

Do more with an Agenda Review than you ever thought possible

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Most agenda reviews are a ritualized reading of a written agenda. It may take as little as five minutes (or less!), with a few logistical questions. However, when done with intention, agenda reviews can build safety, set tone, build rapport – even begin working conflicts that might otherwise get in the way of the workshop. Here are a few vignettes that may expand your sense of possibilities to make the review count!

Acknowledge where tension will rise

During a training of trainer workshop I had led many times, I drew pictures of where (I expected) the overall group dynamics to be alongside the traditional agenda items. For example, based on my experience of the workshop's flow I drew a picture of a large brick wall on day two ("hitting the wall!") and soon after that a picture of people bursting through the wall ("breakthrough!").

As predicted, when day two rolled around the group was tired, flagging, and irritable. A few people directed snarky comments at each other and facilitators. Suddenly someone sat up and pointed at the picture on the agenda review, "That's exactly what we feel!" It normalized the moment and while the low-energy and blocks continued, the nastiness and snark decreased (within a few hours the group had their break-through moment, too!).

Even without pictures, the agenda review can flag for people the group dynamics that often happen in the workshop. When they happen, people can recall it, which helps normalize the journey and build further trust in the facilitator's awareness of it.

Get to know the group

Agenda reviews don't need to be one-way activities. It can be really useful to stop frequently and invite questions and reflections. For a local pantry wanting to move into fiercer activism, I was asked to lead a 3-hour workshop with no information about who was in the room. I showed up and inside the cafeteria was about seventy elderly people. I used my agenda review to learn about the group:

Next we'll look at ways to be involved in politics that are beyond voting or being involved in the democratic structure. I'm curious, how many people would say they've done something like that – pushed politicians from the outside as opposed to being inside the system?

When a handful raised their hands I got a sampling of them – and got to know who I might need to lean on later in the workshop. And then again I said,

Before we close we'll talk about a game plan. What might you do differently? How many people here showed up because they want to do something differently, beyond the good work you've already been doing?

When three-fourth of the group raised their hand, I was relieved. It would have mostly been a waste of three hours if the organizers had just thrown people into the room without any buy-in on the idea. Plus it got me buy-in – and so I started the workshop.

Warn them if your style is out of their comfort zone

During a 5-hour anti-racism workshop, TFC trainer Nico Amador was working with a group of young, white Jewish participants. He knew that many of them were recent college graduates and came from academic settings where emphasis on language and intellectual concepts were the norm. Early on in the agenda review, Nico told them upfront:

Some of you may have participated in workshops like this where the focus is on definitions and theories about oppression. Those are valuable and I've learned a lot from those concepts myself but what I've found is that it doesn't always help people develop a practice of anti-racism that allows them to build solidarity successfully. That's what I'd really like to focus on in this workshop – awareness, behavior, and skills that apply to the work that you're doing. So if it's ok with you, I'd like us to not get too caught up in worrying about terminology as we go and instead just notice what kind of insights you're having as we move through some of these activities together.

Nico reported it gave huge permission to bring what he wanted to bring without being in a struggle with them or dismissing value they may have found in other kinds of workshops.

Connect with people through stories

I was nervous before leading a training of trainers for union that they wouldn't connect with me. So during the agenda review I told at least three short campaign stories – stories that established my credibility as an organizer, e.g.

Next on the agenda is the experiential cycle. That's our methodology of starting with people's lived experiences for learning. For example, last week I ran into a volunteer for a group I work with who told me she was burning out – and while I had immediate advice for her, I realized she was in no emotional shape to take it in. So I asked questions to help her reflect on what had happened. Without getting into the whole story, the questions provoked a new self-reflection. In fact, I didn't have to offer any advice – she figured it out on her own. That's starting with people's experiences instead of our answers – a taste of what we mean by experiential cycle. Right after that section on the cycle we'll get into asking questions...

At another workshop with older African-American Philadelphians I told stories from 60s activism to assure them I wasn't another youngster without a sense of history.

Model the energy you want for the workshop space

I'm amazed at how few facilitators bring levity to the agenda review. It's a great time to model the kind of workshop space you expect this to be. *Is it an exciting workshop? A place for jokes? A place for people to laugh? A place for people to be emotional?*

During one highly charged workshop to address heavy issues of oppression, I heard a facilitator play with this by bringing balloons. Despite the group's best intentions to stay stuck in heaviness, the balloons lightened the mood and a few smiles emerged.

Signal to the mainstream you expect them to grow

During a strategy retreat I wanted to push the mainstream of the group that was highly "proper" – very consistent with middle-class obsession with appropriateness. The group trusted me and without thinking much about it, I rebelled against the norm and cursed a bunch in the agenda review. I joked self-referentially:

Wow, I guess I just cursed a lot. Well, not a lot. Maybe a lot for some of you. And, since you say you want to build a movement with lots of different kinds of people, you're gonna have to get over it.

And then I turned back to the agenda review.

Deflect anxiety, such as how people strategize

Many people walk into strategy workshops concerned that they don't do it right. Trainers can unintentionally add to that by sending the signal that their preferred agenda is "the" right way of doing it. I was concerned about this for a strategy retreat for a relatively young climate justice group, filled with people new to activism. During the agenda review I explained that many of the people may have ordered the agenda in a different order:

People don't design campaign strategy only one way. Some of you may have wanted to spend time first thinking about targets, then move on to goals. Others would want to settle some of the personal and structural issues of the group first.

I went on to explain my particular rationale. While teaching about strategy, I validated everyone's approach, which helped settle and relax the group with less resistance than I had experienced with the group before.

Model responsiveness

The hour-long agenda review didn't start like most. It was with a group of fierce disability rights direct actionists. I read out the first line and immediately got interrupted. "*What do you mean by past actions?*" Coolly I explained my intention to have the group reflect on actions they've done in the past. Another person interrupted: "*How will you get us to do that?*" I described the tool to do that and when someone else had another question, started to worry how long this would take.

After the first ten minutes went through like this and we had barely finished the first day (of a five day training) I asked if it would be okay for me to read the whole agenda and then we could do questions. With a unified voice they shouted "*No!*"

In my mind I switched gears. Something deep is happening here. Let me go with the flow and not fight it. People's questions and concerns kept coming. I continued at a slower pace.

On the rare moments when people didn't ask a question on an agenda item I slowed it down. With sincerity I asked, "Should I go forward or should I explain this one?" Oftentimes a new question would emerge, or something else would occur to people: "*We need to talk about history. Where is history on this agenda?*" When I pointed at the agenda item of 'Looking at past actions' they shook their ideas. "*We need the word history up there!*" So I scratched out 'Past Actions' and wrote 'History'. They were satisfied.

It took a little over an hour. But it was worth it. By the end the group had complete buy-in and trusted me enough to move smoothly through the workshop.

What nobody had told me was that no outside person had ever (successfully) facilitated them before. They were feisty, powerful, and carried deep anger from the years of able-bodied people like humiliating and disrespecting them.

If your group isn't that honest or upfront with its concerns you may have to listen for more subtle concerns in order to be responsive. But when you do, it will build the group's trust in you.

There's plenty of other ways to make an agenda review an activity that builds group safety, trust in the facilitator, and sets you up for later down the road. Please let me know what you come up with – so we can plan more than just five minute agenda reviews!