

HACK YOUR NEXT WORKSHOP

32 SCIENCE-BASED TIPS FOR FACILITATORS

The following tips are organized by preparation or delivery stage, then roughly in priority order. Please don't let this list overwhelm you. Focus on one or two points at a time until they become new habits for you. If you're eventually able to do most of these, you'll go from good to great!

Preparing Your Session

Focus on what the audience wants or needs from you, and what you want from the audience.

What's your goal for them? Hint: it's not about you! As you craft your workshop, imagine your audience saying "So what? Who cares? What's in it for me?" They may be thinking just that! Focus on the audience's learning and objectives all throughout your preparation. Think—and ask any key stakeholders: when you're done facilitating, what do you want the audience to think, feel, or do differently?

Minimize your text.

Write slide titles that are like newspaper headlines: short but complete sentences with information in them. (Don't just put a category heading like "Test results," give information such as "Tests show performance improvement.")

Do **not** use paragraphs of text, or even lots of bullets. When you put a lot of text on screen, your audience will read it instead of listen to you. Use lots of images, graphs, and other visual information instead of text. Your audience's brains can absorb visuals along with spoken words much better than text along with spoken words (which overloads the brain's language processing centers.)

Don't tell them everything you know. Tell them what they need to know. If you only had fifteen minutes with your audience, what three points would you quickly make? Organize your talk around those three key points. Often, less is more when it comes to learning. Overloading your audience with information is not a good way for them to learn. Give them the essential facts. Let them ask questions to get more detail or information.

Get the audience involved.

Give them activities. Get them talking and doing things. As the title of the excellent book says, *Telling Ain't Training!*



What's your goal for the audience?

Think about: When I'm done facilitating, what do I want the audience to do, think, and feel?

Write slide titles that are like newspaper headlines.

Create short, complete sentences.

Less is more.

Overloading your audience with information is not a good way for them to learn.

Involve your audience right away.

Get them talking and doing things.

Preparing Your Session - Continued

Practice. Rehearse. Repeat.

Time yourself and allow ample room for audience questions and participation. Most facilitators attempt to put too much material in a workshop and either run out of time or race through their material.

Tell stories.

The human brain is wired for stories. You may reach their conscious brain with a lot of facts, but you'll more effectively reach their subconscious brain with stories. Minimize narration. Inject stories with dialog, visuals, sounds, feelings, and even smells. For example: *We were sitting in a café. You could smell the coffee brewing and hear the marching band playing as we sat on the patio and looked out on the colorful floats. My boss said "Projects are like parades. Everyone is excited to go, but you can only move forward when the path ahead of you is clear."*

Send participants information ahead of the training.

Tell them why they are being asked to attend, what they will learn, and how they will be expected to use that information on the job afterwards. This could come from you or a sponsor such as the participants' boss. Sending this advance information greatly improves attention and learning during the session.

Prepare handouts and other resources that are likely to get used.

This may be a combination of printed pages, short summary cards, web sites, and more. What do you use after a training or workshop? What do you recycle or file away and forget?

Consider the culture(s) of your audience.

What works well in the U.S.A. may not work nearly as well in another country. Learn more about any cultures you don't know much about. This site is a great resource: <http://geert-hofstede.com/united-states.html>.

Setting Up The Room

Seat people at tables of six if possible.

This will allow small break-out groups for activities and discussion. Research suggests that in groups bigger than six, some people will become quiet and no longer interact. An even number is ideal, so that you can also pair people up for conversation.

Put up flip-charts; you may need to draw on one even if you don't plan on doing so ahead of time.

Time yourself.

Be sure to leave time for audience questions and participation.

The human brain is wired for stories.

You'll reach their subconscious brain with stories.

Send information in advance.

It greatly improves attention and learning during the session.

What works in one country may not in another.

Cultural awareness is important.

Go for groups of six.

In bigger groups, some people will become quiet and no longer interact.

Setting Up The Room - Continued

Distribute your handouts at the last possible moment,

in the last 5 minutes of your workshop if you can. You do not want your audience multi-tasking by reading your handout while you are presenting. For example, if they are going to be filling in a chart on a handout give them that handout just as that activity starts.

