Regardless of which type of process you're facilitating, all facilitators need to be constantly using the core practices:

**Stay Neutral On Content** Your job is to focus on the process role and avoid the temptation of offering opinions about the topic under discussion. You should use questions and suggestions to offer ideas that spring to mind, but never impose opinions on the group.

**Listen Actively** Look people in the eye, use attentive body language and paraphrase what they are saying. Always make eye contact with people while they speak, when paraphrasing what they have just said, and when summarizing their key ideas. Also use eye contact to let people know they can speak next, and to prompt the quiet ones in the crowd to participate.

**Ask Questions** This is the most important tool you possess. Questions test assumptions, invite participation, gather information, and probe for hidden points. Effective questioning allows you to delve past the symptoms to get at root causes.

**Paraphrase to Clarify** This involves repeating what people say to make sure they know they are being heard, to let others hear their points a second time, and to clarify key ideas. (i.e. “Are you saying ...? Am I understanding you to mean ...?”)

**Synthesize Ideas** Don't just record individual ideas of participants. Instead, get people to comment and build on each other's thoughts to ensure that the ideas recorded on the flip chart represent collective thinking. This builds consensus and commitment. (i.e. “Elena, what would you add to Jeff's comments?”)

**Stay on Track** Set time guidelines for each discussion. Appoint a time keeper inside the group to use a timer and call out milestones. Point out the digression if discussion has veered off topic. “Park” all off-topic comments and suggestions on a separate “Parking Lot” sheet posted on a nearby wall, to be dealt with later.

**Give and Receive Feedback** Periodically “hold up a mirror” to help the group “see” itself so it can make corrections. (i.e. “Only two people are engaged in this discussion, while three others are reading. What's this telling us we need to do?”) Also ask for and accept feedback about the facilitation. (i.e. “Are we making progress? How's the pace? What can I do to be more effective?”)

**Test Assumptions** You need to bring the assumptions people are operating under out into the open and clarify them, so that they are clearly understood by everyone. These assumptions may even need to be challenged before a group can explore new ground. (i.e. “José, on what basis are you making the comment that Brenda's idea is too narrow in focus?”)

**Collect Ideas** Keep track of both emerging ideas and final decisions. Make clear and accurate summaries on a flip chart or electronic board so everyone can see the notes. Notes should be brief
and concise. They must always reflect what the participants actually said, rather than your interpretation of what they said.

**Summarize Clearly** A great facilitator listens attentively to everything that is said, and then offers concise and timely summaries. Summarize when you want to revive a discussion that has ground to a halt, or to end a discussion when things seem to be wrapping up.

**Label Sidetracks** It’s your responsibility to let the group members know when they’re off track. They can then decide to pursue the sidetrack, or stop their current discussion and get back to the agenda. (i.e. “We are now discussing something that isn’t on our agenda. What does the group want to do?”)

**Park It** At every meeting, tape a flip chart sheet to a wall to record all sidetrack items. Later, these items can be reviewed for inclusion in a future agenda. “Parking lot” sheets let you capture ideas that may be important later, while staying on track.

**Use the Spell-Check Button** Most people are nervous enough about writing on flip charts without having to worry that they’re spelling every word right. You’ll relax everyone by drawing a spell-check button at the top right corner of a flip sheet. Tell participants they “can spell creatively, since pressing the spell-check button automatically eliminates all errors.”
BEST AND WORST
FACILITATOR PRACTICES

Some of the Best Things

- Carefully assess the needs of the members
- Probe sensitively into people’s feelings
- Create an open and trusting atmosphere
- Help people understand why they’re there
- View yourself as servant of the group’s needs
- Make members the center of attention
- Speak in simple and direct language
- Work hard to stay neutral
- Display energy and appropriate levels of assertiveness
- Champion ideas not personally favored
- Treat all participants as equals
- Stay flexible and ready to change direction if necessary
- Make notes that reflect what participants mean
- Listen intently to understand totally what is being said
- Periodically summarize ideas
- Use a wide range of discussion tools
- Make sure every session ends with clear steps for the next meeting
- Ensure that participants feel ownership for what is achieved
- End on a positive and optimistic note
- Involve all members

Some of the Worst Things

- Remain oblivious to what the group thinks or needs
- Never check group concerns
- Not listen carefully to what’s being said
- Lose track of key ideas
- Take poor flip chart notes or change the meaning of what’s said
- Try to be the center of attention
- Become defensive
- Get into personality battles
- Put down people
- Unassertively manage conflict
- Let a few people or the leader dominate
- Never check how the meeting is going
- Be overly passive on process
- Push ahead on an irrelevant agenda
- Have no alternative approaches
- Let discussions get badly sidetracked
- Let discussion ramble without proper closure
- Not know when to stop
- Be insensitive to cultural diversity issues
- Use inappropriate humor
- Turn facilitation into a lecture
- Advance a personal agenda
FACILITATOR PROCESS

IDEAS FOR ME

Contracting/Setting Up the Project

Assessment Questions

Preparing & Planning the Intervention

Starting a Facilitation

During a Facilitation

Ending a Facilitation
1 CONTRACTING/SETTING UP THE PROJECT

☐ Boundaries of Your Analysis
• Define the issue or problem to be addressed in the intervention
• Surface concerns and expectations
• Clarifying wants:
  • What the client needs and wants
  • What the facilitator needs and wants

❯ Are you certain you have identified the true purpose of the intervention?
❯ Are there any hidden agendas or signs that other issues may be part of the root cause for the intervention?

☐ Discovery and Dialogue
• The presenting problem is often not the REAL problem
• Come up with your own sense of the problem and help the client do the same
• Make sure you have enough time, access to participants and data to conduct your own assessment of the problem underlying the facilitation

☐ Outcomes of the Project
• What is expected to happen if the facilitation is successful
• Identify client's desired outcomes and deliverables

☐ Information You Seek from the Client or Sponsor
• Collect data on the problem or issue
• Attitudes of the sponsor and their perspective of the participants
• Roles (discuss underlying concerns about exposure or vulnerability)
  • Of the client
  • Of other participants
  • Of others in a leadership role
  • Of the facilitator
• Responsibilities of the key participants
• Discuss climate of the group
• Determine who needs to be at the table

☐ Your Role in the Project
• Decide how you want to work with the client
• Determine and clarify with the client what you will and will not do in the project

❯ Have all the participants agreed to a facilitated event?
Have all the participants agreed to you as the facilitator?

**Your Deliverables**
- Clarify the client's expectations for deliverables
- If you are to provide feedback, how specific will you be with the client
- Will feedback or results be an oral or written report
- Will you be making recommendations
- What kind of evaluation will be conducted

Are you being asked to comment or provide recommendations on process or content? Facilitators should focus on process only ... in most cases.

**Support and Involvement from the Client**
- What do you need from the client or sponsor in order to be successful
- List what the client is offering you
- Confirm details with client in writing to insure a shared understanding

Are you comfortable with the sponsor's commitment to the process?

