



CORPORATE KEYNOTE SPEAKER
WATERFORD · IRELAND

THE COMPLETE ORGANISER'S HANDBOOK

What Makes a Great Conference or Town Hall?

Enda O'Doherty's complete organiser's handbook

Everything from the first honest conversation about why you're doing this at all, through the seating plan and the sound desk, to whether anything was actually different thirty days later.

20 sections

20 printable templates

24 diagrams

Every figure sourced

Free to use and share

As featured on Newstalk, Down to Business



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Free · no sign-up · print the templates

By **Enda O'Doherty**

Updated August 2026

Reading time ~55 min

Why this handbook exists

Over the past decade I have spoken at hundreds of conferences, town halls and leadership events across Ireland, for AIB, Kerry Foods, TripAdvisor, Sanofi, Blackbaud and many others. I have also spent a great deal of time sitting in the audience at other people's events, which is where most of what follows was actually learned.

What becomes clear from both vantage points is this. **The difference between an event people are still quoting in November and one they have forgotten by Tuesday is rarely the quality of the content.** It is the quality of the decisions made around it: the purpose it was built on, the way the day was paced, whether people could genuinely hear and see what was happening, and whether anything at all was designed to happen afterwards.

Those decisions are mostly made early, cheaply, and often by people doing this alongside a full-time job. Very little practical guidance exists for them. This handbook is written to close that gap.

It covers the full arc in twenty sections, with twenty printable templates and twenty-four diagrams: defining the purpose, understanding the audience, designing the experience, briefing speakers properly, holding attention across a long day, running the room itself, and measuring whether any of it actually worked. Where a figure is drawn from research it is sourced. Where it is my own judgement from the stage, I have said so.

Everything here is offered freely. Use it, print it, circulate it inside your organisation, and disagree with the parts you think are wrong.

Enda O'Doherty

Corporate Keynote Speaker · Waterford, Ireland

Planning a conference, town hall or leadership event?

I'm always glad to talk it through, whether or not there's a booking in it. No pitch deck, just a conversation about what your people need.

Let's chat →

Email info@endaodoherty.ie · Phone 086 677 2154 · endaodoherty.ie/lets-talk · Corporate keynote speaking, Ireland

Who wrote this



Enda O'Doherty is a corporate keynote speaker and endurance athlete from Waterford. He taught for nearly thirty years, and speaks on resilience, mental health, adversity and high-performance teams.

In 2015 he covered nine marathon distances in eight days, Belfast to Waterford, carrying a washing machine on his back for Pieta House. In 2017 he led an expedition for a mental health charity, carrying that washing machine two days above the clouds on Kilimanjaro.

"Attendees at our national conference called your session the highlight of the conference."

Mary Beth Westmoreland, Chief Technology Officer, Blackbaud Inc.

"Enda spoke at the end of year risk town hall. The feedback from the attendees was extremely positive."

Deirdre Hannigan, Chief Risk Officer, AIB

AIB · KERRY FOODS · TRIPADVISOR · SANOFI · BLACKBAUD

As featured on **Down to Business with Bobby Kerr**, Newstalk.

Also heard and seen on **RTÉ Radio 1**, **Virgin Media One** and in **The Irish Times**.

Consider Enda for your event →

Who this is for: anyone who has been handed a conference, an all-hands, a town hall or a leadership offsite and is now responsible for making it worth people's time. HR, internal comms, L&D, EAs, marketing, or the person who happened to be in the room when it was decided. You do not need to be an events professional. You do need to make some decisions in the right order, and that's what this is.

What's in here

1. Defining the purpose
2. Understanding the audience
3. Think → Feel → Do
4. Designing the experience
5. The opening ten minutes
6. Leadership presentations
7. The keynote speaker
8. The science of attention
9. Slides and visual communication
10. Interaction and participation
11. Storytelling
12. Energy management
13. Psychological safety
14. Recognition and celebration
15. The room: capacity and seating
16. Sound, light and comfort
17. Breaks, food and flow
18. Accessibility and inclusion
19. Measuring whether it worked
20. The 30-day follow-up
21. All 20 templates
22. Sources and further reading

PART ONE

Purpose, People and Outcome

Everything expensive that goes wrong later is decided here, cheaply, in a room with four people and a whiteboard. This part is worth more than the rest of the handbook put together.

SECTION 1

Defining the purpose

Ask most organisers what their conference is *for* and you get a theme. "Growth Together." "Stronger 2027." "One Team, One Vision."

Those are not purposes. That's wallpaper.

A purpose is a sentence with a verb in it, and a consequence if you fail. "*We need four hundred people who currently think the restructure is being done to them to leave believing it is being done with them, and to be able to explain it to their own teams on Monday.*" That's a purpose. You can design against it. You can measure it. You can tell a speaker what you need.

Here's the practical test I use. If you cannot finish this sentence without using the words *journey*, *alignment* or *engagement*, you don't have a purpose yet:

"We are spending this money and taking these people out of the business for a day because _____, and if it works, _____ will be different."

The ten reasons events actually get held

Almost every conference and town hall is doing at least one of these. The trouble starts when it's quietly doing five, and nobody has ranked them.

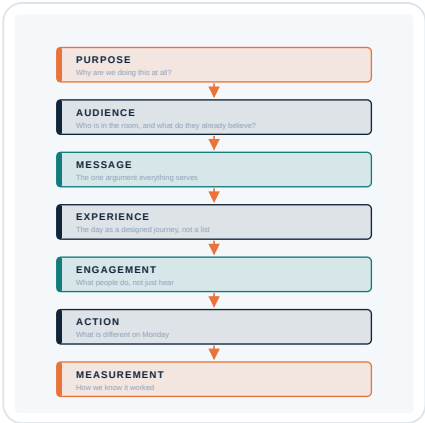
PURPOSE	WHAT IT DEMANDS OF THE DESIGN	FAILURE MODE
Communicate strategy	Clarity over completeness. One argument, repeated. Time for questions, not just slides.	Death by roadmap
Align people	Shared experience and shared language. People need to hear each other, not just the stage.	Broadcast, no dialogue
Launch a new direction	Emotional lift plus practical detail. Both, or it's either hype or homework.	Announcement with no "so what"
Build culture	Time together that isn't scheduled. The corridor is the content.	Packed agenda, no air
Recognise achievement	Specificity. Named people, named things they did.	Generic thanks from the stage
Motivate	Honesty first, energy second. Motivation on top of a lie has a half-life of a day.	Rah-rah in a bad year
Educate	Practice, not exposure. And a plan for reinforcement afterwards.	Content firehose
Create connection	Structured, low-risk ways to talk. Not "there's drinks at six."	Networking left to chance
Drive behaviour change	One behaviour. Manager involvement. A 30-day plan built before the day.	Inspiration with no scaffolding
Address uncertainty or change	Candour, real Q&A, and someone senior willing to say "I don't know yet."	Scripted reassurance

The ranking exercise. Write your top three on a whiteboard. Now delete one. Whatever you fought hardest to keep is your actual purpose. Design for that; let the other two happen as by-products.

The purpose test for every item on the agenda

Once you have the sentence, you have a weapon. For every proposed session, ask: "if we cut this, what does the audience fail to understand or feel or do?"

If the honest answer is "nothing, but Finance always presents", you have just found forty minutes to give back to the breaks. This is the single most useful question in conference planning and it makes you unpopular for about a week.



The Conference Success Model. Each layer depends entirely on the one above it. Most events start at Experience and work outwards, which is why they feel busy and land soft.

1

Why are we here?
PURPOSE

2

What do people need to know?
MESSAGE

3

What do we want them to feel?
EMOTION

4

What do we want them to do?
ACTION

5

How will we know it worked?
MEASUREMENT

If you cannot answer all five, you are not ready to book a venue.

If you cannot answer all five, you are not ready to book a venue, never mind a speaker.

TEMPLATE 01**Conference Purpose Worksheet**

Do this before anything else. Twenty minutes with the sponsor, in person, before a venue is booked.

THE EVENT, IN ONE SENTENCE, WITH A VERB AND A CONSEQUENCE

PRIMARY PURPOSE (PICK ONE FROM THE TEN)

SECONDARY PURPOSE (MAX ONE MORE)

WHO IS THE SPONSOR, AND WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE TO THEM PERSONALLY?

WHAT IS THE HONEST BUSINESS CONTEXT? (RESULTS, CHANGE, MORALE, WHAT PEOPLE ALREADY SUSPECT)

WHAT MUST NOT HAPPEN ON THE DAY?

WHAT ARE WE DELIBERATELY NOT TRYING TO DO HERE?

AT 90 DAYS, WHAT WILL BE MEASURABLY DIFFERENT? (BEHAVIOUR, NOT SATISFACTION)

BUDGET

DELEGATE NUMBERS

DECISION-MAKER SIGN-OFF

Struggling with the purpose sentence?

It's the hardest page in this handbook and the one most worth outside eyes. I'm happy to be a sounding board, no charge, no pitch.

[Talk it through →](#)

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SECTION 2

Understanding the audience

Every organiser can tell you how many people are coming. Very few can tell you what those people currently believe.

That gap is where conferences die. You build a day for the audience you wish you had, curious, optimistic, up to speed, and then four hundred people walk in carrying last quarter's redundancies, a commute, a laptop full of unanswered email and a well-earned suspicion that this is going to be another one of these.

You are not speaking to a room. You are speaking to four hundred private, ongoing arguments that were already in progress before you started.

The five questions that matter

AUDIENCE DIAGNOSTIC

- Who are they, actually?** Not headcount, roles, seniority mix, how long they've been here, how many are meeting each other for the first time, how many are remote and resent the travel.
- What do they already know?** If half the room has heard the strategy three times and half have never heard it, you have two audiences and one stage. Decide which one you're serving before someone else decides for you.
- What do they believe?** This is the one nobody asks. What is the prevailing story in the canteen? What do they think this event is *really* for? If people believe an all-hands has been called to announce bad news, that belief is in the room whether it's true or not.
- What are they worried about?** Ask their managers. Ask three of them directly. Write the top three fears on a page and check that your agenda addresses at least one before lunch.
- What do you want them to think, feel and do differently?** Which is the next section, because it deserves its own.

Segment the room honestly

Most audiences contain at least four distinct groups, and a session that works beautifully for one can actively alienate another.

SEGMENT	WHAT THEY NEED	WHAT KILLS THEM
The believers	Something new. Permission to go further. To be given a job.	Being sold what they already bought
The sceptics	Acknowledgement that the last initiative didn't land. Evidence. Honest answers.	Unearned optimism from the stage
The tired	Relief. Recognition. A reason to care that costs them nothing extra.	Another ask on top of the pile
The new	Context. Who's who. Language decoded. A way in socially.	Internal acronyms and in-jokes

Do the fifteen-minute version. Phone three people who will be in the room, one from each of the first three segments. Ask: "what would make this day worth your while, and what would make you switch off?" You'll get better design intelligence in forty-five minutes than from any post-event survey.

TEMPLATE 02

Audience Profile & Mapping

One per major audience segment. Photocopy it. If you can't fill in "what they believe", go and find out.

SEGMENT NAME

APPROX. NUMBERS

% OF THE ROOM

WHO THEY ARE, ROLES, TENURE, LOCATION, HOW THEY GOT HERE

WHAT THEY ALREADY KNOW ABOUT THIS TOPIC

WHAT THEY CURRENTLY BELIEVE, INCLUDING THE CANTEEN VERSION

WHAT THEY ARE WORRIED ABOUT (TOP THREE)

WHAT EARNS THEIR TRUST

WHAT LOSES THEM INSTANTLY

THE ONE THING THIS SEGMENT MUST TAKE AWAY

Not sure what your audience actually believes?

Sometimes an outside voice can ask the questions internal people can't. Happy to help you frame them.

[Talk to Enda →](#)

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SECTION 3

Think → Feel → Do

This is the most useful three words in the handbook, and the fastest way to improve a conference agenda without spending a euro.

For every single session, every keynote, every leadership slot, every breakout, every video, every award, three questions:



Run every session through all three. Most corporate presentations only ever fill the first box, which is why they could have been an email, and often should have been.

Why all three, and why in that order

THINK is the easy one. It's the content. Every organisation is good at this and most stop here.

FEEL is the one that determines whether THINK survives the car park. Trust, energy, relief, urgency, belonging, being taken seriously. You cannot bolt this on with a video at the end. It comes from who speaks, how honestly they speak, and whether the room has been designed to let people feel anything at all.

DO is the one that gets left blank. And a DO is not "be more customer-focused." A DO is specific enough that someone could observe whether it happened. *"Every manager runs the three-question conversation with their team in the next fortnight."* That's a DO.

The test: if a session cannot fill all three boxes, it is an email. Send the email, give the time back to the breaks, and watch the whole day improve.

Worked example

SESSION	THINK	FEEL	DO
CEO strategy update	We are moving from three business units to two, and here is the logic in one sentence.	This was decided for reasons I can follow, by people who know it's disruptive.	Be able to explain the change accurately to my own team on Monday.
External keynote	Resilience is a set of practices, not a personality trait.	Permission. Relief. That the thing I've been quietly struggling with is normal.	Take the self-assessment. Have one honest conversation this week.
Customer panel	Three specific things customers say we get wrong.	Uncomfortable, in a productive way. Not defensive.	Bring one of the three to my next team meeting.
Awards segment	These are the behaviours we actually value, demonstrated.	Seen. That effort here gets noticed by name.	Nominate someone in my own team this quarter.

TEMPLATE 03

Think · Feel · Do Planner

One row per session. Send the completed row to the speaker, it is the single most useful thing a speaker can receive.

SESSION

SPEAKER / OWNER

THINK, WHAT SHOULD THEY UNDERSTAND THAT THEY DIDN'T BEFORE?

FEEL, WHAT SHOULD THE ROOM FEEL DURING AND AFTER THIS? (NAME THE EMOTION)

DO, WHAT SPECIFIC, OBSERVABLE ACTION FOLLOWS? BY WHEN? OWNED BY WHOM?

HOW WILL WE KNOW THINK LANDED?

HOW WILL WE KNOW DO HAPPENED?

IF WE CUT THIS SESSION ENTIRELY, WHAT IS LOST?

Want a session that fills all three boxes?

Think, Feel and Do is the standard I brief myself against for every booking.

