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Participatory Workshops: A Book Review

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Participatory Workshops: A Book Review

Abstract

Participatory Workshops: A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas & Activities, by Robert Chambers, is a superb sourcebook for ideas and activities that can be used to enliven workshops and meetings. The book is organized like a cookbook and can be used in a similar fashion because it is easy to find specific activities, techniques, or ideas through both the table of contents and the index. Chambers presents 441 suggestions (21 lists of 21 items each) that range from the odd to the outrageous to the ingenious. It is reference book that will be used.

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Stuck in a Rut

Robert Chambers has provided us with a truly useful book in *Participatory Workshops: A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas & Activities*. To understand why, consider this scenario:

It is 5:00 p.m., and your thoughts turn to the workshop you will be offering the next morning. You did some planning for the event a few weeks back but really not very much because you have put on a hundred similar events over the years. Suddenly, in a lightning bolt of inspiration, you think "Wouldn't it be great to offer a hundred DIFFERENT events instead of largely the same event one hundred times?"

In a flush of enthusiasm, you turn to your bookshelf knowing that the good ideas you need must be lurking there. But after a few minutes of leafing through books, you give up. Something may be there, but you just don't have the time to find it.

Another idea pops into your head--"Google". You launch a search for "meeting design getting started," confident of finding a clever opening for tomorrow's workshop. The response is immediate, it's overwhelming, and it's TOTALLY USELESS. You never imagined that so many documents and Web sites would contain these key words. A few might have something useful to say, but good luck finding them. So the reality sinks in. Your 101st workshop will be much like those that preceded it.

A Source of Ideas

An investment of less than \$20 provides the possibility of achieving a different, better outcome. This investment will allow you to practice "just-in-time" meeting preparation and still incorporate something new, exciting, and maybe even dangerous.

Robert Chambers organized *Participatory Workshops* (PW) similar to a cookbook so that it can be used in a comparable fashion. Both the table of contents and the index are designed so that the reader can quickly find specific topic areas or techniques. The PW's subtitle is, "A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas & Activities," and each of the 21 lists has 21 items. As with cookbooks (which many people read cover to cover), PW provides rich rewards to those who read it from start to finish. But you don't have to do that to benefit from the book.

Chambers is well known for his work and publications focused on developing countries, and this

book does address the unique constraints of those societies. Some of the suggestions may seem exotic, strange, or silly to American readers. But just like discovering a new cuisine, even the odder suggestions may provide a new way of looking at your work.

Chambers establishes his credibility by demonstrating that he has faced the same problems as you and survived to tell the tale:

- In "21 Horrors in Participatory Workshops," Chambers discusses how dreadful it can be when a "PAIN (Pompous and Insensitive Notable) opens the workshop."
- In "21 Mistakes I Made," he discusses the danger of "Spinning out the Start: Taking too long with initial hiccups-preamble, introductions, jokes . . . so that the start on substance is late."
- In "21 Ways Not to Answer a Question," he suggests a two-stage approach: "Stage 1: Flatter," followed by "Stage 2: Evade."

As should be expected, many of the 441 items didn't resonate with me. No one, however, buys a cookbook with the intention of preparing all of the recipes. I had no problem leafing through PW and identifying interesting suggestions and ideas. Here are four of my favorites.

- **Johari's window:** The group constructs a two-by-two matrix that examines what outside professionals and local citizens know and don't know about a situation (from both perspectives).
- **Participatory PowerPoint:** Just as it sounds--a group jointly works on a PowerPoint document.
- **Knotty Problem** (only for the adventurous): Participants hold hands and works themselves into a knotty mess. One or more outsiders try to instruct them on how to untangle by following verbal instructions only. Next, the group members are allowed to untangle on their own. The second approach is much quicker and less complicated. This provides a real-life example of the advantage of allowing groups to solve their own problems.
- **The Candy Game:** The discussion leader provides very large hard candies to each person who makes a comment. Participants are only allowed to suck the candies and are thus forced to free up the "air space" for others to contribute to the discussion.

A Change for the Better

Do not expect PW to transform your workshops and conferences. The task just isn't that simple. The changes you make as a result of adding this reference to your library are likely to be small and subtle. A step in the right direction should still be viewed as progress. If each of us only stopped one more participant per workshop from nodding off, imagine how much more productive we would be.

Reference

Chambers, R. (2002) *Participatory workshops: A sourcebook of 21 sets of ideas & activities*. Sterling, Va.: Earthscan Publications Ltd.

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