**Time Schedule**
- Starting time and dates
- Intermediate mileposts
- Desired completion date

Can you personally commit to the time schedule?

Can be what's being requested by accomplished in the time proposed?

**Confidentiality**
- Determine who will receive the information from the facilitation

Does the sponsor and the group recognize your responsibility to hold their conversations in confidence?

**Feedback to You, Later**
- Determine the kinds of feedback the client provide to you about the results and effectiveness of the facilitation and the intervention

**Written Contract**
- If appropriate create a written contract detailing all the agreements you reached with the sponsor during this phase of the facilitation
ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

When meeting a new group, you'll need to ask certain questions to determine the state of the group. Here are some questions to consider using in your diagnoses.

♦ What's the history of the group?
♦ How familiar are members with each other?
♦ Are there clear goals?
♦ Are there team norms or rules?
♦ Does everyone participate or do a few dominate?
♦ To what extent are members honest and open?
♦ Do members listen to and support each other's ideas?
♦ How does the group handle any conflicts?
♦ How are important decisions made?
♦ Do people leave meetings feeling like something has been achieved?
♦ How would you describe the group atmosphere?
♦ Are meetings thoroughly planned and structured or are they basically freewheeling?
♦ Does the group ever stop to evaluate how it's doing and make corrections?
♦ What's the best thing about the group? What's the worst?
♦ How do people feel about being part of this group?
♦ Describe a recent incident that illustrates how members typically interact.
♦ Are there any reasons why members might not be open and say what they really think?
♦ Why do you need (external) facilitation support? Is there any opposition to this?
♦ What's the worst thing that could happen at this meeting? What could be done to ensure that this doesn't happen?
2 PREPARING & PLANNING THE INTERVENTION

 Logistics—Consider these Elements:

- Where (visit location ahead of time whenever possible)
- When will the facilitation be conducted (exact times)
- Who (confirm that all stakeholders are invited and their availability for the event)
- Time (confirm facility will be open/available for entry & exit at designated times)
- Materials and copies of any handouts
- Equipment:
  ✓ Flip chart easels, markers, tape, pins
  ✓ Flip chart pads
  ✓ Laptop; projector
  ✓ Any audio recording or amplification equipment
  ✓ VCR/monitor
  ✓ Post Its, dots and other facilitator tools
- Refreshments
- Determine seating and room layout (tables & chairs, chairs only, theater, classroom, circle, U-shape, etc.)
- Wall space available for posting recorded materials
- Nametags or name tents
- Paper, pens for participants

 Overplan and Reconfirm all the logistics

 Setting the Agenda

- Introductions
- Set groundrules
- Review desired goals and outcomes
- Clarifying roles: participants, staff, facilitator, sponsor
- Discuss confidentiality issues
- Icebreaker or greeting activity
- Timing for breaks (e.g., every 1-1½ hours)
- Determine format of discussion to match the desired outcomes
  ✓ Refer to the Facilitator’s Tool Box for possible strategies
  ✓ Hint: include both total group and small group activities
- Determine if this is a single event or if additional gatherings will be held
- Design an appropriate evaluation
- Over-prepare with additional ideas for format, activities, materials, etc.
- Duplicate handouts (may include agendas and evaluations)

Information sharing: background information
3 STARTING A FACILITATION

- Introduce yourself and give a brief personal background
- Clarify the role you'll be playing as the facilitator
- Clarify the roles to be played by any other members
- Go around the room and have members introduce themselves by name and perhaps position, especially if there are people present who don't know each other
- Conduct an ice-breaker to relax the group. Make sure this fits with the time available and session focus
- Review any data collected from members. Have key points written on flip chart paper or on overheads. Answer questions
- Clarify the goal and the specific objectives for the session
- Review the agenda and invite comments. Make any changes
- Specify time frames. Appoint a timekeeper. Make sure there is true acceptance of the agenda
- Take care of all housekeeping items
  - Restroom locations
  - Silence cell phones and mobile devices
  - Breaks/Meals
  - End times
- Ask the group to set norms or groundrules for the session; post these on a wall within clear view of all members
- Set up a parking lot sheet to keep track of digressions for later review
- Proceed to the first item on the agenda. Make sure everyone is clear about what's about to be discussed
- Explain the process, or how you'll be handling this agenda item
- Be sure that the timeframe for the first item is set. Have a timekeeper and a minute taker on hand
- Get on with the discussion
4 DURING A FACILITATION

Your key contribution during any meeting is to provide the structure and process focus that will keep the discussion moving efficiently and effectively. You'll need to:

- Ensure that all members participate
- Manage conflicts
- Keep the group on topic
- "Park" off-topic items
- Help members adhere to their ground rules
- Make interventions if there are problems
- Maintain a high energy level
- Set a positive tone
- Keep track of the discussion by making concise notes

As a meeting proceeds, periodically employ these process checks:

Check The Pace Ask members how the pace feels to them.

"Is this session dragging or do you feel rushed? What can we do to improve the pace?"

Respond to their assessments by implementing needed adjustments.

Check the Process Periodically ask members if the approach being taken is working.

"We said we would work this issue through as a large group, rather than sub-grouping. Is this approach working or should we try something else?"

Adjust the process throughout the session to ensure that things keep working.

Take the Pulse of Members Continuously read faces and body language to determine how people are feeling. Don't hesitate to ask.

"How are members feeling? Do we need a stretch? Is anyone feeling like they've dropped out? How can we get our energy levels up again?"

"Reading" people lets you know when to stop for a break or bring lost members back into the fold.

Summarize When there are lots of the ideas floating, summarize what's being said. Stop and review:

"Let's see what we've got so far."

If the discussion seems to be winding up:

"Let me read what we've said to see if we've reached a conclusion."

Summarizing helps people who might have lost track of the conversation get back in. It can revive a group in a slump or help move the group towards closure.
5 ENDING A FACILITATION

One of the most common problems in any meeting is lack of closure. Lots of things get discussed, but there is no clear path forward. One of your key contributions is to ensure that decisions are arrived at and detailed action steps are in place before the group adjourns.

Here are some ways you can help a group bring effective closure to a meeting:

☐ Make clear statements about what has been decided and write these decisions on a flip chart
☐ Ensure that they've created detailed action plans with names, accountabilities and dates beside each step
☐ Round up items not discussed at the meeting, including those on the "parking lot" list, prioritize them, and create plans to deal with them in future
☐ Create an agenda for the next meeting
☐ Decide on a means for follow-up, either written reports or a group session
☐ Help members decide who will take all the flip chart sheets for transcribing
  ✈ Put page numbers on all charts so they are transcribed in the correct order
☐ Conduct a written evaluation of the session
☐ Solicit personal feedback from participants
☐ Allow members to express how they felt about the session
☐ Clarify your role in the follow-up process
  ✈ Try and walk out the door with nothing to do!
  ✈ Once the session is over, thank the participants for having you facilitate and help clean up
  ✈ Go relax!
Different groundrules are appropriate in different situations, depending on purpose of the intervention, nature of relationships, number of participants, and interaction history of participants. The following are examples of groundrules we have used in previous facilitations. Groundrules are often suggested both by the facilitator and the members of the group. Most common groundrules are bolded.

