



February 26, 2009

Dear Senator Kerry,

I was quite concerned to hear about your proposed legislation designed to prevent any recipient of TARP funds from hosting, sponsoring, or paying for conferences and other events. While I share your concern about reckless disregard for proper use of taxpayer money to finance lavish or frivolous entertainment, I feel that you are going too far in suggesting the prohibition of all conferences and events without an explicit waiver. In this situation, it is important to wield a scalpel instead of a hatchet.

I have done research and consulting in the area of leadership for almost two decades. What is very clear from my research is that our information-based economy, fueled by mass collaboration, is creating unprecedented levels of complexity in the business environment. This complexity is changing the leadership equation by creating a much stronger need to connect, inform, and engage people. Leaders must tap into the intellectual capital of a wide range of stakeholders in order to get the information they need to make decisions and help move organizations (both public and private) forward. And what's one of the best ways to connect, inform, and engage people and get them to share ideas? Meetings.

Meetings that I have designed with clients are true leadership interventions – not junkets. The leaders use meetings as tools to fully engage their workforces and accomplish work right there in the room before leaving the meeting. The events are considered as part of a communications continuum, i.e. we link what happens in the meeting to other corporate initiatives and use the time before and after the meeting to extend the boundaries of the meeting beyond what happens on-site.

You might wonder why all of this cannot be accomplished through technology. Having consulted in the area of collaborative technologies for almost 25 years, I can tell you that technology affords some wonderful new approaches to communication. However, technology cannot replace face-to-face communication. I'm sure I don't have to tell you this as you probably can't imagine replacing diplomatic missions with web conferences. Different media are appropriate for different objectives.

I'm convinced that in-person meetings are the premier leadership medium of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. New breakthroughs in meeting design that are well matched with the contemporary demands of leadership (e.g. new tools such as large group methods and innovative in-person technologies) are transforming the way leaders inspire and inform the people with whom they work. Indeed, meetings are an essential component to managing our way out of the economic crisis we currently face.

There are better ways to ensure that TARP recipients use meetings appropriately. I have developed, in conjunction with two colleagues, an approach to ensuring the strategic use of meetings and events. This approach includes 4 essential elements: portfolio management, strategic design, measurement, and advanced logistics.

Portfolio management encompasses available methods and technologies designed to help companies get a handle on all of the meetings they are holding and how they contribute to strategy. Strategic meeting design is the use of methods and technologies to design the content and form of the meeting in order to deliver strategic value. Approaches to measurement help determine the return on investment a meeting provides. Finally, advanced logistics refers to the high-level support needed to make a meeting both effective and efficient.

If the TARP recipients do a good job of addressing these 4 imperatives, then they will be able to exploit meetings fully to manage their way out of this crisis. I implore you to consider this type of approach as an alternative to a blanket prohibition. If you want more information about it, I will be happy to provide it to your staff.

I recognize that you have included a provision for a waiver from Treasury. There are three problems with this approach: 1) Companies that fear reprisals may just simply say “no” to all meetings instead of trying to determine if the meeting they are planning is acceptable to a Treasury official; 2) Some meetings need to happen right away and a 30-day turnaround might be too long to address a crisis; and 3) This is not a long-term solution to the problem. Companies need to learn to address the four imperatives outlined above in order to sustain their ability to use meetings properly on an ongoing basis.

Broad-scale cancellation or prohibition of meetings is not unlike shutting down computer networks or turning off phones. Meetings are arguably a leader’s most vital and effective communication medium – now and well into the future. Those who are deprived of a key communication channel will be stymied in their attempts to formulate, communicate, and execute the strategies of their organizations and ultimately lead them out of this economic crisis.

In addition to the problem of constraining a key leadership medium, there is the issue of the direct economic consequences of prohibiting meetings. According to the US Travel Community Coalition, “Without the jobs generated by meetings, events, and incentive travel, the current unemployment rate of 7.6 percent would rise to 8.2 percent and cost the average American household an additional \$136 in taxes annually.”

If this legislation is passed as it is currently written, I believe the negative unintended consequences will be swift and profound.

Sincerely,

Mary Boone

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Mary Boone is President of Boone Associates, located in Essex, CT. She is an expert in interactive meeting design and has been consulting in the field of organizational communication and collaborative technologies for over two decades. The author of several books, including the bestselling Leadership and the Computer (Prima), and Managing Interactively (McGraw-Hill), she has been featured in a wide range of media outlets including CNN, NPR, The New York Times, Investor’s Business Daily, The Wall Street Journal, and many others. Her 2007 *Harvard Business Review* article (with David Snowden) won an award from the Academy of Management. If you have any questions, please contact her at [mary@maryboone.com](mailto:mary@maryboone.com) or twitter @maryboone



