10 TNT tactics for facilitators

TNT tactics are what often sets amazing workshops apart from good workshops. A lot of the tactics in this document have, in one way or another, already been applied by a lot of people in facilitation. No one owns them, and everyone can come up with them.

So many people are amazingly good at facilitation without knowing it and without having the experience or the track record to show for it. Anyone can become a great facilitator. It merely requires you to be more in tune with your intuition and to genuinely care about the people and their moment of co-creation.

You already have everything you need to facilitate well. Approach your next facilitation opportunity with care, and challenge yourself creatively to come up with tactics that trigger controversy. Doing so will kickstart deeper conversation and connection. It will also lead to your group truly exploring the unknown, the birthplace of all growth.

01 - Take A Stand

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

Whenever you feel like a team is merely scratching the surface and that they need to “stir up the shit”, as a good friend of ours often says (thanks, Daryl), “Take a stand” can stir things up by building toward confrontation. This confrontation may happen between two or three “sides”. More than three will probably overcomplicate the conversation during the confrontation.

You can keep it simple and work with a battle between two sides. First, present two extreme points of view on the topic and work with your team to choose sides. Make sure the points of view are expressed in a way that triggers emotions from the get-go.

For example, if the topic is about how to deal with artificial intelligence (AI), express both sides with two opposing strong statements:

- Side A: “AI will make our lives much better in every aspect and will even make them last longer” versus
- Side B: “AI will take over and kill us”.

Or, as another example, when the topic relates to dealing with hierarchy:

- Side A: “Hierarchy is part of the ruins of the past. It keeps us in old, toxic mindsets” versus
- Side B: “Hierarchy is necessary to create focus and make progress.”

Each topic can render more extreme opposite views from which to start.

When you establish the teams by having the participants “take a stand”, the side they take doesn’t have to match their real opinion. They just have to be prepared to build the arguments behind the perspective to make the confrontation happen.

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That is the next step after taking a stand: each party comes up with strong arguments to defend their point of view. They prepare themselves for the confrontation. When ready for battle, they take the stage and fire their arguments at each other in an alternating way. They start with their strongest or most provocative argument; the counterparty then responds. Either there is no counterargument and no disagreement (these arguments are then moved to the “box” called “common ground”), or there is disagreement, and the two parties need to figure out whether a consensus is possible.

If there is consensus, the resolution is moved to “common ground”. If there isn’t, the arguments are moved to the box “unresolved”. In the end, you get a nice overview of things that are hard to predict where they may go, the unresolved items, and things we have some level of understanding about.

This overview is a great new starting point. It provides a thought-provoking context to start thinking about potential risks and opportunities, followed by a consolidated plan of approach.

02 - Create Mayhem

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Mapping out a system of stakeholders around a topic will show participants that multiple perspectives exist. Outlining the stakeholders related to a certain topic or challenge brings out the related level of complexity. Becoming aware of a system and its complexity can get participants to loosen their grip on their perspectives. You can go one step further, however: you can have them dig deeper into the complexity of the system by describing and empathizing with each stakeholder.

This would be a great exercise to combine with stakeholder mapping. It would include listing the most important stakeholders and indicating how they are related to each other or thinking about the value exchange.

To do this, either assign a stakeholder to each participant or have them choose a stakeholder they relate most with. Preferably, as many different stakeholders are assigned as possible to capture the diversity of perspectives in the system. After choosing or assigning each stakeholder, each participant tries to capture the point of view and stake of the assigned stakeholder. They should explain how they experience the topic, what they are trying to achieve, what drives them and how they go about it.

With every new stake(holder) captured and shared, more complexity of the system is revealed. The complexity causes mayhem in terms of the initial perception of the participants. It shows how the system is too complicated to stick to one perception or opinion. The story has many sides and potentially many different needs that drive various dynamics and behavior in the system.

After capturing and sharing these stakes, the next step is identifying the stakeholders' dependencies. To what extent does each stakeholder need other stakeholders to achieve their goals? This second step will emphasize that it is a system in "movement".

