

# HOW TO PLAN BETTER SESSIONS IN 2026

A practical, detailed guide to designing sessions that engage, energise, and still meet serious objectives.



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There is almost always a better way to run a session. The challenge is that many planners have never been shown what “better” actually looks like in practice. Not because they lack skill or care, but because habit, regulation, templates, and expectation quietly narrow the field of what feels possible.

This guide is written for planners, organisers, facilitators, and anyone responsible for shaping learning or discussion at events. It is especially relevant if you work in regulated or compliance-heavy environments where sessions must meet strict learning objectives, credit hours, or legislative requirements.

Better sessions do not require flashy technology or huge budgets. They require intention, structure, and a willingness to rethink format. When you do that, audiences feel the difference immediately.

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# 01

## Start With the Real Problem, Not the Format

Many sessions begin with a format decision instead of a learning decision. Someone books a speaker, allocates an hour, sets up theatre seating, and assumes learning will happen because information is delivered.

A better approach starts by asking clearer questions.

- ✓ What should participants be able to do differently at the end of this session?
- ✓ What decisions should they feel more confident making?
- ✓ What conversations are not currently happening that need space?
- ✓ What knowledge already exists in the room?

When you frame the session around outcomes rather than content, new formats become possible. A four-hour education requirement does not mean four hours of lectures. It means four hours of learning. Those are not the same thing.

Write your learning objectives in plain language. Avoid vague phrases like “understand the topic.” Instead, aim for actions such as apply, compare, decide, challenge, or design. Once you do this, you can choose formats that actively support those actions.

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# 02

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## Acknowledge the Limits of Traditional Lectures

Lectures are not inherently bad. They are efficient for transferring information to large groups. The problem is overuse, especially in long blocks.

Most adults struggle to maintain focused attention for more than 20 to 30 minutes of passive listening. When sessions run for hours without interaction, energy drops, retention falls, and even motivated attendees disengage.

In regulated industries, this often creates a painful paradox. Important material is delivered, boxes are ticked, but little changes in practice because the audience was mentally elsewhere.

Recognising this is not a failure. It is the first step toward improvement.

Instead of asking how to make lectures more entertaining, ask where lectures are genuinely the best tool and where something else would serve the learning better.



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# 03

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## Expand Your Session Format Toolkit

One of the most powerful moments for any planner is realising they are not limited to one template. Furthermore, these formats also help people find allies, build trust, and feel part of the room, without ever labelling it as networking.

Below are proven session formats that work within professional and regulated environments when designed properly.

### World Café

Small groups sit at tables discussing a focused question for a short period. Participants then rotate to new tables, building on previous conversations. This format works well for exploring complex topics, gathering diverse perspectives, and encouraging cross-pollination of ideas.

### Unconference Sessions

Participants shape the agenda themselves around a defined theme. Topics emerge from the group, and people choose where to contribute. This works best when the audience has strong peer expertise and shared challenges.

### Problem-Solving Corners

Different areas of the room focus on specific problems. Participants move between corners based on relevance. This allows targeted learning while giving people agency.

### Flipped Learning

Core content is delivered in advance through videos, reading, or short briefings. Live session time is then used for discussion, application, and questions. This format is particularly effective for meeting education requirements without exhausting the audience.

### Rotating Roundtables

Participants discuss a topic in small groups, with a facilitator or table host guiding the conversation. After a set time, participants rotate while the host stays. This helps deepen understanding and keeps energy high.

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# 04

# Walking Conversations

Pairs or small groups walk while discussing guided questions. This works surprisingly well for reflection, networking, and peer learning, especially after heavy content.

# Peer Learning Groups

Participants with similar roles or challenges work together on shared issues. This builds trust and practical insight that lectures rarely achieve.

# Micro Debates

Short, structured debates around a specific issue or decision. This encourages critical thinking and exposes different viewpoints quickly.

