Driving change for better cities

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GETTING RESULTS THROUGH ANIMATED MEETINGS

8 TOPS TIPS

URBACT TOOLBOX

Analysing Problem
Engaging Stakeholders
Planning Actions
Sharing knowledge
Implementing
Resourcing
Measuring results

Updated Version - May 2020

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FOREWORD

Successful exchange and learning rarely happens by chance. Over the years, URBACT has developed a reputation for its methodology and effective tools. These provide a framework for network activity, supporting exchange and learning amongst URBACT partners. This document was initially produced to encourage partners to work in interactive ways that encourage stakeholder participation.

Its main purpose is to share information on a range of methods and techniques that can help animate partnership meetings at the local, national and transnational level. It primarily targets **practitioners facilitating participative processes**. URBACT encourages – indeed expects – such approaches, which have numerous benefits. For example, participants often enjoy the meetings more; their energy levels often remain higher, so they are more productive. In addition, these techniques often foster stronger partnerships as people relax and get to know one another better.

In the next pages, which have been reviewed and updated, we showcase some of the techniques that we have seen in operation across the programme. We also offer some tips to try them out. It is not a compendium, merely a starting point and through the links provided readers can take their interest further.

Although initially produced in 2012, most of these activities remain relevant and useful for the URBACT community. Almost a decade later, there is a growing focus on blended approaches to transnational activity – mixing virtual and actual activities. In this context, URBACT continues to pioneer new ways of doing things, providing support and resources to encourage participation with results in both the digital and physical settings.

THE GUIDE AT A GLANCE

At a glance	How to animate partnership meetings at the city or transnational level for successful sharing and exchanging events, with tips and examples. Dedicated to practitioners that have a facilitating role in participative processes.
Who is this for?	☒ Urban planner / designer ☒ Facilitator – coordinator – trainer participative processes ☐ Communication/media officer – manager ☒ Project / sectoral manager ☐ Elected officials ☐ Other …
Focus	☒ PLAN: prepare your action(s) ☒ DO: implement /test your action(s) ☐ CHECK: control, monitor and assess your action(s) ☐ ACT: make improvements to your action(s) ☐ SHARE: communicate with others your story (i.e. your action(s)
Level	☐ Beginners ☒ Advanced ☐ For all
Keywords	#problem-solving #creativity #group-management

Before starting, it is important to say that the techniques should not be applied just for the sake of it. Knowing when and where to use them is also an important consideration. Following, you will find an introduction to some of the techniques available, but it will be up to you to decide when best to apply them.

Tip 1: Be clear about your objectives

This may seem like an obvious thing to say. However, our selection of different groupwork processes will depend on the goals of the session. So, a key starting point is to be clear about what we want to achieve – and to make sure that this is conveyed to our meeting participants from the start. In some cases, partners may come together with a very specific focus – for example to solve a shared problem. In other cases, there may be a number of objectives, which will allow the opportunity to incorporate different techniques.

The identification of the primary and – many times – secondary objectives will also determine the choice of the methods you will apply.

Tip 2: Getting started – setting the scene

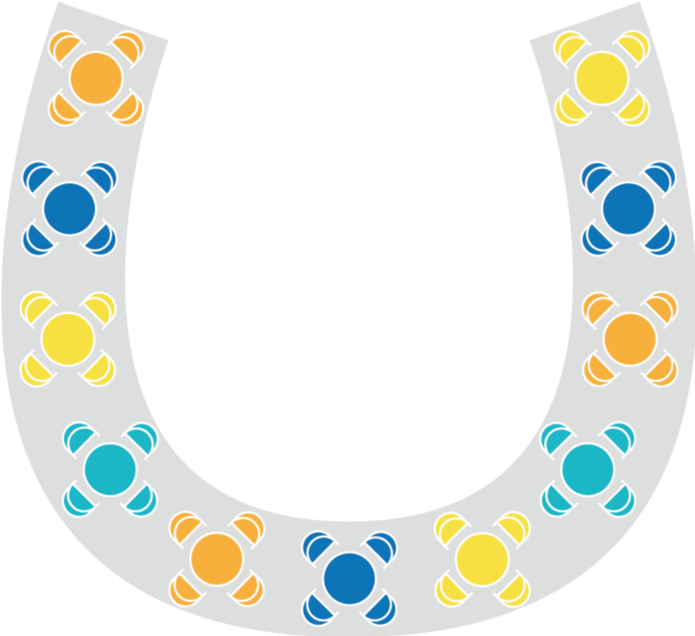
“You never get a second chance to make a good first impression” (Anon)

Let’s be clear – creative, productive meetings and workshops don’t happen by accident. Before we start planning the format, we need to make sure we have created an environment that will get participants in the right mood. For most of us, these basics include:

- ***The physical space*** – Is there lots of natural light? Is there enough room for people to move around and to work comfortably? What about the temperature – can we make sure it is not too hot or cold?