Think about the complete experience for your audience.

Consider putting up relevant posters and other supportive images on the walls. Think about whether you need food and drink available, and when you need breaks. They need to be relaxed, comfortable, and engaged to learn.

Seating

Decide whether you want to let people randomly choose seats, or if you want to mix people up from their usual patterns and groups. Each has advantages and disadvantages.

The Hour Before Your Session

Arrive early.

Set up your computer, projector, screen, and anything else you will need. The last thing you and your audience want is you fiddling with a projector as the workshop is supposed to start. Turn off your phone, email and instant messaging alerts on your computer.

Pose like a super hero for two minutes.

Research suggests this will raise your testosterone (present in women and men and associated with assertiveness and confidence). It will also lower your cortisol, a hormone which makes you reactive to stress. For more see [this great TED talk by professor Amy Cuddy](#).

Walk around if you can, or get any other moderate physical activity.

Research suggests it may ease your nerves and improve your ability to think on your feet.

Befriend your nervousness.

I would be worried if you were **not** nervous before presenting. A bit of nervousness energizes you and focuses your mind. If you are excessively nervous, try whatever relaxes you. Techniques proven to work for many include deep, slow breathing, visualizing, meditating, and even touching your lips brings a slight relaxation response.

Starting twenty minutes before you will start presenting, think about your opening

and try to get into 'flow' by focusing as completely as possible on what you'll do in the first few minutes of the session. That way you'll start warmed up, as opposed to starting cold and warming up in front of the audience. You may do some of this by talking with your audience members as they are arriving. Ask what they know. Ask what they hope to learn.

Wait to hand out your handouts!

Keep the audience's attention on you.

The little things matter.

Food, drinks, and breaks are important.

Know who can help with tech issues in advance.

And don't forget to turn off your phone.

Power pose!

Raise your testosterone and lower your cortisol.

Move and breathe deeply.

A bit of nervousness energizes you.

And focuses you, too.

Talk with your audience as they are arriving to warm you up.

Ask what they know. Ask what they hope to learn.

Delivering Your Workshop

“Be yourself. Everyone else is taken.”

—Oscar Wilde

Be yourself.

Tell people why they are there and how they will benefit as soon as possible.

Even better if the person introducing you can explain this. You should say the word “you” in the first minute of your session. Be sure you are saying “you” far more often than you are saying “I.”

Compliment your audience in the first few minutes.

This shows you respect them and makes them more likely to buy what you are telling them.

Ask for complete focus.

Don’t tolerate multi-asking if you can possibly avoid it. Request that laptops be closed, and phones silenced and put away.

Present with energy and emotion.

People don’t remember boring things. If you aren’t excited about what you are presenting, nobody else will be either.

Restate the most important points at the end of each section, and at the end of the workshop.

Memories are not created equally; research suggests the last things you say will be remembered more strongly than most other things you say.

Use your hands and body language naturally.

Don’t get stuck behind a podium. Don’t pace frantically. Move with purpose, stand and deliver, repeat.

Don’t get stuck behind the podium.

Make contact with and talk to one person at a time.

Shift your gaze a bit to a new person for each new sentence or point.

Pause...

Especially after important points...and at the end of themes or sections...what feels like way too long a pause to you is likely a precious few seconds for the audience to process and really learn what you just said.

Silence is always better than “um”.

Silence is also better than “uh”, “like”, “so”, “stuff”, and any other filler words you say. Almost everyone—including great speakers—say “um” sometimes—so don’t worry when you do say it. Just try your best to minimize it.

Avoid the fillers.

Um, uh, like, so, stuff.

Concluding Your Workshop

Remember to end by repeating the most important three points you have made as well as your call to action.

End with the 3 main points and the call to action.

Ask for feedback.

Act on the feedback you get. This is the best path to improvement as a facilitator, long term.

Offer places to go to learn more.

The handouts you've prepared, web sites, a recommended reading list, and/or videos.

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