Leading Town Halls People Actually Want to Attend

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Why most town halls underperform

The common format, a series of updates delivered from the front, followed by a brief, often sparsely used Q&A, tends to produce low genuine engagement. Attendees frequently treat it as a broadcast to half-listen to rather than a genuine opportunity to raise or hear about what matters most to them, and leaders often mistake attendance for engagement.

What makes a town hall genuinely useful

Address what people are actually wondering, not just what leadership wants to announce. Gathering real questions in advance, anonymously if needed, and structuring at least part of the session around them, tends to produce far higher engagement than a purely leadership-driven agenda.

Be honest about difficult topics, rather than avoiding them. A town hall that carefully avoids the issue everyone in the room is actually thinking about, a restructuring, a difficult result, a leadership change, tends to be read as evasive, which damages trust more than direct, even uncomfortable, honesty would.

Create genuine space for live questions, and protect it. If Q&A is consistently the first thing cut when a session runs long, people learn quickly that their questions are not a genuine priority, and engagement declines over time as a result.

Follow up visibly on what was raised. Questions or concerns raised in one session that are never referenced again signal that raising them made no real difference. Closing the loop, even briefly, in a subsequent session builds credibility for the format over time.

Handling difficult or hostile questions in a public setting

A defensive or evasive response to a difficult question in a town hall is highly visible and tends to damage trust broadly, not just with the individual who asked. The same principles that apply to Q&A generally, pausing, answering directly, acknowledging what is not yet known, matter even more in this more public, higher-stakes setting.

Format adjustments worth considering

Smaller breakout discussions alongside a larger session, rotating who presents rather than always the most senior leader, and genuinely anonymous question channels can all increase the honesty and range of what surfaces, particularly in cultures or organisations where direct public challenge to leadership is less comfortable.

The underlying purpose

A town hall is not primarily an information delivery mechanism, information can usually be delivered more efficiently in writing. Its real value is building trust through visible, honest, two-way engagement. Leaders who treat it that way, rather than as a broadcast obligation, tend to get significantly more value from the format.