Consider Enda as a speaker →

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SECTION 4

Designing the experience

An agenda is a list of things that will happen. An experience is a plan for how the room will *feel* across seven hours. Almost every conference has the first. Very few have the second.

The audience is on a journey whether you design one or not. They arrive in some state, they pass through a sequence of rooms and moods and queues, and they leave in some other state. Your only real choice is whether that journey is intentional.



The Conference Journey Map. Note where the natural troughs fall, arrival, lunch, and the first ten minutes after every break. Those are the moments to design hardest, and they're the ones that get the least attention.

The twelve moments

Every event, however simple, moves through these. Write a name beside each one, the person responsible. Any moment with no name is a moment left to chance.

MOMENT	WHAT IT'S REALLY DOING	WHERE IT USUALLY GOES WRONG
Before	Setting expectation, seeding curiosity, reducing anxiety about the practicalities	A calendar invite with a venue address and nothing else
Arrival	First impression. Am I welcome? Is this organised? Do I belong here?	One queue, one badge printer, nobody making eye contact
Opening	Setting tone, permission and relevance for the entire day	Housekeeping, fire exits, and a slide of the agenda
Energy building	Getting the room from "audience" to "participants"	Skipped entirely; assumed to happen by itself
Keynote	The shared reference point everyone can quote in the taxi	Booked last, scheduled worst
Leadership	Credibility, candour, direction	Sixty slides read aloud
Breaks	Physiological recovery and the conversations that justify attendance	Fifteen minutes for three hundred people and four toilets
Interaction	Turning listening into thinking	"Any questions?" into silence
Stories	Making abstract strategy concrete and memorable	Replaced by a case study slide
Workshops	Practice. The only part where people do rather than hear	Too short, no output, no follow-through
Recognition	Demonstrating what the organisation actually values	Generic, rushed, or squeezed by an overrun
Close	The line people carry out the door	4.45pm, half the room watching the car park

The peak-end principle, applied. People don't remember an average of the day. They remember the most intense moment and the last moment. So: engineer one genuine peak, a story, a reveal, a moment of real honesty, a piece of recognition that lands, and then protect the close with your life. Never let an overrun eat the ending.

TEMPLATE 04

Conference Journey Map

Score each moment 1 to 5 for expected audience energy. Then fix the troughs before they happen, rather than apologising for them afterwards.

MOMENT	ENERGY 1-5	WHAT THE AUDIENCE IS THINKING HERE	THE FIX, AND WHO OWNS IT
Before / invite			
Arrival & registration			
Opening 10 minutes			
Leadership session			
Mid-morning break			
Keynote			
Lunch			
Post-lunch (14:00-16:00)			
Workshop / interaction			
Recognition			
Close			
Week 1-2 follow-up			

Designing the shape of the day?

Tell me what you're building and I'll tell you straight where a keynote helps, and where it doesn't.

Ask Enda →

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PART TWO

What Happens On Stage

The opening, the leaders, the keynote, the slides and the questions. This is the part everyone thinks the conference *is*, and it's still only about a third of what decides whether it works.

SECTION 5

The opening ten minutes

The room decides very early. Not consciously, and not fairly, but it decides. Within about ten minutes people have formed a view on three things: *is this organised, is this honest, and is this going to be worth my day?*

And here is what almost every conference in Ireland does with those ten minutes: fire exits, phone etiquette, the wifi password, a slide of the agenda, and a welcome from somebody reading a script somebody else wrote.

You spend fifty thousand euro on a day and give away the ten most valuable minutes of it to housekeeping.

What the opening actually has to do

FOUR JOBS, IN THIS ORDER

1. **Establish relevance immediately.** Within ninety seconds, someone in the room should think "*this is about me.*" Not about the company. About them.
2. **Set the emotional temperature.** If it's a hard year, name it in the first two minutes. If you don't, everything afterwards sounds like it's being said by someone who hasn't noticed.
3. **Give permission.** Tell people what kind of day this is. "You will be asked to talk to the person beside you. There will be time for real questions and we will answer them." People behave the way you tell them they're allowed to behave.
4. **Create a little energy.** Not forced fun. Movement, laughter, or a moment of genuine surprise. Something that changes the physical state of the room from "seated audience" to "people who are here."

What works

- **Start on time. Exactly on time.** It is the cheapest credibility you will ever buy, and starting eight minutes late tells four hundred people that their time is the flexible ingredient.
- **Open with something concrete.** A number, a customer's actual words, a photograph, a thirty-second story. Not a welcome.
- **Name the elephant.** "I know the last twelve months have been hard, and I know some of you are here wondering whether today is going to acknowledge that. It is."
- **Get people talking to each other inside the first ten minutes.** Ninety seconds, in pairs, one question. It changes the acoustics of the room for the rest of the day, literally. A room that has spoken is a room that will ask questions later.
- **Say what the day is for, in the purpose sentence you wrote in Section 1.** Out loud. In plain language.
- **Tell them how it ends.** "By four o'clock you'll have three things to take back to your team." People relax when they know the shape.

What fails

- **Housekeeping first.** Move it. Put it after the opening, or into the pre-event email, or on a slide during the first break. Nobody has ever been unable to find a fire exit.
- **The agenda slide.** They have the agenda. Reading it aloud is not an opening, it's a stall.
- **Corporate waffle.** "As we continue on our transformation journey towards becoming a truly customer-centric organisation..." People have heard this sentence. They know it means nothing. Every one of these costs you credibility you'll want later.

- **A video with no sound.** Ninety seconds of someone crouching at a laptop and the room is gone. If you open with video, it has been tested on the show laptop, with audio, that morning.
- **Thanking the committee.** Do it at the end. Nobody has ever been energised by a list of names at 9.02am.
- **Apologising.** "Sorry, we're running a bit behind, and the microphone's playing up, and unfortunately Sarah couldn't make it..." You have now told the room this is a shambles before anything has happened.

The one-sentence rule for MCs. If your MC's opening contains the phrase "without further ado", the ado has already been considerable. Brief them: no more than ninety seconds before the first real content.

TEMPLATE 05 The Opening 10 Minutes Planner

Plan this minute by minute. It is the only part of the day that deserves that level of detail.

MINUTE	WHAT HAPPENS	PURPOSE, WHAT IT DOES TO THE ROOM	WHO
-10 to 0	Room walk-in: music, screen state, lighting, who greets		
0:00-0:30	The hook, concrete, specific, not a welcome		
0:30-2:00	Relevance: why this, why now, why you		
2:00-3:30	Name the elephant / set emotional temperature		
3:30-5:00	The purpose sentence, said out loud		
5:00-7:00	Permission & shape of the day		
7:00-9:00	First interaction, 90 seconds, in pairs		
9:00-10:00	Hand over with momentum		

WALK-IN MUSIC & WHO OWNS THE FADE

WHERE HOUSEKEEPING HAS BEEN MOVED TO

THE FIRST SENTENCE, WRITTEN OUT WORD FOR WORD

Want an opening that isn't housekeeping?

Setting the tone in the first ten minutes is the bit I'm most often brought in to do.

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SECTION 6

Leadership presentations

Most senior leaders are considerably better in conversation than they are on a stage, and the standard corporate conference is designed to showcase the version of them that is worse.

Give a capable CEO forty slides and twenty-five minutes and you will get a person reading. Give the same CEO a chair, an interviewer and eight prepared questions and you'll get somebody the room actually believes.

How to communicate strategy without drowning people

THE RULES THAT HOLD

- **One argument, three supports.** Not seven pillars. Not a wheel diagram with nine segments. One sentence that a delegate could repeat accurately in the car park, and three reasons it's true.
- **Lead with the decision, not the journey to it.** Executives love to walk the room through the analysis. The room wants to know what was decided and what it means for them, and will happily take the analysis afterwards.
- **Translate everything into "what this means for you."** Every strategic point needs a second sentence beginning with those words. If the leader can't write that sentence, the point isn't ready.
- **Numbers need one comparison.** "€47 million" means nothing. "€47 million, up from €31 million, and the first time we've beaten the UK business" means something.
- **Fewer slides than you think, bigger than you think.** See Section 9.

Using stories properly

The most powerful thing a senior leader can do on a stage is tell one specific, slightly uncomfortable story about themselves. Not a triumph. A moment where they got it wrong, or didn't know, or were frightened, and what they did next.

It works because it does something no slide can: it establishes that the person on stage is a person. Everything they say afterwards is heard differently. See [Section 11](#) for the structure.

Coach the leader on one story, not the whole deck. If you have one hour of prep time with a CEO, don't spend it on slides. Spend it finding and shaping the one story. It's the highest return on preparation time available anywhere in the event.

Communicating difficult messages

The principles below apply to any hard message a leader has to deliver from a stage:

- **Bad news first, and unhedged.** Burying it in the middle after twenty minutes of context reads as manipulation, and people are extremely good at detecting the shape of an approaching announcement.
- **Say the actual word.** "Redundancies," not "a reduction in force." "We lost the contract," not "a change in the client landscape." Euphemism is the fastest way to lose a room.
- **Explain the reasoning, and be honest about what was hard.** People can accept a decision they dislike far more easily than one that appears arbitrary.
- **Say what you don't know, and when you will.** "I don't have the answer to that yet, and I'll have it by the 14th" is a hundred times stronger than a confident non-answer.
- **Do not follow bad news with a motivational video.** Ever.

Authenticity, without the poster

Authenticity has been used so heavily in corporate life that it's become almost meaningless. In practice, on a stage, it comes down to something quite specific and testable: **is this person saying anything that costs them something to say?**

If everything a leader says is safe, polished and upside-only, the room concludes, correctly, that they are being managed. One admission of difficulty buys more trust than an hour of confidence.

The confidence paradox. Leaders often worry that admitting difficulty will undermine confidence. In practice the opposite happens. Confidence built on obvious omission is brittle, the moment reality contradicts it, everything else the leader said becomes suspect. Confidence built on "here's what's hard, here's what we're doing, here's what I need from you" survives contact with a bad quarter.

Preparing a leader for a hard room?

Coaching a CEO to find the one story worth telling is some of the most useful work I do.

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The keynote speaker

I should declare an interest here: this is what I do for a living. So I will be as straight as I can about my own trade.

There is a version of the external keynote that is entertainment. It's a good story, well told, the room enjoys it, everyone claps, and by Wednesday it has evaporated completely. It is not worthless, a room that has laughed together is a better room, but if that's all you got, you overpaid.

Then there's the version that's actually worth the fee. And the difference is almost entirely down to two things: **whether the speaker was briefed properly, and whether anything was designed to happen afterwards**. Both of those are your job, not the speaker's.

What makes an external speaker genuinely valuable

QUALITY	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE	HOW TO TEST IT BEFORE YOU BOOK
Relevance	Speaks to your people's actual situation, in their language, referencing their world	Ask: "what would you change about this talk for us?" Vague answer = off-the-shelf
Credibility	Has genuinely done the thing, or genuinely studied it. Skin in the game.	Ask what they got wrong, and what it cost them
Storytelling	Specific scenes, not summaries. You can see it.	Ten minutes of unedited video, not a showreel
Humour	Arises from the material and from self-deprecation, not from bits	Does the audience laugh in the unedited footage, or just the showreel?
Emotion	Earns it. Doesn't manufacture it, and doesn't leave people stranded in it	Ask how they land the room afterwards
Energy	Real, not performed. You can hear the difference in a phone call.	Have the call. Always have the call.
Practical takeaway	Something a delegate can do on Tuesday without permission or budget	"What are the three things people do differently after hearing you?"
Participation	Gets the room doing something, appropriate to your culture	Ask what they'll ask the audience to do, and veto anything that would horrify your people
Memorability	One image or phrase that survives six months	Ask past clients what people still quote
Connection to objectives	Willing to read your purpose sentence and build toward it	Send them Template 03 and see what comes back



The questions below are the ones I would want to be asked. If a speaker cannot answer them clearly, that tells you something useful before you have spent anything.

The twelve questions to ask before you book anyone

- ☐ What would you change about this talk for our audience specifically?
- ☐ Can I see ten minutes of unedited footage, not a showreel?
- ☐ Will you speak to our people, or will you deliver your talk?
- ☐ What do you need from us to be at your best?
- ☐ What are the three things people do differently after hearing you?
- ☐ Tell me about a time it didn't work. What happened, and what did you change?
- ☐ What will you ask the audience to do during the session?
- ☐ Can you talk to two clients who booked you for something like this?
- ☐ What happens after the talk, do you offer anything, and is it included?
- ☐ How much preparation time will you spend on us, and what does that look like?
- ☐ What's your position on being recorded and on us using clips afterwards?
- ☐ What would make you turn this booking down?

Question 12 is the tell. A speaker who has never turned down a booking is a speaker who will say yes to a room they're wrong for. The good ones have a list.

Briefing a speaker properly

Here is the honest truth from the other side of the transaction: **most speaker briefs are a calendar invite, a venue address and a running order.** That's it. And then organisers are disappointed when the talk feels generic.

The best brief I've ever received was two pages. It told me who was in the room, what had happened in the business in the previous eighteen months, what people were angry about, what the CEO was going to say immediately before me, three things I should not mention, and one sentence describing what a win looked like. I rewrote a third of my talk. It was the best session I did that year, and it took that organiser about forty minutes.

Forty minutes of briefing is worth more than four thousand euro of fee. If a speaker won't engage with a proper brief, that tells you what you're buying. And if you won't write one, you've capped what any speaker can do for you.

TEMPLATE 06

Speaker Brief

Send this to every speaker, internal and external, at least four weeks out. A speaker who arrives briefed is a different speaker.

SPEAKER

SLOT & DURATION

Q&A? HOW LONG?

THE ONE-SENTENCE PURPOSE OF THE WHOLE EVENT

WHO IS IN THE ROOM, ROLES, SENIORITY, NUMBERS, HOW MANY ARE NEW, HOW MANY ARE REMOTE

WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN THIS BUSINESS IN THE LAST 18 MONTHS THAT MATTERS HERE

WHAT THE AUDIENCE CURRENTLY BELIEVES, INCLUDING THE CANTEEN VERSION

WHAT HAPPENS IMMEDIATELY BEFORE THIS SESSION

WHAT HAPPENS IMMEDIATELY AFTER

THINK · FEEL · DO FOR THIS SESSION (FROM TEMPLATE 03)

DO NOT MENTION / HANDLE WITH CARE, LIVE CHANGE PROGRAMMES, RECENT DEPARTURES, SENSITIVE NUMBERS, IN-HOUSE JARGON

WHAT DOES A WIN LOOK LIKE?

