

# Techniques and Exercises for Action Workshops

This is a compilation of tools and techniques that we have found useful for participatory workshops with an emphasis on learning through experience.

## ***General guidelines for using these tools***

- ★ Every group is different. Some tools may not be appropriate in a specific group or situation. Don't force a tool on people - let them decide for themselves to what extent they want to participate.
- ★ Be flexible. Don't let the process dominate the spirit of the group, but allow tools to evolve organically. Be creative and invent your own tools.
- ★ Make use of visual aids such as whiteboards. Use them to write down instructions, questions to consider and to record responses from the participants.
- ★ Be aware that people might not be happy to share with the whole group everything that was said in a pair/small group.
- ★ Do explain the purpose of a tool before asking the group to use it. That way people feel in control of what they are doing, allowing them to participate more fully.

## **Personal Introductions**

Each person gives their name, where they are from and one other fact about themselves. This third fact could be freely chosen by each individual or the facilitator could suggest a theme (e.g. What kind of food they like, why they are at the meeting, something good that happened in the last week).

## **Go-round**

Everyone takes a turn to speak on a subject without interruption or comment from other people. Go-rounds are useful for equalising participation and giving everyone some clear space to express their opinion. Allowing people to “pass” means that quieter people don't feel put on the spot. To keep it focused clearly state what the purpose of the Go-round is and write the question on a flipchart where everyone can see it. You can set time limits as necessary.

Good at the beginning of workshop – go-rounds on experience of actions, actions people have found inspiring, expectations of the workshop etc

## **Ideastorms**

A tool for sparking creative thinking and help to quickly gather a large number of ideas. Begin with stating the issue to be ideastormed. Ask people to call out all their ideas as fast as possible - without censoring them. Crazy ideas are welcome – they can help people to be inspired by each other.

Use for collecting lots of ideas for actions, roles on actions or for obstacles to overcome.

Have one or two notetakers to write all ideas down where everyone can see them. Make sure there is no discussion or comment on others' ideas. Structured thinking and organising can come later.

## Paired Listening

This tool creates a space where everyone is heard, enabling participants to explore and formulate their own thoughts / feelings on an issue without interruption. Listening in pairs is also a good way of developing skills in active listening.

Split into pairs, one person is the listener, the other the speaker. The speaker talks about her thoughts/ feelings on the issue that you've chosen. Encourage the thinker to speak first thoughts - that is to speak as thoughts enter the mind without analysing or holding back. This may seem difficult at first - think of it as holding an internal monologue, but out loud. The role of the listener is to give full attention to the thinker without interrupting, questioning or commenting. The listener can provide an attentive and supportive atmosphere through eye contact, body language, encouraging noises, smiles and nods. If the thinker gets stuck the listener may ask neutral questions such as "How does that make you feel? Why do you think that?" After a set time (3-5 minutes is usually plenty of time) thinker and listener swap roles.

**Use for:** Bringing out people's inspirations and concerns about taking action. Follow with talking about support systems on actions.

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This exercise can be followed by a go-round in the full group, with every participant summarising her/his thoughts or summarising those of their partner.

➤ Time: 20-30 min including feedback round

### I'd do that if...

Variation of paired listening for exploring personal limitations and then looking for ways to support people in overcoming them. Give the group a scenario and ask them to discuss, in their pairs, whether they'd find it easy to do that action, whether it was something they could never do, or if there was a third "I'd do that if..." option. Encouraging them to think of a circumstance in which they might be persuaded to take, or at least support the action. Then follow with a feedback go-round.

➤ Time: 30 min for three scenarios and feedback round

### Possible Scenarios

- Running an info stall in town to encourage people to come to an action
- Marching to a military base and then sitting in the road to block the gates
- Sitting in the road and locking to each other
- Taking part in a die-in on the steps of a government office
- Occupying the foyer of a government office
- Occupying a government office, barricading yourself in a room and 'locking on'
- Taking part in a citizen's arrest of Tony Blair for warcrimes

## Roleplays

In a roleplay players take on roles in a given scenario as preparation for a real life situation or to evaluate a past experience. Roleplays help to understand people's reactions, and can give insights into the thoughts and feelings of "opponents".

