



Experts guide to: successful away days



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There's no denying that a well-designed away day can rejuvenate your staff. It can spark fresh ideas, strengthen team bonds, and create the space for strategic thinking that is all too often squeezed out of the busy day-to-day operations.

But what separates an energising, productive session from one that leaves participants checking their watches? We've gathered insights from our most experienced Blumers, who have guided a plethora of successful away days. They are experts who know how to create those magic moments where teams align, barriers break down, new possibilities emerge, and, most importantly, your staff and trustees feel refreshed and raring to go.

Enjoy their practical wisdom and proven techniques to help make your next away day truly count.

Leah Selinger:

What to do: Have a clear, realistic and tangible objective for what you want to get out of an away day. What is the purpose of your away day? Set expectations from the start, and get agreement before you start planning, by consulting with key people within the organisation on what it is important for you to achieve.

What not to do: Invite the wrong (or don't invite the right) people. Away days need the right voices to be heard, involved and engaged with the process and the outcomes – be those board members, staff, volunteers or beneficiaries. If you can't get everyone together (and it's not always possible or appropriate), then make sure you find other ways to get those voices heard and fed into the away day discussion is important.

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Jenny Davidson:

What to do: Plan, plan, plan! Make a plan for the day and share it with everyone – staff, trustees and volunteers, and whoever else is at the away day. Make sure there is flexibility in the plan so that discussions can be free-flowing, and that everyone has the opportunity to contribute and be heard. Take each person's contribution seriously.

What not to do: Avoid vagueness about break times and whether lunch will be provided or not. This may sound unimportant but it really isn't. People need to know where they stand with refreshments, lunch, and comfort breaks. Avoid going over time – if you say you're going to end at 5.00 p.m. end at 5.00p.m. **NOT** 5.30p.m or even later. People have outside responsibilities.

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Jenny Davidson



Ed Moss:

What to do: Create a safe and inclusive environment by going around the space to hear from each participant, ensuring you go last. Use a check-in technique that encourages participants to talk about an object they resonate with, like a teapot or a superhero. The leader should go first to role model vulnerability, while in feedback rounds, the leader or highest-paid person should go last to avoid overly influencing the answers.

What not to do: Avoid overloading your agenda - Chanel it —like the designer Chanel famously said, 'take one thing off before leaving the house.' Prioritise quality over quantity to ensure participants have the space to reflect, engage deeply, and contribute meaningfully, leave time for the group to co-create the actions, sign up to them and put review dates by each one and a mechanism for following up with colleagues. A mindful pace allows for more authentic interactions and sustainable outcomes.



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Bring in someone else (I would say that) but seriously, when you bring in a professional facilitator, they can ask the questions in the briefing that mean you get clear on one or two specific goals/ outcomes to focus on and will then design a process, so you can actually dive into being in the content. Trying to manage the process and be part of the content, providing your insight, at best is exhausting at most just creates confusion around your role on the day and leads to lower engagement

Ed Moss



Nick Wilkie:

What to do: Advice from my brilliant former colleague Laura McArthur who, shared her four tips for facilitation. 1. Stay present in the moment. 2. Stay veggie - don't you get into their content - facilitating is not chairing. 3. Be constantly aware of your own emotional state. 4. Continually contract - check that the pace, focus and style is working for them. *(I know; I'm a cheat, but it's too good not to share, thanks, Laura!)*

What not to do: Avoid packing too much in: organisations always over-estimate their bandwidth - for everything including change, delivery and thinking space. And avoid an away day being marooned, unanchored from discussion and decision-making before and after it in the usual cycle of board or senior team discussion: I am amazed how often organisations book an away day without thinking through how it fits into their wider strategy, planning and budgeting schema.

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Nick Wilkie



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Final tips:

- 1) *It requires meticulous planning and understanding what questions people want to answer to make sure it goes well on the day. Out of the box stuff has its place, but really working with the facilitator to understand the questions you're really trying to answer - which sometimes they can help you unearth! - is key. At the same time, your facilitator has to be flexible. Not because they're going to go off on a tangent - a good one will avoid that - but because you may discover something incredibly interesting and vital you hadn't planned for. You can't fail to capture that lightning in a bottle.*
- 2) *'Creative' techniques have their place but remember that it's a lot easier for extroverts to sit quietly for a bit than it is for introverts to have to perform their strategic insights through the medium of expressive dance in front of 20 people. Don't make people uncomfortable. We're grown ups; let's talk. More subtle creative things can be fun - everybody loves glittery stickers, and who doesn't love a post-it or ten.*
- 3) *If people aren't comfortable raising an issue, make sure there's some way for them to do so with the facilitator, either during, or even after, the workshops, especially if a report is being produced. That way you know that if there is a problem with groupthink, or lack of confidence for one person that can't really be broken through on the day, there is still a way for a voice or voices to be heard.*
- 4) *Your facilitator needs a lot of gravitas and authority - especially if your Board has 'big beasts'. But some good humour and playfulness are vital, along with high energy. The facilitator really helps to set the vibe of the room. At the same time, if there are conflicts or unpleasant undercurrents, it's vital that the facilitator can address them, move beyond them, or call them out directly - and that they know which is the right thing to do at anyone time.*

Dr Alex Evans





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If you'd like to discuss your away day needs in more detail, scan the QR code below to book at 20-minute slot with Alexander.



blume.life

