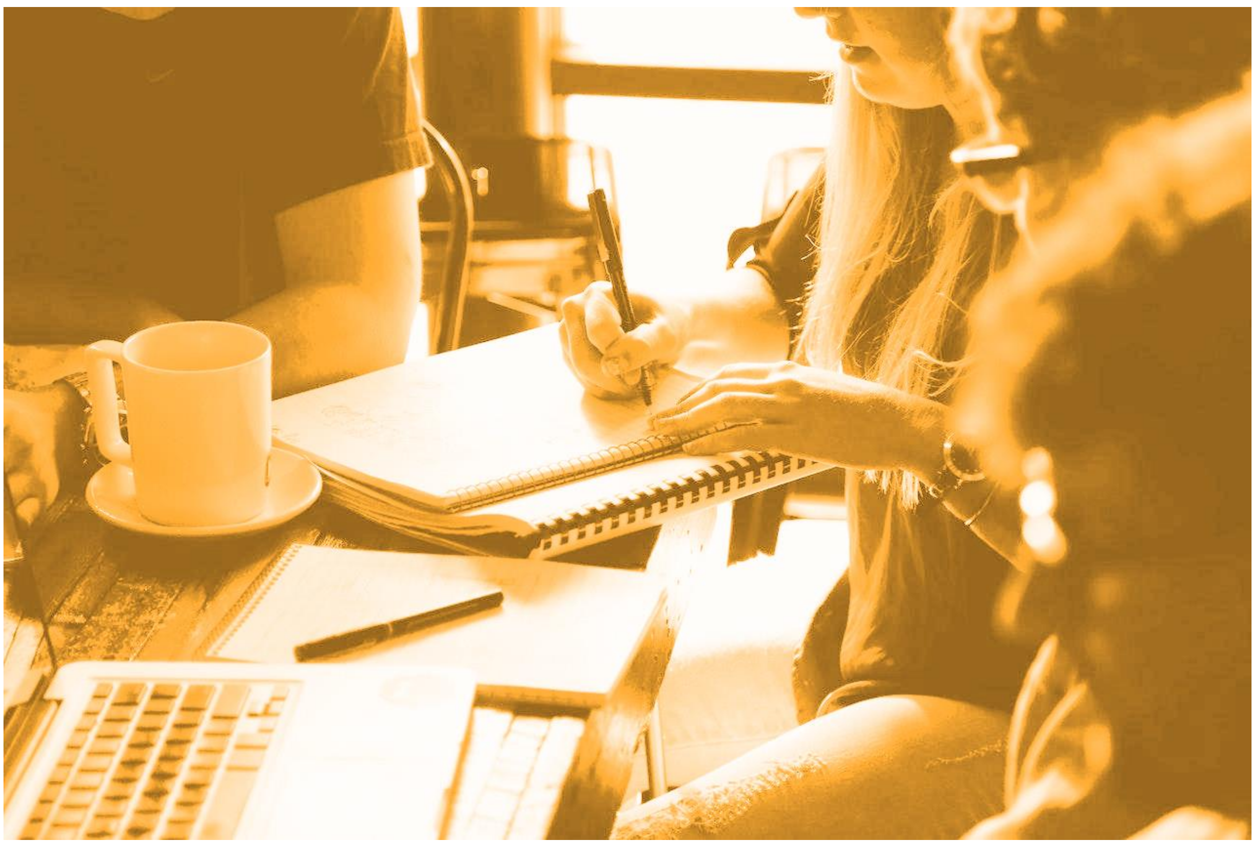
Playbook

Setting up and running the Visit Kent Experience Development Programme

Peer Network Eco-system

Version 2: 24th March 2021



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1. Introduction

This Playbook has been created to facilitate the successful implementation of the Visit Kent Experience Development Programme Peer Network Eco-system. It aims to be a central resource to support local Visit Kent Account Managers in the delivery and management of the sessions, both in virtual and face-to-face settings.

The Visit Kent Experience Peer Eco-systems will comprise 125 local businesses and entrepreneurs who are participating in the Experience Development Programme. The programme will deliver engaging peer networking services to support participants launching their Experiences by addressing shared challenges to product development and distribution. . The sessions also represent a great opportunity for Visit Kent to demonstrate the value it provides by helping local companies to develop relationships, share best practice and build partnerships.

