DESIGNING REVIEW SESSIONS: 10 TIPS

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This is the second of three articles about design and experiential learning. The first was about programme design. This article is about session design. The next article is about the design of reviewing methods. To find the archives visit: http://reviewing.co.uk/_ezines.htm

I am not suggesting that every review should follow these ten tips: most of the active reviewing methods I promote would only meet some of these criteria some of the time. But if your starting point (for a review) is that you simply have a few good questions up your sleeve then STOP! - and ponder whether some of these design tips for reviewing might help you and your participants get more value from the session.

1. Get every individual reflecting within 2 minutes
2. Get every individual communicating within 5 minutes
3. Agree the main focus for the review within 10 minutes
4. Get the main review process going within 15 minutes
5. Agree a time structure for the whole session
6. Ensure sufficient time for reporting back (or other kind of sharing)
7. Build in time for evaluating the review session
8. Highlight key learning at group and individual levels
9. Connect learning with other parts of the programme – and life/work.
10. Close the session with a link to the next event
11. Feel free to play the 'Joker' at any time

1. GET EVERY INDIVIDUAL REFLECTING WITHIN 2 MINUTES

WHY: Having everyone reflecting in the first two minutes matters because reflection is for everyone. Solo reflection time allows individuals to reflect alone before their thoughts can be influenced by others. This thinking time also helps people come up with considered responses rather than finding themselves saying the first thing that comes to mind – which is more reaction than reflection.

HOW: Make one of these proposals for getting off to a quick, thoughtful, inclusive start.

- Write down a statement: such as an observation, feeling, intuition or insight.
- Find an object or picture that helps you say what you want to say.
- Reflect on ... [this question] for a minute and be ready to answer it in one sentence.
- Choose a question you would like to answer and prepare your response.
- Move to a position on the spectrum ... [described] that represents your own view.
- Create a chart showing your ups and downs during the experience.
- Lie down and listen to this guided reflection ...

2. GET EVERY INDIVIDUAL COMMUNICATING WITHIN 5 MINUTES

WHY: Getting everyone communicating within the first 5 minutes matters because communicating with at least one other person turns fleeting thoughts into a more concrete form. And as reflections ricochet between people this provokes further reflection as everyone discovers an ever broadening range of perspectives. And this is not yet discussion – it is simply the sharing of reflections.

HOW: Make one of these invitations to get everyone communicating their reflections.

- Share your reflections / object / picture / statement / answer / position with a neighbour.
- Share your reflections with someone you talk with less often than most.
- Share your reflections one-to-one with at least 3 people in 3 minutes.
- Share your reflections in a round (briefly if the 5 minute target is to be achieved!)
- Meet in 3s or 4s to create a summary of your reflections to share in the whole group.
- Exhibit your reflections and tour the exhibition responding to what you see.

3. AGREE THE MAIN FOCUS FOR THE REVIEW WITHIN 10 MINUTES

WHY: Agreeing a main focus saves everyone from a meandering review that follows the loudest voices. The more democratic the agreement, the more everyone will be engaged in what follows. Even if the process is simply an endorsement of your recommendation, at least the main focus of the session is the result of an open and deliberate choice.

HOW: Choose one or more of these processes for establishing the main focus.

- If there are no other suggestions I recommend that we focus on ... [this one suggestion]
- I would like you to choose what we focus on using 'Deciding Line' (quick version).
- Show the strength of your preference by where you stand on this spectrum '(Horseshoe').
- In 3 groups decide the top 3 reasons for and against focusing on ... [one of these topics].
- Show the strength of your preference(s) by where you stand on this triangle of options.
- Lobby and campaign for your preferred option when you can see where people stand.

4. GET THE MAIN REVIEW PROCESS GOING WITHIN 15 MINUTES

WHY: Impatience and frustration may set in if the main process has not begun inside 15 minutes. (For some active reviewing methods, such as 'Action Replay' or 'Sketch Map', the method will have begun within the first minute of the reviewing session. When this happens, the first three 'tips' listed above are usually designed into the method as an integral part of the process.)

