Facilitation Tips for Managing the Pace of Any Session

When you are preparing for a meeting, working session, or interactive training module that you'll be facilitating, how do you allocate the "right" amount of time for various discussion points or exercises? You estimate as best you can.

If you've led similar sessions previously, you may feel more confident in your time estimates. But even then, as any experienced facilitator knows, "stuff happens" and you may find that the session progresses faster or slower than you anticipated. When that occurs, **you need to intelligently extend or shrink any remaining exercises, discussions, or action planning elements**. We use an accordion analogy here, where the image is to "squeeze" or "expand" the remaining parts of the agenda while remaining "on key."

Tip: When you are confident that you can expand or contract a session, you can be comfortable making adjustments. That might include allowing unscheduled time to continue a fruitful discussion, or to shorten an exercise that isn't accomplishing what you intended because you know you can adjust later. This means that you can focus on ensuring the session really meets participants' needs rather than feeling locked into a schedule that isn't working.

Below are **15 tangible facilitator tricks for managing the timing and pace of any session**. They are segmented into four categories:

I. Preparing for the Session
II. Introducing the Session
III. Making "Real-time" Adjustments
IV. Avoiding Pitfalls

I. Preparing for the Session

1. When you set up your original plan, **know what you can drop from the agenda** without major repercussions.
   - Equally important, know the "non-negotiables" from your sponsor's perspective. These are items that if you don't accomplish or cover during the session, your sponsor will consider the session a failure.

2. If you are concerned that the group may move quickly through the agenda, **be prepared with additional ("back pocket" or "deeper dive") questions**.
   - In some cases, you might even have an "add-on" task or exercise that you'll only use if the group gets way ahead of the agenda.
   - While most groups don't mind wrapping up a little early, they can get upset if they allocated a full day and the session wraps up at 1PM.

3. When you design an exercise that contains a set of questions or tasks, identify in advance which ones could be skipped. Then, if you need to save time, **ask participants to just focus on certain questions or specific parts of a worksheet**.
   - An alternative that can also work is to allow them to pick and focus on 3 questions.

II. Introducing/Setting-up the Session

4. If you aren't fully confident about your time estimates, when you introduce the agenda to the participants, frame it as **a "tentative agenda" that you'll adjust as the session progresses**, based on their needs.

5. If you are concerned that you have a lot on the agenda**,** at the start of the day **apologize, in advance, that at times you'll be interrupting their conversations**. You can add that you value their time, and "want to keep us moving along crisply."

6. Establish a few **ground rules** regarding the pace of the session.
   - For example, that you'll step in and move things along as needed, throughout the session or that you may skip an item on the original agenda if it appears the group has addressed it elsewhere or something more important emerges.

III. Making "Real-time" Adjustments

7. There are often a few alternatives ways to conduct an exercise or discussion, with different time commitments. You can give people time individually to work on the task, you can have them work on it in pairs or small groups, and/or you can have them discuss it as a large group.
   - **Fastest** – Go directly to a large group discussion or ask them to reflect individually and hand in their notes (the individual solution is only worthwhile if the group doesn't need to hear what others are thinking about the topic during the session).
   - **Most in depth** (i.e., most time consuming) – First give them time to reflect individually, then time to discuss in pairs or small groups, then finally solicit their thoughts and ideas and engage in a full group discussion. If you have additional time, you can have each pair or smaller group report back with 1-2 highlights prior to engaging in a full group discussion.
   - **In between** – Allow a little time for quick reflection or quick discussion in pairs, followed by a full group discussion.

8. When you introduce the next topic or exercise, **inoculate the group about the expected pace**.
   - For example, "We'll discuss this quickly" or "This is important, so I want to give you ample time to work through it." Sincerity and transparency can go a long way here.

9. If groups have a hard time stopping their small group discussions and seguing into the full group discussion, **announce a one or two-minute warning**.
   - "We'll be comparing notes in two minutes, so please wrap up your conversations." Then when it's time, clearly state, "Okay, let's pause here to compare notes."

10. If you are typically empathetic, you may find yourself watching a group as they work on an exercise, and get uncomfortable when the fastest person (or pair) finishes quickly and looks bored or the slowest person (or pair) doesn't have time to complete an exercise. However, **be careful not to manage a session based on the fastest or slowest participants** or the rest of the group will suffer.
    - Read the room, and in most cases, the best target is somewhere in between the fastest and slowest participants.

11. If your sub-groups have difficulty choosing who will present or “brief back” (and thus, take a lot of time doing so) consider **appointing a presenter for each table**.

IV. Avoiding Pitfalls

12. If you find that you are running behind, you may look to trim breaks. But people need breaks both biologically and psychologically, or they are likely to disengage. So **use breaks wisely**.
    - If you need to keep up the pace, let them know you’d like to take a crisp break and ask, “How quickly can you realistically return from a break?” You can add that doing so will help ensure that the session ends on time.
    - If you have a little extra time, you can give them a few extra minutes to “check their emails/messages,” but if you do so, you should provide them with a specific time to return.
    - Instead of saying let’s take a 10-minute break, glance at a clock and say, “We’ll reconvene at 1:15,” so participants know exactly when the meeting will begin again.

13. Recognize that **cultural norms about pace of conversation and the value of spending time “reflecting” can vary** from country to country, region to region, profession to profession, and company to company.
    - If you’re not sure about the expectations and tolerance levels for moving quickly or slowly, or spending time “thinking,” check with a colleague. Insights about your audience (e.g., this is a group that digests things very quickly) can help you with your initial times estimates and help you recognize what is unlikely to work (you can’t do many individual reflection tasks) with a particular group.

14. When we feel we are ahead or behind it is easy to subconsciously accelerate or decelerate the pace with which we talk. **Be careful about simply talking faster or slower**. By way of analogy, if you are accustomed to talking at 30 mph and you try talking at 50 mph, you will forget things and your audience is unlikely to understand you.
    - It is typically better to make smart decisions about the agenda and how much time you allocate to remaining sections than to “pick up or slow down” your cadence.

15. Do not underestimate the **value of spending time to reach and summarize agreements**, surface any remaining questions, establish any forms of follow-up (when, who, how), and generally wrap up.
    - Too often, when a session falls behind this is what gets sacrificed. Unfortunately, without ample time in the “wrap up,” an otherwise great session can easily fail (“what did we accomplish?”). So **don’t look to trim too much time from the wrap up**.
    - If you have no choice but to reduce the wrap-up, be sure to let the group know you will **send out an email that summarizes the session** and any agreements that were made.