

Parking Lot For Effective Workshops

Idea In Short

The parking lot technique helps workshop moderators handle important but off-topic items that arise during sessions. It keeps discussions on track while ensuring no valuable idea is lost or ignored.

Workshops can often go off the agenda. Sometimes this is because a person wants to air their point of view with a forum. Other times, it may be because the participant has not understood the purpose of the workshop & believes that his / her point is relevant. In other situations, going off subject may be caused by the workshop moderator not keeping a tight rein on the workshop & allowing people to get off the subject matter at hand. Sometimes, ideas that are raised during a discussion are interesting & worthwhile to follow up. But, this may necessarily align with the goals of the current workshop. Hence, it is important for those leading the workshop to spot when this is happening & stop it. Having an agenda & sticking to it is essential for effective workshops.

PARKING LOT			
What?	Who?	Action	When?

Parking Lot Visualization

What is parking lot?

Parking lot, also known as issue bin, is a productivity technique to effectively deal with distracting, but important non-agenda items that arise during a workshop. Non-agenda items always find a way to creep into workshops. Yet, it is important to honor & recognize the existence of these important non-agenda items. By adding a topic to the parking lot, the new, unrelated item will not be forgotten. This reassures the person who raised the issue that it will be dealt with, even if now is not the most appropriate time for such a discussion. But, you should do so without interrupting the focus & goals of your workshop agenda. As a result, the parking lot technique allows the workshop moderator to elegantly move on to the agenda items without appearing rude or brushing aside a point that might be important for a workshop participant, even if it might be tangential to the current workshop. Thus, the parking lot involves recording these tangential issues & ensuring that the points raised are addressed at an appropriate time. This can immensely support your group's ground rules.

How to use the parking lot?

At or before the beginning of each workshop, place a chart labeled parking lot on the wall. When considering using the parking lot for a workshop, it may be helpful to advise the workshop attendees up front that you are going to be doing so. This can be easily done by explaining that the workshop has a set amount of time assigned & that you plan to make sure that the agenda is stuck to. Gain their approval to use this technique as needed throughout your workshop. Let the participants know that if you feel they are going off on a tangent to the main thrust of the workshop, then their comments or points will be noted in the parking lot & will be addressed later. This may also serve the purpose of helping to keep the workshop on track at the outset, by demonstrating to participants that deviations from the main topics of discussion at the workshop will not be allowed. When the conversation sways off track with an issue worthy of consideration but off the topic under discussion, briefly stop the workshop. Write a quick synopsis of the issue, with permission from the group, on the parking lot chart. With issues that are trivial, politely remind the group that the workshop is getting off track. If you are not sure if an issue is worthy of the parking lot list, ask the group what they think.

Finishing the workshop

As one of the last agenda items to your workshop, go back to your parking lot list. Decide, as a group, how to address each item. Some issues may be appropriate for discussion at your next workshop. A subset of the group or even an individual may best handle the other

issues. Some issues will no longer seem important & will be dropped. During this discussion, document "who" will do "what" by "when." This ensures that issues will be addressed. Write the information directly on your parking lot chart & include it in the minutes of your workshop. Be sure to save enough time at the end of your workshop to do this step. If you fail to go back to your parking lot before the end of the workshop, you lose credibility. People will be reluctant to have their issues permanently left & forgotten on the parking lot chart.

Taking action

Go through the parking lot with the group. Act on each item.

- **Delete** items that really weren't relevant to the discussion, or now aren't relevant
- **Defer** things that are relevant to the whole group. Schedule a slot in the next meeting agenda to discuss those items. Probe the audience if it considers the item a relevant idea. If so, defer it to the next workshop
- **Delegate** things that are relevant to part of the group to the subgroup that cares about that item

Exceptions

Just because you added an item is added to the parking lot does not necessarily mean that you need to discuss it at another time. If the workshop participants get through the rest of the agenda & make all the required decisions that are needed with time left over, there is no reason why the parking lot items for the workshop cannot be reviewed.

Summary

Parking lot is a technique for dealing with the tangential issues that threaten to take your workshop off track.

1. Post a chart labeled parking lot on the wall
2. When the conversation sways off track, briefly stop the workshop. Write a quick synopsis of the issue on the parking lot chart

3. As one of the last agenda items to your workshop, go back to your parking lot list. Decide, as a group, how to address each item