HOW: You will have a few options up your sleeve. You need to choose which is the best reviewing method for reviewing the agreed topic with this group at this time and in the time available. If the group is familiar with the methods that are 'up your sleeve', you may wish to include participants in discussing the best method for reviewing the chosen topic.

5. AGREE A TIME STRUCTURE FOR THE WHOLE SESSION

WHY: Participants will take part more responsibly and intelligently if they have an understanding of the bigger picture, if they have a clear sense of shared purpose, and when they know how much time is available. Arbitrarily stopping whenever the clock dictates means that review sessions feel like 'half a review' – such as when sharing happens but nothing is done with what is shared.

HOW: Let participants know how much time is available for the review session and what finishing point you hope to reach. Knowing the time structure allows participants to pace themselves and to make a suitable contribution. For example, if they know it is a 20 minute review with 10 people everyone senses how much to contribute and how much to encourage others to join in.

6. ENSURE SUFFICIENT TIME FOR REPORTING BACK (OR OTHER KIND OF SHARING)

WHY: As soon as you have asked people to review in subgroups, there is an expectation that these smaller groups will be sharing something in the whole group. The smaller the group size the greater the opportunities for all to participate, but the more subgroups you create the longer will be the reporting back in a plenary session - unless you have thought ahead and have come up with a time-saving alternative...

HOW: ... Here are some options:

- Have each subgroup put their 'output' on display and extend the break by 5 or 10 minutes so that people have time to tour the exhibition. The 'output' could be a summary of key points, a headline, a picture, a diagram, a question, a formula or recipe, a proposal etc.
- Alternatively announce 2 x 5 minute exhibitions. Each group splits into exhibitors and viewers. Exhibitors stay put with their exhibit while viewers tour at least two other exhibits. For the second 5 minutes, viewers become exhibitors and vice-versa. These are sample timings only: adjust times and advice to suit the occasion.
- Have each individual make a copy of their own subgroup's output in a form that they can wear such as: a badge, a bandoleer, tie, arm band, tunic, apron, sandwich board, headband or hat. Extend the next break to allow time for people to view, mingle and learn about other perspectives.
- '4 x 4' is so-called because I first used this with a group of 16 people who were reviewing in 4 subgroups but this sharing method can be scaled up (or down) for other group sizes. Within each subgroup each person is identified by a number, starting with 1. Then all 1s meet, all 2s meet, all 3s meet and all 4s meet, etc. Each and every individual is now responsible for sharing the output from their former group. An optional extra stage is that people can then return to their former group for further sharing or discussion.
- Have a representative from every subgroup do a flip-chart or Powerpoint presentation – but now that you have read the other options you may decide that this is not the most time-efficient and engaging way of achieving your purpose.

7. BUILD IN TIME FOR EVALUATING THE REVIEW SESSION

WHY: So that you and participants can learn how to improve the reviewing process.

HOW: If you sneak in a quick evaluation at the end of a reviewing session do not expect high quality data. But perhaps some evaluation is better than none. In some situations, mid-session evaluation may be more productive because it has a more immediate purpose and it allows you to make instant adjustments to the review process.

For evaluations of up to 10 minutes you can ask a series of questions that can be asked on a spectrum. I like the physical version ('Horseshoe') in which you ask people where they stand on a curved scale that you have defined. Depending on the purpose of your evaluation, you may find some of these questions useful:

- Do you feel that people are listening well to each other in this group? (very well – not well)
- Do you feel that other participants are facilitating your learning in any way? (a little – a lot)
- Do you get sufficient opportunity to reflect on experience? (a little – a lot)
- Do you get sufficient opportunity to participate in reviewing processes? (a little – a lot)
- Do you find that reviewing processes are adding a little or a lot to the value of this event?
- How do you find the pace of reviewing sessions? (Too fast – just right – too slow).
- If anyone makes a proposal for improving reviewing sessions, turn these into a question that can be answered on the spectrum: how much do you support this proposal? (a little – a lot)

Unless everyone is bunched together and the message is clear, I like to invite people to talk with their 'friendly neighbour' about why they chose their position. As a minimum I would then sample views from 3 points on the spectrum: 'at or near this end', 'at or near the other end', 'at or near the middle'.