Stakeholders' behaviors will continuously influence each other. The system is not static. This adds another layer of complexity, which again helps to loosen the participants' grip on their predispositions.

In the third step, the team can identify the most significant variables that impact the dynamics between stakeholders in the system related to the topic, thinking about all the important stakes and the dependencies. By prioritizing the most significant variables, the participants evolve from a rigid, static, one-sided interpretation at the start of the exercise into a more flexible, multi-sided understanding of the topic.

To intensify this exercise, a facilitator could start by having each participant express their view on the topic. "What is the first thing that comes to mind when explaining the predicament or situation related to the topic?"

At the end of the exercise, you can ask them to review their initial statement and share how their understanding shifted.

03 - *Take A Ride On A Rollercoaster*

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

Whenever participants are stuck in a rational mindset, making interpretations in a functional and rational manner, they might be unable to move beyond a high-level interpretation. Agreeing on conclusions like "We need better communication", the participants are merely scratching the surface and aren't yet investigating on a deeper level why people need certain ways of interaction and more transparency on specific items. It could be that communication just means a feeling of acknowledgment by being included in conversations. It could mean people would prefer to be addressed and provided with information adapted to their needs and tasks. It could mean they feel overwhelmed with how things are currently communicated.

On the other hand, they might get to a deeper level of interpretation of the situation, understanding underlying emotions and motivation, but they keep interpreting them from their own perspective and need to step into the shoes of other stakeholders.

Whatever the reason is to shake the team up to be more open to the relevant emotional drivers behind the behavior of people related to the topic of your session, you can have them embark on an "emotional rollercoaster" by presenting a couple of unexpected and compelling scenarios.

Imagine the session is about improving the experience at the reception desk of a very popular and busy hotel. The group comprises people working at the reception desk or having related operational or managerial roles. As they discuss the potential improvement areas, they keep repeating issues like, "At peak moments, waiting lines get too long, and we can't provide a friendly, welcoming experience. Instead, we turn into efficiency robots, working through all the check ins and outs as fast as possible." They might also say, "People want to get to their room as quickly as possible after arriving."

03 - *Take A Ride On A Rollercoaster*

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To unlock deeper interpretations of the guest's perspective and shift their perspective away from their operational role, you can provide a couple of scenarios to run through, having them all pretend to be the guest. With each scenario, ask them to express how they would feel being a guest.

1. You had a flight with a stopover. You were worried about whether your luggage would make it. When arriving at the final destination, you found your baggage - the last one on the belt. The kids kept running around in the luggage area, annoying other people. You were overcharged by a taxi to the hotel and got stuck in heavy traffic. At the same time, the kids went on and on about how hungry they were, asking repeatedly when they'd arrive. When you finally arrive, after making some promises to the kids, you are confronted with a long line of people at the reception desk. How would you feel?

2. You realized you forgot an adapter for the power socket. You need to urgently finish a presentation for a meeting, worried about making it in time for your appointment. You hurry to the reception desk in a stressed state only to find a long line. You are considering skipping the line, but notice the facial expressions of those waiting in line, which indicate that cutting the line wouldn't go down well. How would you feel?

3. You ask the person at the reception for some advice. You are celebrating a special evening tomorrow because of an anniversary, but the surprise reservation you made in the restaurant for some reason didn't come through. And you only noticed now, the day before. The restaurant is full, and the special occasion will be ruined. Your only hope is for the people at the reception desk to help save the evening with their local connections. How would you feel?

03 - Take A Ride On A Rollercoaster

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These scenarios should be specific and based on real-life situations. After presenting the group with such scenarios, you should ask them to add some more specific scenarios that happen at reception desks from their own experience and imagination and align on what the emotions would be like.

The idea is to relate to as many different scenarios that trigger as many different emotions as possible in a short period of time. This creates an “emotional rollercoaster”. It opens the participants up to having a deeper conversation about a topic. By stepping into other people’s shoes and imagining their emotions related to the topic, they stir up their own emotions related to the topic. You don’t want them to get stuck on one type of emotion to feel empathy for. All the different scenarios and different related emotions trigger their empathy in a broad way.