Select a situation to be played out. Ask yourself what you want to examine and why. A simple situation is best. Explain the situation carefully, including the groups represented and the physical layout.

If you need people to assume roles ask them to volunteer– never force people to take on a role they're uncomfortable with. Give them a few minutes to get into their roles. Ask everyone who is not playing to be active observers.

The facilitator stops the roleplay when enough issues have been uncovered, the exercise comes to a natural end or people want to stop. The play should also be stopped if a participant shows great tension or gets too involved. Have a short break, *de-role* (see below) and then evaluate the exercise.

Evaluation gives players and observers the chance to assimilate and analyse what has happened and how well they put their skills into effect. Start by asking the players how they felt in their roles. Ask observers for their impressions and then allow discussion. What have people learnt and how they will apply their insights in real life? Discourage comments that tell participants what they *should* have done. Compliment people for acting boldly in difficult situations regardless of the outcome. These tools are there for learning. Use encouraging language such

as “Another option that you might try is...”, “Perhaps this would work...”, “I learned ... from your tactic and would like to try...”. Evaluation should not go on too long. If new insights come up the group might want to try them out in a new exercise rather than talk about what might happen.

- **Time:** For a blockading roleplay allow at least 25 min, but better more so people can have a second go and swap roles. For quick decision-making roleplays allow at least 20min.

## Reverse Roleplays

Allow people understand both sides of a conflict. They can help people entrenched in one position to think more flexibly. They are useful for examining a critical incident that occurs repeatedly or is expected to occur and for developing a definition of acceptable behaviour (e.g. conflicts over power, sexism, ageism etc.).

Set up a situation involving two sides. At an important point in the roleplay, have everyone freeze. Ask people to take the opposite role and take up the conversation where it left off. The facilitator may have to help people remember what the last lines of the dialogue were. It can help if the facilitator physically moves people to their new positions and says “You are now X, and you are now Y”. Give people a moment to mentally shift to their new identities and resume the roleplay. Follow the roleplay with an evaluation.

Roleplays are great for running through the planned action – such as a blockade, office occupation, getting into a site. Divide people into protestors and police/security. Set up a realistic action situation. You can practise every aspect of the action in this way.

### Scenarios for practising quick decision-making

1. You are taking part in a sit down protest outside a government building. The police have told you that you have 5 min to move off the road and behind their cordon, or they will arrest you all (5 mins)
2. You are taking part in a sit down blockade of a gate at a military base. The guards are momentarily distracted by another protester trying to climb the fence, and the gate is unguarded. You had not planned to enter the airfield but....( 30 secs)
3. You see a fellow protester (from another affinity group) being treated with excessive force as the police carry them to a police transit ( 30 secs)

## Hassle Lines

Are a form of quick roleplays. They are great for getting people to explore their emotional responses to a situation, to look at body language or to prepare for a particular situation such as aggression from the public or the police during a protest or action.

Participants form two lines, each facing a partner. The two lines are given roles and a brief scenario and then step towards each other and play their roles. The left row for example may take on the role of protesters, the other side of unsympathetic passers-by, making a provocative comment such as “get a job, you dirty hippy”.

After a short time (thirty seconds to two minutes) the facilitator stops the roleplay and asks a few people for their comments, e.g. how it worked and how it made them feel. Roles can then be swapped and scenarios varied.

**Pick one overall relevant scenario**, eg protesters blocking a gate on nuclear power station to prevent workers getting in. They might come into conflict with police officers and workers. Run several scenarios: First scenario: Police approach and, politely but firmly, ask protester to leave. Protester briefed to react naturally – whatever comes to them.

1. Police approach and, politely but firmly, ask protester to leave. Protester briefed to react naturally – whatever comes to them.

2. As above but protester reminded about the need for calm body language and voice.

3. Protesters are faced with an casual employee (e.g. cleaner, kitchen staff) who wants to go to work and won't be paid if they don't turn up.

4. Police move forward as one unit, link arms and order the protester line back (shouting 'Get back'), pushing against the protesters as the 2 lines clash.