The Playbook is designed to help Account Managers to take on the role of Facilitator in the Peer Eco-systems. It will help them to build confidence in facilitating group wide discussions and guide them through the key management, delivery and reporting tasks associated with the role. The sessions will also provide an opportunity for Account Managers to check in with businesses and build deeper relationships.

2. Supporting Documents

The Playbook is supported by a series of assets which can be used in conjunction with the Playbook. These include:

- Presentation slide deck template, an agenda and content for each of the sessions
- Email communication to help promote the sessions and business facing information about how the sessions will work.
- Pre-event joining instructions and post-event message templates.
- Website/event landing page and social media copy and graphics
- Facilitator session feedback template

3. Context

Peer networking has increased in popularity in the last 3-5 years. Peer Networks are successful because the group works together and competes against each other to deliver more successful individual outcomes than would otherwise be the case when not operating in a supportive peer network.

The Business Productivity Review (2018)[1] found that businesses adopting formal management practices are more likely to achieve increased productivity. There is also a broad evidence base which suggests that businesses which seek external advice or undertake formal training are more likely to improve their overall business performance.

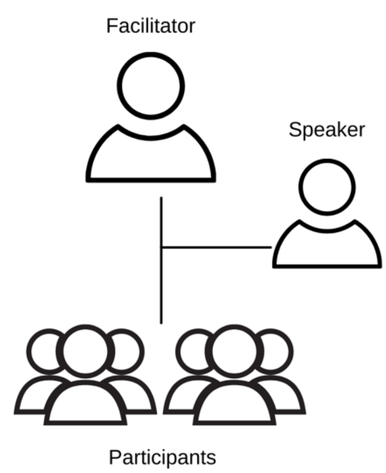
Peer Networking is now an increasingly important tool that will support businesses in the face of COVID-19. Since February 2020, COVID-19 has decimated domestic and international traveller numbers to UK tourist destinations. The impact to the visitor economy in Kent has been significant, with an estimated 62% loss of the annual £4 billion value that it would usually contribute to the Kent economy annually. This is set against the increase in required capital investment, such as screening and PPE, to enable businesses to be safe and compliant with COVID-19 regulations and policies.

More and more research points towards Transformational Tourism. A recent (March 2020) Travel Scotland trends paper highlighted that travellers now want their trips to have meaning challenge, connection and impact. The study also highlighted that tourists are increasingly aware of the environmental cost of travel and will seek out providers with sustainable credentials.

The Visit Kent Experience Development Programme wants to harness the opportunity that COVID-19 brings, with significant interest in ‘Staycation’ holidaying alongside the changes in tourism trends with demand for amazing experiences, that capitalise on unique regional selling points and are delivered sustainably. The programme wants to build a portfolio of high-quality services and experiences to be able to market Kent as a destination for all seasons, building visitor numbers in the off-season months. This in turn provides capital for Kent to leverage further increases in the importance of visitor booking using online and influencer channels as highlighted in the BDA-BVRC Holiday Trends 2020 survey.

4. About the Peer Eco-systems

The Visit Peer Eco-systems are group forums where members of the Experience Development Programme meet up to discuss particular business issues. The sessions start off with a presentation from a specialist speaker and then break out into smaller discussion groups, facilitated by a VK Account Manager, to discuss the issue and share experiences. There will also be an opportunity for drop-in sessions with Account Managers after the main session.



Visit Kent already works closely with both public and private sector partners and via the Kent Garden of England proposition (Nested Brands Strategy) have developed a collaborative approach to destination management. We now have a network of over 150 investor partners and engages with over 1,200 tourism businesses. This work has led to a growth of £1 billion in the Kent visitor economy over the last decade through an increase in both day and overnight visits. A new strategy to address the changing needs of the visitor is required upon the mature county level brand and further develop engagement with our network of stakeholders.

Visit Peer Eco-systems follows on from this strategy. Visit Peer Eco-systems will help participants to better understand their individual 'stories' and how collectively, they can work together to ensure that visitors further enhance their visits with additional interesting or exciting experiences.

4.1 Active Learning

Peer Eco-Systems promote 'Action Learning' which is 'an approach to problem solving and learning in groups that brings about change in individuals and their businesses' (2). The idea behind Action Learning is that the most effective learning takes place in the context in which people are working. The participants work together to share their challenges, experiences, knowledge and solutions for the benefit of all.

The sessions have been carefully coordinated to discuss business issues and continue to promote key benefits of the programme focusing on sharing successful ideas between each group. Sessions will focus on specific themes such as book-ability and sustainability, targeting how the entrepreneurs think as well as what they do in order to further develop their customer focus and effectiveness; both of which will improve the chances for each individual business. Further guidance on how to promote Active Learning within a session can be found in the Annexe.