# Live Case Clinics

Real cases from participants are explored by the group with structured feedback. This format delivers immediate, practical value and strong engagement.

Each of these formats can be aligned with formal learning objectives if you document outcomes and structure properly.



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## 04

# Design for Energy Flow, Not Just Agenda Blocks

Better sessions consider how energy rises and falls across time. An agenda that looks logical on paper may feel exhausting in reality.

Plan sessions in waves. Start with something that invites participation early. Follow intense focus with movement or discussion. Avoid stacking long passive segments back to back.

A simple rule is to change the mode every 20 to 40 minutes. This does not mean constant novelty. It means alternating between listening, thinking, speaking, and doing.

Movement matters. Asking people to stand, switch tables, or even change seats can reset attention and mood. These small shifts make a disproportionate difference to how sessions feel.

# 05

## Respect Regulation Without Being Ruled by It

In highly regulated environments, planners often assume there is no flexibility. This is rarely entirely true.

Most regulatory frameworks care about learning outcomes, evidence of engagement, and content coverage. They do not usually mandate a lecture-only format.

Work closely with compliance or accreditation bodies early. Show how alternative formats still meet objectives. Document activities clearly. Use structured discussion guides, facilitator notes, and learning summaries.

Many regulators welcome approaches that improve comprehension and retention. They simply need reassurance that standards are met.

When you design creatively within the rules, you often improve both compliance and experience.

# 06

## Shift the Role of the Speaker

In better sessions, speakers are not just content deliverers. They become guides, provocateurs, and facilitators.

Brief speakers differently. Ask them to identify the three ideas that matter most, not everything they know. Encourage them to leave space for discussion and application.

A powerful structure is to combine short expert inputs with facilitated interaction. Ten minutes of insight followed by small group discussion often delivers more value than forty minutes of uninterrupted talking.

Not every speaker will be comfortable with this at first. Support them. Explain the goals. Many discover they enjoy it more once they see the audience come alive.

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# 07

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## Make the Audience Part of the Content

Every room contains experience, insight, and questions. Better sessions are designed to surface this rather than ignore it.

Use simple techniques. Ask people to reflect individually before discussing. Collect questions early and shape the session around them. Invite participants to share examples or challenges.

This does not mean losing control. Structure is essential. Clear prompts, time limits, and facilitation keep discussions focused and productive.

When people see their own reality reflected in the session, engagement rises naturally.

# 08

## Create Psychological Safety

Engagement requires safety. People need to feel comfortable speaking, questioning, and experimenting.

Set expectations at the start. Make it clear that participation is valued and that diverse perspectives are welcome. Use small groups to lower the barrier to speaking. Avoid putting individuals on the spot in large rooms unless they volunteer.

Facilitators play a crucial role here. Their tone, body language, and responses shape the room more than any slide deck.

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## Evaluate What Actually Worked

After the session, go beyond surface feedback. Ask what people found most useful, what felt different, and what they would want more of next time.

Look for patterns. Did energy stay higher? Were conversations richer? Did people reference the session later?

Use this insight to refine future designs. Better sessions are built iteratively, not perfectly on the first attempt.

# 10

## Break Habits Gently but Intentionally

Habits are powerful. Templates exist for a reason. They reduce risk and save time. But they also limit imagination.

Change does not require a full overhaul. Start small. Replace one lecture with a roundtable. Add one interactive element. Introduce one new format.

Often all it takes is exposure. A single experience of a well-run alternative format can change how planners see what is possible.

Sometimes people simply need to hear someone say, have you ever tried this?



## Closing Thoughts

Better sessions are not about novelty or technology. They are about respect for the audience and belief in their capacity to contribute.

When you shift the format, even slightly, the room responds. Energy lifts. Attention sharpens. Learning deepens.

People feel it immediately.

And once you see that change happen, it becomes very hard to go back to the old way.

For more helpful guides and tips, check out [fielddrive Academy](#)  
our in-depth resource repository for all things events!



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