

Making Programme Workshops Work:

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How many hours have you spent in programme workshops which have dragged on and on?

How many times have you left a programme meeting feeling that it wasn't the best use of your valuable time?

Too many?

As programme managers, these could even be our own meetings or workshops. When we're in charge of major change, it can feel as if all the stakeholders have very different points of view.

It's a bit like an old Eastern story of six blind men and an elephant. Have you heard it before? Each of the blind men goes up to the elephant and touches only one part of it. One touches the tusk, while another feels the trunk and so on. Each blind man is convinced that he alone knows what an elephant is like. Of course, a huge argument ensues:



'It's like a spear', says the man who felt the tusk.

'It's like a snake', says the man who felt the trunk.

'It's like a rope', says the man who felt the tail.

And so on. Everyone is right in part, but they are all wrong about the overall nature of an elephant! In the story, they never work it out.

Well, perhaps this helps us to explain why programme meetings can be so tricky. After all, major change in an organisation makes an elephant seem simple, solid and easy in comparison. We have a range of stakeholders, often with different perspectives. We are dealing with ambiguity beyond the comfort zone of most people.

I've been there too. One programme that I managed involved business executives, government ministers, civil servants, the United Nations and non-governmental organisations. We worked in a mixture of English and French. This made me search for what worked on programmes, and I have now set up my own company to share these skills and knowledge with others.

When programme workshops and meetings work really well, they help to build up a coherent picture of reality. This means that everyone can see the entire 'elephant' of change. Good workshops help to engage team members and stakeholders in the process of change, as well as in the benefits for their own areas.

So what can we do as programme managers to make our workshops really work?

1. Be really clear on the fundamentals:

Why are you having a meeting? What's the point of your meeting? Unless this is clearly understood by all the participants, you are likely to find that there will be as many un-stated purposes as there are people at the meeting.

What are the outcomes – what will change as a result of the meeting or workshop? What goals will be met by the end?

What about the agenda – is it clear what's going to happen when? Of course, if you need to be flexible to stay 'to the point', that's fine too. Just make sure that everyone knows what's happening and agrees the changes.

Who is going to do what in your meeting? What roles are required – from time keeper, to facilitator, to recording actions?

How will everyone work together? People's expectations can vary a lot, and meeting styles differ – especially if people are from different organisations or departments. In some places, for example, it is considered quite acceptable for people to have open laptops during meetings, checking e-mails when they get bored. Elsewhere this is very discourteous. It's worth clarifying these ground rules upfront. How can people raise issues – can they do this anonymously? How will the group take decisions?

All of these will take a short while up front but will save time later.