**De-roleing** After a roleplay it's important to provide participants with the chance to de-role, that is to come out of their role and leave any strong emotions behind. You will need to judge the level of de-roleing required, depending on the intensity of the roleplay. A simple shake, or a few deep breaths may be all that you need. Other options include taking a break, a physical game, or a visualisation that take's people's attention elsewhere (to a pleasant memory, for example).

## Small Groups

There are many reasons why you may want to split into smaller groups:

- ★ Large groups can sometimes become dominated by a few people or ideas, stifling creativity and the contributions of others.
- ★ Small groups alter the dynamic of a workshop, keeping the energy moving.
- ★ Smaller groups allow time for everyone to speak and to feel involved. They are a lot less intimidating too.
- ★ You can cover several different topics at once – with each group taking on one topic or task.

### Small groups:

ideastorm and discuss roles on actions - each group thinks about a different action: a march, a blockade, an office occupation, a street stall.

Follow with feedback to the whole group.

Think about the sort of group you need - a random split (e.g. numbering off or by eye/hair colour etc.) or groups of people with particular experience or skills (or mix of experience or skills)? Explain clearly what you want groups to do. Write specific questions or topics on flipchart paper or a blackboard beforehand. If you are going to have feedback at the end, you need to say clearly what they need to feedback and ask them to ensure someone from each group is ready to give the feedback.

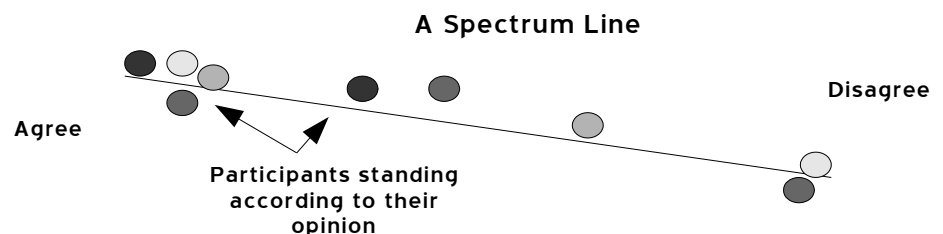
## Spectrum Lines

Can help to explore and visually rank the different views on an issue within the group. Start by creating an imaginary or real line through the room (chalk or masking tape on the floor are good for indoor spaces). One end stands for “I agree completely”, the other end for “I disagree completely”. Outline the issue under debate and formulate it into a statement to agree or disagree with. Ask people to position themselves along the line according to their views. They may try out several spots before making a final choice. Ask them to have a short conversation with the person next to them, explaining why they are where they are. Then invite participants to share their viewpoints and feelings with the group. Repeat this exercise with other statements that explore the issue under discussion and see whether and how people’s viewpoints change. You could also use a curved line so that people can see each other. This exercise taps into both our intuitive and rational sides and needs to be done quietly and thoughtfully. A spectrum line may require strong facilitation to stop the group from slipping into general discussion.

Time: You can cover 4 or 5 scenarios in 20-25 min if you take 3 or 4 brief opinions about each.

Use for exploring:

- Personal definitions of what is effective direct action.
- People's definitions of violence/nonviolence. Eg: 'Breaking the law is an act of violence against society' / 'Hammering the nose cone of a Hawk fighter jet to prevent it being used in combat is violent' / 'Pulling up a genetically modified crop is violent' / 'Nuclear power is violent' / 'Smashing a Mc Donald's window is violent' / 'Living an affluent lifestyle in a world where millions live in poverty is violent' / 'Occupying a corporate office is violence'
- People's limits and the support systems they require before they can take action. The ends of the spectrum are “I'd never do that action” at one end and “I'd find it easy to do that action” at the other. People in the middle are saying they would do the action in the right circumstances, an



## Tools for facilitating the workshop

These tools help you to keep to time and get through your workshop plan whilst involving everyone in the workshop.

