what makes the magic happen), but the tension that comes with it has an emotional cost to the people involved. Positive feedback isn't fluff – it's fuel. If you want the team to keep bringing their best, make sure they let each other know why they rock. Far from 'blowing smoke' it's the key to unlocking their full potential.*

## 2. Structure in layers of safety (think ‘team tiramisu’)

Picture the scene: it’s a packed room, and your boss jumps up to the flipchart. *‘What could we have done better this year? Don’t hold back! This is a safe space, filled with your closest colleagues, senior leaders, and your imminent career hopes and dreams...’*

Tumbleweed blows through the room, trailing polite platitudes, tortured analogies, and the sound of people tiptoeing around what they *really* think.



We shouldn’t be surprised. On a personal level, we all have different ways of expressing ourselves (speak truth to power? Or avoid drama at any cost?). On a fundamental level, we all want to fit in with the tribe (blame those hairy Neanderthal days again). In a group setting, even top-performing teams can underestimate the tendency to play it safe. To get to real insight, you must take people on a journey. Structure in layers of safety – step-by-step conversations which take you deeper each time, so you can get into what’s *really* going on.

## TRY THIS EXPERIMENT...

### Without pause, hesitation or interruption...

- Pair people up; hand each a pad/ pen, and send them off for a short walk
- Every pair takes it in turn to talk *without pause, hesitation or interruption* on a hot topic: ***what could we have done better this year?***
- Most people hit a natural wall at 90s secs. Forced to keep on talking (for 3-5 mins) they'll dig deeper, and repeat the things that are really bugging them. You'll be surprised by what pops out!
- The partner needs to actively listen, and note down the big stuff. After 5 minutes, switch roles.
- When both have splurged about the negatives, flip to the positives: ***what we got right!***

Having aired and shared in pairs, bring the team back together to share the themes you've surfaced. Spot the areas of commonality and difference, and really dig in (*tell us more!*) Let this layered approach spark ideas for the next stage of your review.

## WHY IT WORKS...

### Creating 'psychological safety' is a journey made from small steps...

- It's easier to open up to one other person than stand up in front of a group.
- By asking people to start with the negatives, you invite them to let rip. (*Yesss, all year I've been waiting for this!*)
- You provide space for them to really share (without interruption).
- You give them a mechanic that surfaces the subconscious (walking + talking without pause or interruption).
- Finishing on the positive leaves people feeling uplifted (*it's not all gloom!*)
- Sharing back in pairs provides safety in a group setting. (*This is stuff we both spotted*)

## The Power of Pressing Pause

### To take it to the next level:

Pair together team-mates who've struggled to connect and collaborate during the year.

- By providing space to *really listen* to each other, you allow them to develop an understanding and sense of shared struggle.
- Get team mates to share what they heard from the other person – helping that person feel *really heard* by someone they've struggled to connect with.

As for the walking? It helps you access a relaxed brain state (freeing your thinking), and encourages safe, honest dialogue with your partner (it's hard to lock horns when walking side-by-side!)

### ***There's a reason world leaders get invited to Camp David***

#### ***(and it's not for the squirrels...)***

*The tranquil woodland setting for the US President's woodland retreat relaxes VIP visitors, reducing 'alpha' behaviour (a particularly presidential problem!), and fostering more open, relaxed conversations. Famously, during the 1978 Camp David Accords, President Carter overcame the tense stand-off between Egypt's Sadat and Israel's Begin by taking each leader for reflective, collaborative strolls.*

***Conclusion: Whatever your pair dynamic - two big-hitters, or a senior leader trying to relate to the team 'newbie' - nothing dispels pressures (and protocol) like a blast of fresh air.***



### 3. Turn Good Intention into Action

Having spotted the challenges/ opportunities, around how the team's working together, it's easy to rush to personal pledges — 'I'll listen better', 'collaborate more', 'stop doing my Amazon shop in board meetings'. In reality, such good intentions rarely survive the first five minutes of any BAU bunfight.

The fact is all behaviour change is hard. We all go into work *meaning* to stay humble, listen better and get closer to the customer - but have we shaped our environment to ensure it happens? Are our team practices shaping the right behaviours?

As a leader, you've surrounded yourself with the best people. Now show you believe in them! Tweak your process, not the people. Co-create experiments around new ways of *working together* to make change inevitable.