100 mile rule
16 second soapbox
**Agree or disagree only when it makes sense**
All ideas are good and will be listened to carefully
**Anyone can call a timeout if they're confused about the topic or feel the discussion is going off track**
Ask questions
Avoid personal agendas
Avoid sidebars
**Be brief**
Be on time
Both people and issues will be handled with respect
Come prepared to do what's best for the organization
**Communicate clearly; listen actively**
Conduct other business outside the meeting
**Consider this a “safe zone”**
Contain digression
Engage in friendly disagreements when appropriate, and strive to understand the positions of those who disagree with you
**Everyone participates – no one dominates**
Everything is written on flipcharts
Feedback must be phrased in a constructive and supportive manner

**Have fun**
Keep an open mind
**Listen respectfully, with care, and without judgement**
Listen to each other
Listen without bias
Minimize interruptions
**No one will personally attack another**
Observe timeframes
Respect others' opinions
Seek common ground and action
**Silence pagers and phones**
**Speak truthfully, from the heart**
**Stick to the agenda**
There will be no retaliation on the basis of what is said at the meeting
Use the parking lot
**Use neutral body language**
Wait to be recognized before speaking

**EXAMPLE**

We collectively agree to:
- Deal with differences as problems to be solved rather than battles to win
- Share all relevant information
- Focus on interests not positions
- Provide everyone with a chance to speak once before someone speaks twice
- Be a good listener – listening does not require agreement
- Take personal responsibility for clearly communicating your views
- Keep the discussion focused
An Introduction to Your Facilitator and His Role in the Workshop

Your Facilitator – Bill Chiat

William "Bill" Chiat (pronounced shy-at) brings a unique combination of knowledge, abilities and enthusiasm to his facilitation projects. He incorporates over 30 years of practical leadership experience in state and local governments into his work with groups, mixed with a fluency in governance issues and the challenges of today's environment.

As a Director of Alta Mesa Group, LLC Bill serves as a facilitator and organizational and executive leadership development consultant with local governments. He also serves as Executive Director of the California Association of Local Agency Formations Commissions and Director of the California State Association of Counties Institute for Excellence in County Government.

Previous service includes County Executive Officer of Napa County and Director of Organizational Effectiveness in Santa Barbara County. He worked in city government as assistant to the city manager (and Organizational Development Coach) of Oxnard and in special districts as a Planning and Development Director for the Ventura Regional Sanitation District. At the state level, Bill served as the Executive Director of the Arizona Governor's Office for Excellence in Government.

Bill began his career as a park ranger with Minnesota State Parks and an environmental educator with the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Throughout his career Bill has often been tapped to facilitate groups addressing complex organizational and community problems. Previous facilitations range from creating a countywide oak tree removal policy to establishing a regional juvenile justice strategy, a countywide mental health strategic plan, and a city council vision and strategic plan.

Bill has a Bachelor of Science from the University of Minnesota and a Masters of Science in natural resources administration from the University of Michigan. He is a graduate of the Senior Executives in State and Local Government program, and the Leadership in the 21st Century program, both from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Contact Bill at wchiat@sbcglobal.net.

What He'll Be Doing

The facilitator’s role is to keep the discussion on track and to move the group along in achieving its goals. The facilitator helps to enforce the groundrules and other group standards. The facilitator will design and manage the process for the group’s work, but not the content.

The facilitator is not here as a mediator or judge. You can expect that he will add data and information that may be of value in the discussions, but will remain neutral on the content or solutions.

Among the tasks of the facilitator:

- Manage the discussion so everyone has a chance to speak and no one dominates.
- Ask questions to test assumptions, invite participation, gather information, and probe for hidden points.
- Paraphrase to clarify; repeat what people say to let others hear their point a second time and clarify key ideas.
- Synthesize ideas so people comment and build on each other’s thoughts.
- Help the group stay on track and point out digressions if discussion has veered off topic. “Park” off-topic comments and suggestions.
- Look for common ground and test assumptions to see where the group may have agreement.
- Collect ideas through group process activities which provide an opportunity for everyone to have a voice.
- Summarize discussions in a concise and timely manner.

Remain Neutral: While the facilitator is here as a contractor for the agency, his role is to help the group achieve its goal and not to arrive at a predetermined goal or strategy.
CITY OF AMERICAN CANYON
Mobile Home Rent Stabilization Task Force

Ground Rules

We collectively agree that:

• Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

• One person speaks at a time; don't interrupt the speaker

• Stick to our schedule and times.

• You can disagree, but don't personalize it. Stick to the issue. No name calling or stereotyping.

• Report on what is said in our group, but not on who said it.

• Be a good listener - listening does not require agreement

• Pitch the cell phones

4 February 2009
When selecting questions to ask, there is a broad range you can choose from. It’s important to understand how each of these question formats achieves a slightly different outcome.

**Fact-finding questions** are targeted at verifiable data such as who, what, when, where, and how much. Use them to gather information about the current situation.

“What kind of computer equipment are you now using?”

“How much training did staff receive at the start?”

**Feeling-finding questions** ask for subjective information that gets at the participants’ opinions, feelings, values, and beliefs. They help you understand views. Usually contain words like think or feel.

“How do you feel about the effectiveness of the new equipment?”

“Do you think the staff felt they received enough training?”

**Tell-me-more questions** can help you find out more about what the participants are saying. They encourage the speaker to provide more details.

“Tell me more?”

“Can you elaborate on that?”

“Can you be more specific?”

**Best/least questions** help you understand potential opportunities in the present situation. They let you test for the outer limits of participants’ wants and needs.

“What is the best thing about receiving a new computer?”

“What is the worst thing about the new equipment?”

**Third-party questions** help uncover thoughts in an indirect manner. They’re designed to help people express sensitive information.

“Some people find that computer training is too time consuming. How does that sound to you?”

“There is some concern about overly autocratic managers in many departments. Can you relate to that concern?”

**Magic wand** questions let you explore people’s true desires. Also known as “crystal ball” questions, these are useful in temporarily removing obstacles from a person’s mind.

“If time and money were no obstacle, what sort of a computer system would you design for the department?”
PARTICIPATION TECHNIQUES

There are many excellent techniques available to get even the most reluctant and shy participant to play an active part. These techniques offer anonymity to members and generate lots of activity.

DISCUSSION PARTNERS
This simple technique can be used as a way of starting any discussion. After posing a question to a large group, ask everyone to find a partner and discuss the question for a few minutes. Have people report on what they talked about. You can use this with threesomes as well.

TOSSED SALAD
Place an empty cardboard box or an inexpensive plastic salad bowl on the table. Give out small slips of paper and ask people to write down one good idea per slip. Have them toss the slips into the bowl. When people have finished writing, have someone ‘toss the salad.’ Pass around the bowl so that each person can take out as many slips as they tossed in. Go around the table and have people share ideas before discussing and refining the most promising ones together.