5. Session Format

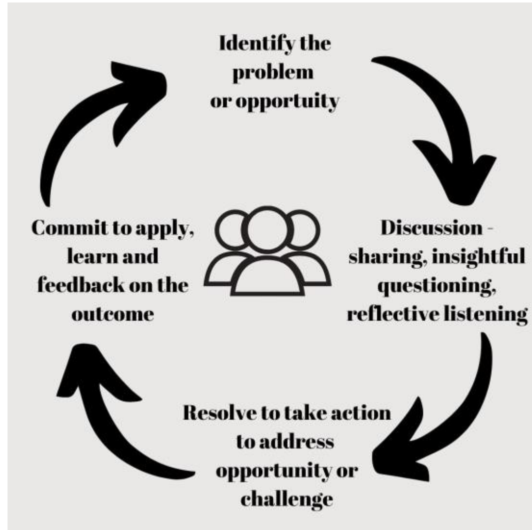
Peer Eco-systems do not provide formal skills training but are personal development orientated and are guided by a facilitator. Action Learning enables the participants to benefit from collective thinking, knowledge and experience present within the peer group.

Sessions will be conducted quarterly in order to provide sufficient time between sessions to process, action and review ideas. This aligns well with the Experience programme and ensures that they remain on a share, collaborative, journey together.

Each session lasts for approximately 1.5-2 hours.

The session will be presented in the following format:

- ➢ Welcome and updates (5 minutes)
- ➢ Brief recap of last session and opportunity to discuss progress gained (10 minutes)
- ➢ An Introduction to the topic (10 minutes)
- ➢ A guest speaker (30 minutes)
- ➢ Summary of topic and how it impacts the Visitor Economy (15 minutes)
- ➢ Breakout session, with use of a whiteboard or flipchart (30 minutes)
- ➢ Summary of agreed actions points and close (15 minutes)



Following each session, participants will leave with the following:

- ➢ Having clearly identified a particular challenge or opportunity
- ➢ A greater depth of understanding surrounding the discussion topic
- ➢ New insights, ideas and solutions to challenges and opportunities related to the discussion topic
- ➢ Clear action points to take away and experiment with inside their own businesses

There will also be an opportunity for drop-in sessions with Account Managers after the main session. The drop-in sessions are like a surgery and can be made available after the events, either immediately following or in the days after. Each session is an opportunity to target a specific issue and then follow-up with actions, signposting and advice. Keeping the session time-bound means that both parties focus on the issue as opposed to a general discussion which may not be as productive.

6. The Benefits

There are a number of benefits to facilitator-led peer networking sessions:

- ➢ **Group learning** - the participants will benefit from the experiences of others within the group, gaining insight into how others have approached similar challenges and learning what strategies were most effective.

- **New perspectives** - as key issues are discussed within a group, new perspectives will be presented which allow participants to approach challenges and opportunities from a different angle, one which they may not have previously considered.
- **Clear action** - problems can be shared and collective feedback given including possible solutions or actions to take. This enables participants to leave the session with a clear roadmap of activities to undertake in order to solve their particular challenge or take advantage of an opportunity.
- **Accountability**- peer groups tend to hold much more weighting when it comes to accountability and seeing specific actions through. Having to report back to the group on the outcomes in the next session can often be more effective in ensuring action takes place than from a single coach or advisor.
- **New relationships** - the depth of engagement that takes place within these sessions far exceeds that of standard networking sessions and leads to long lasting connections and relationships which tend to continue outside of the group sessions.

The ultimate outcome is that connections nurtured within the group grow into deeper, long-term relationships. Participants form their own trusted support network and may even begin facilitating their own group meetings to continue sharing and collaborating with each other.

7. The Role of the Facilitator

The role of the Facilitator is not to lead but to gently steer the group through a process of discovery, exploration and reflection. It includes:

- Guiding the participants through the planned sessions in a manner that exudes confidence, control and clarity.
- Encouraging participants to share their experiences, ideas and concerns regarding the business challenges and opportunities they are facing
- Helping participants to take stock of their current circumstances and identify realistic and practical solutions to help them achieve their goals
- Helping participants to analyse their progress and reflect on what has worked well and what hasn't
- Encouraging participants to take responsibility for their own decisions, plans, actions and progress within the group
- Helping participants to work together to achieve group and individual objectives
- Directing participants to additional information, resources and support which may help them to take their actions forward

- Managing group discussions, being aware of the group's dynamics and handling any conflict which may arise
- To compile a Facilitator report at the end of each session which summarises the 'hot topics' raised and action points agreed. A sample Facilitator report is provided in the Annexe.

