



Staging for Success: Preparing Environments for Productive Meetings, Trainings, and Workshops

Jean Young and Michael Cheang
Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

Physical environment and people

Physical settings can create cognitive and emotional reactions in people. In fact, many disciplines, including human ecology and environmental psychology, assert that environmental variables have an impact on human behavior. In ecological psychology, for instance, when the quality of the fit between human occupants and the physical environment is high, the people and the place are unified.

Research on the restorative effects of the natural environment found that individuals report feeling rejuvenated and energized by the places that they occupy. Additionally, research on creativity suggests that people confined to a "featureless environment" do not perform to potential intellectually and emotionally.

Environmental variables that may affect human behavior include the lack or the expansiveness of space; the location, shape, or temperature of a room; the texture and color of the walls and flooring; and the type and arrangement of furniture. Environmental variables may also include the absence or presence of natural lighting, windows with scenic views, and music or sounds that may be calming or distracting. Odors (e.g., the scent of flowers) may also conjure up images or set the mood in a given environment. Strong odors such as garbage, incense, strong perfume, or cologne may be distracting or off-putting.

A person's mood, attention span, and ability to focus may also be affected by color. For example, colors have the power to affect human senses by conveying meaning and presenting an atmosphere of pleasantness. Specifically, the cooler colors (blues, greens, and grays) create more passive participation, or a sense of coldness, while

warm colors (such as reds and yellows) or light pastels tend to give a sense of warmth.

From an environmental psychology perspective, extreme temperatures can reduce interpersonal attraction and interfere with successful task performance. For example, a study on hot and crowded areas found that participants in a room at normal temperature (72.4°F) reported feeling vigorous and comfortable, whereas individuals assigned to an overheated room (93.5°F) reported feelings of discomfort, fatigue, and sadness. High temperatures are also linked to loss of attention and productivity, and group members tend to be more aggressive when they are hot.

Physical environment and group function

Just as a group orientation assumes that individuals' actions are shaped by the groups in which they are a part, an environmental orientation also assumes that groups are shaped by their environments. The physical environment can promote a high-performance workplace, and groups generally respond best, in terms of productivity, creativity, and satisfaction, in positive and stimulating environments.

Studies of manufacturing teams in factories, students in classrooms, and workers in offices have found that individuals are more productive when working in attractive spaces that are visually interesting rather than drab. These studies have also concluded that physical features such as furniture, decorations, artwork, lighting, color, and music stimulate or provoke emotions that in turn tend to be associated with a range of positive group dynamics including improved communication, increased cohesion, and productivity.

Hence, physical space may be more decisive in creating positive group outcomes than we realize. In order to create physical environments that may contribute to better outcomes, here are some things to consider when planning for meetings, trainings, seminars, or workshops.

Type and arrangement of furniture

Institutional settings typically include gray or almond colored walls, gray furniture, harsh lighting, and industrial flooring. While these spaces are often designed by “experts” for reasons of cost, efficiency, and practicality, these designs also tend to make spaces sterile, cold, unpleasant, and uninviting.

The new paradigm of creating and using space, however, focuses on making the meeting space or environment comfortable and inviting so that the people can meet and function at the optimum.

Rectangular tables are most frequently used in meeting and conference rooms. However, rectangular tables tend to separate individuals by forcing them to sit on “this or the other side of the table.” With one side facing the other at a rectangular table, one tends to only see those on the other side, while being blind to those sitting on the same side of the table. In Western cultures, the ends of table are typically avoided unless one has prestige, privilege, or control.

In order to avoid such a divisive and hierarchical arrangement, one can level the playing field by using a round table or a circle configuration. Similarly, chairs arranged in a circle for a training session will stimulate more interactivity than a classroom-style configuration. The circle is the geometric symbol for community, and arranging chairs in a circle would

- level the playing field
- include all individuals in the group as equal partners
- improve group communication, and
- create a sense of belonging and community.

Classrooms are almost always designed for formal instruction. This assumes that there is “one expert” versus “the others” who are there to absorb what the expert knows. Therefore, classrooms, structured for teaching and not peer-to-peer learning, do not necessarily create an environment that is optimal for meetings and cooperative learning.

Hence, in order to create a sense of relatedness and belonging, and to eliminate or minimize the sense of prestige, privilege, power, or control, arrange chairs in a circle without the table.