ISSUES AND ANSWERS
When faced with a long list of issues to tackle, rather than attempting to problem solve all of them as a whole group (which would take forever), post the problems around the room. Put only one issue on each sheet of flip-chart paper.

Ask all members to go to one of the issue sheets and discuss that problem with whomever else was drawn to that sheet. Make sure people are distributed evenly, with at least three people per issue. You can use chairs, but this works best as a stand-up activity.

Allow up to five minutes for the subgroups to analyze the situation. Have them make notes on the top half of the flip-chart sheet. Ring a bell and ask everyone to move to another flip-chart sheet. When they get there, ask them to read the analysis made by the first group and to add any additional ideas. This round is often shorter than five minutes. Keep moving people around until everyone is back at their original sheet.

Once the analysis round is complete, ask everyone to return to the original issue they started with. Ask them to generate and record solutions to their respective issue on the bottom half of the sheet. Once again circulate people
until everyone has added ideas on all of the sheets.

To end the process, have everyone walk by each sheet, read the solutions and check off the one or two ideas they think are the best.

When everyone is seated again, go through the ideas together and then ask the small groups to each take responsibility for creating action plans for the ideas on one of the sheets.

**TALK CIRCUIT**

This technique works best in a large crowd because it creates a strong buzz and lets people get to know each other. Start by posing a question to the group and then allow quiet time for each person to write their own response.

Ask everyone to sit ‘knee to knee’ with a partner and share their ideas. Have one person speak while the other acts as facilitator. After two to three minutes ring a bell and have partners reverse their roles. After two or three more minutes stop the discussions.

Ask everyone to find a new partner and repeat the process, but in slightly less time. Stop the action and then have everyone repeat the process with a third partner.

In the final round allow only one minute per person. When the partner discussions are over, discuss the ideas as a whole group and record them on flip charts.

**PASS THE ENVELOPE**

Give each person an envelope filled with blank slips of paper. Pose a question or challenge to the group, and then have everyone write down as many ideas as they can within the given time frame and put the slips into the envelope. Tell people to pass the envelopes, either to the next persons or in all directions, and when the passing stops, read the contents. Pair off participants and have them discuss the ideas in their two envelopes. What ideas did they receive? What are the positives and negatives of each idea? What other ideas should they add? Combine pairs to form groups of four and ask them to further refine the content of their four envelopes into practical action plans. Hold a plenary to collect ideas.
GUIDELINES FOR RECORDING

1. Aim to record exactly what is said, without interpreting or editing it. Don’t try to “say it better” or add in your meaning.

2. Focus on being invisible. If you are working with another person who is handling the facilitation or leading the meeting, avoid the temptation to help the facilitator facilitate or the leader lead.

3. Ask questions only when you did not hear what was said, or when what was said seems important but was not stated clearly.

4. Write quickly and legibly. Try to make letters 3 to 4 inches tall. Keep up with the conversation. Don’t worry about spelling; take your best guess—don’t stop to ask someone how a word is spelled.


6. Record key words and phrases exactly as they are said, but don’t try to write down everything that is said. Feel free to abbreviate words.

7. Use different-colored markers to make the charts more readable. Record at least every other item in a different color. Experiment with using colors to make the chart more readable.

8. Test all the markers before using them. Discard those that are worn. Use bold-colored markers so your writing is clearly visible to those in the back of the room. Be sure the markers are water-based, so they won’t bleed through to the wall.

9. Number the chart pages sequentially. Write the number in the lower right-hand corner of each page. Number the paper before ripping it from the pad.

10. You can draw boxes or circles around key items. Highlight certain words or items with underlining, stars, or asterisks. As you get more used to recording, try using graphics to illustrate points, if you feel comfortable doing so.

11. Tear off the chart pages slowly, so that they cleanly tear at the perforation all the way across the page. Practice this!

12. Before the session, plan where you will hang charts and if needed, have strips of masking tape torn off and affix them to the side of the flip chart. Make sure tape, pins or adhesive will work on the walls so charts are not falling off during the session.

- Use water-based (scented) markers which don’t stain clothes or create noxious odors
- Avoid using Post-It easel pads if charts will be collected
- Make sure tape sticks to walls without damaging the paint or wallpaper
- Have push pins available
- For small groups (5-8) consider using a mini-flipchart
AFFINITY DIAGRAM  A tool to involve all group members in generating, gathering, and grouping ideas.

What
An affinity diagram is a technique for creatively organizing a large number of ideas or issues into a visual pattern. An affinity diagram starts with specific ideas and helps you work toward broad categories. This tool can help you summarize natural groupings among the ideas to understand the essence of a problem and breakthrough solutions. Affinity diagrams can help you:

- Organize and give structure to a list of factors that contribute to a problem.
- Break a team out of old ways of thinking
- Identify key areas where improvement is most needed.

How
1 IDENTIFY PROBLEM
Write the problem or issue on a board or flipchart in a full sentence. Reach consensus from the group on the words used. Neutral statements are best, but positive, negative, and solutions-oriented questions also work.

2 BRAINSTORM INDIVIDUAL IDEAS
Provide participants with index cards or sticky-back notes to record their ideas, along with identical black markers (not pens). Ask participants to brainstorm responses to the problem statement. Complete one sticky or index card per idea or response.

Here are some helpful hints:
- Each person should brainstorm at least 6 ideas or issues; the more the better

- Each idea should use at minimum a noun and a verb; avoid single words
- Four to seven words work well; limit to ten words per card

- Flipcharts and easel
- Markers
- Masking tape
- 2”x3” sticky notes (such as Post its)
- Black markers – 1/participant
- 8½”x11” paper for group headings
- A typical affinity has 30 - 60 items; some may generate as many as 200 items

3 CLUSTER IDEAS
Ask the group to post their ideas on the wall, board, or flipchart paper (allow one sheet of flipchart paper for every 25 or so ideas generated). You may want to read each idea as it is posted to ensure everyone understands what it means.
Alternatively (and to keep the focus off who wrote the ideas), the facilitator can gather all the cards, mix them up, and then post them on the board. The facilitator can read the ideas while he or she is posting them. This is a particularly valuable approach for sensitive discussions or problems.

Ask members to come up to the board and quietly sort ideas simultaneously into six to ten related groupings. Use questions like "Which other ideas are similar?" and "Is this idea somehow connected to any others?" to help you group the ideas together.

- Silence helps members focus on the meaning behind the ideas rather than history
- Ideas may end up in more than one column, just create a duplicate sticky
- It's okay for some ideas to stand alone if they are not connected
- End the sort when consensus in the group is attained and the group feels the clusters make sense

4 CREATE AFFINITY CARDS

For each grouping create an affinity card, a card that has a short statement describing the entire group of ideas. Use a consensus process. Good affinity cards clearly describe all the ideas in the group. It should be able to stand alone if all the individual cards were removed. Affinity cards typically range between 6 and 10 words in a reasonably full sentence. The card is used as the header for the group of ideas.

