

Tool 25: Adjust group size: Buzz and Break-outs

Aim of the tool

To ensure that all participants can contribute effectively to the meetings' objective.

When to use it?

This tool can be used in all phases of an MSP. Apply it when you suspect too many plenary sessions are being planned.

Why Adjust group size with Buzz and Break-outs?

When facilitating interaction between stakeholders in MSPs, it is important to always be alert on who is doing the talking. If no specific provisions are made, we often see that meetings tend to get dominated by only a few participants. Even if their contributions are on-topic and relevant, you need to ensure that the best possible contributions from all participants are heard and considered. And, of course, to avoid that people fall asleep during dreadful plenary sessions.

Adjust group size - Step by step

1. Have a critical look at the agenda before your meeting. Ask yourself whether there is a good balance between plenary presenting and small group work. As a rule of thumb, try to alternate between plenaries and small group works, or even abandon plenaries all together.
2. If you see that plenary sessions go on for too long, have alternatives ready to mix up the group or change the focus:
 - Energizers: if energy is low. This can range from collaboration games, stretching arms and legs, to brain teasers.
 - Buzz: "Please discuss in threesomes what you thought of this morning's presentations". Very time-efficient as it does not require changing the seating arrangements.
 - Break-outs: "Let's divide into five groups and work on question x; report back using template y". Break-outs usually need 45-60 minutes and involve people changing location, so ensure you have sufficient time. Think about break-out rooms, or outside if weather permits, in advance. Instruct groups clearly on whether to report back or not. Be careful for long group presentations; consider a gallery walk instead.
 - If you don't know what to do: ask the group. You usually get good feedback on the level of energy of participants or their preferences. It does not make you look weak.

3. Reserve space for informal moments and individual reflection in your meeting agenda. This will help participants to collect their thoughts, and check their impressions/views with other participants. Stick to agreed coffee and lunch break times, if only for this reason.

4. Monitor small group work. Usually people are happy to work in smaller groups once the assignment is clear. But small groups can also be awkward and frustrating, especially when there are dominators. Listening to group discussions and helping groups to get going, gives a facilitator very good feedback and is appreciated by participants.

Well-known methodologies based on self-directed small group work are World Cafe (Tool 13) and Open Space (Tool 39). Most buzz and break-out sessions can be augmented with Card Clustering (Tool 48) to document and synthesize group work results. See the [manual](#) of The International HIV/AIDS Alliance for ideas for energizers and group games. For ideas on reflection methods with groups, see this [WCDI manual](#).

Learn more

Robert Chambers (2002) Participatory Workshops: A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas and Activities. London: Earthscan. Also see: www.participatorymethods.org

International HIV/AIDS Alliance (2008) 100 ways to energise groups: games to use in workshops, meetings and the community.
<https://www.participatorymethods.org/resource/100-ways-energise-groups-games-use-workshops-meetings-and-commuity>

Femke Gordijn, Natalia Ernstman, Jan Helder, & Herman Brouwer (2018) Reflection methods: practical guide for trainers and facilitators. Tools to make learning more meaningful.
<https://research.wur.nl/en/publications/reflection-methods-practical-guide-for-trainers-and-facilitators->