### Group Agreement

Draw up a group agreement with the group to outline how the group would like the meeting to run. Some common 'groundrules' in group agreements are: no interrupting; only one person speaking at a time; respect everyone's opinion; start and finish on time; and mobile phones switched off to avoid distraction. The agreement needs to be owned by the group for it to be a useful facilitation tool, so don't impose it, propose it and seek agreement from everyone. Once you have an agreement, you can refer to it whenever problems arise... "OK folks, we agreed we'd finish on time, so we need to focus the meeting if we want to achieve that". You can draw up an agreement at the start of each meeting, or each cycle of meetings as you see fit. If you use the same agreement for a series of meetings, or the life of one particular group, it can help to recap it regularly.



### The Parking Lot

Makes sure all ideas get recorded and participants don't feel like they've been ignored. Whenever anything comes up that's not relevant to the discussion at hand "park" it in the Parking Lot (a large sheet of paper on the wall). In other words write it up on the paper and deal with it later. This allows you to stay focussed but reassures participants they will be heard. Make sure you do deal with parked items! Consider having a space reserved on the workshop agenda to deal with parked items.

### Keeping a Speakers List

A tool used in conjunction with *handsignals*. Ask people to raise a finger when they wish to speak, and noting them down in order. They are then invited to speak in that order. The group will soon become impatient with people that ignore this protocol and just barge in and interrupt.

### Handsignals

A simple technique that can make meetings run more smoothly and also help the facilitator see emerging agreements and common ground. Three simple signals should suffice:

- ★ Raise a forefinger when you wish to contribute to the discussion with a general point.
- ★ Raise both forefingers if your point is directly relevant to the current discussion. This allows you to jump to the head of the queue, in front of all those people raising just one finger. Use wisely and discourage overuse!
- ★ 'Silent applause' – when you hear an opinion that you agree with, wave a hand with your fingers pointing upwards (also called 'twinkling'). This saves a lot of time as people don't need to chip in to say "I'd just like to add that I agree with..."

### Pros & Cons

Got several ideas and can't decide which one to go for? Simply list the benefits and drawbacks of each idea and compare the results. This can be done as a full group, or by asking pairs, or small

groups to work on the pros and cons of one option and report back to the group.

## Feedback during and after exercises

### Giving Feedback

- say something positive before you give someone negative feedback
- don't make it personal – criticise what people did not who they are
- give feedback that's designed to help us learn, not just to get something off your chest
- be honest!

### Receiving feedback

- listen and accept feedback as well meant
- don't get defensive and counter/excuse every point
- thank people for their feedback, even if you don't like it

## Games

Use when people are tired, after an emotionally stressful section or to prepare people for physical roleplays. Here's just one:

**Wizards, Pixies, Giants:** A very physical team version of 'Paper, Scissors, Stone'! Sort the group into 2 teams and explain that each team has to choose one of three options - Wizards, Pixies, or Giants. Demonstrate the action for each choice. Wizards step forward and use their arms to "Zap" their opponents (and of course say "Zap" as they do so). Pixies bend down low and scurry around in circles quickly whilst chattering to themselves in high-pitched gibberish. Giants step forward and raise themselves to their full height (arms stretched above their heads, hands clawed) and they roar. Obviously. Now get the teams to huddle together and give them a minute or two to agree their choice. Then they stand facing each other across the room, and on your count of "1...2" they take 2 steps forward. On the count of 3 they do their thing, be it wizardly, pixie like or gigantic.

Here's how to score:

- Wizards "Zap" all known Pixies. Dead.
- Pixies scurry round giants legs until they fall over
- Giants bash wizards to death.

Play enough rounds for a clear winner to emerge, or until laughing begins to hurt.. One variation sees the winning team chase the losers. Any losers that are touched before they get to the safety of their starting point join the winning team. The game is won when one team captures all of the other.

## Evaluation of the workshop

Evaluation allows us to learn from our experiences. It should be a regular part of our workshops as it give us the chance for honest feedback on the process and content of the event, allowing us to improve in the future. Choose between the following:

- Have a round where everyone sums up their feelings or ask everyone to write down comments on a large piece of paper.
- Ask everyone to call out two or three high and low points of the workshop.
- Ask “ What are you taking away from this session?”