5 CLUSTER CARDS

Put all of the individual ideas in a group under their affinity card. Now try to group affinity cards under even broader groups. If appropriate, subgroups can be created to further refine a team's thinking. Subgroups may be appropriate when an affinity grouping is more than twice the average size of all the groupings. Subgroups may also work when an affinity header has two or more major thoughts in it.

6 CREATE AFFINITY DIAGRAM

Lay out all of the ideas and affinity cards on a single piece of paper or board. Draw outlines of the groups with the affinity cards at the top of each group. The resulting structure will give you valuable insight into the problem.
Affinity Diagram Example

A publication team wanted to reduce the number of typographical errors in their department's documentation. As part of a first step, they conducted a brainstorming session that produced the following list of factors that influenced errors.

- Computers
- Printers
- Lighting
- Comfort
- Technical Jargon
- Grammar
- Draft Copy
- Font
- Computer Skill
- No Feedback
- Unreasonable Deadlines
- Typewriters
- Desk Height
- Interruptions
- Slang
- Punctuation
- Final Copy
- Typing Skill
- Proofreading Skill
- Noise
- Chair Height
- Time of Day
- Handwriting
- Spelling
- Distribution
- Editing Skill
- No Measurement

The following affinity diagram helped them to focus on areas for further analysis.

**Problem:** What are the issues involved in reducing the number of typographical errors?

- The surrounding environment of the workplace is distracting
  - Interruptions
  - Unreasonable deadlines
  - Time of day
  - Ergonomics
    - Noise
    - Lighting
    - Desk height
    - Chair height
    - Comfort

- There are no definitions or standards of quality
  - No measurement
  - No feedback

- Equipment is old and out-of-date
  - Computers
  - Printers
  - Typewriters

- Staff does not have adequate amount of training
  - Typing skills
  - Editing skills
  - Computer skills
  - Proofreading skills

- The original document is in a condition which makes it difficult to be accurate
  - Unclear requirements
    - Draft copy
    - Final copy
    - Distribution
    - Font
    - Layout

- Author skills
  - Poor handwriting
  - Poor grammar
  - Poor punctuation
  - Poor spelling
  - Technical jargon
  - Slang
**BRAINSTORM** A fast, creative technique to generate bigger and better ideas ... and explore whole new ways to solve problems and improve processes

**What**
Brainstorming is a group technique for quickly generating a shopping list of ideas about a specific problem or topic. It can help you:
- Generate a variety of ideas in a short time.
- Produce new and creative solutions.
- Build off of each other’s ideas to identify new opportunities.

Brainstorming is used solely for generating ideas; it does not involve analysis.

**How**
The goal of brainstorming is to generate lots and lots of ideas. Before you start, make sure everyone understands the importance of postponing judgment, evaluation, and criticism until after the brainstorming session is completed.

1. **REVIEW PROCESS**
   Review with the group the purpose and structure of a brainstorm:
   - All ideas—no matter how crazy—are valid
   - Think fast ... more is better
   - Hold all discussion, judgement, or evaluation of ideas
   - No criticism of ideas or the person who offered the idea
   - Build on each others’ ideas
   - Have fun and be creative!

2. **DEFINE TOPIC**
   Write the problem or topic on a blackboard or flipchart where everyone can see it. Make sure the topic is understood and agreed upon by everyone in the group.

3. **GENERATE IDEAS**
   Start the brainstorm by asking for ideas. Write all ideas on the board exactly as stated. Do as little editing as possible. Write large so everyone can read each idea. Keep the group motivated and thinking creatively. Get past the expected ideas...to the unexpected.
4 NUMBER
Number each idea for future reference.

5 CLARIFY & COMBINE
Allow the group to ask clarifying questions related to the ideas. The purpose is not to remove any ideas, just to make sure everyone understands. Where appropriate similar ideas may be combined. Ask the group which of the similar ideas will stay and which are crossed off.

6 SELECT
Use Multivoting or Nominal Group Technique as tools to identify the ideas with the most promise.

Alternate Techniques

Here are some variations of the typical unstructured brainstorm described above. Try one of these if you feel the group may be reluctant to speak out, when you believe there may be conflict among group members...or just for a change of pace.

• Structured Brainstorm
  1 Conduct Steps 1 and 2 as above.
  2 Select a volunteer to contribute the first idea.
  3 Collect only one idea per person.
  4 Solicit one idea from each of the remaining group members in sequence from the first volunteer.
  5 Participants who don’t have an idea at the moment may pass.
  6 Continue going around the sequence picking up new ideas. Encourage creative—even outrageous—thinking.

  7 A complete round of passes ends the brainstorming session. Sessions last 15 to 20 minutes, depending on the complexity of the subject.
  8 Review the written list of ideas for clarity and to discard any duplicates. Discard ideas only if they are virtually identical.
  9 Use Multivoting or Nominal Group Technique as tools to identify the ideas with the most promise.

The advantage of structured brainstorming is that each person has an equal chance to participate, regardless of rank or personality. The disadvantage of structured brainstorming is that it lacks spontaneity and can be somewhat rigid.
Silent Brainstorm

The process is the same as the structured method (above) except that ideas are first brainstormed silently by each participant and then shared with the group.

1. Conduct Steps 1 and 2 as above.
2. Ask participants to write down on their paper as many ideas as come to mind. Encourage them to think quickly and write down all ideas. Allow 5-10 minutes for the silent brainstorm.
3. Ask a volunteer to share one idea from their list and write it on the board.
4. Solicit one idea from each of the remaining group members in sequence from the first volunteer.
5. Participants who have exhausted their list may pass.
6. Continue going around the sequence picking up new ideas. Encourage new thinking. Participants may continue suggesting new ideas at their turn even if they had not written them down.
7. A complete round of passes ends the brainstorming session. Sessions last 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the complexity of the subject.
8. Review the written list of ideas for clarity and to discard any duplicates.
9. Use Multivoting or Nominal Group Technique as tools to identify the ideas with the most promise.

The advantage of the silent brainstorming is that participants can freely think of ideas without fear of judgement and can still build off each other's ideas. The disadvantage of silent brainstorming is that there tends to be less freeform thinking and building on ideas.

Another variation is to use one of these two alternate methods along with unstructured brainstorming session. Begin the session with a few rounds of structured or silent brainstorming and finish up with a period of the original unstructured brainstorming.

Points to Remember

- Never judge ideas as they are generated. The goal of brainstorming is to generate a lot of ideas in a short time. Analysis of ideas is a separate process, to be done later.

- Don't quit at the first lull. All brainstorming sessions reach lulls which are uncomfortable for the participants and the facilitator! Research indicates that most of the best ideas occur during the later parts of a session. Try to encourage the group to push through at least two or three lulls.

- Write down all of the ideas exactly as they were presented. Ask a co-facilitator to help record ideas. Write down the same words as used by the participant. If it's too long, ask the participant to shorten the idea for recording. When you condense an idea to one or two words for ease of recording, you are doing analysis. Analysis should be done later.

