The URBACT II Programme

GETTING RESULTS THROUGH ANIMATED MEETINGS: SEVEN TOP TIPS

May 2012

CONTENTS

Foreword

Some of you took part in the URBACT Summer University (USU) held in Krakow in August 2011. Like me, you may have felt that it was one of those rare occasions where you learned a lot, developed your networks and had fun at the same time. How often does that happen…?

For me, one of the reasons why the event worked so well was that delegates came with an open and positive attitude. We know that there is a breadth of experience across the Urbact community – but at the same time (according to the Urbact evaluation) 40% of partners are involved in this kind of work for the first time. So, it seems that many people came to Krakow keen to try out new things and to learn from one another.

When planning the USU, the URBACT team had spent a lot of time thinking about the event format and discussing what the most appropriate process tools might be. We had also considered how to animate the group sessions so that they were enjoyable as well as productive. Back in Paris after the event, we thought that it would be good to build on this momentum by sharing some of our thinking about ways animate meetings and workshops.

A core part of our mission is to support the learning and transfer of effective practice – and we want to encourage and support cities to try out new approaches. In this short paper we are going to showcase some of the techniques that we have seen in operation across the programme. Under each of our headings we offer some tips to try out. Some of them will be familiar but others, we hope, less so. And as there is so much information out there, we have added a few links and resources for those who want to find out more.

Remember that we are keen to hear about your experiences – good and bad! Don't be afraid to take risks as that is when we are likely to learn the most – and we would love to hear how things work out.

Eddy Adams

URBACT Thematic Pole Manager

Tip 1: Be clear about your objectives

This may seem like an obvious thing to say. However, our selection of different groupwork processes will depend on the goals of the session. So, a key starting point is to be clear about what we want to achieve – and to make sure that this is conveyed to our meeting participants from the start.

The main purpose of this paper is to share information on a range of techniques that can help animate partnership meetings. In my experience, such approaches can yield better results but they also have a number of spin off benefits. For example, participants often enjoy the meetings more; their energy levels often remain higher so they are more productive; and these techniques often foster stronger partnerships as people relax and get to know one another better.

But before getting into the detail of the techniques, it's important to say that these should not be applied just for the sake of it. Knowing when and where to use them is also an important consideration. In some cases partners may come together with a very specific focus – for example to solve a shared problem. In other cases there may be a number of objectives, which will allow the opportunity to incorporate different techniques. This paper gives an introduction to some of the techniques available, but it will be up to you to decide when best to apply them.

Tip 2: Getting started – setting the scene

"You never get a second chance to make a first impression" (Anon)

Let's be clear – creative, productive meetings and workshops don't happen by accident. Before we start planning the format, we need to make sure we have created an environment that will get participants in the right mood. For most of us, these basics include:

- *The physical space* – Is there lots of natural light? Is there enough room for people to move around and to work comfortably without feeling cramped? What about the temperature – can we make sure it is not too hot or cold?

- *Room layout* – The way the furniture is arranged sends a strong signal to participants about the type of session they are about to take part in. A congested layout is to be avoided, and rows of tables and desks are also unlikely to encourage free flowing creativity. Think about desks and tables as barriers, and although people may have to write at certain points, try to ensure that the furniture doesn't get in the way of your approach. Islands of small tables fitted together can work well – with lots of space between them to encourage circulation. If you can manage, a circle of chairs or a horseshoe shape can be even better!

- *Lights, music, action*… - In a workshop setting, we've found that music can play an important role in setting a creative atmosphere. When people hear music playing as they arrive, they associate this with coming to a party of being with friends. Yes, we're here to work but we can have fun at the same time. But remember, not everyone goes big on Iron Maiden, so think carefully about the selection…

Tip 3: Setting the right tone – breaking the ice

Many people feel uncomfortable with the idea of 'ice-breakers.' Certainly, in traditional meetings the biggest risk you might take is to go round the table asking people to introduce themselves with their name and an 'interesting' fact.