FOLLOW-UP COMMITTED TO (SESSION, RESOURCES, TOOLS)

DECK DEADLINE

SOUNDCHECK TIME

CONTACT ON THE DAY + MOBILE

MIC TYPE

RECORDING PERMITTED?

GREEN ROOM / ARRIVAL TIME

Looking after speakers on the day

Small things, and every one of them affects the quality of what the room gets:

- **Somewhere to be beforehand that isn't the audience.** Not a corridor. Not the coffee queue. Twenty quiet minutes before going on is the difference between a good talk and a great one.
- **Water on stage, at room temperature, opened.** Sparkling water before a fifty-minute talk is an act of hostility.
- **A countdown clock the speaker can see.** Not a person waving. A clock.
- **Tell them honestly if you're running late** and by how much, before they go on, not in a whisper at the lectern.
- **Brief them on the room's mood.** If the session before was heavy, say so. It changes how a good speaker opens.
- **Introduce them properly and briefly.** Ninety seconds maximum, and never read their whole biography, you're spending the room's attention on your credibility rather than theirs.

Drawing up a speaker shortlist?

Send me the completed Template 06 and see what comes back. That'll tell you more than any showreel.

[Consider booking Enda →](#)

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SECTION 8

The science of attention

A conference can have brilliant content and still fail, because at some point people quietly stopped listening and nobody on stage noticed.

Before we get to what works, let me clear out two statistics that are almost certainly in someone's slide deck for your event right now. Both are false, and both are quoted constantly.

"Humans now have an attention span of eight seconds, shorter than a goldfish."

Fabricated. Traced back, it came from an SEO website presenting itself as a research institution. Its cited sources were an analytics report about 25 people leaving websites in 2008, and a second source which told reporters the claim was false. Microsoft, which had repeated it, removed the report. (Forbes, 2023; Temple University Beasley School of Law, 2024)

"Only 10% of training transfers to the job."

Also fabricated. It comes from a 1982 trade article where the author posed it as a *rhetorical question*, "how many times have you heard training directors say...", with no data behind it whatsoever. It has been cited as fact in business cases for forty years. (Fitzpatrick, Work-Learning Research)

And the one everyone believes about lecture length

The "audiences can only concentrate for ten to fifteen minutes" rule has no evidential basis either. Reviewers went looking at the studies underneath it and found them insufficient. Bradbury's 2016 review in *Advances in Physiology Education* noted that the most frequently cited source on the matter "*barely discusses student attention at all*", and reached the conclusion every conference organiser should have somewhere visible:

"The greatest variability in student attention arises from differences between teachers and not from the teaching format itself."

Bradbury, N.A. (2016), *Advances in Physiology Education* 40(4)

Which means: **the format is not your problem. The person is.** A brilliant speaker holds a room for fifty minutes. A poor one loses it in six, and no amount of interactive breakout design will rescue them.

What the evidence does show

Bunce and colleagues measured attention during lectures using clickers and found something more useful than a cliff-edge. Attention lapses are **frequent and brief**, students reported lapses of a minute or less more often than long ones, and engagement "*alternates between attention and non-attention in shorter and shorter cycles as the lecture proceeds.*"

Critically: interactive elements such as clicker questions and demonstrations produced significantly lower attention decline, and "*this effect persisted during lectures immediately following the intervening pedagogies.*" (Bunce, Flens & Neiles, *Journal of Chemical Education*, 2010)

In other words: an interruption doesn't just create a good five minutes. It buys back the segment afterwards.



Attention doesn't fall off a cliff at ten minutes, it sags and recovers in short cycles, and the sag deepens as a session runs on. Every format change resets it. This is why the fix is variation, not shorter sessions.

Cognitive overload, the real enemy

Attention isn't usually lost because people are bored. It's lost because they're full.

Working memory is small. When a slide is dense, an accent is unfamiliar, the acoustics are poor and the concept is new, people are spending capacity on *decoding* rather than *understanding*, and there is nothing left for the actual point. Every friction you remove gives capacity back.

THE NINE LEVERS FOR HOLDING A ROOM

1. **Variety**, change voice, format or posture at least every 45 minutes. Not because attention expires on a timer, but because variation regenerates it.
2. **Storytelling**, narrative is processed differently from information. It's the cheapest compression algorithm we have.
3. **Visual communication**, one idea per slide, big. See Section 9.
4. **Participation**, even ninety seconds of talking to a neighbour changes the state of the room.
5. **Movement**, get people out of the chair. Standing changes physiology, not just mood.
6. **Questions**, asking the room a question they answer silently in their own head still works. It converts listening into thinking.
7. **Breaks**, real ones, long enough to actually be breaks. See Section 17.
8. **Energy management**, design the arc deliberately. See Section 12.
9. **Remove friction**, sound, sightlines, temperature, air. All of Part Three. Every one of these is stealing capacity from your content.

The honest framing to use internally. "People can't concentrate for more than ten minutes" is a myth, but "people disengage from an unbroken monologue in a stuffy room with a bad microphone" is not. Fight for the second argument. It's true, and it's the one that gets budget.

Need a session that holds a room for fifty minutes?

The evidence says the speaker matters more than the format. That's a fair standard to hold me to.

[Check availability →](#)

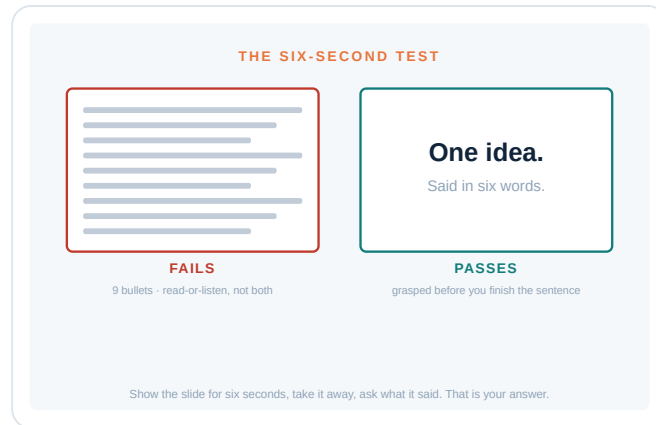
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SECTION 9

Slides and visual communication

Nobody in the history of business has ever said "that was a great presentation, and I particularly enjoyed slide fourteen."

Slides are not the presentation. They are a visual aid to a person talking. The moment a slide contains everything the speaker is going to say, one of the two becomes redundant, and it isn't the slide that people stop paying attention to, it's the human.



The six-second test. Show a slide for six seconds, take it away, and ask someone what it said. Whatever they can tell you is what that slide communicates. Everything else was decoration.

The rules worth enforcing

RULE	WHY	IN PRACTICE
One message per slide	If a slide has three points, the audience picks one and misses two. You don't get to choose which.	Split it. Slides are free.
Text no smaller than 30pt	Treat as a floor, not a target. Anything smaller is a handout being displayed.	If it doesn't fit at 30pt, it's a document
Images over text where the point is emotional	A photograph of the actual customer beats the words "customer-centric" every time	Real photos, not stock. People can tell.
One chart, one message, one highlight	A chart showing everything shows nothing. Highlight the bar you're talking about; grey the rest.	Say the takeaway in the title
Data: the number and one comparison	Absolute figures are meaningless without an anchor	"€47m, up from €31m"
Video: tested, with sound, on the show laptop	This is where conferences go to die	Test it that morning. Every time.
Fonts: one family, two weights	Anything else reads as amateur at scale	Sans-serif. Big. Boring is fine.
Animation: build only, no motion	Reveals help sequencing. Spinning transitions cost you credibility.	Fade or appear. Nothing else.
Branding: small, corner, once	The logo on every slide is a tax on the content area that nobody notices anyway	Title slide and close. Done.

What to remove from a presentation

- The agenda slide (and the "where we are now" agenda slide that reappears four times)
- The org chart, unless someone will genuinely need it
- Any slide whose title is a noun rather than a statement, "Q3 Performance" tells you nothing; "Q3 beat plan on volume, missed on margin" tells you everything
- Every slide the speaker will skip past saying "I won't dwell on this"
- The thank-you slide with the stock photo of a sunrise
- Anything the speaker plans to introduce with "I know you can't read this at the back"

The appendix trick. Senior people resist cutting slides because the detail feels like rigour. Give them a deal: everything cut goes into an appendix that is circulated afterwards. Nobody loses anything, and the room gets a presentation instead of a document.

TEMPLATE 07

Presentation Quality Checklist

Send to every presenter with the speaker brief. Ask them to tick it before submitting their deck.

Structure

- ☐ There is ONE argument, stated in one sentence
- ☐ The audience knows within 90 seconds why this matters to them
- ☐ Every slide title is a statement, not a noun
- ☐ THINK / FEEL / DO are all answerable
- ☐ The close is written word for word
- ☐ Deck runs at least 10% under the slot time

Content

- ☐ One message per slide
- ☐ Every number has a comparison
- ☐ At least one specific story with a named person
- ☐ Jargon and acronyms removed or defined
- ☐ Nothing here that could have been an email

Visual

- ☐ No body text below 30pt
- ☐ Passes the six-second test
- ☐ Charts: one message, one highlight, rest greyed
- ☐ Contrast checked at real house-light levels
- ☐ No pale grey on white
- ☐ Images are real, not stock
- ☐ One font family, two weights maximum
- ☐ Builds only, no motion transitions

Technical

- ☐ Tested on the actual show laptop
- ☐ Embedded video tested WITH audio
- ☐ Fonts embedded or standard
- ☐ Aspect ratio matches the screen (16:9)
- ☐ Submitted by the deadline

Need someone who doesn't arrive with 40 slides?

I speak on resilience, mental health, adversity and high-performance teams, for AIB, Kerry Foods, TripAdvisor, Sanofi and Blackbaud.

[See the talks →](#)

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SECTION 10

Interaction and participation

The default state of a conference audience is passive, and passivity is comfortable. People will happily sit for six hours absorbing nothing at all, and give you an 8.2 out of 10 for the venue.

Interaction isn't about making people uncomfortable or forcing them to share feelings with a stranger. It's about the fact that **listening and thinking are different activities**, and only one of them changes anything.

The ladder, lowest risk to highest

FORMAT	WHAT IT COSTS THE AUDIENCE	BEST USED
Silent question	Nothing. "Think of the last time you..."	Any room, any culture, any time. Free.
Show of hands	Almost nothing, and it tells the room about itself	Early, to establish that participation is normal
Live polling	Anonymous, low risk, generates real data	When you want honest answers to an awkward question
Turn to your neighbour	90 seconds, one question, no reporting back	The workhorse. Use it three times a day.
Table discussion	5-10 minutes, needs a clear question and a timer	Cabaret rooms, after a provocative input
Table exercise with output	15-30 minutes, needs materials and a capture method	When you'll actually use what they produce
Reflection & writing	Individual, quiet, surprisingly powerful	Before a close, to convert intention into commitment
Open Q&A	High social risk for the asker. See Section 13.	Only with roving mics and a way in for the nervous
Audience challenge	Highest risk. Someone comes on stage.	Only if you know the room and have a volunteer briefed

The rule of the first interaction. Whatever you do first sets the ceiling. If the first ask of the day is a show of hands, you can build to table discussion by the afternoon. If the first ask is "who wants to come up on stage?", you've taught the room that participation is dangerous and you won't get a question all day.

Making Q&A actually work

- **Roving mics and named runners.** "Just shout it out, I'll repeat it" loses the back third of the room and makes the recording useless.
- **Take questions anonymously as well as live.** A simple digital tool, or index cards at the tables. The best question of the day is almost always one somebody wasn't willing to put their name to.
- **Have a planted opener.** Not a fake question, a real one, from someone briefed to go first. The first question is the hardest and someone has to break the seal.
- **Answer the hardest one first.** It buys you credibility for everything after it. Ducking it costs you the rest of the session.
- **Never say "great question."** You've now graded the questions, and everyone whose question didn't get that response noticed.
- **Repeat the question before answering.** For the room, for the recording, and to make sure you've understood it.

TEMPLATE 08

Audience Engagement Planner

Map every interaction across the day. If there are fewer than four, the day is a broadcast.

TIME	INTERACTION	RISK LEVEL	THE EXACT QUESTION BEING ASKED	WHO RUNS IT

FIRST INTERACTION OF THE DAY, WHAT IS IT, AND DOES IT SET THE RIGHT CEILING?

ANONYMOUS QUESTION CHANNEL, WHAT TOOL, WHO MONITORS IT, WHEN IS IT READ OUT?

WHAT DO WE DO WITH THE OUTPUT? (TABLE EXERCISES WITH NO DESTINATION ARE HOMEWORK.)

Want an audience that participates rather than watches?

Getting a reserved Irish room talking is a craft. It's most of what I do.

Consider Enda as a speaker →

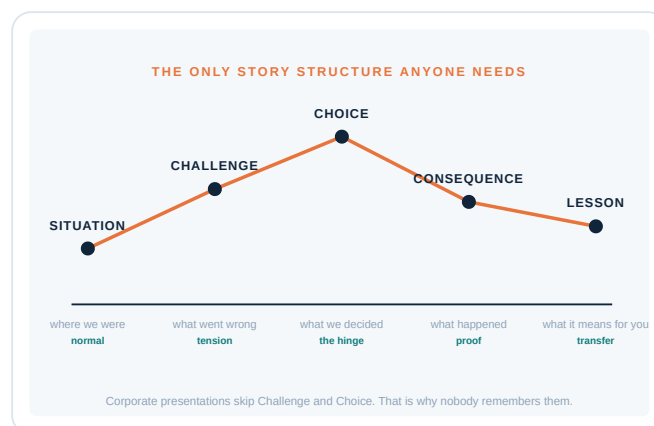
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SECTION 11

Storytelling

Every organisation has extraordinary stories in it and presents almost none of them. Instead it presents case studies, which are stories with everything interesting surgically removed.

The difference is simple: a case study tells you what happened and that it worked. A story tells you what was at stake, what nearly went wrong, and what somebody chose to do about it.



Corporate presentations routinely skip Challenge and Choice, the two beats that carry all the tension and all the meaning. That is precisely why nobody remembers them.

