

Book Review – Marjory Mair

Making Workshops Work - Creative collaboration for our time

By Penny Pullan

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“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” Esther 4:14

This Bible passage regularly occurred to me on two levels as I reviewed Penny Pullan’s latest book *Making Workshops Work – Creative collaboration for our time*.

Firstly, the thought that Penny Pullan is our Esther, bringing us this book ‘for such a time as this’, pushing us into a different way of working as we approach year three of a global pandemic.

Secondly, the content of the book brings the possibility of “relief and deliverance” from dull, boring, waste-of-time workshops because let’s face it, they are ‘a thing’! Where banquets and feasts were a life-saving feature of Esther’s life, this book, at 233 pages, is a feast of underpinning theory and practical insights into making workshops valuable learning systems for individuals, their teams and organisations. But more than that, the presentation of the content supported with many graphics, hand-drawn diagrams and mind-maps makes it easy to access and to come away feeling fed and energised for the task ahead.

It all starts the minute you open the book and out pops a postcard with a hand-drawn graphic explained on page 111 as The Magic 6™ – six questions to plan, prepare and share in order to create clarity for and throughout the workshop.

The book is broken down into nine chapters and starts with the usual introduction as well as a most helpful



‘Quick start guide: fast answers to urgent questions’. Penny’s experience and skill in making workshops work shows up well in the structure of the book where each chapter begins with clearly defined objectives followed by insightful and informative content, a summary, some questions for reflection and further reading if desired.

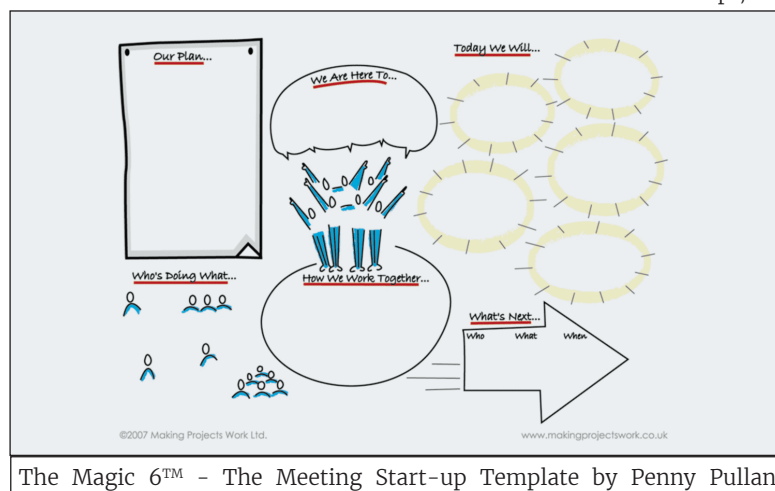
Overview of the Chapters

Chapter One starts by addressing the fundamental question of ‘Why a workshop?’. It clearly shows that they are about participation, where everyone comes with something to add and take away along with helpful advice that ‘spectators should be actively discouraged’. Tips about size and at what point larger group methods of breaking into smaller groups (either virtually or in-person) are examples of the practical value of this chapter and indeed the whole book.

The next two chapters focus on ‘Being an effective workshop leader’ with a helpful list of facilitation competencies worth a look for anyone running workshops as well as some useful and easily accessible neuroscience. In the next chapter, understanding ‘What makes people tick?’, Penny has packed a huge amount of fascinating detail including sections to raise our awareness of how our unconscious biases can limit the potential of our workshops and how change and conflict are natural parts of the process.

Now nearly halfway through the book, Chapter 4, ‘Planning your brilliant workshop’, clearly addresses the three

different modes of workshop, in-person, virtual or hybrid. It helpfully advises against any assumption that the latter two might require less planning than in-person workshops. Practical tips abound including ways of dealing with technology hiccups and frustrations and for the first time we meet The Magic 6™ –



The Magic 6™ - The Meeting Start-up Template by Penny Pullan

six questions that start us off to create clarity for and throughout the workshop.