- Encourage outrageous ideas. While these ideas may not appear to be practical, they may start a flow of creative ideas that can be used. This can help you break through a lull. Often the outrageous ideas lead to the best solutions.
**THE IMPORTANCE OF BRAINSTORMING VARIATIONS**

Brainstorming variations are useful because they enable you to vary your methodology so the group does not become bored with basic brainstorming procedures, and because they increase the quantity and quality of ideas that are generated.

Seven brainstorming variations are presented here. We suggest that you keep a "stable" of idea-generation variations handy for your work with groups. Each one offers a slightly different spin on brainstorming and adds value to the construction of the group data base. Remember: it is the quality of the group's data base that will determine whether you are able to provide breakthrough results in your work with groups. If you keep working with the same data previously available to the group, then members are likely to get the same results they have been getting from previously unsuccessful efforts to tackle major challenges.

**BRAINSTORM MINUS ASSUMPTIONS**

**Description**

This method encourages group members to brainstorm ideas freely, without attachment to the assumptions they have about the issues at hand. The method is used after an initial round of brainstorming. Members are asked to identify their assumptions about the issues and then to hold these assumptions in "suspension" while brainstorming.

**Method**

1. Explain to the group that it is sometimes useful and "frame breaking" to brainstorm ideas without any attachment to assumptions about the issues.

2. Ask the group to identify their assumptions about the topic and issues for which you are seeking ideas, and record these ideas on a flip chart. (It is usually helpful to prepare a list of sample assumptions related to a separate topic with which the group would be familiar, and to post this list as an illustration.)

3. Point out that the listed assumptions most likely run the whole gamut from "incontrovertible" truths to pure superstition. Explain there is nothing wrong with assumptions—they are not bad things and in fact are useful and often essential to productivity and accomplishment—yet, for maximum group creativity, it is helpful to "suspend" the assumptions for a brief time while seeking new ideas or solutions. Point out the difference between "suspending" assumptions and "letting go" of them. When you suspend assumptions, you don't have to release them from...
your belief system. It is as if they are hanging above you, suspended in air, but not driving your thoughts and ideas.

4. Break the group into teams of five to nine members and have them brainstorm ideas, now with assumptions suspended, for approximately 15 minutes.

5. Have each group evaluate the brainstormed ideas and identify ideas that they think should be added to the original brainstormed list for further evaluation.

Variations
1. To dramatize the idea of suspending the assumptions, you can hang the lists from the ceiling by attaching long pieces of masking tape to the flip chart pages.

2. For a more interesting variation (provided you have an open-minded group), ask members to identify the assumptions they were operating with during the initial brainstorming, and write these on the left side of a flip chart page. Draw a line down the middle of the chart page and then ask them to identify the opposite assumption. Tear the chart page off. Fold it over so only the opposite assumptions are visible, and ask the group to brainstorm new ideas using these assumptions.

SEGMENTED BRAINSTORMING

Description
Each person is given a specific assignment to brainstorm alternatives to a part of (or one dimension of) the problem, strategy, or task. Each dimension of the problem is written on a stiff card. Their responses are written on index cards. The cluster of these cards is mounted under the “header” card. The group then goes through each “part” and adds additional alternatives.

Method
1. Post the problem, strategy, or task at the front of the room.

2. If you have not broken down the problem into parts, do so. Strategies and tasks can be divided into subparts.

3. Assign each member a part (or dimension) of the problem or a subpart of a strategy or task, and give each one about 10 index cards and a colored felt-tipped pen. Ask members to generate as many alternatives as they can for their assigned part.

4. Give everyone time to generate their lists.
5. Mount all the cards at the front of the room.

6. Taking each part in turn, ask group members to generate additional alternatives for consideration. Write these ideas on cards and post them.

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**ROUND ROBIN BRAINSTORM**

**Description**
The facilitator asks each person in turn to generate ideas.

**Method**
1. Post the problem, strategy, or task.
2. Post any further elaborations such as dimensions of the problem or subparts of the task you are trying to achieve.
3. Ask each person to generate a list of ideas.
4. Pick a method for taking turns and have everyone take a turn until all the ideas are posted.

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**ANONYMOUS ALTERNATIVES GENERATION**

**Description**
This technique allows group members to share alternatives anonymously, thus eliminating associations of a personality with an idea. It requires two recorders to write down all the ideas and a person (usually the facilitator) to pick up note cards from the participants. Individuals generate ideas anonymously, writing them on note cards. The cards are collected and recorded in random order on flip charts.

**Method**
1. Post the problem, task, question, or desired outcome on a flip chart.
2. Pass out index cards to group members and ask that they record their ideas on the cards. The only requirement is that the idea be written legibly and in a complete sentence. Instruct members to put each card facedown in front of them after they have recorded a response. Allow 20 to 30 minutes for individuals to generate responses.

3. The facilitator goes around the room, picks up the cards as they are completed, and delivers them to the two recorders, who then rewrite the ideas on flip charts or post them. The recorders should be situated in the back of the room, with the flip charts turned around so that no one can see the ideas as they are being recorded.

4. After all the cards are recorded, the flip charts are moved to the front of the room. The facilitator walks the group through each idea and makes sure that members understand it. The person who generated the idea has the option of explaining the idea or remaining anonymous.

**Variation**

You can insist that no one reveal authorship of any idea, thus assuring an anonymous discussion and subsequent analysis of the ideas.

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**"BE SOMEBODY ELSE"**

**Description**

Group members role-play while they are generating ideas. Several options are available for "being somebody else" during idea generation.

**Method**

1. Post the data for the problem, issue, or strategy at the front of the room.

2. Have members divide into pairs and discuss the issues and how they would approach dealing with the problem or doing the work.

3. During idea generation, partners reverse roles and generate alternatives that they believe would meet the approval of the other member of the pair.

4. After the list of alternatives is generated, check with members and see how closely their partners came to "reading them right."
Variations

1. Have the group list people whom they have known and admired—ones who are familiar to everyone in the group. Each member then picks someone from the list to role-play during idea generation.

2. Make a list of famous people who are admired by members of the group. Have everyone pick one person to role-play during idea generation.

**IDEA DERBY**

Description

Small teams of pairs, triads, or quads form to generate as many ideas or solutions as they can. The goal is purely volume. Teams have a set time to generate as many ideas as they can. The team with the most ideas wins.

**Method**

1. Post the problem or challenge on the flip chart.

2. Divide the group into teams. Make teams of two, three, or four members.

3. Review the rules of brainstorming (see Procedure II-9: Basic Brainstorming). Explain that all ideas are valid, but that one team can call a foul against another if they think the team “cheated” in some way. The facilitator should act as referee. If you want, you can devise a prize or reward for the winning team.

**GUIDED IMAGERY**

Description

Group members are led through a relaxation exercise and guided imagery by the facilitator after they have identified the “end point” of the activity or problem solving process. Alternatives resulting from the guided imagery experience are generated.
Method
1. Post the problem, task, or strategy at the front of the room.