Facilitators are not there to provide the answers to the questions. In fact, many Peer Eco-system participants may respond negatively if facilitators try to answer questions, particularly if they don't have direct experience of the issue. The Facilitator should work with the participants to draw out the answers from the group, identifying those individuals that can provide experience, knowledge or insight into the discussion topic.

8. Facilitator Key Characteristics:

Facilitators will ideally possess the following characteristics:

- Optimistic, enthusiastic and self-motivated
- Empathetic approach
- Engaging personal style
- Intuitive - able to read the room and adapt approach accordingly
- Understanding of smaller businesses (micros through to larger SMEs)
- Passionate about getting the best out of people
- Strong IT/technical skills - in relation to video conferencing
- Firm but fair manner to ensure rules are followed and respected

9. Facilitator Conduct, Language and Tone

Whether the Facilitator is conducting the session in a face-to-face setting, or in a virtual environment, a similar approach is required.

A Facilitator should:

- Highlight untested assumptions and ask for more information or evidence
- Promote effective behaviour and language
- Use Action Learning principles to facilitate learning and exploration
- Ask the right questions to guide participants through the session effectively
- Encourage participants to stop, think, question and listen
- Help participants to identify how/when and what learning opportunities are available

- Ensure fair and representative views of the group are presented and that every participant has the opportunity to contribute to each session

A Facilitator should avoid:

- Exerting too much control during a session
- Coming across as being an ‘expert’
- Providing too much advice
- Providing solutions
- Talking too much
- Letting energy levels drop too low as to impact engagement and participation
- Sorting out interpersonal problems between participants

Managing different personality types:

It is important to recognise that participants will react differently to your prompts for engagement and contribution to sessions. More introverted participants will feel ‘de-energised’ when surrounded by groups of people and tend to process their thoughts internally and carefully consider their responses before speaking. Extroverted participants are more likely to speak first and use the talking process to refine their thinking as they go along. This can naturally cause some friction between the two types, particularly during group discussions.

If left to their own devices, introverted participants may contribute very little to the discussions, despite having plenty to say and offer to the group. A few ways you can help support more introverted members include:

- **Providing summary of session in advance** – this allows them to prepare and not feel put on the spot
- **Build in time to write down/consider a question or topic** before, allowing them to have time to consider their response
- **Ask them specifically for their views** or opinions on a topic after everyone else has contributed, this will provide them with time to review others views and formulate their own response
- **Act swiftly on challenges** - Ensure that direct challenges from others to an individual’s opinions or views are neutralised swiftly, any type of pressure, teasing or sarcasm will deter introverts from contributing fully.

In order to get the best out more extroverted participants, consider the following:

- **Provide praise and recognition** – recognising the points they have made can help an extrovert to feel validated and more willing to listen to the viewpoints of others
- **Rein in their time** – extroverts can sometimes take over the discussions and prevent others from contributing, so be sure to limit the time they have to speak. Thank them for their contribution and offer to return to the subject at a designated time to discuss further.

10. Managing a Session

Facilitators will be responsible for conducting the sessions in a professional and efficient manner. The following tasks should be performed:

- Schedule sessions and send out invites (unless this task is being undertaken by administrative support). Ideally send out invites via email and SMS to ensure safe receipt.
- Host each session using an appropriate technology solution which addresses all the needs of the group (see Hosting a Virtual Session)
- Keep an accurate record of attendance at each session
- Promote good attendance and follow up with any absences
- Maintain an Active Learning methodology in all sessions
- Identify any participants who are disengaging with the programme
- Raise any concerns, such as conflict with their Team Leader
- Headline notes of the key discussion points, solutions and actions raised by the participants during the session should be taken by the facilitator or their key representative. This insight will help to shape future sessions. A summary of these should be shared with the participants after the session.

11. Establishing Rules

Facilitators are responsible for ensuring that sessions are conducted effectively, efficiently and with maximum participation. The rules should be included (or referenced) in the pre-event business-facing communications which detail what the sessions are about, our commitment to the programme and the commitment required from the participants. It is also essential that Facilitators to establish the ground rules during the first session.

