

# Running an All-hands

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The other day, I attended an event that took me through the gamut of emotions. I was educated, inspired, amused, moved and energized. There were moments where I could literally feel chills down my spine. When it ended, I wanted to go leap tall buildings in a single bound.

This wasn't a superhero movie or a sporting event. It was Town Square, the fortnightly team all-hands at [Square](#).

Square runs one of the best all-hands I've ever seen. It's a masterly production (no other noun better describes it) that, to this day (~2000 people), rings true to who we are as a company.

I remembered my Town Square experience and was inspired to write this post upon receiving the following email from the CEO of a Series A company with twenty five people.

*Hey Gokul,*

*Wanted to get your feedback on something. We have a weekly Friday afternoon all-hands where we sit around, chat about stuff, and drink beer. Everyone seems to enjoy it, but I wonder — could we use this hour more wisely? Would love your thoughts.*

*Thanks*

Yes, there is a significantly better way for the company to spend an hour each Friday afternoon than sitting around drinking beer. Simply put, start running a formal All-Hands. Here's why and how.

## Why?

An All-Hands does three things. It **celebrates** people and accomplishments; it **drives alignment** around mission, strategy and

priorities; and finally, it provides a forum to **ask and answer** questions. These are all things you, as a leader, need to be doing constantly, and an All-Hands provides an excellent forum to get these done on an ongoing basis.

A good All-Hands will accomplish at least two of these three goals well. A great one will knock all three out of the park. After an awesome All-Hands, every attendee feels **invigorated** (the celebratory aspect), **empowered** (the alignment piece) and **educated** (the Q&A part).

## Your first All-Hands

I strongly believe that as a CEO or leader, you should run your first formal All-Hands as soon as your company or group stops fitting into a single room. As soon as you stop being able to swivel around in your chair and celebrate, communicate and converse with the entire team, organize your first All-Hands.

## Timing

Everyone has their own take on how often All-Hands should be run. Here's mine: company All-Hands should be run weekly, till the company gets to several (~five) hundred people. After that point, getting hundreds of people together for an hour-plus every week can be a massive drain on productivity without compelling and educational content to engage the attendees. I highly recommend moving it to a fortnightly cadence at that point.

Friday late afternoons work really well for company All-Hands, as long as the company is all in one location. It's the end of the week, a perfect time to reflect on what transpired in the past five days and to go into the weekend excited about the week ahead.

As companies diversify geographically, it becomes much more challenging to find a time that's good for everyone at the company to attend. I've seen global companies do All-Hands on Tuesday mornings,

Thursday mid-day, and every day/time in between. The key is to ensure it's convenient for **most** people. You will likely never be able to get a time that's ideal for every person in every geography, especially if the Americas, Europe and Asia are all involved.

## Timing, part deux

Within larger companies, there is not just a single All-Hands. Each team, division or product/business unit should run its own All-Hands, at a cadence that's different from that of the company All-Hands. Celebrations, communication and Q&A are as important at a division level as they are at the company level.

At the division or group level, a monthly or quarterly cadence for All-Hands is ideal, since goals are (for the most part) set quarterly. The All-Hands provides a great setting to review the past quarter's goals and look ahead to the next quarter. Just like company All-Hands, group All-Hands should be spaced farther out as the group expands in size. Groups that are 100+ in size, should likely be on a quarterly All-Hands cadence, and it works perfectly, especially as a complement to the more regular cadence of the company All-Hands.

## Who

All-Hands are important enough (see "Why?" above) that the leadership team for the company / group needs to be deeply involved in curating the content for every single All-Hands. Once the outline for the All-Hands is established (which will likely take several iterations), the responsibility for running the All-Hands should rotate among members of the leadership team. In other words, every week, an executive (staff lead at either the group or company level) should own the content for that week's All-Hands.

This is a true win-win-win. It's a great (fun, learning) experience for the executive to run the All-Hands; it's great for the company to see the

executive running it; and it prevents All-Hands from becoming too formulaic or boring, since every executive puts their own special stamp on the content, while still staying within the confines of the outline.

