



toolbox

Facilitators' techniques for group discussions

These techniques can be used to serve the needs of a group in exploring ideas and making decisions. They can be modified or combined to suit a group's needs.

Brainstorming: List as many ideas as possible, as quickly as possible. Don't evaluate, discuss or criticize. Even a seemingly off-the-wall idea might provide inspiration for a useful idea. Two or more ideas from a brainstorm can be combined to create something else entirely. Brainstorming generates lots of ideas and sparks creative thinking.

Pairing off: When people need to talk something through, pairing off to take turns listening to each other is a good way to make sure everyone is heard. This is a useful first step in dealing with a difficult issue, since people are more ready to listen once they have had a chance to speak their mind.

Small groups: Breaking up into small groups can be good for exploring ideas and discussing them in greater detail. This is particularly useful if you have more topics to cover than can be dealt with by the whole group in the time available. Small groups let everyone participate more than would be possible in large group discussions. Have someone from each small group give a summary report on the discussion.

Round-robin reporting: Go around the group and ask each person to respond to the question or proposal at hand. This technique gets everyone's input and helps keep anyone from dominating a discussion. It works in small to moderate size groups, but bogs down with larger numbers (more than a dozen or so). Another application is to have each person write down several ideas, then go around the group and let each give one idea. Go around again and again until no one has any new ideas to list.

Straw polls: When faced with a list of options, straw polls provide an alternative to voting. Try giving each person two to four votes (depending on the length of the list and number of people) to distribute among the choices. This helps to get the sense of the group without forcing a decision and encourages people to express support for more than one idea. You can then eliminate ideas with little or no support, focusing more in-depth discussion on the remaining options.

Listing pros and cons: This is a good way to evaluate an idea. Draw a line down the middle of a flip chart page. Write "pros" on one side and "cons" on the other. Let people list all the pros and cons they can think of. You may occasionally need to ask if something is a pro or a con: some things will be both. This helps people see both sides of a proposal and brings out considerations that may have been overlooked.

Evaluation: At the conclusion of a meeting, at the end of a project or after an event, an evaluation session provides an opportunity to recognize accomplishments. It also lets people air gripes, often before they become major problems. One simple (and very quick) method is to make three columns on a flip chart, with the headings "Good / Bad / Change." Have participants list the things that were good, what was not good, and what should be done differently in the future. List all the comments in the appropriate columns and try not to argue with the suggestions for improvement!