- ***Room layout*** – The way the furniture is arranged sends a strong signal to participants about the type of session they are about to take part in. A congested layout is to be avoided, and rows of tables and desks are also unlikely to encourage free flowing creativity. Think about desks and tables as barriers, and although people may have to write at certain points, try to ensure that the furniture doesn’t get in the way of your approach. Islands of small tables fitted together can work well – with lots of space between them to encourage circulation. If you can manage, a circle of chairs, a horseshoe shape can be even better!

Figure 1: Horseshoe shape organisation of the room with small group tables



- ***Lights, music, action…*** - In a workshop setting, we've found that music can play an important role in setting a creative atmosphere. When people hear music playing as they arrive, they associate this with coming to a party or being with friends. Yes, we're here to work but we can have fun at the same time. But remember, not everyone goes big on Nirvana, so think carefully about the music's selection.

Tip 3: Setting the right tone – breaking the ice

Many people feel uncomfortable with the idea of 'ice-breakers.' Certainly, in traditional meetings the biggest risk you might take is to go round the table asking people to introduce themselves with their name and an 'interesting' fact.

But if you want participants to make a creative input to your meeting/ workshop then you're going to need more than that. You will also want to send out an **early signal that this will be an 'active' session** where they will be expected to contribute physically – as well as mentally.

Again, some will be more comfortable with this than others. The stereotypical middle-aged civil servant may be less keen on it than the representative of the city Youth Council – or the other way round!

But there are several clear advantages to getting people warmed up. Literally, **having them move around is more likely to stimulate their grey cells**. Also, it sends out a message that 'we're all in the same boat' which can be particularly helpful when some stakeholders may be perceived as being more important than others. I've often been surprised at how well received the introduction of a fresh approach can be. Even those who are initially reluctant can surprise us by the way they change.

The **role of the facilitator is key** at this stage – as it is throughout creative sessions. A relaxed, confident input from him/her will do much to relieve any anxieties. Clear instructions from the facilitator will also help to get the session off on the right footing.

In transnational settings, another plus point of effective icebreakers relates to language. For those less confident working in a second language, fun, effective energisers can help them relax in advance of getting down to business.

And what about techniques? Well, there are too many to describe in detail here, but we've included a few for inspiration.

Musical speed networking – It's a very simple, fun and an effective way of getting some energy into the start of a session. It works particularly well with large groups but can be used in most settings.

☒ Better for large groups ☐ Better for small groups

How it works: Make sure that there's lots of space to circulate in the room. Ideally, push any chairs and tables to the side so that there is a large empty space in the middle. On arrival, participants are given a sheet of paper with ten questions/ statements on it. Some of these will relate to the topic, for example *"What is your city's best asset?" "What would you most like to change in your city?" etc. Others can be more personal and playful such as "What are you most proud of?" "What's your favourite movie?" "When were you happiest?"* etc.

Start the music – ideally something lively! Participants are asked to circulate the room and when the music stops, they get together with the nearest person and in pairs they ask one another questions from the sheet for a few minutes. Encourage the questioner to probe the answer – "Why is that your favourite movie?" "When and where did you first see it?" etc. The music starts, they move and when it stops again they repeat the process with someone else. And so on until you feel that the decibel levels are high enough to show that everyone's getting involved.

A nice way to finish this process is to ask for feedback from random participants once they have sat down. *"What was the most surprising thing you heard" "Did anyone have the same answer as you?" "What answer did you like best"* etc.

Hidden talents – This exercise works better with smaller groups – say between 6 and 20 participants. Again, it gets people up and moving around, and requires them to open up about themselves. It's also one of the best ways to tap into the group's skills at the start of a meeting/workshop session

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How it works: Introduce the exercise by explaining that we all have talents and that we can take some of these for granted. Add that we may spend hours sitting beside colleagues yet know very little about the many things they are good at. Explain that this exercise is about sharing our hidden talents with others.