For longer evaluations of around 20 minutes or more, I would use 'Simultaneous Survey'. About 8 evaluation questions are shared out throughout the whole group. Each individual walks around finding answers to their own question (while also answering any questions they are asked). After about 8-10 minutes, people with the same question meet up and prepare a summary of their findings to share in a plenary session or put on display.

8. HIGHLIGHT KEY LEARNING AT GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL LEVELS

WHY: From a design perspective, team reviews can be readily fitted into the time available. But for reviewing at the individual level, the time needs to be more carefully allocated and controlled. A session in which every individual is expecting to receive quality feedback cannot suddenly stop when there are still one or two individuals waiting their turn. Review session with an individual focus need to be well timed and well structured to ensure that everyone has a fair share of this key learning opportunity.

HOW: Some facilitators seem to review mostly at the group level eg 'What are we learning from these experiences about us as a group / about how teams work / about how this team can improve?' Whereas other facilitators emphasise personal learning eg 'What are you learning from these experiences about yourself / about your abilities / what you need to work on?' This difference in emphasis is partly influenced by programme objectives, and partly by facilitator preferences. But in most programmes there is a need to reflect at both of these levels (and at other levels too). It is important to achieve the optimum balance between these levels. So ensure that you include all relevant levels and that you find the optimum balance for the occasion!

9. CONNECT LEARNING WITH OTHER PARTS OF THE PROGRAMME - AND LIFE

WHY: Although connections to work/community/life can be made at any point in a review session, there is an argument that the sooner such connections are made the more seriously they will be taken and the more thoroughly they will be explored. But there is also an argument that introducing work/community/life connections too soon may limit what can be learned from the most recent experience. Both arguments are right! The situation determines which is approach is best.

HOW: Although this is point 9 in this tips list, it might be the first thing you do at the start of a review session. You may wish to ask 'How was this like/unlike other experiences on this programme?' or 'How do you anticipate this experience could be of relevance to you at work / in life?' The review that follows would delve deeper into any suggested connections. For example 'Action Replay' lends itself to replaying scenes from a) the recent experience b) earlier associated programme experiences c) associated work/life experiences.

10. CLOSE THE SESSION WITH A LINK TO THE NEXT EVENT

WHY: Reviews tend to be backward looking because the primary process is reflecting on the recent past. But there should also be a sense of movement and moving on. So it is always useful to help learners anticipate their next opportunity to use what they have just learned, or their next opportunity to continue exploring what they are currently exploring. Ideally, the next activity provides just the right opportunity to do so!

HOW: There are always two chances of linking between activities:

1) at the end of the review of Activity A
2) when briefing Activity B – which was thoroughly explored in my article on 'Reviewing Before Action' http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/Reflection-Before-Action.pdf

Because 'linking' is so important in learning from experience (with one experience throwing light on another) the optimum strategy is to use both opportunities for linking!

11. FEEL FREE TO PLAY THE JOKER AT ANY TIME

The Joker comes from 'The Active Reviewing Cycle': it is the wild card that can be played at any time and can be anything you want it to be. Every system or model should have a Joker – because the Joker is a reminder that a model is an average, sanitised approximation of how things work. Average, sanitised approximations do have a value in helping us to understand how things work, but there comes a point where we need to keep such approximations at a safe-but-helpful distance so that we can see what is *really* happening. The Joker, amongst other things, helps us to get this distance right – giving models (and 'Tips') the respect they deserve, but no more than that.

Yes this was a 10 Tips 'structure', so it is entirely appropriate that the Joker comes in at No.11!

For fuller descriptions of methods mentioned above search for the name at http://reviewing.co.uk