But if you want participants to make a creative input to your meeting/ workshop then you're going to need more than that. You will also want to send out an early signal that this will be an 'active' session where they will be expected to contribute physically – as well as mentally.

Again, some will be more comfortable with this than others. The stereotypical middle-aged civil servant may be less keen on it than the representative of the city Youth Council – or the other way round!

But there are a number of clear advantages to getting people warmed up. Literally, having them move around is more likely to stimulate their grey cells. Also, it sends out a message that 'we're all in the same boat' which can be particularly helpful when some stakeholders may be perceived as being more important than others. So, it's a bit of a leveler, and I've often been surprised at how well received the introduction of a fresh approach can be. Even those who are initially reluctant can surprise us by the way they change.

The role of the facilitator is key at this stage – as it is throughout creative sessions. A relaxed, confident input from him/her will do much to relieve any anxieties. Clear instructions from the facilitator will also help to get the session off on the right footing.

In transnational settings, another plus point of effective icebreakers relates to language. For those less confident working in English, fun, effective energisers can help them relax in advance of getting down to business.

And what about techniques? Well, there are too many to describe in detail here, but we've included a few and have also added links for further information. In the coming months we'd love to hear your own techniques and experiences of what works and what doesn't.

- ***Musical speed networking*** – USU participants will remember this one. It's very simple, fun and an effective way of getting some energy into the start of a session. It works particularly well with large groups but can be used in most settings.

  Make sure that there's lots of space to circulate in the room. Ideally, push any chairs and tables to the side so that there is a large empty space in the middle. On arrival, participants are given a sheet of paper with ten questions/ statements on it. Some of these will relate to the topic, for example "What is your city's best asset?" "What would you most like to change in your city?" etc. Others can be more personal and playful such as "What are you most proud of?" "What's your favourite movie?" "When were you happiest?" etc.

  Start the music – ideally something lively! Participants are asked to circulate the room and when the music stops they get together with the nearest person and in pairs they ask one another questions from the sheet for a few minutes. Encourage the questioner to probe the answer – "Why is that your favourite movie?" "When and where did you first see it?" etc. The music starts, they move again and when it stops they repeat the process with someone else. And so on until you feel that the decibel levels are high enough to show that everyone's getting involved.

  A nice way to finish this process is to ask for feedback from random participants once they have sat down. "What was the most surprising thing you heard" "Did anyone have the same answer as you?" "What answer did you like best" etc.

- ***Hidden talents*** – This exercise works better with smaller groups – say between 6 and 20 participants. Again, it gets people up and moving around, and requires them to open up about themselves.

  Introduce the exercise by explaining that we all have talents and that we can take some of these for granted. Add that we may spend hours sitting beside colleagues yet know very little about the many things they are good at. Explain that this exercise is about sharing our hidden talents with others.

  Then ask participants to think of something they can do well, but which might be a surprise to others. Ask them to write this 'talent' on a post-it note then to fold it up. The facilitator then gathers these in, mixes them in a container and asks delegates to pick one out. Ask them to have a quick look at it before moving to the next person. If they pick out their own get them to swop it for another.

  When everyone has a post-it note, ask them to move around the room and to try and identify the person with the talent on the post-it they chose. When they find the person, they should try to find out as much as they can about their talent so that they can feed back to the group.

This exercise always throws up surprises. It's amazing what people can do and how much dormant talent we all have! As a short, fun opener it has always gone down well in my experience.

The usual way to finish is to quickly circulate, asking people which talent they picked, who the person was and how easy it was to identify them. In sessions with a focus on entrepreneurship I've used this as a basis for exploring business development models – for example to look at combining talents to generate a business start-up idea.

- ***Tap into the group's skills*** – I learned a huge amount working with the young people from the My Generation network. One of the best was the way in which we can tap into other's skills at the start of a meeting/workshop session. Through an earlier discussion with participants, we identified a wide range of abilities – samba dancing, cheer-leading – that were shared with the group.

