

A Plenary

... derived from the Latin *plenarium* (complete or full), hence *concilium plenarium*, also *concilium plenum*.

What is a Plenary Session/Discussion

- ... a session of a conference or other meeting at which all members are expected to attend
- ... at a conference, the opening keynote may be considered a plenary session, since everyone is expected to attend
- ... a plenary discussion is a mutual exchange of one's own thoughts, usually moderated by a discussion leader (an impartial facilitator)
- ... a broad range of content, from keynotes to panel discussions
- ... sometimes, the term is used to describe when information/learnings is/are summarized
- ... vital for synthesizing output, finding interconnections between the parallel processes that have taken place in breakout groups and reaching agreements

How to prepare and run a Plenary Session/Discussion

A good plenary session or plenary discussion goes beyond introducing the session or the other members – hence, it requires preparation, skill, quick thinking and confidence.

- Have a list of questions ready for the presenters – either to get them warmed up or to keep the discussion going when the audience doesn't know what to ask or give feedback.
- Spark activities are useful in helping participants loosen up, become mentally and physically active, and enter the mindset of building on one another's ideas. Use spark activities at the beginning of the plenary to break the ice or after a break, when people are a bit sluggish to start moving.
- The audience is more important than the presenters, hence it is crucial that their needs are met:
 - ensure questions are understood – repeat and rephrase if necessary
 - ensure the audience is engaged – if not, change the approach to stimulate the session
 - ensure questions are being answered – if not, step in and refocus
- Keeping the discussion flowing, on track, on time, fair and focused without actively participating in the questions and answers.
- When a speaker (presenter or a participant) gets off-track, dominates, or takes longer than she/he should, step in, compliment their opinion, and pass on the question or possibly move to the next one.
- Thank everyone for their contributions and summarize the key points that have arisen during the discussion. Never leave the plenary with any concerns or uncertainties.

Some «Do's» ✓

Chair/Facilitator:

gives a prompt/asks a question: when you give a prompt or ask a question, give the participants time to think (wait for several seconds); then give the floor to several participants in succession

controls, but does not dominate, the plenary session, taking a small share of speaking time

enables participants to reach an agreement

acts as time keeper, group/process manager or assigns the roles to co-moderators/co-facilitators

gives structure to the discussion by using, for example, a flipchart

Some «Dont's» ✗

Avoid:

asking yes/no questions; you will then have to ask the next one immediately after; prefer open questions or prompts

getting drawn into a discussion with one or two participants; rather, pass on their questions to the plenum

a discussion slipping into confusion or chaos, because the participants address different aspects and sub-topics; hence take the initiative and decide or suggest which topic to focus on first

side-stepping/ignoring statements that catch you unprepared; get the participants involved