The five beats

SITUATION → CHALLENGE → CHOICE → CONSEQUENCE → LESSON

- Situation.** Where we were. Specific and short. A time, a place, a person. "March 2024. Three of us in a meeting room in Sandyford at half seven in the evening."
- Challenge.** What went wrong, or what was at risk. This is where most corporate storytelling gets sanitised. Don't sanitise it, the challenge is what makes the rest matter.
- Choice.** The hinge. What we decided, and what we gave up to decide it. A story without a real choice is just a sequence of events.
- Consequence.** What actually happened, including the parts that didn't work.
- Lesson.** What this means for the people listening. One sentence. Don't over-explain it; audiences resent having the moral spelled out.

Turning corporate information into something people remember

THE CORPORATE VERSION	THE VERSION PEOPLE REMEMBER
"We improved our customer response times by 34% following a process redesign."	"A customer in Cork waited eleven days for a callback about a broken meter. Her name was Nuala. Here's what we found when we went looking for why."
"Safety is our number one priority."	"On the 14th of April, Gerry stopped a job because something didn't look right. It cost us four hours. Here's what would have happened if he hadn't."
"We are committed to employee wellbeing."	"Last year one of our managers told me they'd been coming in every day for six months without telling anyone how bad things were. This is what we changed, and it isn't enough yet."

Where to find them. Ask three managers: "tell me about a time in the last year when someone on your team did something you were proud of and nobody outside the team ever heard about it." You will get more usable material in one afternoon than in six months of comms planning.

TEMPLATE 09

Storytelling Planner

One per story. Give it to any leader who is presenting. It is the highest-return prep you can do.

STORY WORKING TITLE

WHOSE STORY IS IT, AND WHO TELLS IT?

SITUATION, WHEN, WHERE, WHO. BE SPECIFIC. A DATE AND A PLACE.

CHALLENGE, WHAT WENT WRONG OR WHAT WAS AT STAKE. DO NOT SANITISE.

CHOICE, WHAT WAS DECIDED, AND WHAT WAS GIVEN UP TO DECIDE IT

CONSEQUENCE, WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED, INCLUDING WHAT DIDN'T WORK

LESSON, IN ONE SENTENCE, WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE PEOPLE IN THIS ROOM

PERMISSIONS NEEDED (NAMED PEOPLE, CUSTOMERS, IMAGES)

LENGTH WHEN TOLD OUT LOUD, TIME IT

Looking for a speaker who tells a real story?

Nine marathons in eight days with a washing machine on my back. It's a true one, and it goes somewhere useful.

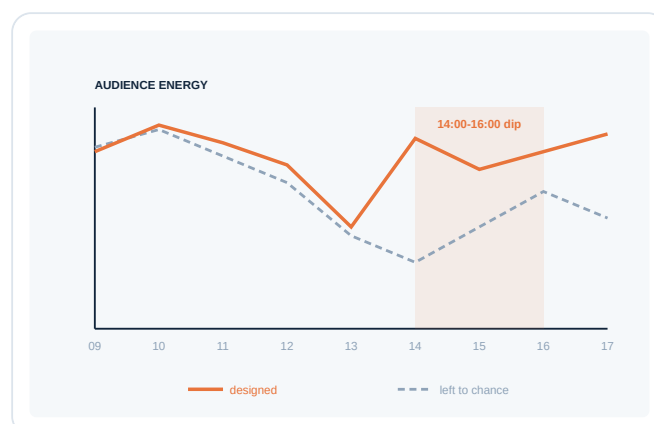
[See the talks →](#)

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SECTION 12

Energy management

You cannot expect five hundred people to sit for six hours and remain equally engaged. That isn't a motivation problem or a content problem. It's physiology, and it is entirely predictable, which means it is entirely designable.



Two versions of the same day. The dashed line is what happens when a programme is built by whoever emailed first. The solid line is what happens when someone owns the energy arc.

The post-lunch dip is real, and it is not the sandwiches

Everyone jokes about the graveyard slot. Almost nobody plans for it. And the research is more specific, and more useful, than the folklore.

14:00 to 16:00

The defensible window for the post-lunch dip. Researchers describe the resulting decrements in alertness as "a widespread problem in the workplace."
Zhou et al., Frontiers in Public Health, 2021

Circadian

The dip is primarily driven by the body clock. A meal amplifies it; the meal does not cause it. So "serve a lighter lunch" is a small part of the answer, not the answer.

d = 1.89

Effect size for the decline in reaction speed under lighting from below the visual field, by far the largest of any condition tested.
Derengowski et al., Lighting Research & Technology, 2025

What actually works after lunch

- **Raise the lights. Do not dim them.** Every instinct says lower the house lights so the slides pop. Resist it. In controlled testing, bright blue-enriched light from 2pm significantly reduced negative mood and subjective sleepiness and improved working memory accuracy. That was a lab with sleep-deprived participants rather than a ballroom, but the direction is clear and the intervention is free.
- **Light from above, not below.** This is the genuinely non-obvious one. All that moody perimeter uplighting is beautiful in the event photography and sedating for the humans sitting in it.
- **Movement.** Brief activity breaks reduce fatigue. Two minutes, standing, turn to the person beside you, one question. That's the whole intervention.
- **Put your best speaker here.** Not at 9am.

The graveyard slot is not where you bury the boring bit. It is where you spend your best asset.

The 9am slot has adrenaline doing half the work for you. Everyone is caffeinated and slightly nervous and the room has energy it did not earn. The 2.15pm slot has none of that. If you put your weakest item there because "nobody's really listening anyway", you have written off a quarter of your day, and taught your people that the afternoon is optional.

The nine variables you can pull

When the energy map (Template 10) shows a trough, these are your levers. Use two or three, not all nine.

LEVER	HOW TO USE IT	BEST DEPLOYED
Content	Move from abstract to concrete. A customer story beats a strategy slide when energy is low.	Any trough
Speaker	Change the voice. Even a five-minute internal contribution resets the room.	After 40+ minutes of one person
Format	Lightning talks, 5-7 minutes each, blocks of four or five.	Excellent at 2.30pm
Movement	Stand, turn, talk, sit. Two minutes.	2pm, and after any long session
Humour	Cannot be scheduled, but can be recruited, book someone who has it.	Mid-afternoon
Interaction	Table discussion with a timer and a real question.	When you need thinking, not listening
Music	Walk-in, walk-out, and returning from breaks. Costs nothing, changes everything.	Every transition
Breaks	A real one. See Section 17 for why 15 minutes isn't one.	Every 90 minutes maximum
Emotion	Recognition, a personal story, a genuine thank-you by name.	Before the close

TEMPLATE 10

The Energy Curve

Score each slot 1 to 5 for expected audience energy, honestly, as if you were sitting in it. Then fix every trough before it happens.

TIME	SESSION	ENERGY 1-5	IF IT'S A TROUGH: WHICH LEVERS, AND WHO OWNS THE FIX?
09:00			
10:00			
11:00			
12:00			
13:00 lunch			
14:00 ▲			
15:00 ▲			
16:00			
17:00			

The 14:00 and 15:00 rows are marked for a reason. That's the circadian dip. Your fixes: strongest speaker, lights up, light from above, movement break, or a block of five-minute lightning talks. Not a forty-minute finance update.

Looking to fill the 2pm slot?

That's the one I'd choose if I were picking. It's where a room most needs somebody who can lift it.

[Check availability →](#)

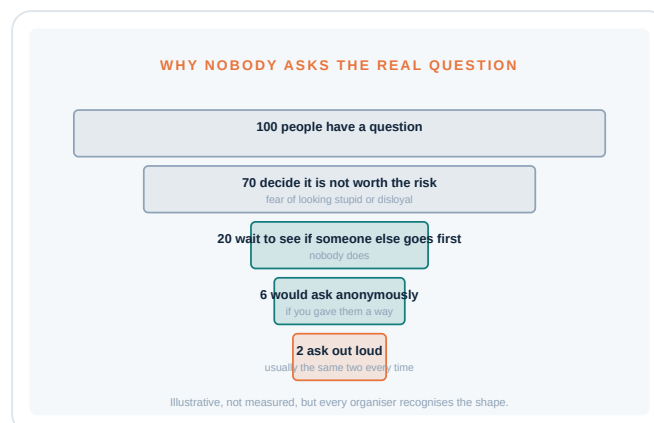
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SECTION 13

Psychological safety

Every organiser has watched it happen. The leader says "any questions?", scans a room of four hundred people, waits four seconds, says "no? great, let's move on", and the meeting ends with the actual question unasked.

That silence is almost never agreement. It's a calculation.



Illustrative rather than measured, but every organiser recognises the shape. The gap between "people who have a question" and "people who ask one" is where trust is either built or quietly lost.

What people are actually calculating

Asking a question in front of four hundred colleagues and the entire executive team carries real, rational risk. Will I look stupid? Will I look disloyal? Will this be remembered at my next review? Is this a career-limiting thirty seconds?

Nobody weighs those risks and thinks "but the organisation values open dialogue." They think about their mortgage.

Psychological safety is not a value you announce. It is a set of costs you lower.

The practical levers

LOWERING THE COST OF SPEAKING UP

- **Provide an anonymous channel and use it visibly.** Read out a genuinely hard anonymous question, on stage, and answer it properly. You have just demonstrated more about the culture than any slide could.
- **Have a planted first question.** Real, from a briefed person. Somebody has to break the seal, and it should not have to be the bravest person in the room.
- **Answer the hardest one first.** The room is watching to see what happens to the person who asks something awkward.
- **Never punish the asker, even mildly.** A defensive answer, a flash of irritation, a "well, that's a slightly loaded question", the whole room logs it and nobody asks again for two years.
- **Have the leader model it.** "I got this wrong last year." "I don't know." "That's a fair challenge and I hadn't thought about it that way." Safety flows downhill from whoever has the most power in the room.
- **Use table discussion before Q&A.** A question that has been agreed by six people at a table is far easier to ask than a personal one, and you'll get better questions.
- **Thank people specifically, afterwards, for hard questions.** Privately is fine. Publicly is better.
- **Follow up on what you promised.** Nothing kills future participation faster than a question that got a promise and then nothing.

The test. Six weeks after your event, ask three people who asked questions whether anything happened as a result. Their answer tells you exactly how many questions you'll get next time.

Building a culture where people speak up?

I talk openly about my own recovery, anxiety and depression, which tends to give others permission to be honest too.

[Talk to Enda →](#)

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SECTION 14

Recognition and celebration

Recognition segments are where conferences most often become embarrassing, and it is almost always the same failure: the recognition is *generic*.

"I want to thank the whole team for their incredible hard work this year" recognises nobody. Everyone in the room knows it costs nothing to say and applies to everyone equally, which means it applies to no one.

What makes recognition land

SIX RULES

1. **Name the person, and name the thing.** Not "our operations team." "Marie in Athlone, who stayed until nine on the 3rd of December because a customer's system was down and she wasn't going to leave it until morning."
2. **Describe the behaviour, not the outcome.** Outcomes are often luck. Behaviours are choices, and recognising a behaviour tells the room what to do.
3. **Make the connection to values explicit but light.** If you've described the behaviour well, everyone can see which value it is. Say it once; don't lecture.
4. **Have the person's own manager tell it, not HR.** The story is better because they were there.
5. **Warn people in advance.** Being surprised on stage in front of four hundred colleagues is a nightmare for a good proportion of people. Ask.
6. **Protect the slot.** Recognition squeezed by an overrun is worse than no recognition at all, you've told people exactly where it ranks.

Beyond awards

- **Team achievements told as stories**, three minutes, using the five beats from Section 11, told by someone who was there.
- **Milestones**, service anniversaries, qualifications, returns from leave. Cheap, and disproportionately meaningful.
- **Peer recognition**, collect nominations in advance and read a selection. What people notice about each other is often better than what management notices.
- **The quiet contributors**, every organisation has people who hold things together and never appear in a results slide. Finding one and naming them well is often the most talked-about moment of the day.
- **Customers' words**, a thirty-second recorded clip of an actual customer describing what someone did for them beats any internal award.

The superficiality test. If the recognition segment could be delivered, unchanged, at a competitor's conference, it's superficial. Specificity is the entire difference.

Planning a conference, offsite or wellbeing week?

If you want a session people are still quoting in November, let's have a conversation.

Consider booking Enda →

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PART THREE

The Room Itself

Seating, sightlines, sound, light and comfort. The unglamorous half of the job, and the half that quietly decides whether any of the content in Part Two actually reaches anyone.

SECTION 15

The room: capacity and seating

The most consequential mistake in conference planning

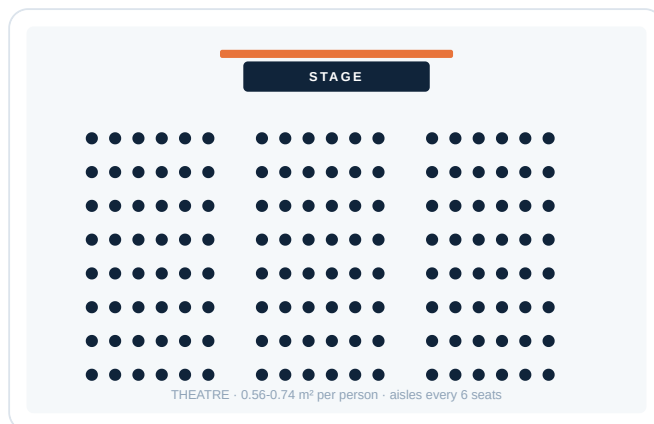
A venue will tell you a room holds 500 people. That number is almost certainly its *fire capacity*, and fire capacity is roughly double the number you can actually run a good conference for.

Fire guidance allows around **0.5 m² per person** for a standing or seated assembly. The practical planning figure for theatre-style seating that people can genuinely sit in for six hours is **0.56 to 0.74 m² per person**, and for banquet rounds **0.93 to 1.11 m²**. Once you add a stage, aisles and a catering area, the workable number drops again.