  This was simply done through providing a short master-class space at the start of the session where everyone got up and followed instructions. See the video clips to share the fun we had ☺

Tip 4: Acknowledging energy levels

There are often points where participants' energy levels dip. In transnational settings, where they will have travelled a long way and can be working in another language, this is a particularly important consideration As facilitators we need to be aware of this and be prepared to be flexible and to mix things up when energy levels are flagging. Like many things in life, it's all about balance.

The overall design of the meeting/workshop should take account of the need to vary the processes being used and the importance of variety. But if we note that things are slowing down or that people are struggling, there is a wide range of techniques we can draw upon to change the tempo.
Here are a few simple starters:

Buzz Groups – split participants into pairs or small groups and ask them to give their views on a given subject. This is a short sharp exercise, so limit them to five minutes then quickly go round the room getting key points.

Comment wall – Distribute post-it notes and ask people to write their comments/ideas down – one per post-it note. Again, this is short and sharp, so after five minutes get them to place their notes on a blank wall. You can extend this by asking the group to work together to cluster the notes to show emerging themes.

Using **web-based clips and images** – Showing a short video clip or relevant visual images can help to mix up the tempo and shift the focus. This additional dimension has a number of positive features. It can bring the outside world into our event – for example by allowing us to hear a local perspective. It can also be used to provide contrasting examples as a stimulus for discussion – for example through comparing different approaches to a shared problem.

Tip 5: Killer presentations

A surefire way of killing energy levels and creative abilities is through a series of flat boring presentations. "Death by PowerPoint" is a widely used phrase, but how many of us are still sitting through stultifying slides week after week? We all have a responsibility to put a stop to this!

A presentation is simply one way of conveying information. PowerPoint can be a wonderful tool, but too often it is a lazy default position which allows people to rehash old content for any given situation. So, if you are planning a meeting/workshop ask yourself whether it's really necessary to have one at all. There are lots of alternative ways to share information, particularly if there's going to be more than one presenter.

One neat way is the **world bazaar** technique where there is a 'presenter/storyteller/ shopkeeper' at each table and where delegates circulate amongst the tables for a limited duration before being cued to move on and visit another table. This allows for movement, gives everyone a chance to speak and is a more efficient way of reciprocating information.

However, if you do need a more linear approach there are some things to bear in mind. If possible, dissuade people from using slides and encourage them to speak from the floor. Make sure that they are well briefed and know that they have a limited time slot which they should not over-run. Encourage them to 'make the pitch of their lives' and to look to the **TED** talks for inspiration and for tips on engaging with the audience.

If they insist on using PowerPoint, encourage them to use slides as they were initially intended – as a graphic or tabular way of sharing complex information in a simple way. At all costs avoid a lengthy presentation where the speaker simply reads the bullet points set out in the overheads. Another option is to explore some of the alternative presentation tools now available – such as **PREZI** that encourage speakers to use more visual images and a more fluid presentational format. But again, the focus should be on the content – otherwise there is a risk that the medium becomes the message.

In many meetings, a Question and Answer session after a presentation is an opportunity for lively interaction. A structured variation that builds on this is the **fishbowl technique**, which can be particularly effective when there have been a number of speakers and where the group size is manageable.

In this process, a small circle of chairs is formed in the centre of the room with the remaining chairs formed in a wider circle around them. The speakers and facilitator occupy the inner circle of chairs but there should also be a few empty seats in the inner circle. The facilitator gets the discussion started by picking up on one of the themes discussed in the presentations. Once this dialogue starts, anyone from the outer circle who wants to contribute or to ask a question must take a seat in the inner circle. Once they have made their contribution – or once they feel that they have taken their turn – they return to their own seat, to create a vacancy for someone else.

The fishbowl process has a number of strengths. It is egalitarian and highly interactive. It often provides more of a flowing discussion than a random set of disconnected questions. And it can also take the discussion in new and surprising directions. If you haven't tried it, you should test it out in one of your next meetings.

Tip 6: Creative problem solving

This section will link into the USU Lab 2 session. It will set the scene by discussing the importance of having a clear problem statement and the value of having a 'problem owner'. It will then provide a detailed explanation of some of the most popular creative problem solving principles and techniques that will include the **De Bono hats** method, the **Future Dialogue** process and the **COCD** approach.