#### ***Tweak the Process (not the people)***

*In the early 2000s, hospitals were dealing with alarming errors—surgeries on the wrong body part, tools left inside patients, even operations on the wrong people! Further investigation showed it wasn't negligence to blame, but chaos in high-pressure environments, where even top professionals could miss crucial steps.*

*A game-changing solution came in 2008 when the WHO introduced the "time-out" procedure, requiring surgical teams to pause and confirm key details before every op.*

*This simple, structured approach drastically reduced errors. One clear, small process created big change.*

### TRY THIS EXPERIMENT...

- Prioritise the big stuff that's come from your 'Even better *if...*' conversations: what's *really* going to shift the needle for you as a team in the months ahead?
- Reframe these challenges as opportunity questions ('How can we ensure we're really listening to each other in team meetings?')
- Break into small teams (no bigger than 4 people) to generate ideas – coming up with a range of different options for how to solve the question.
- Keep things real. Push for practical process ideas and *tangible tactics* you can implement together and (crucial bit, this!) gauge results from.

### WHY THIS WORKS...

We are all creatures of habit, ready to revert to familiar behaviours unless something stops us. Creating change requires a concrete structure, but concrete *doesn't* have to mean massive!

Habit guru Charles Duhigg observed how teams break out of the 'habit loop' more effectively when they focus on **small wins** and cultivated a shared sense of responsibility for change.

Breaking free from ingrained 'keystone habits' – those central routines that shape how we operate – can spark a ripple effect throughout an organisation, encouraging broader cultural and behavioral shifts.

*The UK Leadership Team of Capital One recognised the need for greater collaboration (both within their team and organisation-wide). The simple experiment they tried? To eat lunch together in the staff canteen. Their action was universally noticed, and impacted on direct reports who reflected the behaviour of their leaders, and found ways to work better together.*

*Building on this success, Capital One launched a 'Leadership Team drop-in desk' – members of the same team sharing a hot desk when in the office together. A powerful way for them to stay connected, and signal the importance of cross functional collaboration.*

## The Power of Pressing Pause

### Start small: turn good intention into great experiments

*Your team wants to ‘communicate better’? Great. Now turn that thought into a tangible tactic.*

**‘How about this experiment for our Monday meetings - we’re calling it the Chorus of Communication!’**

*After each team member shares their priorities for the week, we spin a pen on the table. Whomever the pen points at must repeat the other person’s priorities back to them.*

**Why might it work:** Introduces an element of jeopardy, keeping everyone engaged. Repeating each other’s priorities will make us feel heard, and strengthen connections. It feels like a game, and a bit of fun.

**Why is it an experiment:** Who knows if it will work? The pen could go flying...or always stop, pointing to Jeff. Too much for a Monday morning? Might feel like forced fun... especially for Jeff.

**How will we know if it’s working?** Try it in the next 3 Monday meetings. Then review/ take a team vote. If it sucks, what did we learn, and what else could we try?

Expect resistance to any changes, but by framing them as experiments, (‘nothing’s set in stone!’) you take the weight out of them. Any ‘new ways of working’ will feel weird to begin with. Give the experiment enough time to settle, before rushing to judgment.

## Top Tips

Senior teams can struggle to push past beyond interesting thoughts into tangible actions. When strategy is your meat and bread - and tactics are what others deliver – it’s tough to get the team super-practical!

Question process experiments: ‘If you gave this brief to 3 other teams NOT part of this conversation, would it trigger the same action from all?’ If the answer is ‘maybe not’, push again to make sure you’ve landed an idea that is well-defined, instantly gettable and (crucially) ‘do-able’.

## 4. Sleep together!

When budgets are tight, it can be hard to make a case for an offsite meeting; even harder to push for nights away. But fight the good fight, we say! A great offsite is a key moment to invest in – and time away doesn't mean breaking the budget.

A simple switch-up of routine relaxes everyone; creates space for informal connections, and provides the stimulus for new thinking.





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## TRY THESE EXPERIMENTS...

### i. Programme an overnight into your offsite.

- **Day 1** Surface problems/ dive into difficult conversations – but don't push for solutions.
- Give people an opportunity to 'sleep on it', and re-group. While you're resting, your subconscious can get to work...
- **Day 2** Re-group, re-cap and *now* get generative, seeing what fresh insights and new solutions have occurred to people overnight.
- Having processed problems subconsciously, people will be primed to produce their best thinking. This is especially true for more reflective members of the team. Not everyone shines INSTANTLY when asked to flick on the light bulb above their head.

## WHY THIS WORKS...

Sleep, and you access the inspirational theta state - your brain gets busy making creative connections you'd never consciously consider during the day. Think of it as the perfect brainstorming session (without any of the pressure!) REM sleep is particularly great for mixing old and new information, which is why you often wake up with those "Aha!" moments. This kind of brain magic comes in handy when tackling complex problems that need fresh thinking.

