



Facilitating change

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Seminars and workshops are part of organisational life. But often the true value of bringing people together for extended periods is not achieved. So how can the most be achieved from the process?

Working back from the outcome

For an organisation to consider a workshop or seminar in the first place, it must be seeking some kind of change. This could be a change in behaviour, collaboration or understanding. But veterans of organisational workshops know the feeling well. The purpose of the event is not clear and the outcome left to chance. If you buy a computer, the first question of the salesperson will be 'What do you want to use it for?'. The equivalent question for workshops is 'What do you want the outcome to be?' Once this is clear, which may take some time to decide, then the process should be designed towards that outcome.

The right people in the right place

Only certain individuals are in a position to contribute to the outcome of a workshop. Organisers of the most effective workshops are firm about who needs to be there. They avoid the temptation to issue blanket invitations. They offer encouragement to key individuals to show up. If this doesn't happen, then the quality of the exchanges at the event is diluted by a poor dynamic between those who are there to achieve a result and those who come because they felt they couldn't say no to an invitation.

Techniques for inclusion

Of course, attracting the right participants doesn't necessarily mean that the conversation flows, everyone contributes and the workshop marches on towards its conclusion. Effective workshop facilitation ensures that the perspectives of all participants are taken into account. This may be difficult in a plenary session and so group work offers a way for people who are reticent to speak openly to contribute. Other useful techniques include card-based exercises, inviting people to present their perspective visually through a sketch or diagram (which also avoids lists of bullet points) or role plays.

These kinds of approaches often bring the best out of people and help to break down any uneasiness in the room. It can be surprising how well participants rise to the challenge of a new way of tackling the material, providing the exercise does not become an empty performance.

Finding substance

And so we arrive back at the outcome. The facilitator of a workshop or seminar needs to ensure that the 'buzz' of a successful workshop actually leads to the desired results. Pitfalls can be that the time allocated for discussion extends into the space for drawing out conclusions. Or that the summing up process does not sufficiently analyse what has happened in the discussion, simply recording it instead.

The substance of a workshop event, and the part that achieves the most for organisers, comes from distilling the main messages that participants take away with them. Approaches for achieving this can take various forms, depending on the circumstances.

Picking out the threads

One approach is to group observations from the workshop into themes. Participants can help do that using cards or on flipchart paper, led by the facilitator. This process encourages further discussion.

Challenging assumptions

More demanding for participants, but worthwhile if the subject matter is complex, is to explore the assumptions that underlie the workshop conclusions. For example, if everyone agrees on a certain course of action, then what are the assumptions that make them believe this will be successful?

Aggregating the material

A useful way of both analysing the work and arriving at some important concluding statements is to draw higher-level inferences from a set of observations made by participants. The facilitator tests this aggregated material by showing it to the group.

Whichever approach is taken, the workshop should now be close to achieving the desired outcome.