Aligning on all those emotions will also help with the necessary bonding of the participants. As their emotions drive their creativity, and bonding allows for safety to speak out, this “rollercoaster” tactic can kickstart a deeper conversation beyond the group’s initial analytical thinking.

04 - Assign A Devil's Advocate

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

We have seen workshop participants spontaneously take up the role of devil's advocate when a group is getting excited about a possible solution. It creates a level of discomfort. The group is excited about getting to a resolution, and now someone is distracting everyone and even causing insecurity about the solution's value.

That is exactly the tension that is often needed to get to even better outcomes - as long as the occurrence of a devil's advocate doesn't demotivate and drain the energy in the conversation. A group can get too focused on one direction to solve a situation too quickly, becoming blind to the other opportunities or the different variations of the direction they found.

By deliberately assigning the role of "Devil's Advocate" to someone in the team, you ensure there is always someone whose responsibility it is to challenge when the group needs to apply critical thinking and not get carried away by the feeling of resolution. Assigning such a role requires some ground rules to avoid a situation where the Devil's Advocate starts feasting on every little opportunity to tear ideas to pieces whenever they come up. This would wear out the participants and eventually lead to a disconnect.

The devil's advocate brings in additional controversy to challenge the thinking of the subgroup. On the other hand, it does handicap the assigned devil's advocate in terms of fully taking part in the conversation.

Therefore, assigning a devil's advocate only when you have at least four people in the group or breakout is best. And potentially alternate the role, so different people can be devil's advocates for a given time.

04 - Assign A Devil's Advocate

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

This is what you should be mindful of when assigning a Devil's Advocate among the team:

1. Assign the person who is the most knowledgeable about the topic and/or audience.
2. Assign a more introverted person who thinks twice before saying something.
3. Make sure the group has a "safe word" they can use whenever they feel the conversation should continue for a while without interference from the advocate.
4. Agree upon a limited amount of interventions from the devil's advocate.
5. When the devil's advocate intervenes, they need to mention the blind spot in the group conversation as specifically as possible and the level of risk related to ignoring the blind spot.

The last point is probably the most important one. The devil's advocate can only be effective if the group clearly understands what they are forgetting in their conversation and how it can add value to factor it into the conversation.

This mechanic especially works in breakouts, when subgroups have to come up with some conclusions, but there are fewer people to challenge each other in the conversation (compared to a plenary conversation).

The devil's advocate is a role that shouldn't be applied throughout the full workshop because it can become exhausting to be challenged in every conversation in this way. Usually, when the devil's advocate tactic has been applied for one activity, the group spontaneously starts playing devil's advocate in the following activities. It reminds them to remain critical when making conclusions during the remaining activities in the workshop.

05 - Make The Sell

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

When participants share their conclusions in the plenary, returning from a breakout or having done some solo thinking, the ideas and concepts are often roughly described. It rarely sounds sharp and straightforward when shared for the first time. The key benefit behind it, or the essential message, can be blurry.

“Make the sell” is a tactic that pushes participants to bring their best pitch when sharing with the group. It is an obvious tactic but very powerful if the instructions are given correctly.

First, give the participants time to prepare their moment of sharing with the group instead of asking them to jump immediately into presentation mode. This is the basic but most fundamental part of ensuring they share their findings effectively. Then, instruct them with three steps:

- Step 1: Write down the most concise description of the “what”. This is the concept of what you want to present, explained as briefly as possible.
- Step 2: Think about the reason(s) why other participants wouldn’t buy into the “what” you are sharing. What could be their reasons for doubt and hesitation? Write these down.
- Step 3: Add the three top “why” items that counter those potential doubts and hesitations.

Now, here comes the twist. When you ask them to share, instruct them to only share the “what” and the top-of-mind reasons why the others would doubt or hesitate vis a vis the “what”. Then ask the others, the audience, to respond with all kinds of arguments that counter the presented potential doubts and hesitations. Finish with having the presenter(s) share their top “why” items to counter the imagined doubts and hesitations to match the ones presented by the audience.