The ground rules should include:

- **Confidentiality** - be clear that what is discussed within the session cannot be spoken about outside of the group. Clarification will be required as to what this means in practice, such as can details be discussed with a mentor.
- **Commitment -** participants should commit to attend all scheduled sessions
- **Equal time -** Everyone should have time to speak - although they do not have to if they don't want to
- **Listening** - everyone should ensure they listen to others and respect their viewpoints
- **Challenge** - it is helpful to challenge thinking and ideas, but criticisms and judgements should be avoided
- **Safe Space** - the group should be a safe space in which people can discuss their strengths and weaknesses openly

Participants should be frequently reminded to abide by the group rules and a link could be provided to an online version of the rules for ease of reference.

12. Dealing with Conflict

There are likely to be a variety of personalities present within any Peer Eco-system and so it is inevitable that there may be times when conflict occurs. In most cases this is likely to be low-level disruption which can be effectively neutralised through robust facilitation and a reminder of the rules.

Quick tips for dealing with low-level disruption

- **Tactical Maneuvering –** Positioning yourself next to the person most likely to cause a disruption or maintaining eye contact with them whilst talking, can help to reduce the likelihood of negative input.
- **Call out bad behavior** – Be sure to address any disruption immediately, calmly and politely, explaining why that behavior is not contributing positively to the session. Deal with the matter swiftly and continue to progress with the session as planned.
- **Keep to the schedule** – Try to avoid focusing on any particular task or activity for too long. Keep to the allocated time slots and ensure that you progress through the session in a timely manner.

When faced with a disruptive participant, facilitators should issue a first verbal warning, followed by a second verbal warning from the VK Lead in addition to an email which details the breach of group rules and advises the consequences of continuing the undesirable behaviour. In situations where this approach does not resolve the issue, it may be necessary to remove a participant from the group and reassign them to a new group. This should be considered a last resort. Any concerns involving any participants should be raised with the VK Lead to determine the best course of action.

13. Running a Virtual Session

The continuing COVID-19 pandemic means that it is likely that some, if not all, of the sessions will be conducted virtually. Participants should be informed that virtual sessions are by no means inferior to face-to-face sessions and in fact, bring with them a host of additional benefits. These include:

- Less downtime from travel to and from locations
- A familiar home/business setting can help participants to feel more comfortable
- Lower environmental impact
- Enhanced listening skills are required when participating virtually
- Build virtual business and leadership skills which are valuable in the current environment

There are a number of technology solutions which would be suitable for hosting a Virtual Peer Eco-system session. These include:

- MS Teams
- Zoom
- WebEx
- GoToMeeting
- Google Meet

It is worth noting that a subscription may be required to unlock the features necessary to facilitate an effective virtual session. The key requirements for any virtual meeting solution provider include:

- Flexible license to cater for variable numbers of attendees
- Hosting for up to 3 hours without needing to impose a break in the service
- Ability to dial in by telephone or computer
- Ability to include multiple user video streams
- Allocation of 'roles' including 'Host', 'Presenter' and 'Participant'
- Desktop sharing
- Live and Interactive 'Whiteboard' for collaborative ideas, visuals and diagrams
- A waiting room or 'lobby' with admittance controlled by the host

- ➢ Record function (for the main presentation only in order to maintain confidentiality)
- ➢ Live chat or comments stream
- ➢ Virtual 'hand raising' for participants wanting to comment
- ➢ Security encryption

14. Virtual Event Administration

When preparing and conducting a virtual events, Facilitators should:

- ➢ Advise participants in advance of the planned dates for the sessions.
- ➢ All participants should be advised that attendance at all sessions is encouraged, as this will ensure maximum engagement, commitment and support across the group.
- ➢ Information should be provided about the specific technology software to be used for the sessions, including details for downloading any necessary software.
- ➢ Joining instructions should be circulated at least 48 hours in advance of the session.
- ➢ Clear instructions for which interactive functions will be used during the sessions - such as raising a virtual hand or utilising the chatroom

In the event of technology failure or connectivity issues:

- ➢ Participants should be provided with direct contact details for the Facilitator or appointed representative (including email address and telephone number) so that they can be contacted in the event of a connection failure.
- ➢ Participants should attempt to reconnect on the link provided or to try the dial-in conference line. If neither work, they should wait for at least 10 minutes for further email instructions from the host.
- ➢ If participants are having problems with internet stability, they should first try reconnecting using the same link. Next they should try to turn off the video. Finally, they should disconnect and rejoin the session via the dial-in conference call facility.

