

Participant-Centered Design: How to Design Events Worth Attending

By Karen Sella

Whenever I get asked to do a presentation, I always have mixed thoughts. I'm grateful that someone values my perspective enough to invite me to share it, but I'm also concerned that people will expect me to do all the talking. Most people who know me well will tell you that I consider myself to be less of a public speaker and more of a conversation-starter. I enjoy presentations if they catalyze meaningful conversation and action, but I prefer more participant-centered events.

If you look up "monologue" in the dictionary, you will find the following definition: a long speech monopolizing conversation. "Dialogue," on the other hand refers to a conversation between two or more persons; *an exchange of ideas and opinions*. There's no denying that monological presentations can be useful for setting contexts, delivering content, and providing passive entertainment (assuming the speaker is entertaining), but they can also suck the life out of a group of otherwise engaging people more quickly than a leech at a blood-letting.

Most of us have had the unfortunate experience of sitting through a well-intended, but *counting-the-seconds-until-it's-over*, mind-numbing presentation—and when the folks attending to the "butts-in-seats," haven't been as attentive to the comfort of the butts-in-seats—even butt-numbing presentation. Some of us have even had the unfortunate experience of delivering the well-intended, mind-numbing, butt-numbing presentation (so very sorry).

As one such person, I've learned a lot over the years, as I continue to learn, about how to design and facilitate interesting, engaging participant experiences. I imagine much of what I have to say on the subject is nothing new. However, I am still amazed at the number of well-intended, well-attended events that deliver a less-than-optimal participant experience than was possible with a little more skillful design and facilitation, so I offer what follows as a conversation-starter for anyone involved in designing and/or facilitating events large or small with full appreciation for just how challenging it can be to create an event that not



only fulfills its purpose, but actually inspires the majority of participants.

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Obviously, there are numerous aspects involved in producing a great event, and numerous kinds of events from social gatherings to fundraisers to workshops and conferences. What most interests me for the purpose of this exploration is attempting to articulate practical, guiding principles that increase the probability that participants will have a great experience at any organized event, although my examples usually assume larger events. When I speak of “participants,” I am most often referring to those whose primary role is to attend and participate in the event, although in the broadest sense, all who participate in an event as sponsors, speakers, facilitators, volunteers, etc. are also participants.

The number of “butts-in-seats,” though an important, if somewhat crudely stated, success measure, matters less to me than the quality of the participants' experience. In fact, I suspect that the more we attend to the participant experience as the most essential part of our design and facilitation, the more likely it is that they will attend our events.

And so, without further ado, I invite you to pause and ponder...to enquire and share... And of course, do make yourself comfortable... Here are a few thoughts about how to increase the likelihood that participants will have a great experience.

Make folks feel welcome and comfortable.

Anyone who has ever attended or hosted a dinner party knows how important this is (especially if you've had the misfortune of attending or hosting a disastrous dinner party). Introduce yourself and others as much as possible. Please do us all a favor and avoid tedious, time-consuming round-robin introductions of groups greater than ten people as it almost always sucks energy from the group and frequently means starting everything else behind-schedule. Instead, provide enough breaks and dialogical activities that folks can introduce themselves to each other, and encourage them to do so. Pay particular attention to individuals or groups of individuals who may not be as familiar with others in the room. For large events, you may consider having greeters. Acknowledge their presence and thank people for coming. Thank them for their contributions throughout the event. People appreciate being appreciated.

“If you and your participants don’t know why what you’re doing matters, it probably isn’t worth doing...”

Know how and why. Be clear about the purpose of the event. Make sure that every aspect of the event is directly and explicitly relevant in fulfilling the purpose of the event. Know why it matters—not only to you, but to your participants—and know how you're going to do what matters. If you and/or your participants don't know why what you're doing matters, it probably isn't worth doing. Likewise, if you and/or your participants don't have some basic understanding of how you're going to engage together, you're less likely to do really engage at all. What is the purpose of the event? Why are people here? What needs to be done when and how is it done most effectively by whom?