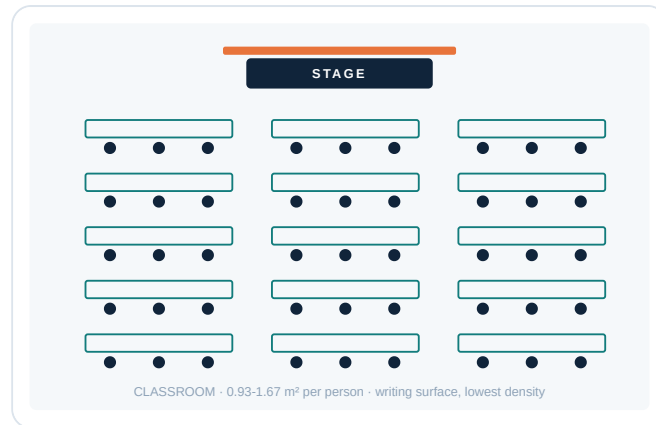
Fire capacity is a ceiling, not a design target. If a venue quotes you a capacity without asking what layout you want, they are quoting the legal maximum. Ask instead: "*what is the capacity in cabaret, with a six-metre stage and two aisles?*" The number will drop noticeably, and that is the honest one.

The layouts

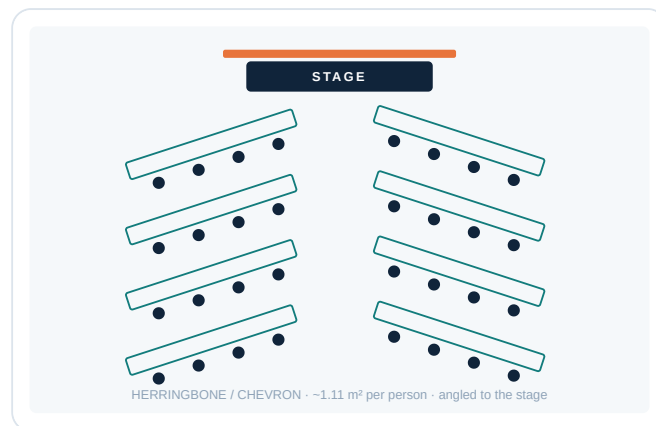
This is the decision that most affects how a day feels, it costs nothing to change, and it is almost always made by whoever resets the room fastest rather than by you.



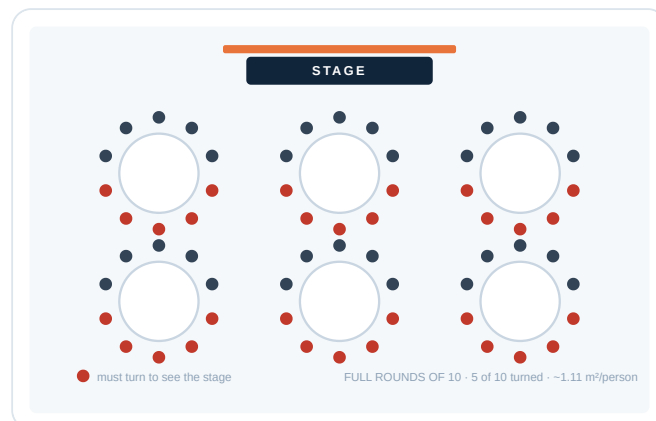
Theatre. Maximum density, minimum comfort. No writing surface. Fine for a 90-minute plenary; punishing for a full day. Note the aisles, you cannot simply run eighteen seats across without them.



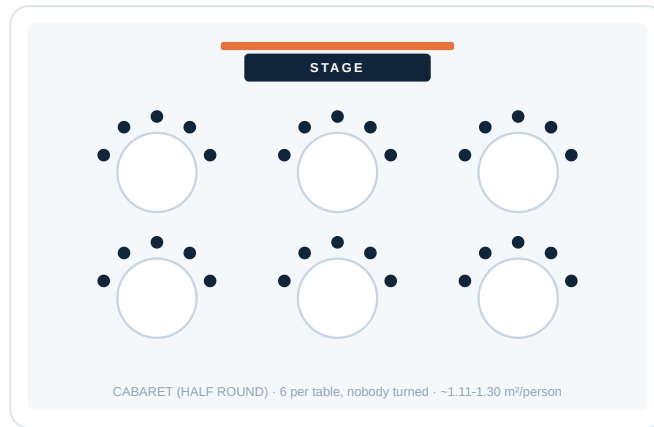
Classroom. The lowest density of any seated layout, but the only one where people can genuinely take notes and use a laptop. Worth the extra space on a training-heavy day.



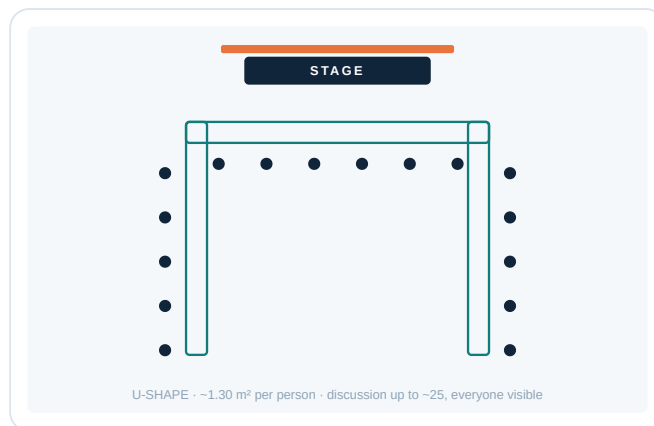
Herringbone / chevron. Angled toward the stage, so sightlines are better than classroom at similar density. Underused in Ireland, and usually available at no extra cost, just ask for it by name.



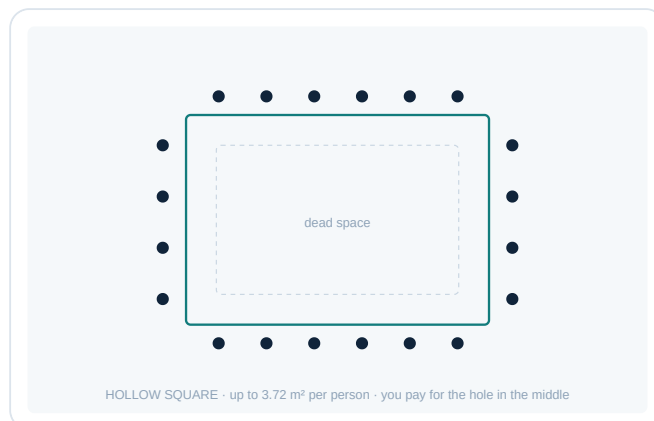
Full rounds. The default for any event with a meal, and geometrically hostile to a stage. On a round of ten, five people are facing away from the front, and roughly a quarter of the room has to turn fully in the chair for the entire session.



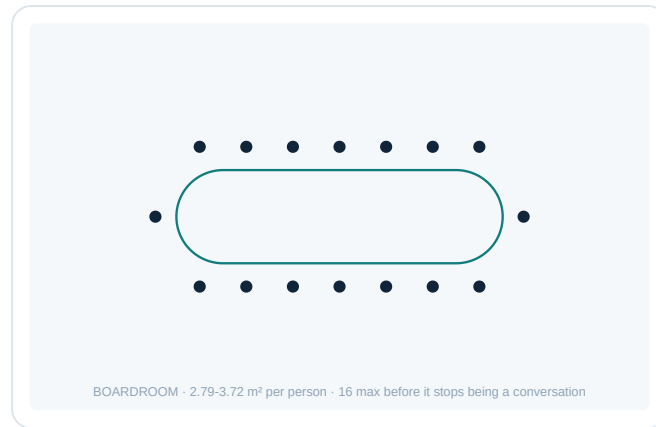
Cabaret (half-round). The fix. Leave the stage-facing side of each table empty and everybody faces forward. It costs roughly 30 to 40% of the seats at each table, which is exactly why venues don't suggest it, and exactly why you should.



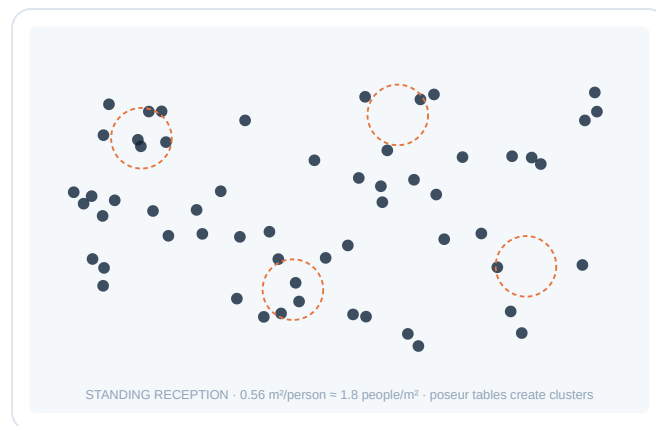
U-shape. Everyone can see everyone. Excellent for discussion up to about 25 people; useless beyond that, and the person at the open end is uncomfortably exposed.



Hollow square. You pay for the dead space in the middle. Use only when there is genuinely no focal point and no presentation.



Boardroom. Above about sixteen people it stops being a conversation and becomes a meeting with an audience. If you find yourself adding a second ring of chairs against the wall, change the layout.



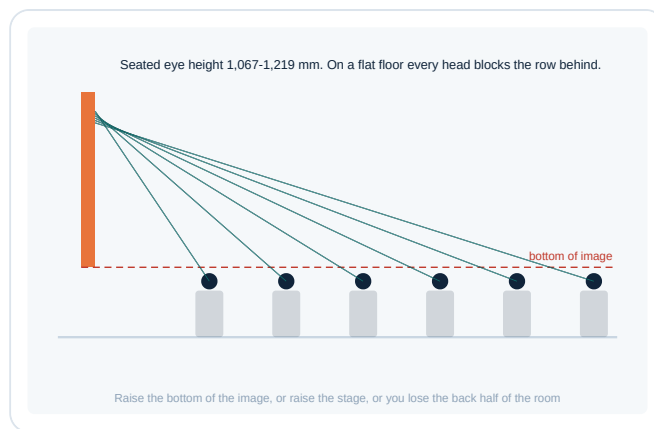
Standing reception. Poseur tables create conversational anchors. Without them, people drift to the walls and the room feels half empty even when it isn't.

Layout comparison

LAYOUT	M² PER PERSON	BEST FOR	WORST FOR
Theatre	0.56-0.74	Large plenary, short sessions, maximum numbers	Note-taking, discussion, long days
Classroom	0.93-1.67	Training, laptops, genuine note-taking	Density, you'll need a much bigger room
Herringbone	~1.11	Sightlines plus a writing surface	Awkward in narrow rooms
Cabaret	1.11-1.30	Full days mixing stage content and table discussion	Capacity, you lose 30-40% per table
Crescent rounds	~1.11-1.30	Compromise between rounds and cabaret	Some seats still poorly angled
Full rounds	0.93-1.11	Meals, awards dinners, pure table work	Anything with a stage. Half the table is turned.
U-shape	~1.30	Discussion up to ~25	Anything larger
Hollow square	1.30-3.72	Peer negotiation with no focal point	Presentations. Space efficiency.
Boardroom	2.79-3.72	Up to 16, real discussion	Anything above 16
Standing	~0.56	Receptions, networking, energy	Anyone who can't stand for two hours

Space-per-person figures are industry convention rather than a published standard. Fire capacity and escape-route rules are set by building regulations, in Ireland, Technical Guidance Document B. Your venue is responsible for those; your job is simply not to confuse their number with yours.

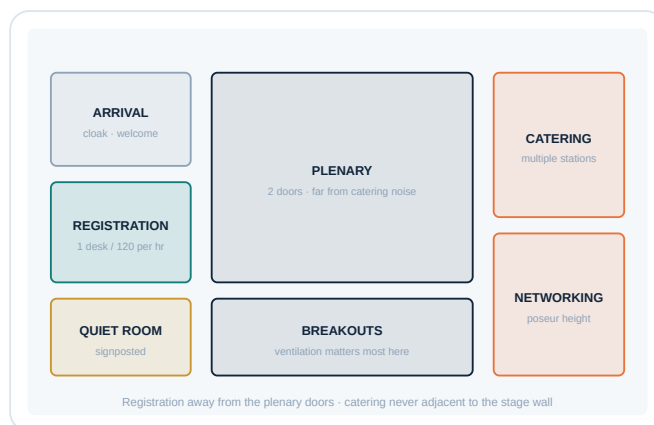
Sightlines: the worst seat in the room



On a flat ballroom floor, every head blocks the row behind it. The bottom of your screen has to clear all of them, which is a stage-height decision, a screen decision and a room-choice decision, usually made months apart by three different people.

The five-minute audit that saves the day. Before the room fills, go and sit in the worst seat, back corner, behind the pillar, beside the door. Put the first slide up. Can you read it? Can you see the speaker's face? If not, you have a problem and about four hours to fix it. Do this every single time. It is the highest-return five minutes in the entire event.

Zoning the venue



Registration away from the plenary doors, so late arrivals don't queue through your opening. Catering never against the stage wall, service noise carries straight through. And a conversation zone *beyond* the coffee queue, so people who've been served move onward instead of blocking the line.

Want a second opinion on your room and running order?

Send them over. I've seen a lot of these from the stage and from the back row, and I'll give you a straight read.

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SECTION 16

Sound, light and comfort

You don't need to become an AV engineer. You do need to know what to ask for, and what to refuse to accept. This section is the short version, the things that actually decide whether people can follow what's happening.

If they can't hear you, nothing else matters

Start here, because everything else is downstream of it. A great conference has sound so good that nobody in the room ever thinks about the sound.

This is not a comfort issue. It's a credibility issue, and there's proper research on it. Researchers presented audiences with *identical* recorded talks, varying only the audio quality. Their finding, verbatim: *"Despite identical content, people evaluated the research and researcher less favorably when the audio quality was low."*

Same words. Same expert. Worse microphone. Less believable.

And it goes further. Background noise degrades what people remember **even when every word is perfectly audible**. One study found recall dropped by around 16% with modest background noise, participants heard everything and retained less of it.

So the air-conditioning hum, the corridor bleed through the airwall and the coffee-station clatter are not background. **They are quietly deleting your content from people's heads.**

WHAT TO INSIST ON

- **Budget AV before you budget lunch.** It is routinely the second-biggest cost and one of the first things cut. That is the wrong order.
- **A full soundcheck in the room, doors closed, at running volume, with every speaker.** Not a five-second "one-two" at eight in the morning.
- **Headset mics for anyone giving a keynote.** They sit close to the mouth, so the level stays constant however the speaker moves, and a good speaker moves. Handhelds are for Q&A. Lecterns anchor people and kill energy.
- **A spare mic, live and tested, and a technician physically in the room all day,** not on a radio in a truck outside.
- **Roving mics and named runners for every Q&A.** "Just shout it out, I'll repeat it" loses the back third of the room and ruins the recording.
- **Ask what's happening in the room next door,** and what the air handling sounds like at full occupancy. Nobody asks this. It is the single most common source of a ruined session.
- **A hearing loop, working and switched on.** See Section 18, this matters more than most organisers realise.