Chapter 5 is rich with practical ideas on 'Choosing your activities and what you need to make them happen', from engaging participants before the workshop starts through to managing the always present 'groan zone'. This is when energy dissipates as the group moves into the action phase, before bringing the workshop to a successful outcome.

After all that, we're ready for 'Running the workshop' in Chapter 6. Reference is made again to The Magic 6™ standing us in good stead to get the workshop started but also deal with any conflicts that might emerge. And despite all our planning and preparation there is a clear message on the need to be flexible and adaptable with an important reminder that we are there to serve our participants and they 'are not the enemy'.

'Getting actions done' is the focus of Chapter 7 warning us on the dangers of Groundhog Day and identifying common barriers to actions being taken. Not leaving it at making us aware of the barriers, the chapter outlines what we can do before, during and after the workshop to facilitate the necessary actions getting done. So, if we ever thought that running a successful workshop ends when we pack our bag or click the 'leave' button . . .

Throughout the book Penny makes suggestions on how to avoid things going wrong but we all know that despite the best planning and preparation, it's not always 'alright on the night'; after all, we are dealing with the most complex thing on the planet in the form of human beings closely followed by technology. Chapter 8, 'Workshop complications and how to overcome them', reinforces many of the practices in previous chapters as well as

hints on how to deal with hierarchy and hidden agendas, not to mention a fun and effective way of dealing with the ever-present challenge of smartphones. And how do you get people to stop speaking or start speaking? It's all here in this chapter. There's a fascinating section here where the author shares a list of her own unexpected mishaps and unimagined complications – a humorous read, although I'm sure they weren't at the time. More helpfully she shares how she dealt with them or challenges us to think about how we might respond in these situations e.g. if someone fell asleep in our workshop?

Finally, in Chapter 9, 'Applying this in practice' shares stories from three people on different aspects of making workshops work in-person, hybrid and virtually before a summary with challenge and reassurance, not to try and be the perfect facilitator but rather to focus on serving the group and learning something for next time.


So, do I recommend this book to Christian Business Leaders? Wholeheartedly I do. Whilst this is not a Christian book as such, there are two things that strike me about it.

Firstly, the enormous value of the content, not only in our businesses but also in our churches, for encouraging engagement and collaboration and a great tool for addressing the often-felt sense of 20/80, where 20% of the people do 80% of the work. It's a practical treasury of ways to understand, appreciate and include the gifts, skills and knowledge of the diversity of people we interact with in our business and church life.

Secondly, and most strikingly, the underpinning tone. Penny, no doubt informed by her own Christian faith, encourages us to focus on serving the participants rather than directing them

or controlling them and I was reminded of the passage in Matthew 20 when Jesus says to his disciples: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (NIV) Then in verse 28 "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Working in a similar field to Penny, I've often facilitated teams where unhelpful conflict has developed. Whilst I don't think I'm going to have to give up my life exactly, I recognise the feeling of doing something a bit scary whether in-person or virtually. It is only through the insight and wisdom shared so accessibly in *Making Workshops Work* that it is possible to survive and thrive in these workshops. More than that though, to hold on to my underpinning belief that God doesn't create rubbish people but given the right environment and support led by an able facilitator, everyone can flourish.

Making Workshops Work strips away the need for a fancy job title, more degrees than a thermometer or any sense of self-importance in truly setting the scene for creative collaboration – where $1 + 1 = 5$. Whilst the introduction states that the book is 'not the definitive, academic textbook' on workshops, it will help you be more confident and competent in making workshops work.

Whether a beginner or vastly experienced, do yourself a favour and invest in the book, the time to read it and sign up to the website www.makingworkshopswork.com for access to the practical workbook that goes along with it and say goodbye to dull, boring, waste-of-time workshops. 



Marjory Mair is a Leadership & Team Learning Coach. Since 2002 she has been running Marjory Mair Associates, enabling leaders and teams to flourish across not-for-profit organisations and SMEs. She is also a support board member for Christian Business Leaders and part of the Steering Group for the Christian Aid SALT Business Network.