

# HOW TO...

## DESIGN A GREAT SESSION PLAN

Too many training sessions are (in my opinion) still built around a slide deck. Even if your slides are visually appealing, minimal in their use of text and useful, they are still very limited in terms of explaining how the session should run. They can only ever be a) a visual aid for the delegates, and b) a prompt for the facilitator.

Great training sessions are designed in detail. This means having a detailed session plan – far more than a few notes to accompany a slide deck could ever provide.

Great session plans fulfil a number of different functions: They:

- Show timings – so people know how long to spend on each element
- Indicate whether something should be covered as a discussion, trainer input or activity
- Indicate what supporting materials and equipment are required, and when
- Provide details of how to run activities and exercises to enable clear briefing
- Suggest questions to ask to debrief exercises and key points to highlight when summarising
- Provide suggestions to look for when running discussions to ensure delegates are being led the right way
- Link sections and theories together – highlighting the 'red thread' that should run through the workshop
- Provide suggested alternatives so the facilitator doesn't have to think on their feet if the main exercises aren't possible for whatever reason
- Provide examples or stories to share or act as a 'starter for 10' in discussions so even if the facilitator doesn't have an example of their own, they can still kick-start discussions
- Provide clarity without being a script – therefore allowing the facilitator to deliver consistently, but still inject their own style

A session plan forms the core of any training session – everything else hangs off this, so as a training designer, this is where I focus my energy. If you get this right, the rest will follow. Here are my tips for creating a great session plan.

1. **Set aside a big chunk of time** - Wherever possible, set aside a full day to work on this uninterrupted. You need to be able to get into the flow of the workshop and you can't do that if you are snatching 20 minutes here and there. You will need more for events longer than a day.
2. **Start with the objectives** - They needn't be perfectly formed at this stage – you can refine the exact wording once you've got into the detail. But the basic objectives should be clear in your mind. If you've prepared a session outline, just take them from this.

3. **Identify your key topics** - If you have created an outline, you will have done this already. If you haven't, identify the key topics/sections that you will cover and in what order.
4. **Use SessionLab or a flexible template** - SessionLab allows you to switch things around and alter timings easily. Otherwise, use a table format with at least 3 columns – a small one for time, a large one for the detail and another small one to indicate visual aids and supporting materials required. If creating in Word, you can create a table and use the 'header rows repeat' option to make sure each page has the headings and stop you having to reformat every time to add or remove material.
5. **Work sequentially** - You need to get into the flow to create a great session plan and that means, mentally experiencing the event. It also means that you have to refer back to things and make links that you couldn't do otherwise. If you have a bit of a blank on one section, don't worry if you can't write the detail. Instead leave yourself a reminder and come back to it later. I sometimes write things like "A 20 minute exercise to bring out the points of..." And then look for one later. The important thing is to get the bulk of the session down in one go.
6. **Use MASTER** - Design the main sections of your workshop in line with the MASTER framework: **M**indset, **A**cquire information, **S**ift for meaning, **T**rigger the memory, **E**xhibit the learning, **R**eflect/Review. This way each section feels complete and will be more likely to be retained by learners.
7. **Keep it varied** - Make sure that you don't over use a particular style of activity or do too many similar activities close together. If you do, they will blend into one and learning is less likely to be retained. Plus, you may start to alienate some delegates if they don't enjoy or get anything from those types of activity.
8. **Describe in Detail** - Even if you are running the session yourself, describing each section/activity in detail is vital. It will cut down your preparation time closer to the event, and you won't be relying on memory "What did I mean when I wrote that?" Of course, if anyone other than you will be delivering this, is even more important. They aren't mind-readers and in order to deliver the workshop in the way you envisaged, they need to have very clear instructions, or examples of the sort of thing they should be discussing.
9. **Highlight key learning points** - Even if the section is a piece of theory, you should highlight which parts to emphasise, or how the theory relates to a specific issue that is relevant to them. For discussions and activities, tell the facilitator what to look for and the learning points to draw out so that the session flows and meets its objectives.
10. **Provide pointers for discussions** - Write down suggested questions (and if appropriate, ideal answers) to get discussions started and ensure they stay relevant to the topic being covered.
11. **Describe activities clearly** - You can't just say "run the water bottle challenge". You need to describe exactly what this activity is, including how to split delegates, what they need to do, when, where, how and how long they have. You may also find it useful to highlight the objective of the exercise for the facilitators benefit and anything they ought to do whilst the activity is taking place (e.g. take notes, provide assistance).

**12. Provide guidance for debrief** - Again, you can't just assume the facilitator knows how to debrief the exercise. Provide guidance, even if it's just a sentence or a couple of bullet points.

**13. Reference supporting material** - In a separate column, highlight all supporting materials required such as post-it notes, building blocks or specific handouts and supporting visual aids such as slides or posters. This helps the facilitator to prepare and run the event smoothly.

**14. Revisit timings** - You will have estimated timings when you drew up an outline (if you did), or as you've gone along. When you have written all of your content, revisit them. Are they realistic? Do they take into account breaks, the time it takes to move people around (logistics) and ensure that each section is being given sufficient attention? Getting the timings right is something that comes from experience. If you are unsure, ask for a colleague to review.

**15. Draw up an equipment and support materials list** - Pull out ALL of the handouts, consumables, equipment and other training aids that are used in the workshop and list them so that the facilitator or organiser knows exactly what they need to run the event.