If they can't see it, you didn't say it

You don't need a formula. You need three habits:

- **Sit in the worst seat and read the slide.** If you can't, the slide is wrong or the screen is too small. Almost always both.
- **Two screens if the room is wide.** One central screen in a thirty-metre ballroom serves the middle third and insults everyone else.
- **Nothing below 30pt on a slide, ever,** and treat that as a floor rather than a target. In a deep room you need considerably more.

The other sightline killers, all cheap to fix: a lectern parked in front of table nine, windows behind the stage turning your speaker into a silhouette, a screen mounted so low that row eight is reading the back of row seven's head, and a projector too dim for a room with the lights up. On that last one, **ask your supplier to confirm the projector is bright enough with the house lights at the level you'll actually use.** A cheap projector looks fine in a dark room and grey in a real one.

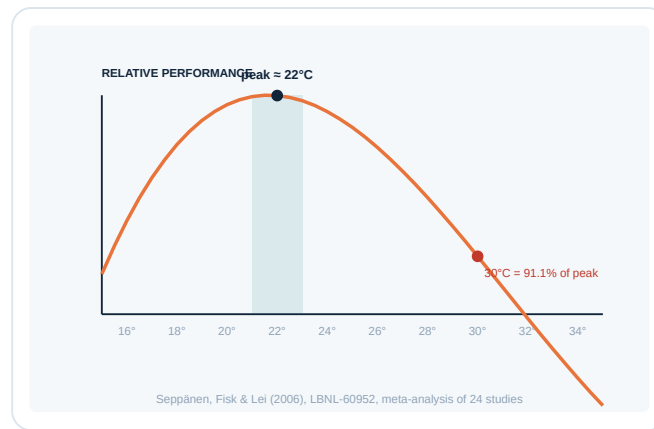
Light

Two things worth knowing, both free:

- **Put a light on the speaker's face.** In a classic study, being able to see the talker's face raised speech intelligibility dramatically when the audio was poor, and the worse the room sounds, the more it helps. Which means it matters most in exactly the kind of ballroom you've probably booked. It helps everyone in the room, not only those with hearing loss.
- **Raise the lights after lunch. Don't dim them.** Every instinct says lower the house lights so the slides pop. Resist it. And use light from *above* rather than moody uplighting from around the room perimeter, light from below is measurably more sedating. Beautiful in the event photography, terrible for the humans sitting in it.

Ask for dimmable, zoned lighting. European lighting standards for conference rooms specifically require dimmability, the standard itself assumes you'll need to control levels for projection. So "the lights are either on or off" is not an acceptable answer from a venue, and you can say so.

Heat and air



Performance peaks at around 22 °C and falls away either side. By 30 °C it has dropped to roughly 91% of peak. Four hundred bodies generate a lot of heat, a room that's comfortable at 8.30am with fifty people in it will not be comfortable by eleven.

- **Aim for about 22 °C**, and know who can actually change it on the day. Get a name and a mobile number, not "reception will sort it."
- **Open the doors during every break.** Free, and it makes a genuine difference to how the next session goes.
- **Breakout rooms are where the air goes bad**, not the plenary. The little room with thirty people in it for ninety minutes is the one nobody checks. If a room feels stuffy, it is, trust the room, not the venue's assurance.

A note on the science, because it gets overstated. You'll see dramatic claims about carbon dioxide levels and cognitive performance. The controlled laboratory results are striking; the real-world office studies find much smaller effects, and ASHRAE, the ventilation body itself, describes the evidence for direct effects at normal indoor levels as inconsistent. So don't tell your venue that CO₂ makes delegates stupid. Do tell them a stuffy, badly ventilated room is a worse place to learn than a well-ventilated one. That claim survives any conversation.

Want a second pair of eyes on your run of show?

I've watched a lot of these from the stage and the back row. Send it over. I'll give you an honest read.

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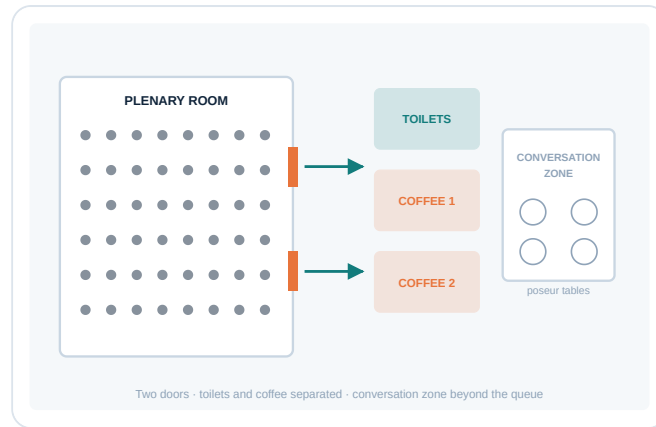
SECTION 17

Breaks, food and flow

The arithmetic no conference programme has ever done

You have 300 delegates. You call a 15-minute break. In that fifteen minutes, each person must: stand up, exit a room with two doors, queue for a toilet, queue for a coffee, check ninety minutes of accumulated messages, possibly have the one conversation that justified their attendance, and be back in their seat.

It cannot be done. So the break overruns, you start the next session late, and by mid-afternoon you are compressing the sessions people actually came for.



What a break needs in order to be a break: two doors, toilets and coffee on separate paths, more than one coffee station, and a conversation zone *beyond* the queue so people who've been served move onward instead of blocking it.

Toilets, why the same queue forms at every conference you've ever been to

UK event guidance (*The Purple Guide*) sets ratios by event duration. For events of **six hours or more where food and drink are served**, which is every conference, the figures are:

1 : 75

Female toilets per attendee

1 : 400

Male toilets per attendee, plus one urinal per 100

+ access

At least one dedicated accessible toilet, unlocked and signposted

The Purple Guide is written for music and outdoor events rather than conference centres, so treat it as a benchmark rather than a rule. The queue maths is identical either way. Compare those ratios to your venue's actual facilities before you set the break length, and note the asymmetry, which is the whole reason one queue is always five times longer than the other.

How long should a break be?

Here's something worth saying honestly: **there is no evidence-based industry standard**. I went looking. IACC, the international body for meeting venues, has published an entire guide to reimagining conference refreshment breaks, and it contains no durations at all. Anything you've read online about "the standard 20-minute break" is convention, not research.

So here is convention, plus judgement from a lot of ballrooms:

- ☐ **25 minutes minimum** for a mid-morning break at 200+ delegates. Fifteen is a fiction you tell yourself in the planning meeting.
- ☐ **Serve refreshments continuously** rather than in a fifteen-minute panic window where the venue allows it. Planners rate this highly and it flattens the queue.
- ☐ **Multiple stations, spread out.** One long table is one long queue.
- ☐ **Put the coffee where you want the conversations**, not in a corridor where people stand in a line facing the same way.
- ☐ **Never schedule anything valuable in the first ten minutes after a break.** Put housekeeping there. Put the video there.
- ☐ **Build a genuine buffer into the afternoon.** Every conference runs late. Good ones run late into a buffer; bad ones run late into the closing keynote.

Catering throughput, the numbers

THING	FIGURE	IMPLICATION
Buffet table capacity	One 8 ft table serves only 20-30 people	200 people needs four separate double-sided lines, not one long one
Serving lines	One double-sided line per 50 people	Ask how many lines, not how many tables
Space per line	~200 sq ft per double-line setup including aisles	The catering area is bigger than you think
Servers, seated meal	1 per 32 guests is industry average; 1 per 20 for genuinely good service	Ask which you're getting. It's the difference between lunch taking 50 or 75 minutes.
Bussers	Minimum 1 per 3 servers	Otherwise plates sit and the room feels neglected
Door flow rate	82 people per metre of width per minute on the flat	Two 1.2 m doors clears 300 people in about 90 seconds, if nothing blocks them
Registration throughput	~30 seconds per attendee ≈ 120 per staff member per hour	600 arrivals in an hour needs five active stations

Food, coffee and the afternoon

Two honest notes before the practical advice.

First: **the "heavy lunch causes the slump" claim is weaker than everyone assumes.** A 2025 scoping review found only nine studies in the entire literature met its inclusion bar. The dip is primarily circadian (Section 12); the meal amplifies it. So a lighter lunch helps at the margin, and it is not the intervention that will save your afternoon. Light and movement have far better evidence.

Second: everything below this line is **practitioner judgement rather than cited research**, it's what I've seen work across a lot of events, and I'd rather label it honestly than dress it up.

WHAT I'D DO ABOUT FOOD AND DRINK

- **Give lunch more time than you want to.** 60 minutes for a served lunch at 200+ is tight; 75 is realistic. The alternative is people eating fast and arriving late and irritable.
- **Standing or grazing lunch beats a seated three-course** for any day where the afternoon matters. People move, talk, and don't get pinned to a table with the same five colleagues.
- **Water on every table, all day, and refilled.** Not just at meals. It's the cheapest thing on this entire list.
- **Real coffee, and enough of it.** The single most complained-about item at any Irish conference. Budget for a proper coffee station and, if you can, a barista, the queue becomes a feature rather than a grievance.
- **Something at the 3pm break with protein in it**, not just biscuits. Nuts, cheese, yoghurt, fruit.
- **Collect dietary requirements at RSVP**, not the week before. Venues report sharply increased requests year on year, and the person who has to ask a waiter three times in front of colleagues remembers it.
- **Label everything clearly.** Under Irish food law the fourteen regulated allergens must be identified for non-prepacked food, but beyond compliance, clear labelling means nobody has to interrogate a server while a queue builds behind them.
- **Never put the coffee station against the plenary room's wall.** Service noise carries straight through, and you'll be undoing everything in Section 16.

Arrival and registration

The first ten minutes of a delegate's day happen before anyone gets on stage, and they set an expectation that the programme then has to overcome or ride.

- **Do the maths on peak arrivals.** Not total attendees, how many arrive in the busiest twenty minutes, which is usually 40 to 50% of the room. Five stations for 600 arrivals in an hour.
- **Separate pre-registered from on-the-day.** Two lines, clearly signed.

- **Someone whose only job is greeting.** Not scanning. Greeting, directing, and spotting the person standing alone looking lost.
- **Badges: first name enormous, surname smaller, organisation or team below.** Readable at conversational distance without anyone having to lean in and squint at someone's chest. It's a small thing that makes the whole day socially easier.
- **Signage from the car park, not from the lobby.** The anxiety starts in the car park.
- **Never queue people through the plenary doors.** Late arrivals then walk through the opening, which is the one part of the day you can't repeat.

Need to fill the slot right after lunch?

It's the hardest slot in the day and the one I'd choose. That's usually where I'm booked.

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SECTION 18

Accessibility and inclusion

Accessibility usually gets discussed as compliance. It's more useful to think of it as attendance: **how many of the people in your room can fully participate in the thing you have paid for?**

8%

of Irish adults have a significant hearing loss, around 300,000 people.
Chime National Hearing Loss Survey, 2022

43%

of people aged 50 to 80 reported some deterioration in their hearing over the previous five years.
Chime, 2022

4%

of seats, the minimum number of hearing-loop receivers recommended by Irish universal design guidance, with a minimum of two.
CEUD / NDA, Building for Everyone

Look at those first two numbers and then look at the age profile of a typical senior leadership audience. There is a meaningful slice of your room sitting in a space with no hearing loop, straining, and not telling you.

The legal position, stated accurately

There's a lot of confidently wrong advice on this, so here it is properly:

- **Hearing loops.** Irish universal design guidance recommends hearing enhancement systems wherever audible communication is inherent to the space, auditoria, lecture rooms, meeting rooms. This is *guidance*, and you will see it claimed as a building regulation. I could not substantiate a numbered mandatory requirement for induction loops in conference rooms in Technical Guidance Document M, so don't tell a venue the law requires it. Tell them the guidance recommends it and that you want one. Where a loop is fitted, it should be commissioned to IEC 60118-4.
- **Captions.** Under WCAG 2.2, live captions for live streamed sessions are a Level AA requirement (SC 1.2.4). Captions on recordings afterwards are Level A (SC 1.2.2), the more basic tier. Do both.
- **The European Accessibility Act** has applied since 28 June 2025, but its scope is routinely overstated. It bites on **online ticketing and e-commerce**, and on audiovisual media services. It does not regulate your physical room. If you sell conference tickets online you are in scope. If you run a free internal town hall, you are not.
- **Irish Sign Language Act 2017.** The duty to provide free ISL interpretation falls on *public bodies* providing statutory services. Around 5,000 Deaf people use ISL as their preferred language, within a wider community of roughly 40,000 who communicate in it. A private conference is not automatically covered, but "not legally required" is a low bar to set for your own people.

The practical list

Physical

- ☐ Step-free access to room, stage and toilets
- ☐ Accessible toilet available, unlocked, signposted
- ☐ Wheelchair spaces integrated into seating, not at the back
- ☐ Doorways wide enough for wheelchair access
- ☐ Quiet room identified and on the signage
- ☐ Clear routes, no trailing cables across walkways

Sensory & communication

- ☐ Hearing loop fitted and commissioned
- ☐ Loop receivers available and offered at registration
- ☐ Light on every speaker's face (Section 16)
- ☐ Live captions for any streamed session
- ☐ ISL interpretation where required, booked early
- ☐ Warning given for strobe or flashing effects

☐ Slides shared in advance for those who need them

Publish the practical stuff in advance. Step-free routes, quiet room, break times, lighting effects, what lunch will be. People with sensory sensitivities, chronic conditions, caring responsibilities or plain travel anxiety plan their day around information you almost certainly have and didn't think to share. It costs one paragraph in the joining email.

Booking a corporate speaker in Ireland?

Every booking includes the live keynote, a follow-up session, a free digital book for every attendee, and the Resilience Map.

[Consider booking Enda →](#)

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PART FOUR

Afterwards

The part that decides whether you ran an event or made a difference. It is designed last, cut first, and worth more than any other line in the budget.

