An introduction to...

Meeting and workshop facilitation

(5)

Be clear about the aims of the session from the outset

The main goal of your session will have a big impact on the approach taken. An idea generating, collaborative session will have a different structure to a session aiming to inform. Ensuring your aims are clearly communicated from the start will help people understand how best to participate.

When it comes to the session itself, creating an environment that enables everyone to engage and participate fully and equally is a key role of a facilitator. Providing adequate and varied opportunities for contribution will help people feel they had a voice and the session was worth attending.

Key terms:

Aims
Statement of intent or purpose.

Outcomes
Desirable results, e.g. what you hope to achieve.

1. Make an agenda
... in fact, make two! One for participants and one more detailed schedule for the facilitator. An agenda helps everyone focus during the session by establishing a shared understanding of what is expected.

The participants' agenda should include an outline of the session structure, aims and estimated time slots. The second agenda is a detailed aid for the facilitator, including any reminders for setup, e.g. flip chart and pens or photos required, and additional facilitator interventions, e.g. the time given to group breakout sessions, which means they don't have to remember these details on the day.

2. Participatory values
Most meetings and all workshops are participatory, so those attending should be supported to contribute.

It is the role of the facilitator in participatory sessions to ensure all voices are heard, not just the loudest. Keep an eye on those who haven't yet spoken and provide an opportunity for them to input. This could be either vocally or through alternative methods, e.g. anonymous ideas on post-it notes or group flip chart notes.

Remember, picking on people to speak, who do not self-initiate a contribution, is intimidating for participants! Try to bring them through more encouraging techniques.

3. Introductions
Encouraging participants to introduce themselves can be a simple but effective icebreaker, as it lets everyone know their voice is equally important in the session.

Introductions are a useful tool to challenge preconceptions. If the participants aren't all part of the same team, they might not know each other's expertise and jump to conclusions based on the loudest voices.

Introductions at the start – who they are and where they are from – levels out the playing field.

4. Inclusive practice
Can people access the room? What if they have a physical impairment? Are there stairs? Is there a hearing loop installed? Can people contribute ideas in different formats?

Creating an inclusive environment is important. If barriers exist before they even enter the room, they won't be able to participate.

Some participant information can be gained during the event sign-up process. Including an access statement on the booking form is good practice. However, this isn't always appropriate, e.g. for a short internal meeting. In these cases, selecting accessible rooms and technologies should be part of the design process.

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Considering alternative options in advance also ensures you are prepared for any eventuality. For example, if holding an online session, think about audio-only or chat-based contributions to accommodate variable internet connections.

In all cases, taking a proactive approach to inclusion is key. Participants will appreciate the additional effort to consider their needs and ensure effective contribution.

5

This activity takes 5min

Activity: Identify the aims

Before you send round a meeting request or booking form, stop and think 'what is the purpose of this meeting?'

- Think about the purpose of the session. Why do you want to hold it? What do you want to achieve?
- Identify the aims. Write them down. From the aims you can construct the structure or the approach you take to facilitating, so they're a really important starting point.
- If you have lots of aims identified, drill down and refine them until you have only a few key points.
- What are the desirable outcomes of the session? Are they aligned to the aims?

Try and get into the habit of using this framework each time you schedule a meeting. Meetings are only effective if scheduled with a purpose in mind and facilitated to achieve those aims. Any size meeting needs clear aims from the outset.

Further resources

Public Engagement Knowledge Hub
- if you are external to the University and wish to access the hub please get in touch with the **Public Engagement Unit**

Example Participant Agenda

Example Detailed Agenda