Shared problems – both within cities and between them – are often the reason for partners coming together. During the USU we considered problems from a number of perspectives. We explored the question of stakeholders – who is around the table and how do we ensure that the loudest voices don't dominate proceedings. This includes the important matter of who decides what the key problem is and how it will be addressed.

For many, the key to effective problem solving is to ensure that the group has established the root problem in a way that can be clearly articulated. A number of approaches favour starting the process with the nomination of a *problem owner* or *issue holder*.

In the **Action Learning Set** model, utlised by **Roma-Net** and other Urbact networks, the Issue Holder presents his/her story. This describes the context and presents a problem to be shared with the wider group. The story should be detailed enough to allow listeners to understand the background to the problem, the underlying causes, who it affects and its impact. It is often useful to know what steps have already been taken to try to solve the problem.

During this stage, other group members remain silent. They are taking notes and considering questions that they might wish to raise with the issue holder. After the sharing of the story, group members have the opportunity to clarify the problem and to raise potential solutions. The aim of the questions stage is to open up thinking, so useful lines of enquiry can relate to:

- The wider ecology/operating environment
- Underlying assumptions
- Consequences – what could happen

Ideally, the group will have a facilitator. Part of their role is to ensure that focus is retained on the issue holder and their story. However, they can also encourage group members to share relevant insights from their own experience which might help illuminate the problem and suggest possible solutions.

An important feature of this process is that the issue holder does not engage with group members who respond to their story. They simply record the questions and contributions and are encouraged to process these and act upon them following the meeting. At some future point – often at the start of the next meeting – they are encouraged to provide feedback on the experience and – critically – whether it has helped them to tackle the problem.

Another approach that uses the ‘problem owner’ model is that promoted by **COCD,** Dutch-based creativity experts. Here, a group member who ‘owns’ the problem starts off by describing it and explaining its effects. Again, the role of other group members at this stage is to help articulate the problem more clearly through a range of questions. An important distinction with this method is the focus on the group composition and chemistry. The model stresses the importance of diversity within the group and, in particular, the presence of ‘wild geese’. These are people who are far removed from the problem and who, ideally, work in an entirely different sphere. Their value to the process is their ‘naivety’ and their ability to contribute left field ideas.

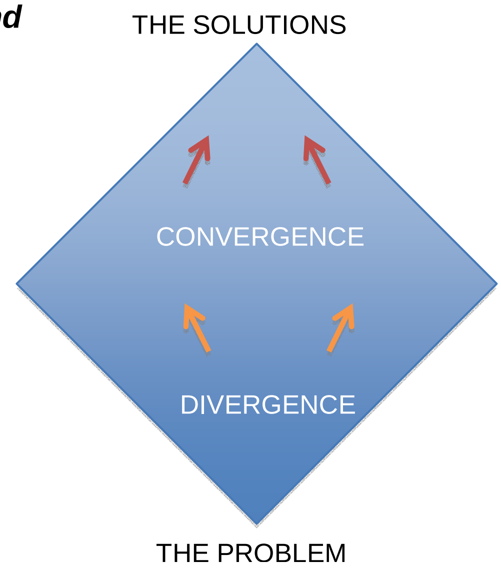
The output from this initial stage is for the group to agree a problem statement that they will tackle together. Often, following the initial screening process, this will differ from the original statement articulated by the problem owner – sometimes quite radically. At this point, the most effective problem statements will be action-orientated, beginning with the following types of phrases:

- “What can we do to…?”
- “How can we…?”

The importance assigned to defining the problem in these approaches is significant. They remind us that it can be very easy to rush to fixing mode. However, unless we spend time circling the problem to ensure that it is fully explored and understood, then we may head off in the wrong direction. With both of these techniques the time invested at the front end to analyse the situation is designed to reduce this risk. As we have said, it can also lead to a radical reformulation of the problem itself.