Then ask participants to think of something they can do well, but which might be a surprise to others. Ask them to write this 'talent' on a post-it note then to fold it up. The facilitator then gathers these in, mixes them in a container and asks delegates to pick one out. Ask them to have a quick look at it before moving to the next person. If they pick out their own get them to swop it for another.

When everyone has a sticky note, ask them to move around the room and to try and identify the person with the talent on the post-it they chose. When they find the person, they should try to find out as much as they can about their talent so that they can feed back to the group.

This exercise always throws up surprises. It's amazing what people can do and how much dormant talent we all have! As a short, fun opener it has always gone down well in my experience.

The usual way to finish is to quickly circulate, asking people which talent they picked, who the person was and how easy it was to identify them. In sessions with a focus on entrepreneurship I've used this as a basis for exploring business development models – for example to look at combining talents to generate a business start-up idea.

Tip 4: Killer presentations

Flat boring presentations are a surefire way of killing energy levels and creative abilities. “Death by PowerPoint” is a widely used phrase, but how many of us are still using slides week after week?

A presentation is simply one way of conveying information. PowerPoint can be a wonderful tool (for more info on this, check the guide ***Speak up, time for your presentation***), but too often it’s a lazy way to reuse your content for any given situation. So, if you are planning a meeting or a workshop, ask yourself whether it’s really necessary to have one at all. There are lots of alternative ways to share information, particularly if there’s going to be more than one presenter.

World bazaar technique

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How it works: The group is split into several smaller groups and scattered throughout the room. Each table/group is supported by a ‘presenter/storyteller/shopkeeper’. Delegates circulate amongst the tables for a limited duration before they move on and visit another table. This allows for movement, gives everyone a chance to speak and is a more efficient way of reciprocating information.

If you do need a more linear approach there are some things to bear in mind. If possible, dissuade people from using slides and encourage them to speak from the floor. Make sure that they are well briefed and know that they have a limited time slot which they should not over-run. Encourage them to ‘make the pitch of their lives’ and to look to the TED talks for inspiration and for tips on engaging with the audience.

If they insist on using PowerPoint, encourage them to use slides as a graphic or to explain complex information in a simpler way. At all costs avoid a lengthy presentation where the speaker simply reads the bullet points. Another option is to explore some of the alternative presentation tools now available – such as PREZI - that encourage speakers to use more visual images and a more fluid presentational format. But again, the focus should be on the content – otherwise there is a risk that the attention is all for the visuals and not to the message.

In many meetings, a Question and Answer session after a presentation is an opportunity for lively interaction. A structured variation that builds on this is the fishbowl technique.

Fishbowl technique *– particularly effective when there have been a number of speakers and where the group size is manageable.*

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How it works: A small circle of chairs is formed in the centre of the room with the remaining chairs formed in a wider circle around them. The speakers and facilitator occupy the inner circle of chairs but there should also be a few empty seats in the inner circle.

The facilitator gets the discussion started by picking up on one of the themes discussed in the presentations.

Once this dialogue starts, anyone from the outer circle who wants to contribute or to ask a question must take a seat in the inner circle.

Once they have made their contribution – or once they feel that they have taken their turn – they return to their own seat, to create a vacancy for someone else.

Tip 5: Find your (real) problem

Never underestimate the importance of defining a **clear problem statement** and the value of having a ‘problem owner’.

Shared problems – both within cities and between them – are often the reason for partners coming together. Problems should be addressed from different perspectives, so the first thing to do is to explore the issue of stakeholders – who is around the table and how do we ensure that the loudest voices don’t dominate. This includes the important matter of who decides what the key problem is and how it will be addressed.

For many, the key to effective problem solving is to ensure that the group has established the **root problem in a way that can be clearly articulated**.

The importance of defining the problem is significant. They remind us that it can be very easy to rush to fixing mode. However, unless we spend time circling the problem to ensure that it is fully explored and understood, then we may head off in the wrong direction. There are techniques to analyse the situation and reduce this risk, this can also lead to a radical reformulation of the problem itself.

A number of approaches favour starting the process with the nomination of a problem owner or issue holder. We have some tips on techniques you can use to define and tackle problems in a group.

