Session example 2: 90 min session with a moderator and 3 panel speakers

Theme: Best practices for developing funding, attracting female students, enhancing career visibility

Role of the chair

The role of chair is vital to the success of a panel session. And yet, this role is frequently underplayed on the international conference circuit.

During the preparatory phase, the chair should be available to the panel members for any information they might need about the session itself, the other speakers, the venue, etc. The chair also plays an essential role in ensuring coherence between the speakers, making sure there is no overlap, ensuring that visual aids are used appropriately and especially that the number of slides in a power point presentation is not excessive. As a rule of thumb there should be no more than one slide per minute maximum.

On the day itself, the chair or moderator must be able to excite interest in the session right from the start and to keep things going during it as needed. This means being able to ensure that speakers respect time limits, that one individual audience member doesn't dominate as can happen, that the discussion remains valid and dynamic, etc. It is essential therefore that much thought be given to the choice of chair.

10 mins Introductions/presentation of panel. The chair could do this or better still, each panel member could introduce another panel member so that from the start different voices are heard. These introductions should be kept short. Give each person 2 minutes for example.

The chair should work at captivating the audience right from the start. One way to do this would be to divide the audience in three, very simply by room section (those seated on the right, on the left, in the centre) and ask each section to write down one best practice idea in one sentence. No more than two minutes should be spent on this. Tell the audience you'll come back to this at the end of this session.

The audience could then be asked to listen to the presentations in groups. How these groups are formed will depend on audience size. For smaller groups this might be done by using the 123456 method, or dividing people into smaller groups or pairs. For larger audiences you might simply tell three people in a given row that they will form a group with the three people behind them.

10mins X 3 (30mins) + 5 mins after each presentation. Presentations designed to set the scene on each topic:

One of the dangers of a panel session is that it become a series of disconnected 'talking heads' with individual, separate points of view or angles that have little or nothing in common. To avoid this happening, it is a good idea to think about how the theme might be divided up between the speakers so that connections between them are apparent and dynamic from the outset. Using the theme above as an example, instead of asking a panel of three deans to present best practice in their individual schools for example, you might ask each of them to pick an aspect of the topic that they have the greatest or most relevant expertise in. So one panel member might talk about the challenges of fundraising, another might talk about how to reduce drop-out rates, another might talk about how to attract more female students to engineering schools. This avoids the monotony of ‘in my school we do this’ by each of the speakers and allows them to connect together. In such a session, the first speaker might include a brief and general introduction to the topic with the second and third speaker elaborating the points briefly outlined by the first speaker.

After each presentation, ask your audience to reflect together in their groups with each other on what the speaker has said and on thoughts they might have, points they would like to go back to, disagree with etc. One member of the group might quickly note down the points made. The idea of this exercise is to give people time to reflect on the issues raised and to encourage audience participation at the end of the session. Many adults prefer to take a little time to digest what has been said by the speaker and work out their own ideas before adding to a discussion. This allows them to do this and to make any point they want to make without necessarily having to stand in the limelight at ‘question time’ which many people are reluctant to do. It also gives them time to breathe between presentations which in turn will increase concentration levels for the next speaker.

20mins Comments, discussion, questions: once the presentations are over then the floor can be handed over to the rest of the room where after the exercise at the end of each presentation there should be plenty of lively exchange and discussion. Returning to the first exercise when participants were asked to write down one best practice idea, they might also be invited at this point to share any idea that has not been included in the speakers’ presentations.

NB: In order to avoid a hierarchical ‘them and us’ situation by referring to this section as *question time* alone, the chair might call for comments, debate, discussion, etc.