15. Evaluating a Successful Session

As businesses prepare to move into the 'Recovery' phase of the COVID-19 response, Peer Eco-systems will help to equip SMEs with the ability to adapt their business models and position themselves for future success. The group's strength is the sum of its parts and long-term benefits of the programme will only be realised through regular and focused participation from the group.

Therefore, the success of each session will be measured by:

- ➢ Participant attendance
- ➢ Level of participation from members
- ➢ Level of quality peer interactions
- ➢ Participant views on their company's resilience
- ➢ Participant views on their leadership and management capabilities
- ➢ Participant views on their company's readiness for the future
- ➢ Participant views on the value of the programme in building their skills

VK Account Managers should consider the use of regular surveys or discussions with individual participants to determine the success of each session and understand areas of improvement.

Annexe

16. A quick guide to Action Learning

16.1 Selecting a 'Problem' to discuss

When choosing a problem to tackle within the Peer Eco-system, it is important to consider a topic which is suitably diverse, critical and complex. The best problems are those where there is no clear right or wrong answer. Equally, they must be real, significant and important challenges which can be acted upon.

16.2 Defining the Problem : 10 Key Questions

It is important to ensure that the problem is sufficiently defined so that clear, measurable outcomes can be determined.

The following series of 10 questions can be helpful in defining the problem:

1. Describe the problem in just a few words
2. Who is affected by the problem (list all those affected)
3. Why is the problem important?
4. What have you tried to do to address the problem so far?
5. Why did those attempts not work?
6. What further obstacles are you likely to face?
7. What options are available to you for addressing this problem?
8. What would success in overcoming this problem look like?
9. What would be the benefits of overcoming this problem?
10. Who would benefit from the problem being solved (list all those affected)

16.3 Asking the Right Questions

Asking the right questions is an essential part of a successful peer networking experience. The right questions will encourage the issue holder to think through their problem, consider the range of options available and go on to choose the preferred course of action. By their nature, the most effective questions are those which are open ended and do not lead the listener towards a particular outcome.

We refer here to the Deeper Questions Grid which was developed by John Sawyer as a tool for assisting in the formation of insightful questions:

By definition, an open-ended question is ‘a question that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no" response, or with a static response’. Open-ended questions are phrased as a statement which requires a longer response.

Examples of open-ended questions include:

- What influenced your decision there?
- Can you explain your comment in a bit more detail?
- What might you have done differently?
- What might the outcome of that approach be?
- What have your learned from that experience?
- What would the ideal outcome look like?

16.4 More Action Learning Questions and when to use them

Questions to understand more from a group member:

- What is the goal you trying to achieve?
- How will things change if you are successful?
- Who might be willing to help you?
- What obstacles do you anticipate?

Questions to dig into a specific topic

- Can you explain? What exactly? How do you know? Can you give an example?
- What do you think will happen and why?
- What are the consequences of doing that?
- What was the high point/low point for you?
- What have you learned from all this?

Questions to stimulate a further response around learnings

- What is challenging for you about this issue?
- What opportunities are there for you in the situation?
- What would success look like?
- That obviously excites you: why?
- What metaphor could you use to describe the situation?
- What is important, what is urgent and what is the priority?
- What have you tried? Why did/didn't it work?
- Who else have you involved in this issue?
- Who can you turn to for advice and support?

Questions to explore further options

- What if…?
- How would they react…?
- How do you feel about…?
- What do you think about…?
- What are the pros and cons of your approach/plan?
- What would happen if you did nothing?

Questions that stimulate action in a participant

- What are you going to do next?
- What are your options for action now?
- Where could you get more information?

- Who else could you seek help from?
- What are you going to do for yourself before the next meeting?
- How can we help you to make progress?

17. Facilitators Evaluation Form

Facilitator's Evaluation Form

Name:
Date of Sessions:
Session Topic:
Key Speaker:

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1. **What were the key outcomes of the session?**
2. **Were there any good examples, best practice or business needs that arose?**
3. **What aspects of the session were particularly successful?**
4. **Which techniques and activities were most effective in achieving the session objectives?**
5. **Were there any training materials or resources used that particularly aided the session?**
6. **What additional materials or resources would have been helpful during this session?**
7. **What issues (if any) arose during this session?**
8. **What actions were taken and what could be implemented to prevent a similar situation in the future?**
9. **What would you do differently if you were running this session again?**

- **ENDS -** `