05 - Make The Sell

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

This approach leads immediately to a conversation about the potential of whatever is presented. It is a "selling without selling" method, taking your audience along with you to sell it, turning them into an ally to uncover the potential of whatever is shared. It immediately creates the "Yes and…" situation instead of the "Yes but ..."

You might say this is the opposite of driving controversy, but actually, it creates a conversation with many different opinions on what the real potential is. It can generate controversy but with a focus on defining the right level of potential or importance regarding what is shared.

06 - Help Opposites Attract

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

This tactic works well when you have two clearly different and relevant perspectives in the room. For example, customers and employees, CEO/C-suite and people on the "work floor", men and women, Boomer and Gen Z, etc.

Set the scene for a controversial situation related to the topic of the workshop or meeting. For example:

Perspectives	**Situation**
Customers vs. employees	More gets charged at the end of a service delivery compared to the initial proposal without any budget updates or alerts during delivery.
COE/C-suite vs. "work floor"	People don't get informed proactively and/or are not even consulted before a radical new change is being implemented, which results in restrictions on how holidays can be taken due to changes in legislation.
Men vs. women	When it comes time for the yearly performance review, the performance of women who took maternity leave is compared to those who didn't.
Babyboomer vs. Gen Z	Long-tenured or senior employees in the company always get the last say when things are decided due to their experience.

When the situation is interpreted by both parties, fully understood and alive in their imaginations, they transform themselves into becoming the other party. To do this, they receive a short persona description of someone from the other party, explaining their identity, general needs and concerns - a brief life summary of sorts. This takes the shape of a story rather than bullet points.

When both parties have taken a few minutes to study this story, they are asked to step into the other party's shoes and formulate what they would think, do and feel in that situation. This can happen in solo or a breakout group of people belonging to only one party.

After thoroughly preparing the "think, do and feel" from the other perspective, the "showdown" is organized, where one party explains how they think the other party would think, do and feel in that particular situation while the other party listens and notes down their thoughts. When the other party expresses where they got it right and wrong, it usually becomes a very vivid and enlightening conversation for both parties, resulting in a deeper understanding of each other.

07 - Bring In Disruptors

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

Outside-in views on a topic always help participants snap out of their habitual way of looking at it. This works extremely well when the timing is right and is brought in “raw” from a credible source.

Timing

If you start out with a compelling presentation from a user, guest, consumer, victim, patient, client or any other key stakeholder who brings an outside-in story built on personal experience, it will obviously help everyone better understand a situation or topic of collaboration. But it will also direct their thinking from the get-go, depriving them of the experience of being completely wrong or making biased conclusions based on false assumptions.

People get to the best insights when failing or making mistakes.

There is little learning when the moment of learning doesn’t have any tension. So, it would make sense not to start with a compelling piece of outside-in information from a great inspirational source. First, allow the group to make their own interpretations and conclusions, and then bring in someone who will explain something you are sure they didn’t know or grasp beforehand.

Imagine you are part of a workshop about safety on the work floor. The team has been working throughout the morning on priorities in physical and mental safety at work. Then you bring in an employee to present their story to the team, which is about how they were harassed and even mugged on their way to work, traveling by bike or public transport in the neighborhood of the office. It might reveal that many people commuting in similar areas have their own strategies to feel safe or avoid dangerous areas via lengthy detours. If this story had been told at the beginning of the working session, it would have probably biased everything that followed.

07 - Bring In Disruptors

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Now, with the right timing, it allows the group to understand that safety (and danger) transverses company walls; it may be important to evaluate how these issues weigh in the planned efforts compared to issues on the work floor. The surprise of this disruptive presentation will immediately open the minds in the room to consider a broader scope of safety outside the conventional one.

"Rawness"

Uncut versions of stories, information coming straight from the heart and non-polished descriptions accompanied by raw emotions have a more disruptive effect than nicely summarized reports or averaged-out statistics. If you want to stir things up, make people curious and trigger them to shift their perspectives, you have to speak to their emotions and not just their rationale.