So, the first principle of creative problem solving is to invest time in defining the issue. The second is to approach the problem with an open mind and to focus on the generation of as many potential ideas as possible. This part of the creative problem solving process is called *divergence.* Here, the focus is on stimulating as wide a range of potential ideas as possible – with an emphasis on quantity not quality…that comes later. The visual representation of this process is often a diamond, starting at a fixed point (the problem) widening out at the divergence stage before closing down and focusing on solutions during the final (convergence) part of the process.

Figure 1: The Diamond



So, having defined the problem our aim now is to generate as many potential ideas as we can to tackle it. Practical tools at this stage include post-it notes, flip charts and lots of wall space! Often people already have ideas in mind so a good way to get started is to capture these to provide an initial ideas bank. You can ask people to call out while you capture the ideas on post-it notes or a flip chart. Or you can ask them to work individually or in pairs for a few minutes to produce as many ideas as they can. Or you can have large sheets of paper on the walls where people can jot down their ideas.

This initial step will produce a good starting point. Ideally, you will have a visual display of ideas around the room to build upon. Encourage people to get up and move around, looking at the content and adding to it. Ask them to ‘piggy back’ on others’ ideas and to record these on additional post-it notes.

Beyond this initial purge stage there are countless methods to stimulate additional waves of ideas. Some of us are more effective using images so the facilitator can use interesting objects and pictures to keep things moving. Ask people to look at the image and think about its relation to the problem statement. You’ll be surprised by what they come up with! And if you’re feeling adventurous there are other advanced ideas generation techniques such as:

- Key words – extract key words from the problem statement and using word association to see whether any new ideas emerge

- Analogies – i.e. the animal exercise where we identify an animal, describe its characteristics then apply these to the problem. So, an ostrich has long legs, runs fast, sticks its head in the sand, has a long neck etc…what ideas can we generate using these cues?

In my experience, people enjoy the ideas generation stage so it’s an opportunity to take some risks, to be playful and to encourage participants to stretch their imaginations. Breakthrough thinking is unlikely to happen if we adhere to our established logical tramlines. Later in the process we’ll have the chance to apply our rationale sides but here we are looking for a free flowing process with an emphasis on volume.

The facilitation role is important during this stage. S/he needs to be actively encouraging, energetic and focused on helping the group to generate ideas in response to the problem statement. S/he also has a role in screening out comments and attitudes which are creativity killers such as:

- “We tried that before and it didn’t work”

- “I don’t think we have the resources to do that”

- “I’m not sure whether…”

Remember, at this stage we are suspending our judgment in order to focus on producing as many ideas as possible, and although these statements will be helpful at the convergence stage, we don’t want them just yet!!

At the end of this stage – the widest point in the ‘diamond’ –we will ideally have a room full of exciting fresh content in response to our problem which we can then start to work on.

Having enjoyed the freewheeling playful experience of ideas generation we then have to move our participants to the solutions stage. Sometimes reluctantly…

This is where our skills of screening and prioritising come into play. Where we have used the ideas generation model, this means shifting from being surrounded by a blizzard of apparently random ideas to a structured proposition for our target audience. Here are some of the most effective techniques for doing this.

- Look for patterns – continuing with the participative principle, work with group members to group and cluster the ideas with the aim of identifying some overarching patterns

- Segment the ideas – there are several ways to do this. One is to segment by group priority, for example by giving participants sticky dots and asking them to vote for their preferred X ideas. Another way is to segment the ideas by their level of innovation – so red ideas are 'known', blue ideas are 'feasible but new' and yellow ones 'left field'. In the COCD process, participants label all of the ideas then select a mix from each colour group to develop an innovative proposition

Another useful tool – both for ideas generation and screening – is the **De Bono** hats approach. One of the best known creative problem solving gurus, De Bono's entire approach stresses the need to alter perspectives and to utilise techniques that take people out of their established thinking modes. The 'thinking hats' technique is based around the idea of six hats, each of different colour, which have different characteristics. These are as follows:

- **White–information and facts**
- **Red–emotions and instinctive reactions**
- **Black–judgment and logic – the critical hat**
- **Yellow–The optimist's hat – focusing on the benefits and positive effects**
- **Green – creative and alternative**
- **Blue – process and big picture**

One of the reasons for the enduring popularity of the thinking hats is the versatility of the process. Participants can be assigned a role/hat which informs how they engage in the process. This might be when discussing the problem or at the point of screening the emerging solutions. Another option is for the facilitator to steer the group through applying the hats technique – "So, let's put our yellow hats on and consider the solutions in front of us".