Action Learning Set (ALS) model *– This method is used by several URBACT networks. The Issue Holder presents his/her story. ALS process has a cyclical nature, and at the end it offers each participant the chance to contribute with his/her perspective on a problem and to comment on others.*

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How it works: The Issue Holder describes the context and presents a problem to be shared with the wider group. The story should be detailed enough to allow listeners to understand the background to the problem, the underlying causes, who it affects and its impact. It is often useful to know what steps have already been taken to try to solve the problem.

During this stage, other group members remain silent. They are taking notes and considering questions that they might wish to raise with the Issue Holder.

After the sharing of the story, group members have the opportunity to clarify the problem and to raise potential solutions. The aim of the questions stage is to open up thinking, so useful lines of enquiry can relate to:

- The wider ecology/operating environment
- Underlying assumptions
- Consequences – what could happen

An important feature of this process is that the issue holder does not engage with group members who respond to their story. They simply record the questions and contributions and are encouraged to process these and act upon them following the meeting. At some future point – often at the start of the next meeting – they are encouraged to provide feedback on the experience and – critically – whether it has helped them to tackle the problem.

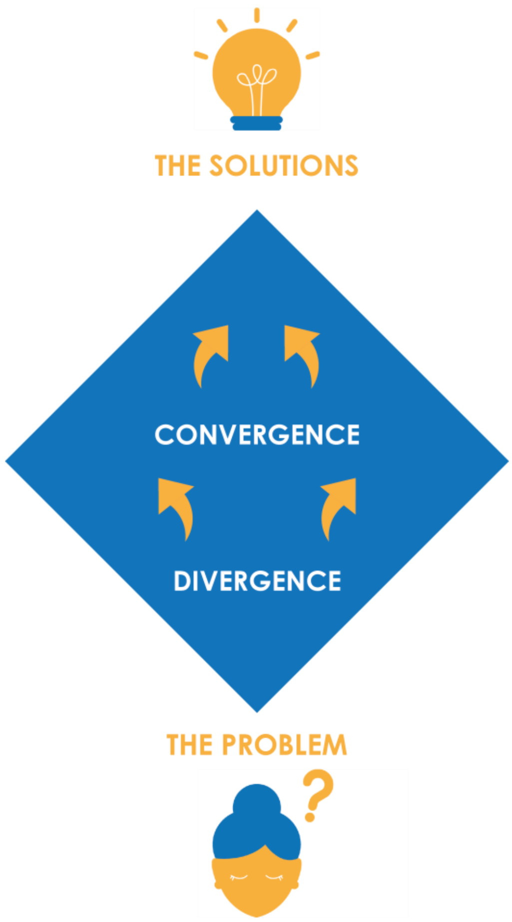
Ideally, the group will have a facilitator. Part of their role is to ensure that focus is retained on the issue holder and their story. However, they can also encourage group members to share relevant insights from their own experience which might help illuminate the problem and suggest possible solutions.

Tip 6: Use creativity to solve your problems

Now, having defined the problem, our aim is to generate as many potential ideas as we can to tackle it.
If the first principle of creative problem solving is to invest time in defining the issue, the second is to approach the problem with an open mind and to focus on the generation of as many potential ideas as possible. This part of the creative problem-solving process is called *divergence.*

Here, the focus is on stimulating as wide a range of potential ideas as possible with an emphasis on quantity not quality…that comes later. The visual representation of this process is often a diamond, starting at a fixed point (*the problem*) widening out at the *divergence* stage before closing down and focusing on solutions during the final (*convergence*) part of the process.

Figure 2: The Diamond



Sticky-notes are your best friends!

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Practical tools at this stage include post-it notes, flip charts and lots of wall space! Often people already have ideas in mind so a good way to get started is to capture them. You can ask people to call out while you capture the ideas on post-it notes or a flip chart. Or you can ask them to work individually or in pairs for a few minutes to produce as many ideas as they can. Or you can have large sheets of paper on the walls where people can jot down their ideas.

This initial step will produce a good starting point. Ideally, you will have a visual display of ideas around the room to build upon. Encourage people to get up and move around, looking at the content and adding to it, also based on others' ideas and to record these on additional post-it notes.

Beyond this stage there are countless methods to stimulate additional waves of ideas. And if you're feeling adventurous there are other advanced ideas generation techniques such as:

Pictures

Ask people to look at the image and think about its relation to the problem statement. You'll be surprised by what they come up with!

Key words

Extract key words from the problem statement and using word association to see whether any new ideas emerge.