When bringing in extra information that might change the flow of conversations, you will spark the most impact when doing so contains "raw" honesty and pure emotions that drive people to act and think in a certain way.

Source

This brings us to the topic of which source to include. If the source's credibility is questionable, it doesn't help when they bring disruptive information. The participants might resist the disruption by minimizing or justifying why it is an isolated case. The choice of source is very important to make this work. Assess the credibility of the source from the participants' point of view. It works very well when the participants don't know this person very well or have no history with this person, when the person has no commercial stake in the topic and when the person speaks from their personal experience.

Combining good timing with uncut raw input from a (in)credible source can change the complete course of a workshop and add a lot more depth to the conversation.

08 - Use Past Mistakes

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

Keeping in mind past mistakes when looking for future solutions is always a good idea. Learning from the past when building the future leads to smarter and more sustainable approaches. But it is not easy to keep past mistakes in mind when thinking about the desired future. Even when applying Design Thinking and getting to the point of ideation, a team can easily lose track of all the meaningful interpretations of their persona's predicament when enjoying an exciting divergent moment in brainstorming. Usually, when thinking forward, one doesn't drag along things from the past.

But how can you then make sure you are building on past mistakes? This is a tactic to wake everyone up again to their past mistakes before jumping into the desired future.

When everyone is ready to be creative and solve a challenge, have them devise ways to tackle it if they apply what they learned from past mistakes. First, ask them to think about the big mistakes they made in the past. Second, invite them to use their imaginations to bring to life how these mistakes would actually come to play if they applied them to this challenge. When having conversations about how these past mistakes came to life or could have come to life, ask them to emphasize the harmful effects and how they can still see some scars today from those effects.

It keeps past mistakes fresh in their minds and makes them aware of the potential impact they could make with new solutions. The next step would be to start coming up with new solutions and directions, evolving away from previous approaches.

09 - Share With Care

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

Sharing opinions and ideas kickstarts conversation. Actively shaping that moment of sharing impacts the quality of the following conversation. With “Make the sell” (see previous), this sharing moment can be spiced up with clear benefits and thereby open everyone up to a deeper meaningful conversation. “Share with care” is a different tactic that shapes sharing to have a stronger impact on the other participants. This tactic is about shaping the sharing by suggesting a particular type of audience or situation to keep in mind.

“Share with care” encourages participants to share their thoughts in a way that provokes responses from the other participants. Here are some examples:

Explain it to your grandparents

This is a particularly interesting approach when the topic is all about technology. It forces the participants to share their thoughts in a human way, explaining everything as if the audience has the frame of reference of an older generation. The resulting explanation will have to have a lot of common sense and be low on gimmicks and shiny sci-fi features. It emphasizes “what is in it for me” and “why should I care about this in my day-to-day”.

Explain it to your kids

This is a great way to get to the essence and explain something in the most simplified way. The process of creating the story as if the audience is kids will help tremendously with understanding the concept yourself. It turns the messages into the basic truth and often a step-by-step structure, laying out what it is and what it is not in a crystal clear manner. As Einstein said in his famous quote, “If you can’t explain it to a six-year-old, you don’t understand it yourself”, this is an approach to start a conversation about basics and essentials.

09 - Share With Care

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

It works great when the conversation is happening between experts and non-experts, marrying academics and engineers with users and developers.

Explain it to your venture capitalists

Present the story in a way to convince people about the return on investment. The return can be monetary or be about loyalty, support, buy-in, etc. Your story should explain the opportunity, the size of the opportunity, the requirements to make it happen, and why "now" is the time.

This type of sharing steers the conversation toward a more business-like approach. The conversation should lead to conclusions about value creation connecting supply and demand. This is an ideal starting point when the collaboration is between people from sales, marketing, business development, etc., trying to shape propositions and business models.

Explain it to the victim

Depending on the audience, things can grow sensitive and/or controversial. Asking participants to explain it as if they are sharing their thoughts with a victim puts them in a more challenging situation. Depending on the topic, this could be a victim from a refugee camp, a victim of assault, a victim of harassment, a victim of lay-offs or economic downturn, etc.