Again, the hats can be playful and there is of course the option to develop collaboration by asking groups to make hats before engaging in the process – which can also function as a creative team-building tool. .

Being creative is all very well – so long as it leads to results. So how do we make sure that we harvest these ideas in a way that leads to potential solutions.

In Krakow we used the 'Problem Tree' model, which provides a mechanism whereby participants can 'flip' their problems into solutions. We also discussed ways in which participants can prioritise the solutions – for example through voting with dots.

In the COCD model, participants select a mix of ideas from which they produce a series of propositions. They are encouraged to work with 'known' and 'unknown' ideas and to look at ways in which they might combine. Again, this promotes the likelihood of finding innovative solutions to the problem statement.

Another effective solution-focused technique is the **Future Dialogue** process. This also introduces an element of playfulness by asking participants to project into the future and to describe a successful scenario. Working backwards, different actors – for example employers, jobseekers, colleges – are asked to describe the barriers they faced back at the start and how these were overcome. In particular, the facilitator will question them about their own role in overcoming these. This method is a particularly effective way of engaging different actors at the same time so that they can gain a better understanding of others' priorities and assumptions.

In summary then, some watchwords for creative problem solving are:

- Invest time and effort in defining and articulating the problem
- Encourage playfulness and look for ways to break out of established patterns and ways of thinking
- Take risks and defer judgment at the ideas generation stage
- Don't discard 'left field' ideas – they may be the most valuable
- Use techniques to support stakeholders to narrow their focus on potential solutions

Tip 7: Getting lively feedback

Many of us will recognize a scenario where the energy of a stimulating groupwork exercise is killed off by a linear series of feedback reports. After the report of Group 7 most of us are struggling to stay awake…

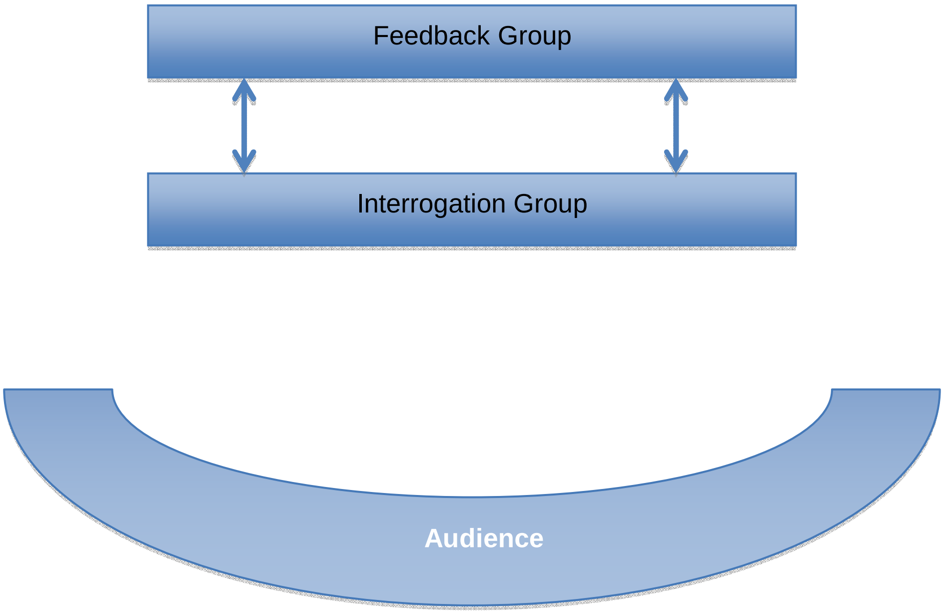
So what are the alternatives? As before, at the planning stage ask the key question – do we need plenary feedback from the group sessions at all? And if so can we capture it in another way – for example by asking each group to provide a key point summary for inclusion in any final report/minute?