2. Have the group precisely identify the final step or end point of solving the problem or completing the task. For example, suppose your problem developing a winning proposal. You might identify the end point as the telephone call through which you learn that you got the proposal.

3. The facilitator leads the group through a guided imagery exercise using the script provided next (in Guide II-10) or an alternative script. The end point the group has identified is used to fill in the blank space on the script.

4. Immediately after finishing the exercise, members silently write out all the ideas that occurred to them during the experience, as well as other ideas that spin off from the experience.

5. In “round robin” style, have each person share his or her ideas. Record all ideas on flip charts.

References


**CONSENSUS** Creating a proposal or solution acceptable enough that all participants can support it.

**What**
Consensus decision making is a process in which participants openly express their views and the reasons behind their opinions in order to find an option or solution that all participants are willing to support. Reaching consensus requires:

- Time
- Active participation of all members
- Creative thinking and being open-minded
- Active listening
- Skills in resolving differences of opinion
- Considering the ideas, feelings and situations of every participant, not just the vocal few

Probably equally important is identifying what *does not* constitute a consensus. Consensus is *not* reached by:

- Making everyone totally happy with the decision
- A majority or unanimous vote
- Creating a compromise or asking participants to "give in"

Consensus is reached when each member of the group agrees to support the decision, though it may not have been his or her first choice. It forces the group to consider all aspects of a problem and voice objections to possible options. Each member has the opportunity to express their point of view and carefully listen to the perspective of others.

Consensus requires each person's commitment to the final decision as if it were the first choice of all group members. Any member can block consensus. That is why consensus decisions are more difficult, yet more effective than other methods. The investment in time pays off with smoother implementation of the solution since it is fully supported by the group.

**How**
The goal of consensus decision making is to arrive at a solution that each member can honestly say: "I believe you understand my point of view, I understand your point of view; whether or not I prefer this decision, I support it because it was reached fairly and openly and is the best decision for the group at this time."
The typical steps for reaching consensus include:

1 BRAINSTORM
Brainstorm for ideas. Use creativity to identify as many potential solutions as possible. The Brainstorm Toolbox provides details and variations for conducting the brainstorm.

2 DISCUSS
At the conclusion of the brainstorm, allow participants to discuss and ask questions about the suggested solutions. Combine ideas where appropriate. Allow participants to advocate the pros and cons of various suggestions.

3 CLARIFY INTERESTS
Help the group separate member’s interests and positions from the issues they are trying to resolve. Interests include the feelings and emotional needs of the individual. Positions are usually the only viable solutions an individual can see at the time.

Ask the participants to share their individual interests related to the issue. Help the group find common ground and focus on their collective interests in the outcomes—what do they want to accomplish together. It’s important for members to recognize and look beyond their solutions or ideas (positions) and consider other options. Often the most obvious or easiest solutions are avoiding the real challenges or issues that need to be addressed.

4 CREATE CRITERIA
Determine objective criteria to evaluate each of the ideas against. If some are more important than others the criteria can be weighted. Make sure each criteria is clearly defined so all participants have the same idea in mind. Use Worksheet 4 in the Problem Solving Process as a guide.

5 REDUCE OPTIONS
Use weighted votes, nominal group technique, multivoting, or similar method to rank and reduce the list of options. Eliminate options that are not feasible or do not meet the established criteria. You should be able to eliminate 70-80% of the ideas at this point.

6 DISCUSS
Call for objections on remaining options. Discuss and modify alternatives as appropriate.

7 TEST
Test for any solutions which all the members could support. If no consensus is reached at this point, repeat from step 5 with the remaining options.

8 CONSENSUS
Reach consensus. First summarize the consensus on a flip chart. Since any member of the team can block a decision, do the **Double Consensus Test:**

- First ask: "Can everyone live with this decision?"
- Then ask: "Is there anyone who cannot support this decision?"

Make sure each member responds to both questions. The double test helps insure that each member supports the final work of the group regardless of their original position or interest.
Points to Remember

❖ To reach consensus the group must let each member participate fully in the discussion. This probably means going through several rounds of the process.

❖ Not every decision requires the support of every member — in fact it's probably impossible and unnecessary for this to occur. The group should decide in advance which decisions will be done by consensus. These should include complex or important decisions that require the coordination and understanding of all members, those which have a major impact on the direction of the project, and those which impact conduct of the group.

❖ Differences of opinion are a strength of the group. These differences are key to gathering additional information, clarifying issues, building deeper understanding and forcing the group to seek better options.

❖ You know you have reached consensus when a solution surfaces that no one is completely satisfied with, but which everyone can live with.

Consensus

Encourage Participants To:

❖ Listen to others
❖ Share information
❖ Express differences
❖ Work for solutions that benefit everyone
❖ Encourage participation by all
❖ Share interests; let go of positions
❖ Be flexible and open-minded
❖ Block a decision one cannot accept

Help Participants Avoid:

❖ Compromise or agree too quickly
❖ Bargain or trade support
❖ Argue for the sake of arguing
❖ Change one's mind simply to promote agreement
❖ Expect unreasonable tradeoffs
❖ Vote
LATERAL PROBLEM SOLVING

Powerful techniques for identifying innovative solutions to problems and process improvement challenges

What

Lateral thinking is a group technique to help solve problems by identifying and using creative new approaches. It can help you:

- Generate practical fresh new ideas.
- Break out of traditional solutions to stuck processes or stubborn problems.
- Design your way forward rather than fix old problems.
- Accelerate the pace of innovation in a deliberate and systematic way.
- Think in terms of possibilities (what could be) rather than probabilities (what will be).

How

The goal of lateral thinking activities is to generate creative solutions or alternatives to address process improvements or stubborn problems. Lateral thinking itself is a form of process improvement. It helps people improve their thinking process in order to generate innovative solutions. Traditional analytical approaches often generate traditional solutions—ones that have been tried before. With the fast pace in the external environment, the increasing demands of constituents/customers, and the limited resources available—adding vigor to one’s thinking process is more critical than ever.

Lateral thinking is another form of logic which compliments critical and analytical thinking. There are many tools available to help improve lateral thinking skills (see Resources). Two specific tools are highlighted here: “Random Word Association” and “Challenge the Status Quo.”

RANDOM WORD ASSOCIATION

This tool is designed to make connections using unrelated input to think up new alternatives or ideas to address problems or process improvements. Keep the process moving quickly.