### ii. Get back to basics (and look after each other)

Nothing screams BAU like another night in a smart hotel (Bland As Usual). When it comes to breaking down work hierarchies, homespun beats 'hospitality' hands down. Plus (in our opinion), nothing beats making your own brew.

- If you want your team to feel at home, 'stand down the staff' – and *don't* book a hotel. Rent a cottage, or take over a chalet in a beautiful setting.
- The simple act of taking care of your shared environment (tidying up after each other, pouring the tea) bonds you.
- See if sharing small practical tasks builds togetherness, and helps you connect as people.
- Divvy up domestic roles (three of you on lunch; three on supper). See how it ups the productivity of your conversations when 'getting down to business'.



## WHY THIS WORKS...

Research shows that doing simple, shared tasks like cooking or cleaning together helps people bond and break down social barriers. Pitching in together helps everyone to connect as equals. By moving away from formal roles and focusing on genuine, human interaction, you increase empathy and openness - rocket fuel for psychological safety.

## The Power of Pressing Pause

### iii. Step outside; embrace nature (and have a laugh).

Don't worry about the weather (buy a coat! Bring a bikini...). Do all you can to get your team *truly* offsite.

- **Nature Walks** Schedule reflective strolls to encourage open, informal discussions. The simple act of walking together, as a team, can enhance problem-solving, foster open communication, and improve mood.
- **Campfire Chats** End the day with a casual discussion around a fire or in a quiet outdoor spot. This relaxed environment often prompts deeper reflection and more candid conversations.
- **Hold meetings in a local park – or hit the waterfront** Urban parks, or city stretches along a river/canal offer a quick escape into nature. No time (or budget) to pack your bags? Just pack your sandwiches, and hold your team meeting outside – you'll reduce stress and stimulate creativity.

## WHY THIS WORKS...

Spending time outdoors offers both cognitive and emotional advantages. Research consistently shows that nature reduces stress, enhances creativity, and fosters better decision-making. Natural environments help to lower cortisol levels, promoting relaxation and allowing leaders to focus more clearly on complex problems.

Can't get outside? Throw in some collective play. Nothing too forced (or furious!), but try a few energisers; encourage a bit of lateral thinking. (*If you could describe your mood as a fruit right now, which fruit would you be... and why?*). Keep things light - distract those busy brains – see surprising ideas spark. Nothing beats play for breaking down barriers. Get people laughing, and you pave the way for smoother collaboration. It also kicks the brain's reward system into gear, releasing dopamine that relaxes the prefrontal cortex—the part that overthinks—letting creativity flow and fresh ideas pop up effortlessly.



### ***PROOF POSITIVE***

***As Winston Churchill said, “the only statistics you can trust are the ones you falsified yourself”. That said, try taking these facts and stats out for a test-drive when making the case for your next offsite budget:***

- **Improve productivity by 20%:** Research from the Harvard Business Review found that teams that feel a strong sense of connection and trust see a **20% improvement in productivity**. Offsites that strengthen relationships, translates directly into more efficient collaboration and higher output.
- **McKinsey said it was true!** A study by McKinsey found that companies that invest in fostering creativity and innovation through activities like offsite retreats are **2.5 times more likely** to experience above-average growth. Offsite activities help create the space for innovative thinking, which can lead to new business strategies or products.
- **Offsites reduce team turnover by up to 25%:** A report from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) showed that offsites, can reduce employee turnover by as much as **25%**.
- **Burnout impairs decision-making, memory, and focus.** How many hours per week do your executive team members spend on critical decision-making? If their burnout reduced, and they became 10-20% more efficient in decision-making, what might that look like in terms of faster resolutions or better strategies?"



## **Final thoughts**

If you want your team to truly come together, forget offsite orthodoxies. Invest in ways to make your connections authentic, meaningful and, above all, fun. High achievers are always putting off reasons to celebrate. So, take this as our OFFICIAL absolution to crack open the champagne! No budget for champagne? Spray the Aldi Spumanti; pump up the Sodastream; whatever it takes to give your team some fizz! They've have worked hard all year. Even if results have been less than spectacular, you've got to celebrate the learnings and small steps forwards - how else will you generate the energy to carry on?

If you're serious about supercharging your team, fun is a non-negotiable. So, raise your glasses, everyone (and raise your game!)

**Big love,**

**Mat at The Culture Experiment**

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