Balance “want” with “can.” Just because you want to doesn't mean you can do. Make sure that both passion and skill equal to the task at hand are in the room. Make sure that there are people who are not only committed, but capable of fulfilling the purpose of the event. Just as everyone is not equally equipped to lead mountaineering expeditions, everyone is not equally capable of facilitating deep personal processing or large-scale change initiatives. If

you're asking people to divulge personal stories or presenting controversial material that may elicit emotionally-charged responses, make sure that you or some other skillful, committed person(s) in the room has enough interpersonal competence to hold and engage what emerges in a productive fashion. If you want folks to engage in conversation about particular content in a particular way, make sure that there is a critical mass of folks with enough knowledge of the topic and the process who are interested in and capable of conversation.

If you can seed a room with a blend of content experts (who don't think they know it all), process experts (who don't have to control it all), and participants (who don't have something better to do) who are genuinely interested in and capable of engaging the content and the process, you have the makings of a fruitful event. This is no small feat.

Prepare and care for your participants.

Obviously, participants are responsible for taking care of themselves, but good design and facilitation supports participants in their efforts to do so. Beyond the basic social grace of making people feel welcome and comfortable, make sure that your event design attends to the physical, emotional, and cognitive needs of your participants.

Notice what people are saying even when they're not speaking and respond accordingly. Look around the room (assuming you're indoors). What are people expressing? Are they smiling, laughing, nodding in appreciation? Or are they yawning, rolling their eyes, or fidgeting? *Invite a stretch break.* Are they fanning themselves with their programs or wearing their coats inside mid-day? Are they craning their necks to hear or squinting to see? *Adjust the thermostat, audio, lighting, etc.*—or if it's beyond your control, acknowledge their discomfort and apologize. And don't forget to provide the locations of break-out sessions, bathrooms, emergency exits, and any other related amenities.

Give people a break. Is there some design principle that I'm unaware of that states all participants must be physically uncomfortable during an event? We all inhabit bodies with universal and individual biological needs. We all need to eat, drink, rest, breathe, pee. Need I remind us that the caffeinated beverages

prevalent at most events are natural diuretics? If there are fifty women at a conference and there are only seven bathroom stalls, well...you do the math. Unless you happen to be using Open Space Technology, which means you know all about the importance of breaks, design frequent and appropriate breaks.

If it is likely—and it almost always is—that people will want to connect during the breaks, plan for longer breaks. Think about how long it would take for you to stretch, go to the bathroom, get a glass of water, and have a conversation with a few participants. Then, design the breaks to address all of these needs.

If you think that conversation during the breaks will be distracting to participants, request that they take the breaks in silence, explaining why you think that the silence is important and make sure that they know that there will be time to connect out loud at another time. If people decide that their need to talk is greater than your request for silence, roll with it. Remember, you're not responsible for how they participate; they are.

Avoid assigning people tasks during breaks.

I realize that it's tempting, but there's no such thing as a working break. That's an oxymoron. Previews of what's to come, so folks can begin thinking about what's next can be helpful, but don't assign tasks during a break. If you're short on time and there is work to be done, but a break is needed, take a short break. Tell people about what's next. Then, come back and do the work. You can also take a pulse in the room with a simple show of hands, and ask people if they would prefer to take a break now or after completing a task.

Interrupt yourself. Invite unscheduled standing and stretching breaks as needed throughout the day. Most of us experience physical discomfort when we are stationary for too long. Interrupt yourself. Invite people to stand up. Stretch. Get the blood flowing again. Sit down. Resume schedule. It only takes a few minutes and it lets people know that you are present with them and care about their experience—that whatever content or exercise you've designed is not more important to you than their well-being. Believe me, when you're attentive to them, they are much more inclined to be attentive to you.

Get people moving. Literally. There are many formal and informal ways to support the physical health and comfort of your participants. If you have the space, provide a designated area for stretching that people can use as inspired throughout the event. Scout nice walks that could occur during the breaks in advance of the event, and provide maps of walking paths, trails, or city hikes that are “do-able” during breaks. Depending on the capacities and preferences of your participants (as well as the dress code), consider guiding (or having other skillful practitioners guide) people in some basic stretching, Yoga, or Tai Chi. Consider how you might help facilitate more interactive or “hands-on” exercises as part of your process, an often overlooked, but important option for kinesthetic learners who concentrate better and learn more readily while their bodies are in motion. Even if the bulk of your time is devoted to more mental pursuits, integrate kinesthetic and somatic elements into your design—and if you are not experienced doing this, collaborate with other professionals who are.