## Outline

A good all-hands is like a play with a three-act structure. You can sequence the acts differently than my recommended order below, but you should make sure to ensure that every All-Hands includes items in each of the three buckets listed below.

### **Bucket 1: Celebrate people and accomplishments (15% of time)**

Square's CFO, [Sarah Friar](#), has a wonderfully simple and universally applicable phrase: People First. Almost anything that involves a group of people at any company — including All-Hands — should start with putting People first. The good news is that all accomplishments are People First — so to celebrate an accomplishment is to celebrate the people who accomplished it.

Here are a few effective ways to celebrate people and accomplishments.

a. **New hires:** show a picture of every new hire on the big screen and welcome them to the company. While you are small (i.e. less than 5 new hires each All-Hands), you can even bring them up in front of everyone to talk about their background, why they joined your company, what they are most excited about at your company or group, and ideally, something that's pertinent to your culture. As you get bigger, you can bring all of them to the front at once, or have them stand up to applause. At some point, it stops scaling.

b. **Anniversaries:** People don't just start at companies (their "zeroversary"), they have 1-year, 2-year, and other anniversaries. Just like new hire celebrations, you can add your own personal touch to anniversary celebrations.

c. **Kudos:** Do you have a peer praise or kudos system at your company? All-Hands are a great forum to either get people to give live kudos in real time (small companies / groups), or to acknowledge people who received kudos from others. Fun prizes can add to the spirit.

d. **Values:** You probably have a set of values that form the bedrock of your culture. (If you haven't articulated them yet, read this [great post](#) by my friend Yanda on creating your team's constitution.) At your All-Hands, how about recognizing people who exemplify each of your core values, with examples of how they demonstrated that value?

e. **Accomplishments:** What are the top company / group accomplishments you are most excited about? Your All-Hands is a great forum to recount all that you've accomplished in the past week, fortnight, month or quarter, and to celebrate the teams that made it happen. Get the teams to stand up to applause; bring them up to the front to take a bow; or even give them a collective prize (eg: dinner as a team at a great restaurant) if that's consistent with your company's culture.

## **Bucket 2: Drive alignment around mission, strategy and priorities (60%)**

Now that we have the audience all fired up and buzzing with the celebrations, we get to the real meat of the All-Hands. You should aim to spend at least two-thirds of the total time on this piece. There are three sub-sections here — your "Why", your strategy, and your initiatives.

a. **Start with Why:** One of my favorite books is [Start with Why](#) by Simon Sinek. It uses numerous powerful examples - from the Wright brothers to Apple Computer - to illustrate the power of purpose, of inspiring people by getting them to believe in the "why" of what they are doing. This is what you need to do as a leader. Kick off this section by talking about your purpose as a company, your company's raison d'être, how what you are building will make the world a better place. The exact way you do it will depend on your personality as a leader, your communication style, and on your culture, but you need to do what Antoine de Saint-Exupery

said in one of the most beautiful quotes ever: *"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."*

It is so very important to remind people of the "Why" behind your company on a continuous basis. The good news is that since you will be rotating organization of All-Hands among your leaders, how each of them talks about the Why will be different (some might use customer stories, some will use personal anecdotes, etc), so you will avoid becoming repetitive.

b. **Strategy:** There are nearly as many ways of talking about strategy as there are companies. At its core, however, every good strategy describes your company or team's winning aspiration, where you play, and how you will win (i.e. achieve your winning aspiration). Most people at a company cannot describe any of the above. The reason is that the leaders do not articulate their strategy enough (I am being charitable and assuming they do have a strategy).

Just like the "Why", it's essential to constantly remind your team about your strategy. You can never do it often enough. But it needs to be crisp and memorable. Use the rule of three — not more than three items they need to remember.

The Strategy section is also where you should present top-level Metrics, which show how you are doing relative to your winning aspiration. A lot of companies present Metrics at their All-Hands without framing them in the context of strategy. This is self-defeating and serves no purpose other than to confuse the team.

c. **Initiatives:** This is where you get down to brass tacks. What are the top 2-3 initiatives you want to highlight at this All-Hands? This is where your judgment as a leader comes in. You need initiatives that are **relevant** to your strategy, that are **pertinent** (i.e. they are top of mind for many people) and that are **important** (i.e. impactful). Curating initiatives

for All-Hands is one of the most important things you can do as a leader. Make no mistake, the initiatives you highlight show what you care about, for better or for worse.

