

SKO Do's and Don'ts

Kickoff is an engagement event, not a training event. Plan it that way.

Six things to add to your agenda and five to take off it, from someone who has planned at least a dozen SKOs.

Do this.

Six things to add to your agenda.

01 Start with what you want repeated.

Before you book a venue, answer one question: what do you want your team to repeat after SKO? Every session you keep should help with the answer. Every session that doesn't is a candidate to cut.

Then decide how you'll know it worked. Do it before the event, not in March.

02 Plan unstructured time.

Give people room to connect in an environment they're not normally in, without it feeling forced. No, not at the bar at 2am. They're going to do that anyway.

- **Build an internal vendor hall.** Staff booths with the teams reps need but rarely talk to: Deal Desk, Product, CS, the Board.
- **Give people something to do or see during breaks,** so they have something to talk about.
- **Ask (tell) leaders to sit with people they've never met** at meals, not with each other or their own teams.
- **Put one-on-one time on the agenda** as real time, not as gaps between sessions.

Those hallway conversations become the phone-a-friend calls that save deals in Q3.

Do this.

Feed people. Thank people.

03 Feed people well.

Do not skimp on food. People will complain about it forever.

- Plenty of protein and something hot at breakfast.
 - Snacks that aren't just carbs and sweets.
 - Coffee all day, plus something besides soda and water.
 - Dietary restrictions taken seriously, with an easy way for each person to find what they can eat.
 - Meals that make people say "mmmmm," not "huh?"
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04 Thank every planner, by name, from the main stage.

Planning SKO is a thankless job and takes more effort than anyone who has never done it would believe. Months of work, backup plans for the backup plans, late slides, missed flights, and a hundred details nobody saw.

- Every person.
- By name.
- From the main stage.
- By the CEO or, at a minimum, the CRO.

I have planned at least a dozen SKOs and been thanked publicly maybe once.

Do this.

Work, then follow up.

05 Make one session a working session.

Try 2% Better. A rep carrying \$2.5M in ARR who gets 5% better closes one more \$125k deal. Fifty reps doing that is \$6.25M in additional ARR, sitting inside your team's current behavior.

- 1 Every rep picks the one that got away and writes a deal breakdown, structured like a book report.
- 2 Reps present to peers and managers, and the room workshops the small changes that might have won it.
- 3 The team votes on the top two or three deals.
- 4 Those reps re-enact the deal. A manager who was on it replays the meetings and emails, and the rep responds differently, live.

Small adjustments make a big impact. Not everything has to be a seismic shift.

Short on time? Run a "bring me your deal" session: reps bring a live deal and pull it apart with tenured people from across the org.

06 Plan the weeks after.

In 1885, Hermann Ebbinghaus showed that memory for new material drops steeply in the days after learning unless it is reviewed. In the 1980s, Piotr Woźniak and the SuperMemo team built on that work, using review schedules spaced further apart as an idea takes hold.

An idea heard once in a ballroom fades fast. Ideas that come back, spaced out over the weeks after, are the ones that stick.

Give managers the follow-up: a template of each rep's small-change areas to drill, like practicing a putt, while enablement tracks movement in leading indicators and the team doubles down on what's moving.

Sources: Hermann Ebbinghaus, *Über das Gedächtnis* (1885). Piotr Woźniak and SuperMemo, spaced repetition research (1980s).

Not this.

Five things to take off it.

01 Don't make SKO a content dump.

A ballroom full of distractions, reps still managing live deals, and no time to practice is not a learning environment. Content built in November for an August market, delivered in January, is out of date by March.

Use the event for what only an event can do: vision, org updates, and connection.

02 Don't run a 90-minute product session.

A giant room, people wondering what's for lunch, or still groggy from the night before, is not a learning environment. No one will remember it.

INSTEAD

- Keep product to a 15-minute highlight reel.
 - Schedule hands-on product training right after SKO, as a fast follow.
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03 Don't book the motivational speaker.

No. One. Cares. Unless you can book Beyoncé, which you can't, it's a five-figure chunk of your budget that won't help your team hit their number.

INSTEAD

- A customer panel where they go deep on why they bought.
- An internal leader who talks about something that went wrong, and how they recovered.
- A trainer who gives reps something specific to implement on Monday.

Not this.

Skip the formula. Skip the finish line.

04 Don't use the theme formula.

LOUD VERB + money noun + journey metaphor. Unleash Success. Explode Growth. Blast Off to Revenue. Enough. Give people an actual theme:

Wizards and Dragons

Summer Camp

Carnivals and Cracker Jacks

90s Nickelodeon game shows (real slime required)

Winter Wonderland

Pirates

05 Don't treat the event as the finish line.

It's two months into Q1. The SKO buzz has faded and the numbers look anemic. Before you start slinging PIPs, partner with Enablement.

The performance problem showed up in March because the design problem happened in January.

THE SHORT VERSION

DO

Start with what you want repeated

Plan unstructured time

Feed people well

Thank every planner by name

Make one session a working session

Plan the weeks after

DON'T

Make SKO a content dump

Run a 90-minute product session

Book the motivational speaker

Use the theme formula

Treat the event as the finish line

The best part of your SKO isn't on the agenda.

Protect it anyway.

- People who have worked across the world from each other finally meeting, and becoming friends, not just colleagues.
- A leader getting new insight from someone outside their team because they happened to sit together at lunch.
- Themed outfits for the last-night party.
- The 45-person rock-paper-scissors tournament. It never fails.
- The CEO closing the day with the whole company scream-singing Don't Stop Believin'.

Winning becomes a habit, not an accident.

Planning a Q1 SKO? Fiona Covington speaks at kickoffs and runs Pattern Lab workshops, working sessions where reps dig into their own deal data instead of sitting through a lecture.

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