Analogies – i.e. the animal exercise

Identify an animal, describe its characteristics then apply these to the problem. So, an ostrich has long legs, runs fast, sticks its head in the sand, has a long neck etc…What ideas can we generate using these cues?

People enjoy the ideas generation stage so it's an opportunity to take some risks, to be playful and to encourage participants to stretch their imaginations. Later in the process we'll have the chance to apply our rational sides. But here we are looking for a free-flowing process with an emphasis on volume.

The **facilitator role is important during this stage**. S/he needs to be actively encouraging, energetic and focused on helping the group to generate ideas in response to the problem statement. S/he also has a role in screening out comments and attitudes which are creativity killers such as:

- *"We tried that before and it didn't work"*
- *"I don't think we have the resources to do that"*
- *"I'm not sure whether…"*

Remember, at this stage we are **suspending our judgment** in order to focus on producing as many ideas as possible, and although these statements will be helpful at the convergence stage, we don't want them just yet!!

At the end of this stage – the widest point in the 'diamond' –we will ideally have a room full of exciting fresh content in response to our problem which we can then start to work on.

Having enjoyed the open and playful experience of **ideas generation** we then have to move our participants to the solutions stage. Sometimes reluctantly…This is where our skills of screening and **prioritising** come into play. Here are some of the most effective techniques for doing this:

Look for patterns

By continuing with the participative principle, ask people to group and cluster the ideas with the aim of identifying some overarching patterns.

Segment the ideas

There are several ways to do this:

● One is to segment by group priority, for example by giving participants sticky dots and asking them to vote for their preferred X ideas.

● Another way is to segment the ideas by their level of innovation – so red ideas are 'known', blue ideas are 'feasible but new' and yellow ones 'left field'.

***De Bono thinking hats** – Another useful tool both for ideas generation and screening*

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One of the best-known creative problem-solving gurus, De Bono's entire approach stresses the need to alter perspectives and to utilise techniques that take people out of their established thinking modes. The 'thinking hats' technique is based around the idea of six hats, each of different colour, which have different characteristics. These are as follows:

White–information and facts

Red–emotions and instinctive reactions

Black–judgment and logic – the critical hat
Yellow–The optimist's hat – focusing on benefits and positive effects
Green – creative and alternative
Blue – process and big picture

One of the reasons for the enduring popularity of the thinking hats is the versatility of the process. Participants can be assigned a role/hat which informs how they engage in the process. This might be when discussing the problem or at the point of screening the emerging solutions. Another option is for the facilitator to steer the group from a specific perspective – "So, let's put our yellow hats on and consider the solutions in front of us".

Again, the hats can be playful and there is of course the option to develop collaboration by asking groups to make hats before engaging in the process – which can also function as a creative team-building tool.

For detailed information, check the Thinking Hats toolsheet.

Being creative is all very well – so long as it leads to results. So how do we make sure that we harvest these ideas in a way that leads to potential solutions?

Problem Tree

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This model provides a mechanism whereby participants can 'flip' their problems into solutions. You can also prioritise the solutions – for example through voting with dots.

For detailed information, check the Problem tree toolsheet.

***Future Dialogue** – This process is another effective solution-focused technique.*

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This method introduces an element of playfulness by asking participants to project into the future and to describe a successful scenario. Working backwards, different actors – for example employers, jobseekers, colleges – are asked to describe the barriers they faced back at the start and how these were overcome. In particular, the facilitator will question them about their own role in overcoming these.

This method is a particularly effective way of engaging different actors at the same time so that they can gain a better understanding of others' priorities and assumptions.

In summary then, some suggestions for creative problem solving are:

- Invest time and effort in defining and articulating the problem
- Encourage playfulness and look for ways to break out of established patterns and ways of thinking
- Take risks and defer judgment at the ideas generation stage
- Don't discard 'left field' ideas (i.e. the 'crazy ones') – they may be the most valuable
- Use techniques to support stakeholders to narrow their focus on potential solutions

Tip 7: Acknowledging energy levels

There are often points where **participants' energy levels dip**. In transnational settings, where they will have travelled a long way and can be working in another language, this is a particularly important consideration. As facilitators, we need to be aware of this and be prepared **to be flexible and to mix things up when energy levels are down**. Like many things in life, it's all about balance.