Remember that people have physical, personal, and/or cultural limitations about how they are able and willing to behave in public, so do your best to know something about these before designing your event activities. You should keep in mind that many people here in the States are often uncomfortable with their bodies, and self-conscious about moving their bodies in any directed way, as well as touching and being touched, especially if they don't know each other well. In general, refrain from asking people who don't know each other to touch each other—i.e. hold hands, hug, or practice trust falls—unless it is somehow critical to the purpose of the event. Rather, design an experience in which handshakes, hand-holding, hugs, and trust amongst participants may naturally emerge as an authentic expression by providing repeated opportunities for participants to connect with each other about what matters to them.

“If participants are listening to presentation for more than a third of the time, the event needs to be longer, or someone needs to shush.”

Adopt two-to-one. When it comes to events, two (or more) people engaged in meaningful interaction is always better than one meaningful monologue. Adopt a two-to-one ratio of dialogical or experiential engagement to monological presentation. In other words, for every one hour/day of monological content delivery, you should plan to have two hours/days of dialogical engagement. If participants are listening to presentation for more than a third of the time, the event needs to be longer, or someone needs to *shush*.

“The most skillful presenters know they know something without thinking that they know everything...”

Design for equal opportunity listening and speaking. If you're delivering content to adult participants respect the experience and expertise in the room by providing space for the people to actively engage with the content. The most skillful presenters know they know something *without thinking that they know everything*. They ask questions *without assuming that they have all the answers*. If you're the only one talking most of the time, even if you know more than everyone else in the room, you're talking too much.

At a bare minimum, make time for unrushed Q&A. Even if questions are directed to you as the facilitator, presenter, or perceived expert, throw them back to the whole group as a way of engaging other people in the room. Ideally, there is time for reflection and dialogue designed to give everyone in the room a chance to speak and be heard by others. Dyads, triads, small break-out groups with one to three guiding questions work well to engage people.

For every dialogical/experiential exercise, plan to allocate as much time is required for every participant to have at least one experience of being heard—so if you're planning to break people into small groups of five to discuss three guiding questions, imagine each person having time to speak to each question without interruption or rushing, and then, think about the time it would take. Take into account the average participant's comfort with the content, process, and other participants, as well as the quality of conversation they are likely to

experience. How complex is the content? Do you want them to skim the surface or dive deep? And setting aside your own agenda for the moment, *what do you think that they want to do?* How meaningful is the topic to them? How appropriate is the process, given their understanding why they are here? How does it meet their expectations of what they will experience given what's already been communicated? When they tune into WIFM (what's in it for me), *do they want to hum along?*

Remember that the more comfortable folks are with the content, the process, and each other, the more likely it is that meaningful conversations will ensue. Less comfort with content, process, and/or people in the room means you will probably need to allocate more time. If you apply this to a situation involving a small group of five relative strangers asked to discuss three guiding questions, at least one of which invites some personal disclosure, you might plan to allocate anywhere from half an hour (planning an average of 2 minutes per person per question, which will naturally be unevenly distributed depending on the group) to one hour and fifty minutes (offering 10 minutes per person per question).

Be curious. Ask valuable questions. Assume that everyone has something to teach and listen with the intent to learn. If you're not learning from the people around you, you're either stupid or perfect. Since most of us aren't perfect, let's all be smart and learn. Listening is not about making eye contact, nodding your head, and waiting for your turn to speak. Listening is about being genuinely interested enough to learn from another person's perspective and experience. It's about opening your heart and mind to another's point of view.

Provide clear, actionable directions and directives. In writing. Out loud. More than once. Remember that writing exercise in third grade where you're supposed to provide clear step-by-step instructions for how to make a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich? Remember the next day when the class is in hysterics as they discover all the ways not to make a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich, learning a valuable lesson about communicating assumptions rather than clear directions? Too often, we're asked to make peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches with insufficient instructions, and we end up feeling

simultaneously empty and hungry for something more substantial.

