



BRAIN AWARE® VAULT

Keeping on Track and Solving Challenges

All right, it's the day of your learning event and you're ready to go. Let's talk about how you keep things on track as the event unfolds. A large part of being a great facilitator is keeping things on time. You should already have a well-thought-out learning plan with accurate time estimates for each section. I always keep the agenda in front of me with timing clearly marked so I can easily see where we are. I also put notes about timing in my slide deck, so I know if I am on track, ahead, or behind at any given moment.

At the same time, there needs to be some flexibility so you can let a valuable conversation continue or rein in an unproductive activity. Your participants will be very appreciative if you start and end on time, and if you can adapt to their needs while achieving the goals of the learning program. So, your agenda needs to be a flexible plan that you can adjust as needed. Here are some strategies you can use:

- **Explain a bit about your role.** I find it helpful to tell my audience that I am both the timekeeper and goal tender. I'll be making sure we stay on track while simultaneously meeting the needs of the group. This means that our agenda is approximate, as we may adjust 10 minutes here or there. I always promise that we will end on time since many people have made plans based on the stated end time.
- **Build signposts into your slide deck.** Even though your audience has the agenda in front of them, I find it helpful to align the presentation to the agenda with clearly marked segues from one topic to the next. This helps participants feel oriented to where we are and what is still coming.
- **Be a talking clock.** Saying things like "We have 10 minutes for this discussion" or "This activity will take about 30 minutes" can really help your audience gauge their participation. If people seem antsy, I might also say, "We're about 20 minutes away from lunch or a break" to help them settle down. I used to dislike trying to call people back together once they were actively engaged in an activity or discussion. Starting to shush people or yell never feels good to me, so I had some little timer movies made that I drop into my slide deck. These movies count down on screen so that the audience can see exactly how much time is left and can wrap up accordingly.
- **Trim or expand at the breaks.** You should have built-in flexibility to your content and activities. So, at the break, pop into your slide deck and hide or show slides accordingly. For example, I might have a section that I can do either a quick summary of in 5 minutes or present in more depth for 15 minutes. Both versions sit in my deck and I use the break to adjust based on what we need.



- **Give participants choices.** Instead of making all the decisions for the group, I will sometimes let them choose between how they want to use the next chunk of time. For example, I can say “Let me check in with you about what you want to do. We could allot 10 more minutes to the discussion you are having, and then doing a quicker run through of the next segment on X. Or we can wrap up here and have more time for X. Which do you prefer?” This can be especially helpful for intact groups, for example, doing strategic planning, because they have a better sense of the best use of their time. But it works with all kinds of learning programs.

Keeping sessions on track is one of the things that distinguishes the best facilitators from the mediocre ones. Knowing how to read your audience and adjusting the workshop to meet their needs is an advanced skill but one that will pay off many times over.

Dealing with Challenging Dynamics

Working with a group of people can be both incredibly rewarding and sometimes challenging. The dynamics among a group can be unpredictable, which may require you to respond in the moment to keep everything flowing smoothly. When I train facilitators, I always have a session where I ask them to write down their worst-case scenarios. Then we tackle each one, so they are prepared to deal with them. Here are the most common ones:

1. **You have a group that is very quiet.** This has happened to me and it can be uncomfortable if they aren’t engaging, or worse, not laughing at your awesome jokes. Sometimes, they just need time to warm up. One strategy is just to wait. That silence seems longer to you than it really is, so I encourage you to just breathe and count to 20 in your head. Someone usually speaks up. Sometimes, you truly do have a quiet group. In that case, the best thing to do is make participating easier, which means doing lots of work in pairs and small groups.
2. **Someone is doing all the talking** or taking up a lot of time on his or her individual needs. At first, I just focus on making it easy for others to participate. I might ask folks to chat in groups and then ask for a volunteer from each group to share some highlights. Or I might go around the room and hear from everyone. If the person persists, move up to saying something more direct like “I really appreciate your participation—and I’d like to open it up to folks who have not yet had a chance to say something.” And if I need to, I will speak to the person privately during a break, asking them in a kind manner to hold back so we can create space for others.
3. **Someone violates the ground rules.** This is bound to happen so be prepared with ways to gently remind the group about the ground rules because they are



counting on you to hold everyone accountable. If the behavior persists, I will then speak to it more directly, getting more firm as needed.

4. **Someone is overly aggressive, making others uncomfortable.** Start with the strategies I just mentioned but be prepared to interrupt someone as needed. If the person seems triggered or upset, I will call a break and connect with them directly to see if we can get them settled. But if the person is truly disruptive and not able to shift, you may need to ask them to leave or get other facilitators or hosts involved.
5. **The existing conflict is hijacking the experience of the whole group.** With a conflict that seems to involve many members of the group, I have found it helpful to give them a choice. I'll ask if they feel they can set aside their differences long enough to complete the learning program, or if they want to use our time together to resolve the conflict. At this point, I essentially flip the session to be on having difficult conversations and conflict resolution. (This is a topic that you should be prepared to lead if necessary. This is why the more workshops you facilitate, the more adept you get, because you have all this content at your fingertips, and you can be super responsive to your group's needs.) You can also "freeze" the moment so that people can get a new perspective. I'll ask people to stop all conversation and say something like, "Let's stop for a minute. What's happening here in the room? What different views or opinions are being debated?" This can also be a great way to bring in others, who are not in the conflict, and it also gives people time to breathe and calm down.
6. **A participant openly challenges you in front of the room,** questioning your content or your credentials. Obviously, the more you know your content, the more confident you will be and can calmly address their questions. But if they truly disagree, have some elegant language ready to essentially say that you regret that they feel this way *and* you need to continue delivering what you were engaged to do.
7. **You make a mistake,** like giving out wrong information or saying something spontaneous that comes out in a way you didn't intend. If I misspeak, as soon as I notice, I take responsibility for my error and try to fix it. If it's something I realize later, I will send a follow-up email to the group.

Like anything, facing your worst fears can be really empowering because you know you can handle it if it happens. That doesn't mean that it's enjoyable, but the best facilitators can navigate almost any sticky situation while remaining calm and professional.