However, in some cases we need to hear what groups have been saying in order to move our process forward – and in these cases we should think creatively about ways to do this.

A popular technique at the moment is to engage a **graphic artist** to capture key points during the session. A talented cartoonist can create images which present ideas in a very powerful – and often amusing – way. As well as giving an additional dimension to the session, this can provide resources that can be used in the future. For example, colour reproductions can be produced and attached to the walls in future sessions.

Another quick-fire feedback method is the **hot seat technique**. Here's how it works. You assign numbers to all the participants, so everyone has a number between 1 and 5. You then place a set of chairs in a row facing out into the audience and another set of chairs facing them, as in the figure below.

Figure 2: Hot seat layout



Ask the first feedback group to sit in the row of chairs facing the audience. Then explain that when you shout a number you'd like volunteers with that number to come out and occupy the seats facing them. The role of the second group will be to quiz the feedback group on their discussion and findings. The twist is that you explain that the interrogator seats will 'get hotter' by the minute so that after 3 minutes they'll need to vacate them. At that point the facilitator calls another number and invites more volunteers with the new number to assume the seats and the questioning role. After another 3 minutes swop again and so on.

After a few turns, thank the feedback group and ask another one to take its place – when the process starts again.

This is a short, lively focused process with lots of movement that helps retain freshness and interest. As well as keeping time, the facilitator should track the key points emerging and check these with the plenary group at the end of the session.

This is only one of many ways to provide feedback in a way that maintains levels of interest and energy. In Krakow we saw other techniques in action – such as mini-dramas – and again we should be prepared to test new approaches and avoid getting stale by repeating the same processes time after time.

Finally, it is always helpful to gather feedback from participants at the end of working together. An effective way of doing this is what the **ESIMEC** network call the ***Hot de-brief****.* Here, participants are asked to populate four large sheets of paper with the following headings – "Good", "Bad", "Learning" and "Improvements". From this snapshot evaluation, the organisers and the meeting hosts get real time feedback on participants' experience. The process is both forward and backward looking, as it reviews the work undertaken but also advises in ways to improve it in future.

Concluding section: So, where are we headed next?

And finally, don't forget the growing variety of ways in which we can record these events. Increasingly – as in Krakow – there is scope to capture the process on video and through social reporting. Social Media platforms including Facebook and Twitter are being used both to plan and animate events but also share the outputs. And there is also scope to innovate with the established product of the written report – for example like the ESIMEC network which has produced a series of 'recipes' describing the key ingredients and method required for a number of successful approaches to urban problems.

Part of URBACT's focus is on equipping urban policy practitioners with tools to work more effectively. This was a key driver behind the development of the Summer University and it has also been the rationale for the development of this short paper. Within the URBACT community there is an enormous reservoir of talent and experience. The Secretariat is keen to tap into this and to provide a wide variety of platforms for sharing and transferring expertise between our cities.

This paper has provided some basic tips on animating our meetings and workshops whether they are at the city or transnational level. It is not a compendium, merely a starting point and through the links provided readers can build on this to take their interest further. We hope that you will do that, and that you will keep us in the loop about what works and what doesn't so that we can all have the chance to carry on learning together.

URBACT II

URBACT is a European exchange and learning programme promoting sustainable urban development.

It enables cities to work together to develop solutions to major urban challenges, reaffirming the key role they play in facing increasingly complex societal challenges. It helps them to develop pragmatic solutions that are new and sustainable, and that integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions. It enables cities to share good practices and lessons learned with all professionals involved in urban policy throughout Europe. URBACT is 181 cities, 29 countries, and 5,000 active participants

www.urbact.eu

European Union
European Regional Development Fund

EUROPEAN PROGRAMME FOR SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT
URBACT