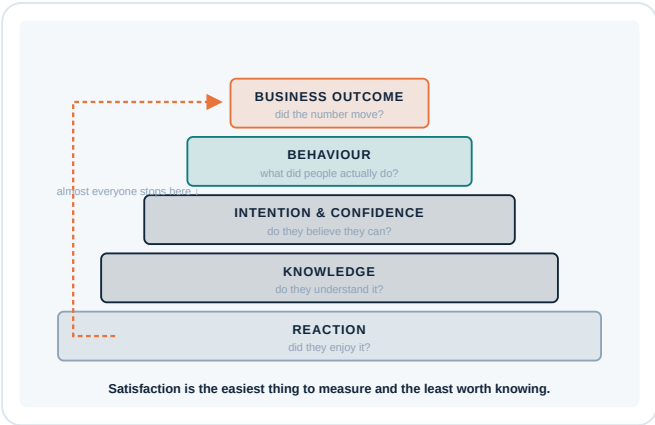
SECTION 19

Measuring whether it worked

Almost every conference in Ireland is evaluated by a survey that asks, in various forms, *did you enjoy it?* And almost every conference scores about 8.2 out of 10, because people are polite, the sandwiches were fine, and nobody wants to be the person who gave the internal comms team a 4.

Satisfaction is the easiest thing to measure and the least worth knowing.

An 8.2 tells you people were comfortable. It does not tell you whether anyone understood the strategy, believed the leadership, or did anything differently. Those are different questions, and they need to be asked at different times.



Five levels of measurement. Nearly every organisation measures the bottom one and stops. The two that matter to the business sit at the top, and they cannot be measured on the day.

What to measure, and when

LEVEL	WHEN	WHAT YOU ACTUALLY ASK
Attendance & engagement	On the day	Who came, who stayed after lunch, how many questions were asked, poll participation rates, how many stayed to the close. Attendance at 4pm versus 9am is a devastatingly honest metric.
Reaction	48 hours	Two questions maximum. "What's the one thing you'll remember?" and "What was the least valuable part of the day?" Open text. Far more useful than a 1-10 scale.
Knowledge	48 hours	"In your own words, what is the strategy for the next 18 months?" You will find this sobering. It is also the single most valuable data point you will collect.
Confidence & intention	48 hours	"How confident are you that you can explain this to your team?" "What is one thing you intend to do differently?" Intention is the strongest available predictor at this stage.
Behaviour	30 and 90 days	"You told us you'd do X. Did you? What got in the way?" Also ask managers what they've observed.
Business outcome	90 days+	The indicator you agreed <i>before</i> the event. Retention, safety reports, pipeline, engagement score, absence, whatever your purpose sentence pointed at.

Agree the measure before you book the venue. If you decide what success looks like after the event, you will, entirely honestly, without meaning to, pick the number that moved. Write it on the purpose worksheet in Section 1 and put it in the sponsor's email.

Three questions worth more than a whole survey

ASK THESE AT 48 HOURS, OPEN TEXT, ANONYMOUS

1. **"In your own words, what was today about?"**, tests whether your one argument survived contact with the room.
2. **"What is one thing you will do differently, and by when?"**, creates the commitment you'll measure at 30 days, and the act of writing it increases the chance it happens.
3. **"What's the question you didn't get to ask?"**, this one is gold. It tells you what the room was actually thinking about while you were presenting something else, and it is often the entire agenda for your next event.

Want an event that's still working at 90 days?

Every booking includes a follow-up session, a free digital book for every attendee, and the Resilience Map.

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SECTION 20

The 30-day follow-up

Here's the pattern every organiser recognises. Everyone is energised on Friday. By Monday the inbox has reasserted itself. By Wednesday the conference is a pleasant memory, and by the following month it is a line in a budget report.

This is not a failure of the event. It is a failure to plan for what a normal human week does to a good intention.



Every one of these is scheduled *before* the conference happens. Trying to organise follow-up afterwards, when the team is exhausted and the sponsor has moved on, is why it never happens.

Why the manager matters more than the speaker

A meta-analysis across 89 studies found that the **transfer climate people return to** correlates with whether training shows up in the job at $r = .27$, at least as strongly as the trainee's own motivation, at $r = .23$. Supervisor support scored higher again at $r = .31$, across a smaller set of studies.

Read that again if you're in L&D. However motivated somebody is walking out of your conference, **what they walk back into is what decides whether it lasts**. You cannot fix that with a better speaker. You fix it with a manager who asks about it on Tuesday.

And spacing matters: a synthesis of 317 experiments on distributed practice found that the optimal gap before reinforcement grows with how long you need people to remember something. One brilliant day with no follow-up is the least efficient method of changing behaviour ever devised.

The plan

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS	WHY THIS, AT THIS POINT
Within 48 hours	Resources, slides, recordings and photos out. A short, personal thank-you from the sponsor, not a newsletter.	The feeling is still live. After a week it's an archive.
Day 7	Manager pack lands: three questions to ask their team, plus a one-page summary of what was said.	Highest-return item in this whole handbook. Costs one page.
Day 14	Managers hold the conversation. Follow up with the ones who haven't.	This is where transfer actually happens, or doesn't.
Day 30	Reinforcement session, a webinar, a short follow-up talk, a team exercise. Not a repeat of the day.	Spaced reinforcement, after the forgetting curve has done its damage.
Day 30-45	Share three internal stories of what actually changed. Specific, named.	Proves it was real. Feeds the next event's credibility.
Day 90	Measure. Report to the sponsor against the purpose sentence.	This is what buys you the budget next year.

The three questions for the manager pack

1. What's the one thing from the day you want to try?
 2. What would get in the way of that, and what can I do about it?
 3. When will we check in on it?

That's it. Three questions, one conversation, ten minutes. It is free, and the evidence says it does more than anything else you can buy.

What I do about this, since you asked

It's why I don't just turn up, speak and leave. Every organisation I work with gets four things rather than one:

- **The live keynote**, customised to your audience, your argument and your slot.
- **A follow-up session**, scheduled 4 to 8 weeks later, when the forgetting curve has done its damage and reinforcement does the most work.
- **A free digital book** for every attendee, so the ideas have somewhere to live after the room empties.
- **The Resilience Map**, an app-based tool where your people privately assess their own stress and resilience levels, see where they sit, and get practical, non-medical guidance on what to change. Not therapy, not a diagnosis. A mirror and a nudge.

That last one exists because of a pattern I kept noticing. People would come up after a talk, tell me something real, and then go back to a workplace with no mechanism at all for what they'd just admitted to themselves.

The context matters. **29% of European workers report being unaware of any measures to prevent work-related stress in their organisation** (Eurofound, EWCS 2024). In Ireland, CIPD's 2025 survey found mental health is now the second most common cause of absence, and the leading contributors to employee mental health problems were workload (58%) and a perceived lack of management support (54%).

Those are organisational design problems, and no keynote fixes them. But the individual still has to get through Tuesday. That's what the follow-up is for.

Ready to talk about your event?

No pitch deck. Just a conversation about what your people actually need, and whether I'm the right person for it.

Book a call with Enda →

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If you'd like a hand with any of this

Conference, leadership offsite, wellbeing week, town hall or fireside chat, if you want a session people are still quoting in November, and a plan for the Monday after, let's have a conversation. No pitch deck. Just a chat about what your people actually need.

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THE TEMPLATE PACK

Ten More Working Templates

Templates 01 to 10 sit inside the sections they belong to. These ten are the operational ones, print them, fill them in, bring them to the meeting.

TEMPLATE 11

Session Planner

One per session. If you cannot complete the middle three fields, the session isn't ready to be on the agenda.

SESSION TITLE

OWNER / SPEAKER

DURATION + Q&A

THINK

FEEL

DO

FORMAT (KEYNOTE / PANEL / WORKSHOP / LIGHTNING / FIRESIDE)

INTERACTION BUILT IN, WHAT AND WHEN

EXPECTED ENERGY LEVEL OF THE ROOM GOING IN (1 TO 5) AND WHAT WE'RE DOING ABOUT IT

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

IF WE RUN 15 MINUTES LATE, WHAT GETS CUT FROM THIS?

Templates are free. So is the conversation.

If you're mapping a running order and wondering where an external voice earns its place, ask me.

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TEMPLATE 12

Master Running Order

One page. Everyone gets a copy, venue, AV, MC, every speaker. If it isn't on this sheet, it isn't happening.

EVENT

DATE

VENUE / ROOM

TIMEKEEPER (MOBILE)

AV LEAD (MOBILE)

MC

TIME	MINS	SESSION	SPEAKER	PURPOSE / AUDIENCE OUTCOME	TECHNICAL & CUES

WHERE IS THE BUFFER, AND HOW LONG?

IF WE'RE 20 MINUTES LATE, WHAT GETS CUT, DECIDED NOW,
NOT ON THE DAY

TEMPLATE 13
Technical & AV Checklist

Send this filled in to the venue and the AV supplier, and ask for it back confirmed. "We'll sort that on the day" is how conferences lose their first twenty minutes.

REQUIREMENT	CONFIRMED	SPEC / DETAIL / WHO OWNS IT
Screen size & number, readable from the back row		
Projector bright enough with house lights up		
Headset mics, quantity		
Handheld / roving mics, quantity		
Spare mic live on standby		
Technician in the room all day		
Wireless mic licensing handled by supplier		
Confidence monitor for speakers		
Countdown clock visible from stage		
Hearing loop fitted, tested and switched on		
Loop receivers available at registration		
Lighting: dimmable, zoned, from above		
Face light on the speaker		
Air handling noise checked at full volume		
Adjacent room bookings checked for bleed		
Recording / streaming + live captions		
All decks tested on the show laptop		
Embedded video tested WITH audio		
Clicker + spare batteries		
Backup laptop with all decks		
Power at lectern / stage / tables		
Wifi, capacity for full occupancy, not just the venue's word		

IF THE PRIMARY MICROPHONE FAILS MID-KEYNOTE, WHAT HAPPENS? WHO DOES WHAT, IN WHAT ORDER?

Take this with you. Do the visit at the same time of day your event runs, and sit in the worst seat.

The room

- ☐ Capacity confirmed **for our layout**, not fire capacity
- ☐ Sat in the worst seat, sightline checked
- ☐ Pillars, low ceilings, windows behind the stage
- ☐ Ceiling height adequate for screen and stage
- ☐ Floor flat or raked? Stage height needed?
- ☐ Two or more doors to the plenary
- ☐ Airwall to adjacent room, what's booked there?
- ☐ Background noise: HVAC, kitchen, corridor, road
- ☐ Natural light and whether it can be controlled
- ☐ Lighting dimmable and zoned

Access

- ☐ Step-free from car park to seat to stage
- ☐ Accessible toilets, number, location, unlocked
- ☐ Lift capacity if upstairs
- ☐ Hearing loop present and working
- ☐ Quiet room available

Flow & comfort

- ☐ Toilets counted against the ratios in Section 17
- ☐ Registration area away from plenary doors
- ☐ Catering area away from the stage wall
- ☐ Multiple coffee station positions possible
- ☐ Space for a conversation zone beyond the queue
- ☐ Cloakroom capacity
- ☐ Temperature control, who operates it on the day?
- ☐ Ventilation, how does it cope at full occupancy?
- ☐ Breakout rooms: size, air, noise

Practical

- ☐ Parking, and public transport walking distance
- ☐ Load-in access and times
- ☐ Green room / speaker prep space
- ☐ Wifi capacity at full occupancy
- ☐ Named venue contact on the day + mobile
- ☐ What else is on in the building that day?

THREE THINGS ABOUT THIS VENUE THAT WORRY ME, AND THE MITIGATION FOR EACH

TEMPLATE 15

Risk & Contingency Planner

Planning for what could go wrong?

One thing that rarely does: a speaker who has been properly briefed and turns up early.

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Fifteen minutes on this saves the day it goes wrong. Name a person for every row, "the team" is not a person.

WHAT COULD GO WRONG	LIKELY?	IMPACT	WHAT WE DO, FIRST THREE ACTIONS	OWNER
Keynote speaker cancels / delayed				
Microphone or PA failure				
Projector / screen failure				
Video won't play or has no sound				
Running 20+ minutes late				
CEO overruns badly				
Hostile or distressing question from the floor				
Medical incident				
Evacuation / fire alarm				
Severe weather / travel disruption				
Catering failure or major dietary error				
Bad news breaks externally during the event				
Streaming / hybrid platform fails				

WHO HAS AUTHORITY TO MAKE A CALL ON THE DAY?

EMERGENCY ASSEMBLY POINT

FIRST AIDERS ON SITE + LOCATION

TEMPLATE 16

Post-Event Survey (48 hours)

Short, anonymous, open text where it counts. Send within 48 hours. Six questions, not twenty-six, response rate matters more than question count.

1. **In your own words, what was today about?** (free text, tests whether your one argument survived)
2. **What's the one thing you'll remember?** (free text)
3. **What was the least valuable part of the day?** (free text, people are honest here in a way they never are on a scale)
4. **How confident are you that you could explain this to your own team?** (1 to 5)
5. **What is one thing you will do differently, and by when?** (free text, this becomes your 30-day measure)
6. **What's the question you didn't get to ask?** (free text, usually the most valuable answer you'll receive)

Optional, and only if someone insists: one overall satisfaction score. Put it last, so it doesn't anchor everything above it, and don't let it become the headline number in the report.

TEMPLATE 17
Speaker Evaluation Sheet

Complete this yourself, on the day, while you remember. It builds an institutional memory that outlives whoever currently runs the events.

SPEAKER

SESSION & SLOT

FEE & WHAT WAS INCLUDED

DIMENSION

SCORE 1-5

EVIDENCE, WHAT YOU ACTUALLY OBSERVED

Relevance, spoke to our people, our situation

Content, substance, accuracy, originality

Delivery, clarity, pace, presence

Energy, real, sustained, appropriate

Storytelling, specific, memorable, earned

Audience engagement, the room's actual state

Practical value, could someone act on Tuesday?

Memorability, what are people quoting?

Professionalism, brief engaged with, deck on time, easy to work with

Overall impact

WOULD WE BOOK AGAIN? FOR WHAT KIND OF EVENT?

WHAT WOULD WE BRIEF DIFFERENTLY NEXT TIME?

WHAT DID THE AUDIENCE QUOTE IN THE BREAK? (WRITE IT DOWN VERBATIM, IT'S THE TRUEST MEASURE THERE IS.)