To add more tension, the other participants can pretend as if they are the victim and respond accordingly to make it real and even potentially shocking.

This is a great tactic when it almost hurts to empathize because the topic is heavily emotional. When the elephant in the room is not addressed, for example, when the hardship is not embraced in conversation, but we have to work our way through it.

09 - Share With Care
10 TNT tactics for facilitators

There are multiple variations to this tactic, changing the audience each time in a way that serves the conversation that needs to happen. It can also go beyond addressing an audience by taking on a role or imagining a certain situation. For example:

- Explain it as a dictator.
- Explain it as an activist.
- Explain it as an optimist vs. a pessimist.
- Explain it as if we live in 2050.
- Explain it after a worldwide ecological disaster.
- Explain it as if the internet doesn't exist.
- Explain it as if AI has taken over.

Shaping the sharing before the conversation really kicks off is like putting some extra fuel on a fire or adding some extra spices to a dish. It can shake up a group of participants to start talking about the topic in a totally different way.

10 - Rise And Fall

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

In this series of examples exploring TNT tactics to unlock conversations that may lead to better outcomes, “Rise and fall” is probably the simplest to understand and the hardest to execute.

A lot of things in life can be explained as a bell curve. The adoption of new technology, the life span of a human, the lifecycle of a business, the seasons, moon cycles, and even the tides. Life is characterized by rise and fall.

When envisioning the future, our five-year growth plan, strategy and new solutions, we always focus on the rise. At the same time, the most interesting conversation might be about when something peaks and when the decline starts. What would trigger the decline, and what would the relevant context be?

Decline, deterioration and even death, in the broadest sense of the word, are not the most exciting and motivating aspects of creation. But when something ends, something new begins. In business, especially in the area of technology, it can bring a lot of value to envision the rise and the fall of something new, including what would be on the next horizon as the next rise.

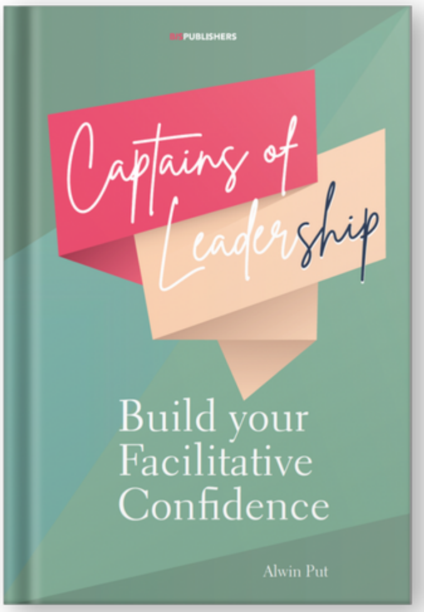
It can be hard to paint a picture of the emergence of something new and its downfall. It triggers a good level of controversy in terms of thinking about how sustainable a new solution or situation can be. In practice, this can be applied when you ask a team to create a vision of the future and include thinking around the peak and the downfall. It doesn’t need a perfect timeline; it could be an expected series of events without exact time indications.

10 - Rise And Fall

10 TNT tactics for facilitators

This is especially relevant when the topic is related to training and consultancy when there is an aim to make your customer or student self-sustainable or self-reliable, making yourself redundant in the process. The redundancy is the end of a kind of relationship that potentially morphs into another type of relationship or just ends. It can also be applied when working on the customer lifecycle for your service or product, not only getting clear on making the sale or maybe multiple sales in a lifetime but also when the customer will fall out of love with the brand and stop buying your product or service.

Concretely, to go to a deeper level of understanding the value delivered by an organization, internally or externally, it will make sense to also trigger thoughts about the downfall as much as the rise. It raises questions about the expiration date of relevancy, factoring in trends and changes on a macro level. It raises questions about resilience and innovation. It also brings some flexibility and humility into the conversation. Everything, even the best ideas, has a lifecycle.



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