Preparing for an Unconference

www.unconference.net

The unconference* format creates space for peer-to-peer learning, collaboration and creativity.

At the start, the whole group will gather together and be guided through creating an agenda using open space technology. The exact process is not important to under- stand in advance – the process will become clear as it happens. The important part is that all those gathered will have the opportunity to put conference sessions on the agenda. No session will be voted off or ‘won’t happen’ for some other reason. All ses-sions are welcome.

Unconference.net
Dynamic events for a fast moving world.

The sessions convened will range from the formal to the informal:

- From the well thought out pre-prepared talk reflecting years of research and practice - to the spur of the moment ‘new idea’ that would be fun to talk about.
- From the presentation of a working tool to the white boarding of something completely new.

Before the event…

You my think about subjects ahead of time— but the agenda gets created at the event itself.

Convening a session…

There are several key points about an unconference:

- You do not need to do preparation in order to convene a session. If you get an idea the day of the event, call a session.
- There is no ‘right way’ to lead a session. However there is a bias towards interaction and discussion.
- Choose a format for your session will help you achieve your vision.
- Collaboration among participants who convene sessions and even merging of sessions on similar topics are both encouraged. If you convene a session, the decision to merge with another session will always be yours to make.

* The term "unconference" arose as people in the technology industry started making conferences that stepped out of the traditional models, which had involved presentations selected months beforehand, panels of speakers, industry sponsors talking about their products, and “trade show” exhibits.

Following are a few ideas about different session types to get you thinking about possibilities.

Types of sessions

- **The longer formal presentation**
  This is tricky, because it's difficult to make a formal presentation interactive. But if you have a big, well-developed idea you can pull it off.
- **A short presentation to get things started**
  5-15 minutes of prepared material/comments by the session leader followed by an interactive discussion
- **Group discussion**
  Someone identifies a topic they are interested in, others come to join the conversation and an interesting discussion happens
- **My Big (or Little) Question**
  You have a question you want to know the answer to, and you think others in the group could help you answer it. This format could also just be the seed of a conversation.
- **Show and tell**
  You have a cool project, a demo, or just slides to show, this can be a springboard for the conversation in the session.
- **Learn how to do X**
  If you're inclined to teach, this can be simple and effective. Bring the equipment that you need, and have a plan that will let you teach five, ten, or 15 people how to do something all at the same time.

Do take photos of different elements of your program so you can share them with others either at sessions you lead or in other sessions.

Advice about leading a session…

If you convene a session, it is your responsibility to "hold the space" for your session. You hold the space by leading a discussion, by posting a "first question," or by sharing information about your program. Be the shepherd – stay visible, be as involved as necessary, be a beacon of sanity that guides the group.

- Ask for help holding the space if you need it. You might, for example, put a session on the board and know that you are so passionate about the topic that it would be better if someone else, someone more objective, facilitates the discussion. Choose someone from your team, or another participant who is interested in the topic.
- Don't assume people in the room know more, or less, than you do. You never know who is going to be interested in your session. You might want to start by asking people to hold up their hands if they've been involved with the topic for more than five years, for one to five years, or for one year or less.

- Don’t be upset if only two people show up to your session. Those two people are the ones who share your interest.
- Don’t feel that you have to “fill” up an hour of time. If what you have to say only takes 15 min and the group has finished interacting–then the session can end. At the start of the conference, we will discuss guidelines for how this can happen.
- Don’t feel pressure to have everything take place in “only” 45 minutes . If you start with a short presentation, and then a group conversation gets going, and your discussion needs to continue past an the time alloted – find a way to make this happen. You might be able to keep talking for awhile in the room you are in, or move to another part of the conference area. At the start of the conference, we will discuss guidelines for how this can happen.
- Be Brave! Others are interested in making your session work!
- Do think about the ideas that you want to cover in your session, and how you want to cover them. But don’t feel as though you need to prepare a great deal. (If you’re over-prepared, your session might lose energy.)
- Experiment with the kind of sessions you lead. There is no such thing as “failure” in an unconference.

Advice for everyone at unconference…

- Go with the flow – This event is intended to help you and all the other grantees find the time and space to talk with and learn from each other.
- Follow your passion – Go to the sessions that interest you.
- Take responsibility for your own learning – If there are topics you are really interested in that don’t appear on the agenda at first, you need to put them on there.

Credit:

Scott Berkun wrote a great description of how to run a successful unconference session; some examples are drawn from his outline.