

CHAPTER 10

Preparing and Designing Workshops

Design is a complex multi-dimensional process. One doesn't just sit down and "do it; rather, it consists of several constituent activities often visualized as a spiral to depict the process as a journey of successive round trips, each incrementally shaping the destination.

—Susan Wright

There is a certain contemporary mindset which bridles at the idea of careful preparation and thinking through. "Just do it!" is used as a motto by more people than the footwear company. In this case, it seems to say, "Just go ahead and workshop—why design, why prepare?" Suppose the builders of the Confederation Bridge between Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick had said, "Just do it!" and went ahead putting in pylons and trestles as they came to mind. The ice floes and wind would have had a field day. It is true that there are occasions when you just have to go ahead with some project, regardless of preparation. But not the consensus workshop.

What is the key to facilitating a stellar consensus workshop? A productive, satisfying workshop depends on "the action before the action"—the amount of preparation that goes into it and the artful design you create for it.

Most beginning workshop facilitators would assume that the thing to prepare is the process they will use—the steps, the order of the steps, tools to be used with the steps—in other words, the workshop design. But facilitators also need to think through the current situation of the group they are leading. Time also needs to be spent on honing the focus question and the product. Then the workshop can be appropriately designed and orchestrated. So, we can enumerate three major areas of preparation:

1. Assessing the group's situation
2. Designing and orchestrating the process
3. Orchestrating the process

Again, one might well ask: why this level of detail in preparation? Why can't I just write the question on the flip chart and get the group to go for it? What's the big deal here? The big deal is that, in facilitation, as in cooking, execution is only as good as preparation. Sun Tzu, the Chinese writer on strategy, has a famous sentence relevant

here: “Generals win battles the night before the battle, through their preparation “in the temple.” It is the same with workshop facilitators. Success is assured by the amount of detailed thinking through of the total environment of the workshop—in the time before the workshop happens. Some facilitators have been known to sweat out their preparation all night long before they go on stage. Preparation is serious stuff.

1. Assessing the Group’s Techniques and Situation

If you’ve decided to lead a consensus workshop, you need to drench yourself in background details. So, the first step in preparing a workshop has nothing to do directly with the details of the consensus workshop method. It is to understand or review the details of the organization, or group you’ll be facilitating. Some questions need answering:

a. What is the topic?

There are one million possible topics for a workshop. It is critical to get very clear what the topic of this workshop is: Is it human relationships, team conflict, sales strategy, marketing tactics, customer relations, suppliers, janitors’ issues? And within those, what aspect does the group need to deal with? Then you need to know what the related issues are.

If the topic is very hot or contentious, you may need to spend much more time in this part of the workshop, to encourage understanding all around. But if the topic requires a very specific result that everyone can buy into, you will have to be much more meticulous in the naming—for example, creating a project implementation plan.

b. What is the situation? What are people concerned about?

Every consensus workshop has a sociological wraparound. In one workshop, people were passionate about getting the issues prioritized, but underneath it all was a grave doubt about whether they would be empowered to deal with the issues, once prioritized.

The facilitator knew that this kind of concern would pull a lot of energy and motivation from the workshop. So he went to the client, and asked what was his intent for the workshop. The facilitator pointed out the participants’ concerns about support from the management, upon which the client said he was very interested in the results and in the group’s suggestions for dealing with the issues. He said he meant to ensure that the workshop’s proposals had his support, and he agreed to say so to the workshop group. The workshop and the participants felt empowered.

c. What is the organizational history, recent shifts and events?

Some image of the organization’s history, for example, how long it has been around, is helpful. What are the major shifts it has been through? For example, the introduction of teams, employee ownership, going public. What have been recent accomplishments and setbacks? What recent external or internal events have led up to this—a collapse of funding? Bad press? Perhaps a crisis in communication or a market that has just tripled in size? A new exciting vision within the organization? Perhaps an incredibly successful year which inspires larger goals?

In most of these instances, the workshop facilitator will need to acknowledge the climate he is working in, and the importance of this workshop to that climate and of giving the group permission to think about the future.

d. What is the group’s past record on the topic and the current degree of consensus?

Is it that every time this workshop topic comes up there is an explosion of feeling? Is this a hot topic? Or does it bore people to tears because they’ve dealt with it so many times? Is there a fair degree of consensus around the

topic? Or are there several camps of opinion that must be reconciled?

What is the main bone of contention? Have they worked on the problem before? If so, what did they do? What were the results? What has happened since? This affects the context and the decision on the focus question.

If there is a history of working together and agreement, you can move much more quickly. If there is a history of no-consensus, more time will be needed for brainstorming and even more time to clustering so that people really do hear and understand each other. In clustering, you will have to continually ask people to comment on various associations. In the naming, you will have to clarify the names that people use so that participants know what the emerging consensus is. You also want to present this workshop in the context of the work already done, so that participants don't develop a sense of déjà vu.

e. Who are the people in the group?

This is a big one, almost a separate arena of preparation. The old pedagogical adage, "To teach John, one must first understand John," is just as true in facilitating a consensus workshop. To rephrase the adage, "To lead a workshop, one must first understand the workshop group." If your task is to do a workshop for a client group, the facilitator will need to ask the client about the people in the group.

What is the current mood of the group? Are they weary? Cynical about the topic? Excited to be able to deal with it at last? Somewhat scatterbrained because of a recent crisis?