Take the time to ensure that your instructions are clear and actionable. Write these. Read these. Speak these. *Before the event.* During the event, speak these at least twice and provide either a hand-out or other visual aid if the directive contains multiple instructions. Remember that there are different kinds of learners who will appreciate different kinds of instructions, so whenever possible try to appeal to all of the senses when sharing information, and don't be afraid to repeat yourself. How many times have you been asked, or asked, or wish you had asked, or appreciated when someone else asked for the instructions to be repeated?

Never ask a duck to climb a tree.

"I once knew a wise man—a teacher of very young children...He was one of those magical people who show you what you can do that you never thought you could do. He used to say that we would never ask a duck to climb a tree—a duck's not equipped to do that with webbed feet. But the duck swims superbly..."

Kaleel Jamison, *The Nibble Theory and the Kernel of Power*, 1989

Appreciate people as they are. Yes, people grow and change. Yes, taking people out of their comfort zones, pushing their edges, and facilitating new experiences can be life-changing, useful, and entirely appropriate in certain contexts. But it's a fine line between pushing one's edge and pushing one *over the edge*, so respect the personal boundaries, values, capacities and conditions of participants. Avoid asking people to do work that is incongruent with who they are or what they are equipped to do.

Know your "innies" and "outies." Most design seems to overlook the "ins" and "outs" of how folks process information. External processors, more often than not extroverts or "outies", are those more inclined to process information in conversation; they learn by *talking* things through and thinking out loud. Internal processors, more often than not introverts or "innies," are those more inclined to process information more introspectively; they learn by

thinking things through and prefer time to think before they speak. Honor both kinds of processing by offering adequate discussion time for those inclined to process externally and building in adequate time for individual reflection.

Pause. Often. If you're not already acquainted, acquaint yourself with the "Group Pause," and *facilitate it with as much care as you would any other group activity.* Any time you are inviting people to speak or give feedback, you should *first invite people to pause and reflect.* For folks inclined to internal processing, well-planned individual reflection time is especially important prior to discussion-oriented sessions, as well as prior to inviting feedback or evaluation at the end of the event. Provide discussion-group-related guiding questions to everyone in the room, either as handouts in advance of the gathering, or facilitate a Group Pause as an introduction to the discussion groups that will follow.

Pause. Share any guiding questions with the group and invite people to spend some time (at least one to two minutes per question is a good rule of thumb) reflecting on the questions in silence. Invite them to write their thoughts as inspired and with the understanding that sharing these later may be welcome, but is not required. Then, *be quiet.* The next two times you speak should be to let people know when they have a minute left, and then again, when it's time to proceed with the agenda.

The folks who process more internally will appreciate a few moments to reflect and gather their thoughts in quietude before entering the discussions, and the discussions to follow will benefit from their more comfortable participation. People who process more externally will grow their capacity for reflection (or take a nap :).

You can also provide evaluation sheets long before the end of the event and/or facilitate a Group Pause prior to completing any written evaluations, inviting people to pause, reflect on the evaluation content with a few moments of silence before completing their evaluations. Internal processors will experience a more comfortable process of evaluating which will likely elicit more positive experiences and thus, more positive evaluations.



Pay attention to the physical space—the layout of the room, the flow of traffic, the proximity of chairs, tables, cushions, flipcharts, etc. What do people need to see, hear, sit, speak, and move comfortably in the space? Often, too much emphasis is given to ensuring that people can see the presentation screen or speaker or sit in a big circle without providing for easy flow in and out of the space. Always design the seating in a room to allow people as easy access to the entrances/exits and bathrooms as possible without having to cross through the front of the room or center of a circle. Make sure the seating supports whatever interaction will be occurring in the room. Most people will suffer terribly in the name of courtesy, so make it easy for them to be courteous by making it possible for them to speak without shouting and move at will. Participants should be able to take care of their basic needs with as little inconvenience and interaction as possible.

If you're uncomfortable or distracted by people moving about, think about how distracting it is to be physically uncomfortable and unable to move without blocking someone's view or asking three people to stand even though your back or bladder is screaming for some relief. No one likes to feel trapped, and proper space planning is a simple thing that you can do to prevent people from having this unfortunate experience.

More thoughts? Connect. What have you learned along the way that makes for a great participant experience? We would love to learn from you—and of course, if we can be of assistance in designing and facilitating (or hosting) your next event, please get in touch.