Bring nature into the room

Elements of nature in a meeting space may create a calm and peaceful ambience. So, bring nature into a room by opening the curtains and pulling up the shades or blinds. Bring in plants and flowers (even if they are artificial!), install water features (e.g., a water fountain), and use background music and sounds (e.g., birds chirping gently in a rainforest) to conjure images of nature that relax and soothe.

Use of artwork and the aesthetic

In profound and transformative gatherings, people come together in moments of silence to share a song or a recitation. Art in the form of music, poetry, theater, literature, painting, sculpture, a story, or a dance can shift the tone in a room and create a sense of relatedness, togetherness, appreciation, and trust. Hence, consider including artwork in the physical space where meetings and workshops are held. Also, ask the participants to share a story, and if appropriate (e.g., during a weekend long retreat) get them to create works of art on site and have them share the meaning of their work. This kind of sharing allows the group to see more of the individual, and from a holistic perspective.

An empty wall can make a space feel sparse and cold, and as William Whyte, a pioneering street-life researcher, remarked, “An empty wall is a testimony to the insignificance of the human spirit.” Consider softening the windows and walls with printed fabric, such as pareos, and filling the walls with photographs and artwork by group members or workshop participants. Artwork may also include visual aids with welcoming and motivational statements.

Thoughtful planning in advance that incorporates relatively easy strategies can positively affect meeting or workshop outcomes. The converse of not paying attention to details and environmental factors can result in meetings or workshops that may not function at optimal levels and may not meet desired outcomes.

References

- Albers, J. 1968. *Interaction of color*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Barnes, S. 2006. Space, choice and control, and quality of life in care settings for older people. *Environment and Behavior* 38: 589–604.
- Bechtel, R.B. 1987. *Enclosing behavior*. Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania: Dowden, Hutchinson, and Ross.

- Bell, P.A., J.D. Fisher, A. Baum, and T.E. Greene. 2001. *Environmental psychology*. 5th edition. Forth Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace.
- Birren, F. 1978. *Color and human response*. New York: Van Nostrand Company.
- Block, P. 2008. *Community: The structure of belonging*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Borchardt, J.K. 2008. Creating a high performance workplace. *Contract Management* 487:10–15.
- Brief, A.P., and H.M. Weiss. 2002. Organizational behavior: Affect in the workplace. *Annual Review of Psychology* 53: 279–307.
- Danielsson, C.B. and Bodin, L. 2008. Office type in relation to health, well-being, and job satisfaction among employees. *Environment and Behavior* 40: 636–668.
- Duran-Narucki, V. 2008. School building condition, school attendance, and academic achievement in New York city schools: A mediation model. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 28: 278–286.
- Evans, G.W. 1999. Measurement of the physical environment as stressor. In: S.L. Friedman and T.D. Wachs (eds.), *Assessment of the environment across the lifespan*. p. 249–277. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Evans, G.W., and S. Cohen. 2004. The adaptive costs of coping with suboptimal environmental conditions. In C. Spielberger (ed.), *Encyclopedia of applied psychology*. p. 815–824. New York: Elsevier.
- Evans, G.W., S.J. Lepore, and A. Schroeder. 1996. The role of interior design elements in human responses to crowding. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70: 41–46.
- Forsyth, D. R. 2006. *Group dynamics*. 4th edition. Belmont, California: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Goldman, A.E., and S.S. McDonald. 1987. *The group depth interview: Principles and practice*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Griffitt, W., and R. Veitch. 1971. Hot and crowded: Influence of population density and temperature on interpersonal affective behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 17: 92–98.
- Hamann, A. 2007. Ways to create the best space for meetings. Beyond content. Give equal weight to the physical space. *The Journal of New England Technology*. <http://www.masshightech.com/stories/2007/02/26/focus2-Ways-to-create-the-best-space-for-meetings.html>.
- Jones, David G. 2000. Voices from the field. *Journal for Quality and Participation* 235: 53–56.
- Kaplan, R., and S. Kaplan. 1989. *The experience of nature: A psychological perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Knirk, F. 1979. *Designing productive learning environments*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.
- McCoy, J., and G.W. Evans. 2002. The potential role of the physical environment in fostering creativity. *Creativity Research Journal* 143(4):409–426.
- White, S. 1972. *Physical criteria for adult learning environments*. Washington, D.C.: Adult Education Association of the USA, Commission on Planning Adult Learning Systems, Facilities and Environments.
- Wong, M. 2006. *Color basics for landscapes*. University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources. <http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/oc/freepubs/pdf/L-18.pdf>.