But what's interesting is that you can also use All-Hands to *drive action*.

For example, if reliability / uptime is an issue that's persistently bogging down your company, you could have your lead engineer give an update every single All-Hands on how the pertinent metrics are trending and what the team is doing to address it. Guess what? The engineering team realizes they have to give an update every single week to the company. They start focusing on the problem. And you see that the metrics start trending in the right direction fairly quickly.

Keep the number of presented initiatives to two, only going to three if absolutely essential. This allows you to go in depth (ten to fifteen minutes) per initiative, instead of peanut buttering.

And finally, think carefully about who's presenting. Do use All-Hands as opportunities for your rising leaders to present in front of their colleagues. Do your best to ensure the presenters are diverse, in every sense of the word (role, ethnicity, gender, etc). Who presents at All-Hands gives off subtle signals that everyone notices, consciously or not.

### **Bucket 3: Provide a forum to ask and answer questions (25%)**

One of the biggest mistakes I see leaders (self included) make is inadvertently spending too much time on the first two parts, with the Q&A being extremely rushed. It's absolutely imperative to tightly manage the time accorded to the people and mission/strategy pieces, and to leave enough time at the end for questions.

Remember: people will not walk away with a feeling of completeness — something I can attest to from countless post-All-Hands surveys — if they don't feel they had enough time to ask what's on their mind.

I like to break down the Q&A section into two sub-sections:

a. **Answer pre-asked questions:** Provide a forum — ideally through an online tool— for people to ask questions in advance of the All-Hands, and for everyone to vote on the questions they want answered. At the All-Hands, you (actually, not you you, but the right person who is closest to the topic) answer the top five or so questions that get the most votes (the other questions should be answered in writing in the tool itself, and the answers emailed to the team). Google Moderator was a great tool to collect questions and vote on them, but it was shuttered. There are [alternatives](#) to it, though.

b. **Impromptu Q&A:** This is literally open mic time, where anyone who had a question that was sparked by the preceding discussion, can come up and ask a question. It's really important to have time for at least two spontaneous questions — from experience, these can be some of the most insightful and hard-hitting questions, and you want to encourage people to ask them in an open forum. Again, redirect the question to the right person to answer it. Some of these questions can be fairly complex and challenging to answer on the fly, so an answer that is of the form “I don't know, let me look into it and get back to you by <date>” is perfectly acceptable, as long as you hold the person (or yourself) accountable to actually follow up by that date.

## **Part 4: Wrapping Up**

That's it. Thank everyone, and bring the proceedings to an end. At Square, we have a great tradition of ending Town Square with a music video or a video clip that's appropriate for the occasion (eg: we played the “I Have a Dream” video clip just before MLK day, etc). Something to consider.

## **Later**

It becomes tedious to run surveys (not to mention take them) every week or two weeks, so I would not recommend running post-event surveys for company all-hands to gauge satisfaction. The best metric to gauge happiness with the event is —attendance. People speak with their feet. If



they choose to stay at their desks or go home instead of attending your All-Hands, and the attendance slowly but perceptibly drops each week, you know the content is not clicking, and you need to pivot and make it more compelling.

For quarterly or monthly (group-level) All-Hands, it's absolutely a best practice to field an anonymous survey asking the audience to rate the event as well as an open-ended comment field around how it could be better. And, like with everything else, if you don't actually act on the comments, well, then you shouldn't ask for them.

## **Don't forget**

Please do provide an adequate supply of food (and drinks) at All-Hands. Feeding your employees is key, especially for All-Hands held on Fridays. Friday All-Hands are what stand between your people and their weekends, and having food at these events goes a long way towards increasing the overall happiness level.

## **Thank you**

All-hands can be incredibly powerful drivers of culture, strategy and performance. You want to ensure yours is done right and done well. Thank you for reading this article — I hope it helps you organize your next (or your first!) All-Hands. Please let me know in the comments, any ideas, suggestions or best practices I can incorporate into this article to make it better.