What is their attachment to solutions? Are there elements in the group who think they have a winning model—they just need to share it and people will buy in? If so, you will need to stress the hearing of all perspectives. Is the group on the side of the status quo? If so, you'll need a context that stresses the importance of thinking wildly and outside the box. Or are they dying for change?—in which case you will need to remind them not to throw the baby out with the bath water.

Is the group knowledgeable about the topic? Is the topic in their bailiwick? Or does it seem foreign to them? Will there need to be preliminary research, or a presentation? Or are they loaded with information? If they are all knowledgeable, you can dive into brainstorming. If not, you will need to spend time in the context, maybe with presentations from people who do know the topic, or maybe a focused conversation to explore the topic and let people understand its complexity.

If people are insecure because they do not know each other very well, give them time to get better acquainted, so that they feel free to discuss things openly.

What are the cognitive and operational styles of the people? What are the main thinking and learning styles operating in the group? Are they print-oriented, highly visual, very kinesthetic, hyper-rational?

If you need movement in the room, you could plan to ask people to bring up cards to give them the chance to move around. You could ask them to change seats to do the brainstorming. Take away tables and use only chairs, if you want spontaneity and a feeling of complete openness and exposure. If you are after standard workshop process, set the room very deliberately to give the message that everything is very orderly and thought-through.

What are the keys to the way the group operates? Are they familiar with team operation? Is there a high degree of initiative in the group? Are they proactive or reactive? More intuitive or more rational? Do they operate institutionally or semi-autonomously? Is there a high degree of collaboration, or do work units keep to themselves?

Some people (e.g. company presidents) may have universal permission to get up and make astute observations at any

time, and, similarly, to point out important points to the group, or comment on short cuts in the process. At other times presidents must be asked to follow the process to the letter, to give the appearance of complete impartiality and openness.

Be prepared to watch for people who never speak, and occasionally ask them a direct question so they can hear their own voice and have permission to participate freely.

Without this situational examination, the workshop facilitator may do an excellent technical job on the workshop, but not a quality job for the organization.

Of course, if the consensus workshop is within your own organization, the need for this review seems less necessary, but if you do it, you will do a better job for the group.

2. Creating a Focus Question

Getting the focus question right is very important. It indicates the type of answers the group is looking for. It acts as a guide in clustering the data. The focus question enables clusters to be named in enough detail that the solution is obvious. The focus question begins with a “what.” It is such that people can easily come up with 8 to 15 answers to the question. It includes a time frame if that affects answers.

The focus question will drive the whole workshop. It triggers the brainstorm and provides a guide for the clustering and naming. It’s important to create one that both focuses the topic and elicits lateral thinking.

a. The subject

First identify the topic or subject. This is probably fairly abstract at this point. Your notes from the situational analysis will likely tell you.

b. The time frame

There are two considerations that have to do with time. You need to think through both to create your focus question.

The first is how long the actual workshop will last. Usually you are given a limited time in which to do the workshop. If you have only an hour or less, you will probably be able to do a quick, intuitive workshop on an easy issue. If you have three to four hours, you can probably do some real exploration of an issue.

The second consideration is the duration of the results the group needs from the workshop. Does the group need a five-year vision, so that they don’t need to redo it each year? Or do they need a one-week temporary solution to a problem? This time period may be usefully made part of the focus question.

c. The stakeholders and participants

The facilitator needs to know who will be affected by the results of the workshop. Staff? Management? Overseas groups? Suppliers? Certain customers? Funders? The results of the workshop will be much wiser and more sustainable if all affected stakeholder perspectives are represented by participants. People who are a part of the process don’t have to be “sold” the results – they know how their ideas are a part of the final result. And they are more likely to have ownership of the implementation of the results as well.

d. Two kinds of aims need to be clarified by the facilitator:

The Rational Aim has to do with the product of the workshop. What is the product or result needed? How will it be used? Knowing how it will be used helps clarify the form of the product you need, for example, a list of items, a set of paragraphs, a list of priorities, or one solution that involves all the elements defined.

The Experiential Aim states how you want the group to experience the workshop—how the group needs to be different at the end. If the group needs to trust each other and be inspired to move forward, the focus question and process will be very different than one where the group needs to be angry about their analysis. In general, the consensus workshop method tends to create respect and harmony.

The aims will have the most direct impact on the wording of the focus question, because the focus question elicits a brainstorm of the elements of a product, and guides the clustering and naming of those elements to best produce the result that is needed.

Spinning the data

All this data and other things that you know about the group now have to spin around in your head like a cartwheel. When it comes to rest, try writing the focus question. Most focus questions begin with a “what” question, although a few successful ones start with “how”. The focus question needs to catalyze a number of specific responses from each person, within the boundaries set by the rational aim. Those specific responses, when grouped together, need to create the necessary product.

After choosing the best question, sit back and critique it. Run it past a colleague if possible, and see what kind of answers they give. Or imagine all the possible answers of the participants. Will the answers, when grouped with others and named, fulfill the aims? If you are not happy with your first attempt, keep trying until you have a focus question that is clear, concise, and on target.

Some sample focus questions can be found in Appendix 2

3. Orchestrating the Process

The next step of preparation involves a fine-tuning of the process. An orchestration sheet is very useful for holding at least the outline of the data below.

This is a draft excerpt from *The Workshop Book: From Individual Creativity to Group Action*.

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