

# Unconferencing

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## Unconferencing

An Unconference is a structured, facilitated way to run workshops and events with no pre-set agenda. It is a means to create a space for peer-to-peer learning and to drive both energy and collective purpose across a diverse group. No topics are pre-determined, no keynote speakers are invited, no panels or working groups are arranged. Instead, the event lives and dies by the participation of its attendees. They decide what topics will be discussed and they convene the individual breakout sessions. There is no content until the participants create it.

Unconferences aren't a new phenomenon. There is around 20 years of experience, expertise and positive outcomes from which to learn.

To date, most Unconferences have been organised by groups of activists and enthusiasts, outside formal organisational structures. However, there is a growing trend for organisations to use Unconference methods for in-house learning and development. These days, there are very few workshops and events that the NHS Horizons team organises or facilitates that don't involve some components of an Unconference. When run well, Unconferences are a powerful group process to unleash the energy and expertise in the room.



The Unconference format means that people taking part can have the conversations they want to have about the challenges they are facing, with others who face the same challenges. Rather than absorbing information, they are connecting to action. They are networking with others the whole time.

## Why it works

The underlying premise of Unconferencing draws on [David Winer's](#) observation:

*The sum of the expertise of the people in the audience is greater than the sum of expertise of the people on stage.*

A traditional workshop approach may focus on spreading explicit knowledge (the codified knowledge on what works best) that is contained in best practice databases and toolkits. By contrast, the Unconference format also uncovers tacit knowledge; what participants have learnt works well in their local context.

Sharing tacit knowledge helps people to validate and analyse their skills. It is more likely than explicit knowledge to lead to breakthroughs in thinking and performance.

Unconferences also draw on Organisational Development theory, particularly as it relates to creating energy for change. Central to their success is the so-called 'Law of Two Feet'. It means that if a session doesn't inspire attendees and they are not contributing, they can (and should!) get up and find a different one.

Blended with other design techniques, this principle enables high energy among participants and contributions of high quality.

## How it works

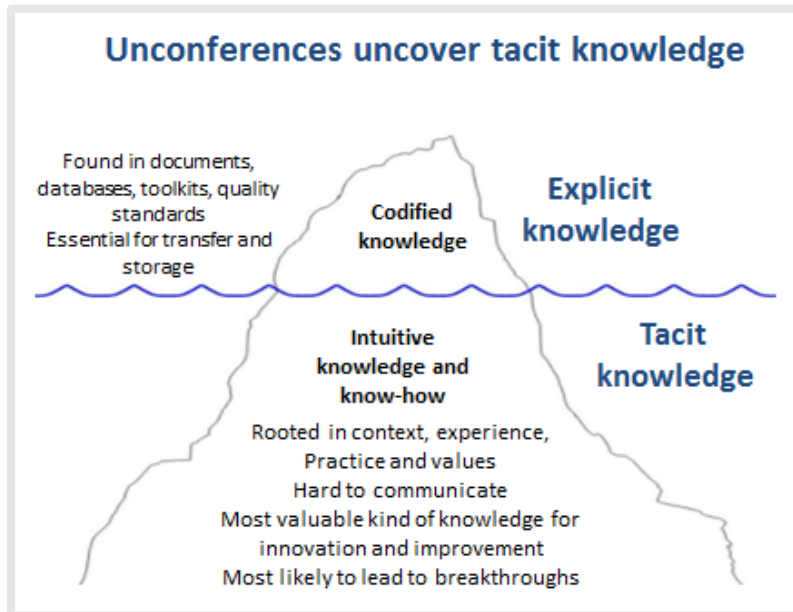
Unconferences work best when the design team adhere to the key principles *and* adapt the specific design to suit the overall aims, blending in other facilitation methodologies as appropriate.

In a 'pure' Unconference design, attendees arrive and are welcomed by the host, who explains the process for the day. The agenda is created dynamically through a whole-group structured process, through which empty session slots for break-out discussions are filled. Attendees can put a session up on the agenda on whatever topics they like.

Once the slots are all filled (and, where appropriate, merged with other similar suggested topics), the agenda is set. Sessions can be amended throughout the day as and when required.

Each session is then run by the person who suggested it ('the convener') with professional facilitator support if needed. As such, the discussions take on a whole range of different formats.

At the end of the day (or at key points, if several different themes are being explored throughout the day), everyone comes together. At the end, there is a wrap up and thanks from the host, and if appropriate a session is convened so that follow-up/ forward actions can be designed.



## About NHS Horizons

NHS Horizons, led by Dr. Helen Bevan OBE, has extensive knowledge and skills in human-centred design and accelerated change methods in the health and care sector, developed over nearly three decades. All members of Horizons' senior team coach, teach and provide thought-leadership in various approaches to leadership in complex systems.

Members of NHS Horizons have provided advice and guidance on transformational change to leaders of healthcare systems globally and have created and facilitated some of the most significant change initiatives in the NHS, including initiating NHS Change Day, in partnership with a group of young clinical and managerial leaders, which became the largest voluntary collective action for improvement in the NHS. Change Day has spread to 21 other countries and territories globally.

More recently Horizon launched the School for Health and Care Radicals (now the School for Change Agents), a five-week, online course for frontline staff and change leaders to develop skills, connections and confidence to activate improvement in their own settings.