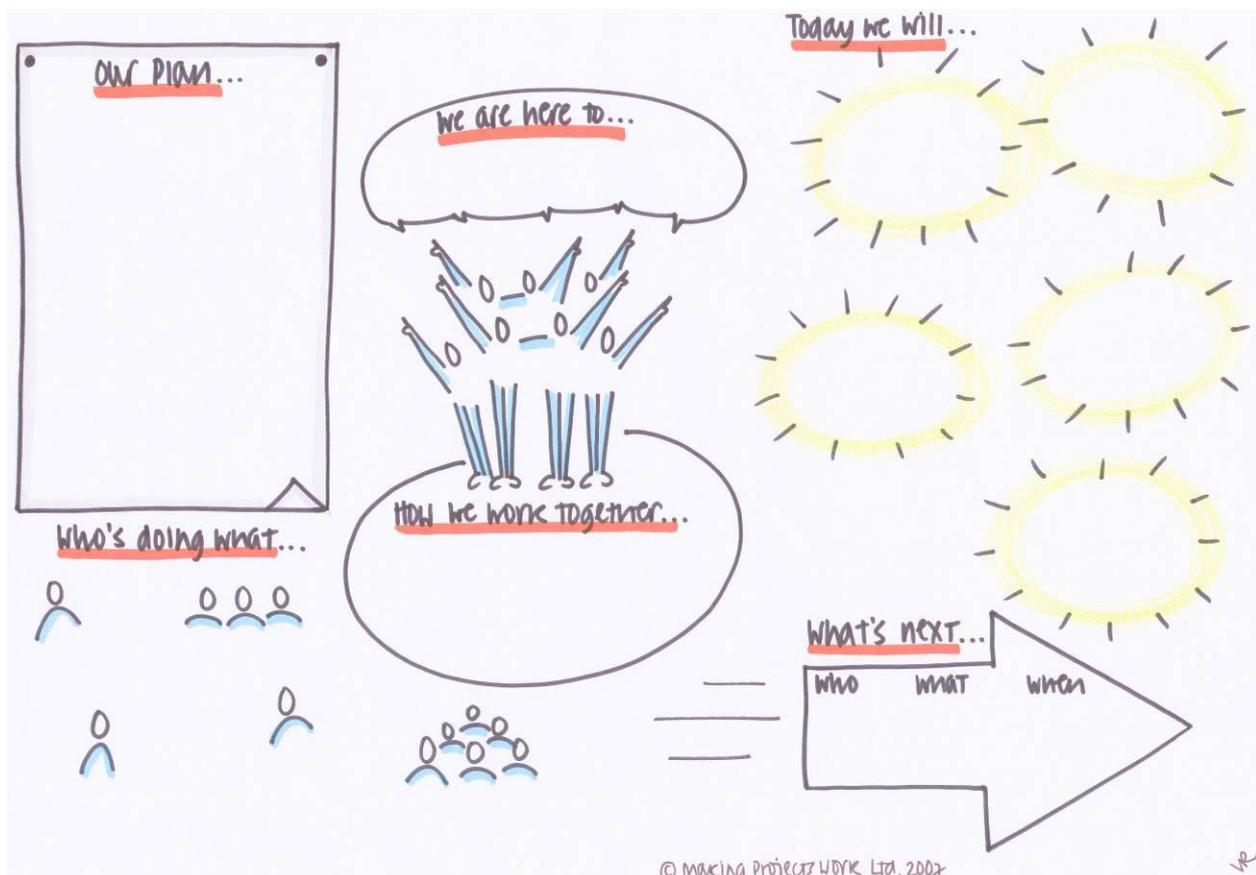
2. Avoid 'Death by PowerPoint':

So many meetings are powered by slides – which are neither flexible nor interactive. If you want to engage your people and encourage them to participate, why not try something different?

One ProgM member, John Chapman from Touchstone Ltd. showed me some great video clips. Only lasting a minute or two, they focus the group on a particular topic really well.

Rather than just writing lists on flipcharts, why not use a variety of ways of presenting the information? Clusters of ideas on post-it notes, diagrams, tables and even pictures provide a welcome break. Graphics in meetings can help people see the big picture.

However, not every programme manager would enjoy drawing graphics in real time in front of their groups! So we are working on a set of posters that allow people to use graphics in programme workshops without having to draw at all. Here's a first glimpse of our meeting start up poster. It covers all the points listed in the first section:



The idea is that leaders use this poster at the start of the meeting to write up all the key things. Then they leave the poster on the wall for all to see. This helps to keep people clear and the meeting on track.



The 'What's next' section on the poster reminds people to stay focussed on generating clear, agreed action. They can even write up the actions on the poster as they arise. To document the meeting, the leader can take a photo of the poster and e-mail it to everyone involved.

3. Allow participation:

So we've made our presentation more engaging, but what about the participants? Sometimes, I've found that in the UK silence descends and people tend to stay quiet rather than raise objections openly or risk conflict. How can you design your meeting to make the most of everyone?

The environment is really important. Will people be in small groups able to discuss issues? Will everyone be seated as in a lecture theatre, which makes it difficult to come forward to speak out?

Designing your meeting to allow anonymous (or semi-anonymous) input is illuminating! People are so much more honest – they say things that might otherwise be kept under wraps for far too long and end up costing a fortune to change! Try inviting people to write their three top concerns on post it notes and then clustering the results. This can give you a clear picture. An alternative is to use a pre-meeting internet survey.

Voting can help you to see what's most important to the group – again, to make it less susceptible to peer pressure, consider giving people sticky dots to stick on their three most important concerns, rather than asking for a public show of hands.

So, try applying these points to your programme meetings from the start – from creating your vision, identifying benefits, managing risk, right through to reviewing the lessons learned. Next month, we'll look at how you can best choose and use a neutral facilitator to allow you to be involved in your workshops and meetings without having to run them as well!

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