The overall design of the meeting/workshop should take account of the need to vary the processes used. But if we note that things are slowing down or that people are struggling, there is a wide range of techniques we can draw upon to change the rhythm.

Here are a few simple starters:

Buzz Groups

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Split participants into pairs or small groups and ask them to give their views on a given subject. This is a short sharp exercise, so limit them to five minutes then quickly go round the room getting key points.

Comment wall

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Distribute post-it notes and ask people to write their comments/ideas down – one per post-it note. After five minutes get them to place their notes on a blank wall. You can extend this by asking the group to work together to cluster the notes to show emerging themes.

Use video clips, images and social posts

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Showing a short video clip or relevant visual images can help to mix up the tempo and shift the focus, and has positive features. It can bring the outside world into our event – for example by allowing us to hear a local perspective. It can also be used to provide contrasting examples as a stimulus for discussion – for example through comparing different approaches to a shared problem.

Tip 8: Getting lively feedback

Remember when the energy of a stimulating groupwork vanished after a linear series of feedback reports? After Group number 7 most of us were struggling to stay awake…

So, what are the alternatives? As before, at the planning stage ask the key question – do we need plenary feedback from the group sessions at all? And if so, can we capture it in another way – for example by asking each group to provide a key point summary for inclusion in any final report/minute?
In some cases we do need to hear what groups have been saying in order to move our process forward – and in such cases we should think creatively about ways to do this.

Engage a graphic artist to capture key points during the session

A talented cartoonist can create images which present ideas in a very powerful – and often amusing – way. As well as giving an additional dimension to the session, this can provide resources that can be used in the future. For example, colour reproductions can be produced and attached to the walls in future sessions.
However, you don't need to be an artist to create good graphic recordings, there is an artist in each of us, and you can use simple drawings or symbols. Using different colors helps a lot!

***Hot seat** – Another feedback method*

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How it works: You assign numbers to all the participants, so everyone has a number between 1 and 5. You then place a set of chairs in a row facing out into the audience and another set of chairs facing them, as in **the figure below**.

Ask the first feedback group to sit in the row of chairs facing the audience. Then explain that when you shout a number you'd like volunteers with that number to come out and occupy the seats facing them. The role of the second group will be to quiz the feedback group on their discussion and findings.

The twist is that you explain that the interrogator seats will 'get hotter' by the minute so that after 3 minutes they'll need to vacate them. At that point the facilitator calls another number and invites more volunteers with the new number to assume the seats and the questioning role. After another 3 minutes swop again and so on.

After a few turns, thank the feedback group and ask another one to take its place – when the process starts again.

This is a short, lively focused process with lots of movement that helps retain freshness and interest. As well as keeping time, the facilitator should track the key points emerging and check these with the plenary group at the end of the session.

Figure 3: Hot seat layout

This is only one of many ways to provide feedback and to maintain levels of interest and energy at the same time. There are other techniques in action – such as mini-dramas – and again we should be prepared to test new approaches and avoid repeating the same processes time after time.

Finally, it is always helpful to gather feedback from participants at the end of working together.

Hot de-brief

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Here, participants are asked to populate four large sheets of paper with the following headings – “Good”, “Bad”, “Learning” and “Improvements”.
From this snapshot evaluation, the organisers and the meeting hosts get real-time feedback on participants’ experience. The process reviews the work undertaken but also advises in ways to improve it in future.

FURTHER READING

To go deeper on this topic, we suggest you have a look at the following resources:

- The guide *Setting-up and running a multi-stakeholder group*
- The guide *Speak up, time for your presentation!*

The URBACT online Toolbox also contains some relevant tools related to facilitation and idea generation. Go and have a look!

FINAL WORD

It's good to see how much traction the principles of participation and interactivity continue to have. People are less tolerant of poor quality ineffective meetings! And they want to make an active contribution. URBACT encourages this, of course, and it's good that so many cities have transformed their ways of working from participation in the programme.

And the journey continues. New digital and social media platforms offer a wealth of resources to support our work further. The URBACT Digital Toolbox is, itself, a great example. It gives practitioners access to a world of experience and practical tips that is being constantly refreshed by the URBACT community.

At the same time, the programme is investing in the improved capacity of its participants to design and deliver effective online sessions. Many of the tools discussed in this document still apply to the virtual setting, but there is a huge opportunity not only to reinvent, but also to innovate through the development of new tools and processes. URBACT is committed to doing that, refining its method and tools for the digital age.

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