Evaluating speakers for next year?

I'd be glad to be on the shortlist, and glad to tell you if I'm the wrong fit.

[Check availability →](#)

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Run this within five working days, while people still remember. Not a blame session, a build for next year.

WHAT WORKED THAT WE SHOULD DO AGAIN?

WHAT FAILED, AND WHAT WAS THE ROOT CAUSE?

WHAT DID WE SPEND MONEY ON THAT NOBODY NOTICED?

WHAT DID WE SKIMP ON THAT EVERYBODY NOTICED?

ATTENDANCE AT 09:00

ATTENDANCE AFTER LUNCH

ATTENDANCE AT THE CLOSE

QUESTIONS ASKED FROM THE FLOOR

ANONYMOUS QUESTIONS RECEIVED

MINUTES WE RAN OVER/UNDER

AGAINST THE PURPOSE SENTENCE FROM TEMPLATE 01, DID WE ACHIEVE IT? HONESTLY.

THREE THINGS WE WILL CHANGE FOR NEXT TIME (SPECIFIC, OWNED, DATED)

TEMPLATE 19

30-Day Follow-Up Plan

Complete this *before* the event. Put every date in a diary before anyone leaves the room.

WHAT MUST BE DIFFERENT IN THIS ORGANISATION AT 90 DAYS? (BEHAVIOURAL, NOT A SATISFACTION SCORE.)

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS	OWNER	DATE IN DIARY	DONE
Within 48 hrs	Resources, slides, recordings, photos out			
Within 48 hrs	Personal thank-you from the sponsor			
48 hrs	Survey issued (Template 16)			
Day 7	Manager pack: three questions + one-page summary			
Day 14	Managers hold the conversation; chase the ones who haven't			
Day 30	Reinforcement session (not a repeat)			
Day 30-45	Three internal stories of what changed, shared			
Day 90	Measure and report against the purpose sentence			

THE THREE QUESTIONS IN THE MANAGER PACK, WRITTEN OUT

TEMPLATE 20**Final Conference Scorecard**

One page for the sponsor at 90 days. This is the document that gets you the budget next year.

THE PURPOSE SENTENCE WE SET OUT WITH (COPIED FROM TEMPLATE 01)

MEASURE	TARGET	ACTUAL	EVIDENCE / COMMENTARY
Attendance (start / after lunch / close)			
Engagement (questions, polls, participation)			
Knowledge, can people state the strategy?			
Confidence to explain it to their team			
Intention stated at 48 hours			
Behaviour at 30 days			
Manager conversations held			
Business indicator at 90 days			
Cost per delegate			

DID WE ACHIEVE THE PURPOSE? YES / PARTLY / NO, AND WHY

WHAT WE WOULD SPEND DIFFERENTLY NEXT TIME

REFERENCE

Formats, Mistakes and Sources

The quick-reference material, what format to use when, the things that quietly ruin conferences, and every figure in this handbook traced back to where it came from.

Session formats compared

FORMAT	BEST FOR	LENGTH	EFFECT ON THE ROOM
Keynote	Setting the argument, shifting mood, creating a shared reference everyone can quote later	35-50 min	High, if the speaker is right. Flat if not.
Fireside chat	Senior leaders who are better in conversation than on a script; drawing out candour	25-35 min	Warm, medium. Rises and falls with the interviewer.
Panel	Genuine disagreement between people who actually disagree	30-40 min, max 4 voices	Usually the lowest point of the day. Handle with care.
Workshop / breakout	Applying something specific; small-group problem solving	45-90 min	High, people move and talk
Lightning talks	Internal voices, showcasing many projects, resetting a flagging afternoon	5-7 min each, blocks of 4-5	High. Excellent post-lunch tool.
Town hall / all-hands	Direction, transparency, answering the questions people are actually asking	45-60 min, half of it Q&A	Depends entirely on whether real questions get real answers
Structured networking	Making the connection value deliberate rather than accidental	20-30 min	High, one of the strongest drivers of return attendance
Recognition	Demonstrating what the organisation actually values	10-20 min	High if specific, corrosive if generic

A note on panels, and on fireside chats

A fireside chat is not "a panel with two people." It's a structured interview designed to get one person to say something they wouldn't have said from a script. Write the questions. Share them in advance. Then be willing to abandon them.

Staging: two chairs at a slight angle to each other, not facing the audience in a line. No lectern. No slides. Both on headset mics so the conversation can be quiet where it needs to be quiet.

The beat structure that works: **open warm** (human, easy) → **the story** (a specific moment, not a summary) → **the turn** (what went wrong, what changed) → **the hard one** (agreed in advance, asked properly) → **the lesson** (transferable to this audience) → **audience Q&A** → **one clean line to close on**.

On networking

Freeman's 2025 research across more than 4,000 attendees, exhibitors and organisers found that **51% of attendees say effective networking alone makes them want to return**, one of the strongest loyalty drivers there is. And yet organisers allocate around **20% of budget to networking, while 96% of them have no staff member responsible for it**.

A fifth of the money and none of the ownership. That is not a strategy, that is a hope.

It also isn't working for everyone: nearly one in four attendees feel anxious or sceptical the moment an activity is labelled "networking", rising to 28% among younger professionals; 40% find it awkward; over four in ten want to be told who they should meet *before* they arrive. "There's a drinks reception at six" is not networking design. It's an open bar with a job title.

Fifteen mistakes that quietly ruin conferences

1. **The unrehearsed video**. It plays with no sound. Someone crouches at the laptop. Ninety seconds pass. The room is gone.

2. **Housekeeping in the first ten minutes.** You've spent the most valuable attention of the day on fire exits.
3. **The four-person panel with 25 minutes.** Each gets an introduction, an opening statement, and no time to say anything.
4. **The CEO who overruns by 20 minutes** and eats the break, so people are late, tense, and needing the toilet for the next session.
5. **Dimming the lights after lunch.** Understandable. Fatal.
6. **Moody uplighting around the room perimeter.** Beautiful in the photographs. Sedating for the humans.
7. **The 4.45pm closing keynote.** Half the room already has one eye on the car park.
8. **Booking the speaker last.** The best ones are gone and you build the day around a gap.
9. **Sending a speaker a calendar invite instead of a brief.** You've capped what any speaker can do for you.
0. **Full rounds of ten facing a stage.** Three necks per table, sideways, for six hours.
1. **Fifteen-minute breaks for three hundred people.** Arithmetically impossible, and it compounds all afternoon.
2. **Trusting the venue's stated capacity.** That's the fire capacity. It's roughly double what you can actually run.
3. **A feedback form that only measures satisfaction.** 8.4 out of 10 means people were comfortable. It doesn't mean anything changed.
4. **A motivational speaker booked for the hour after a redundancy announcement.** Tone-deaf, and it damages everyone involved.
5. **No follow-up.** The most expensive mistake of all, and the cheapest to fix.

Recognise too many of these?

Most of them are free to fix. The one that isn't is booking a speaker who'll actually lift the room.

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Frequently asked questions

What makes a conference successful?

A successful conference starts with a purpose you can state in one sentence with a verb and a consequence, is designed around what the audience currently believes rather than what you wish they believed, has flawless sound and sightlines, follows an energy arc rather than an agenda, and has a 30-day follow-up plan built before the day happens. Success is measured at 90 days by what changed, not on the day by satisfaction scores.

How long should a conference session be?

A keynote works well at 35 to 50 minutes, a fireside chat at 25 to 35, a panel at no more than 40 with a maximum of four voices, a workshop at 45 to 90, and lightning talks at 5 to 7 minutes in blocks. There is no evidence for a fixed attention limit, research shows the speaker matters far more than the format, but changing voice, format or posture at least every 45 minutes reliably regenerates attention.

What is the best time of day for a keynote speaker?

Put your strongest speaker in the post-lunch slot, roughly 2pm to 3pm. Alertness dips measurably between 14:00 and 16:00 for circadian reasons, so that is the slot that most needs a great speaker, not the one to bury a weak item in. The 9am slot has adrenaline doing some of the work for you.

How many people does a conference room actually hold?

Roughly half what the venue tells you, because venues quote fire capacity. Practical planning figures are about 0.56 to 0.74 m² per person theatre style and 0.93 to 1.11 m² for banquet rounds, against a fire-capacity floor space factor of 0.5 m² per person. Always ask for the capacity in your specific layout, with your stage size and your aisles.

How long should conference breaks be?

There is no evidence-based industry standard. IACC's own published guide to conference refreshment breaks contains no durations at all. As a practical rule, allow at least 25 minutes for a mid-morning break with 200 or more delegates, serve refreshments continuously where possible, and use multiple stations. Toilet ratios of roughly one female toilet per 75 attendees for a six-hour-plus event explain most break overruns.

How do you fix the post-lunch slump at a conference?

Raise the lights rather than dimming them, use lighting from above rather than uplighting from below, schedule a two-minute standing movement break at around 2pm, and programme your most energetic speaker or a block of short lightning talks. Bright light and movement have the strongest evidence; lighter food helps but matters less than commonly assumed, because the dip is primarily circadian.

How do you brief a keynote speaker properly?

Tell them who is in the room, what has happened in the business in the last 18 months, what the audience currently believes, what happens immediately before and after their slot, what they should not mention, and one sentence describing what a win looks like. Forty minutes of briefing is worth more than four thousand euro of fee. Template 06 in this handbook is the full version.

How do you measure conference ROI?

Agree the measure before you book the venue. Then measure at three points: reaction and knowledge at 48 hours, behaviour at 30 days, business outcome at 90 days. Ask people what they will do differently and by when, then ask them at 30 days whether they did. A meta-analysis of 89 studies found the transfer climate people return to predicts whether learning shows up in the job at least as strongly as the attendee's own motivation does.

How much does a corporate speaker cost in Ireland?

Fees vary widely with session length, travel, whether it is in person or virtual, and what is included afterwards. The more useful question is what you get for the fee: a customised keynote, a follow-up session weeks later, and resources your people can actually use will do far more for your budget than a cheaper speaker who arrives, speaks and leaves. Ask every speaker what happens after the talk before you compare prices.

Download the whole thing as a PDF

Everything on this page, all 20 sections, all 20 templates, all 24 diagrams, as a printable, shareable book. Free, no sign-up form, no email required. Print the templates and bring them to your planning meeting.

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Sources

Every figure in this handbook is attributed. Where something is trade convention or my own practitioner judgement rather than research, I've said so in the text rather than dressing it up. If you want to use any of this in a business case, cite the original sources below rather than this document, and read the caveats.

CLAIM	SOURCE
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Continuous refreshments; no break-length standard	IACC, <i>Meeting Room of the Future</i> (2023, 2024); IACC, <i>Re-imagining Conference Refreshment Breaks</i> (2021).
Toilet ratios (6hr+ with food and drink)	Events Industry Forum, <i>The Purple Guide to Health, Safety and Welfare at Music and Other Events</i> . Sanitation.
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Absence and mental health, Ireland	CIPD Ireland, <i>HR Practices in Ireland 2025</i> , May 2025. n = 233.
Irish business events sector	Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, <i>Business Events 2030</i> , April 2025.

Two honest caveats, because you should be able to defend anything you quote from here:

- **There is no evidence-based standard for break length.** IACC's own guide contains no durations. Anything you read about "the standard 20-minute break" is convention.
- **The "heavy lunch causes the slump" claim is weaker than usually stated.** Only nine studies in the entire literature met a 2025 scoping review's inclusion bar. The dip is primarily circadian.

Where to go next

Standards and bodies worth knowing

- **IACC**, *Meeting Room of the Future* is published annually and is genuinely useful.
- **PCMA** and *Convene*, the annual Meetings Market Survey, for budget benchmarking.
- **The Events Industry Forum**, *The Purple Guide*, for sanitation, crowd flow and safety.
- **Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (Ireland)**, *Building for Everyone*, free, and the best accessibility reference for Irish venues.

Things worth reading

- **Bradbury (2016)**, "Attention span during lectures", eight pages, and it will change how you build an agenda.
- **Blume et al. (2010)**, "Transfer of Training: A Meta-Analytic Review", the evidence behind everything in Section 20.
- **Freeman's Networking Trends Report**, free, current, and the 96%/20% pairing will get your budget conversation moving.
- **Chime's National Hearing Loss Survey**, short, Irish, and it will make you fit a hearing loop.

A closing word

Thank you for taking the time to visit my website, and for spending part of your day with this handbook. I know how much is already on your desk, and I do not take it lightly that you gave some of that time here.

If even two or three ideas in these pages make your next conference or town hall a little better for the people sitting in the room, then it was worth writing. That is genuinely the whole ambition of it.

And if you are drawing up a shortlist of speakers for that day, I would be glad to be considered. If it turns out I am not the right fit, I will tell you so and point you towards someone who is. Either way, I hope the day goes well, and that your people leave it in better shape than they arrived.

Enda O'Doherty

Corporate Keynote Speaker · Waterford, Ireland

About the author



In 2015 I covered nine marathon distances in eight days, Belfast to Waterford, carrying a washing machine on my back for Pieta House. I lost every toenail and broke both feet. In 2017 I led an expedition for a mental health charity, carrying that washing machine two days above the clouds on Kilimanjaro.

The washing machine carries a heavy load. So do people. But at the end of the day, the machine empties itself.

I taught for nearly thirty years. I'm a recovering alcoholic, and I've had the anxiety and depression that came after I stopped drinking. When I talk about resilience, I'm not reading it out of a book.

I speak on resilience, mental health, adversity and high-performance teams for **AIB, Kerry Foods, TripAdvisor, Sanofi and Blackbaud**, and I'm the author of *I'm Fine! Thoughts on Life, Addiction, Love and Health*.

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WHAT CLIENTS SAY

"Enda spoke at the end of year risk town hall. The feedback from the attendees was extremely positive."

Deirdre Hannigan, Chief Risk Officer, AIB

"Attendees at our national conference called your session the highlight of the conference."

Mary Beth Westmoreland, CTO, Blackbaud Inc.

"His personal story of overcoming adversity through focus and rigorous execution was inspirational."

Gerry Hurley, Director Global Sales Training, TripAdvisor



As featured on **Down to Business with Bobby Kerr, Newstalk**.

This handbook is free. Please circulate it, print it, and bring it to your planning meeting. If it saves one conference from a bad microphone, it has done its job.

Enda O'Doherty. Corporate Keynote Speaker, Waterford, Ireland

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