1 CREATE TEAMS

Break the participants into task teams of 4-6 people

2 SPECIFY TOPIC

Identify the specific problem or process (or portion thereof) to be addressed. Write it on a flipchart.
3 SELECT A RANDOM WORD

Ask each task team to pick a word from the Random Word List. Have fun with this step as the word selected should be a surprise. Day of a birthday, zipcode, last two digits of a phone number, last two digits of a dollar bill serial number all are examples. The number needs to be between 01 and 60. (1 min)

4 BRAINSTORM

Give each team a flipchart and markers. Ask each team to brainstorm a list of ideas around their selected word. Follow the guidelines for brainstorming. Remember: ideas generated at this stage should not be judged or edited. If someone thinks it's related—the idea goes up on the chart. (3 mins)

5 ASSOCIATE

Develop associations between the ideas generated during the brainstorm from the selected word, and the selected problem or process. The relationships can be wild and unexpected. Again, don't try and discuss or edit, simply record the associations on the flipchart. (5 mins)

6 CREATE SOLUTIONS

Ask the group to identify which associations have possibilities for practical application. Create potential solutions, products, or improvements around those with the greatest opportunity. Ask each task team to pick their best innovative solution/improvement and share it with the full group. (6 mins)

7 REPEAT PROCESS

After each task team shares their results, repeat the process 3-5 times—depending on the number of task team—in order to generate sufficient ideas. After each round cross-off words used from the Random Word List so fresh words are used in each round.

8 DISCUSS OPTIONS

After the rounds the full group should examine the best ideas generated. Discuss and select the most promising for further evaluation and planning.

CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO

This tool helps groups to check current thinking and ask questions related to problems or processes. The discussion examines underlying assumptions and boundaries as the group searches for alternative solutions.

1 SELECT

Select a specific process, task, or problem to address. Write it out on a flipchart so everyone is in agreement on the topic of the "Challenge."

2 CUT

Ask the group the “cut” question: “What would happen if we stopped doing this right now—how would it impact our organization or customers?”

Brainstorm ideas on a flipchart. If no reasonable answer(s) can be generated to this question, cut the task or problem and end this activity. If the task or process must continue, move to the next step.

An alternative question may be: “Will anyone notice if we stop doing this?” Who and why?
3 BECAUSE

Ask the group to list all the reasons to this statement: “We cannot stop doing this because...”

4 DISCUSSION

Discuss the reasons listed on the chart. Be rigorous about flushing the whys out. Time moves forward. What was valid in the past may not be valid today or tomorrow.

Resources

Books:  

Website:  www.thinksmt.com

5 ALTERNATIVES

Generate alternative new ideas or ways of doing the same thing.

6 COMBINE TOOLS

Once a group reaches this point, improvement plans could be developed, or the group could go on and use the Random Word Association tool described earlier.

Lateral Problem Solving

- *Never judge ideas as they are generated.* The goal of lateral thinking is to generate a lot of ideas in a short time. Analysis of these ideas is a separate process, to be done later.

- *Involve others.* Invite people outside your area of expertise to participate in the innovation sessions. Tap the creativity around the organization. Outside people will see problems and processes from fresh new perspectives.

- *Mix people up.* When using smaller task teams, regularly mix the members up to inject fresh thinking. Innovation is contagious.

- *Encourage outrageous ideas.* While these ideas may not be practical, they may start a flow of creative ideas that can be used.
1 NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE
2 MULTIVOTING Tools which helps groups come to consensus on the relative importance of issues, problems, or solutions and to prioritize activities

NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE

What

Nominal Group Technique is structured method that a group can use to generate and prioritize items in a list. This method uses priorities of each group member to discover the overall priorities of the group. Nominal group technique helps you:

- Generate and prioritize a list of ideas.
- Make decisions using inputs from all participants.

How

1 GENERATE IDEAS
   Give an appropriate amount of time for silent brainstorming. Clarify and consolidate ideas.

2 COLLECT IDEAS
   Collect and/or write the statements on a flipchart or board. Eliminate duplicates and/or clarify meanings of any of the statements.

3 IDENTIFY EACH IDEA
   Identify each of the final statements with a letter. For example, for eight ideas, you would assign the letters A through H. Letters help members avoid getting confused during the ranking process.

4 LIST THE LETTERS
   Have each participant record the assigned letters on a piece of paper.

5 PRIORITIZE LISTS
   Ask each person to prioritize their list by writing a number beside each letter. If there are eight ideas, then 8 is written beside the letter corresponding to the most important idea.
   This is repeated for each number until 1 is written beside the letter corresponding to the least important idea. Each number (1 through 8) is used only once by each team member.

6 COMBINE RANKINGS
   Create a matrix on the board or flipchart and record each vote, then total. The letter with the highest score is the idea with the highest priority, and the letter with the lowest score has the lowest priority.
Nominal Group Technique Example

The following office problems were identified in a brainstorming session:

A. Ineffective organizational structure.
B. Poor communications outside the office.
C. Lack of training.
D. Poor communications within the office.
E. Unclear mission and objectives.
F. Poor distribution of office mail.
G. Lack of feedback on reports on management.

Each group member then wrote the letters A through G on a piece of paper and prioritized each problem from 1 to 7 (lowest to highest), using each number only once. The results were summarized on the chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROBLEM</th>
<th>VOTES</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>PRIORITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>6 5 7 5 6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3 2 4 1 3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1 1 2 2 2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>4 4 5 6 4</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>7 7 6 7 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>2 3 1 3 1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>5 6 3 4 7</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MULTIVOTING

What

Multivoting is a quick and easy way for a group to find the items of the highest priority in a list. This technique helps you:

- Prioritize a large list without creating a win-lose situation in the group that generated the list.
- Separate the vital few items from the trivial many on a large list.

How

1. **EMPOWER**
   
   Give each participant a number of votes equal to 20-33% of the number of items on the list (e.g. 8-12 votes for a 40-item list). The longer the list, the smaller percent of votes. Avoid more than 12 votes.

2. **VOTE**
   
   Have the members vote individually for the items they believe have high priority. Voting can be accomplished by two methods:
   - **Draw dots.** Provide each participant with a marker and ask them to draw a dot to the left of each of the ideas they want to vote for.
3 COMPILe VOTES
Total the votes given to each item. Write the number of votes in large numbers on the sheets.

4 SELECT TOP ITEMS
Generally this method will create a significant break between the top 20% of ideas and the rest. Ask the group where to draw the line. Move on to build consensus on the top items.

If you can't establish the top four to six items, first remove from the list those items that received the fewest votes.

Repeat the process from step 3 with the remaining items.

5 BUILD CONSENSUS
Using the top ideas, follow the process in the Consensus Toolbox for helping the group determine which idea(s) to pursue in their action plan.

6 VARIATION: WEIGHTED MULTIVOTE
Each participant rates - not ranks - the relative importance of choices by distributing a value (e.g., 100 points) across the options. Participants can distribute this value among as many or as few choices as desired. A matrix is then made as above, with the ratings and totals. The choice with the highest total in this case would be the first priority.

With the large number of choices, or when the voting for the top choice is very close, this process can be repeated for an agreed upon number of items. Stop when the choice is clear.

Multivoting

- Multivoting is best suited for large groups and long lists.
- Keep the process simple.
- Before voting, make sure and ask the group if there are any duplicate ideas that can be combined.
- Participants may put only one vote for each item selected.
- Participants do not need to use all of their votes.
- More information on weighted multivoting can be found on worksheet 4 of the Problem Solving Process.
MULTIVOTE VARIATION

SELF-ADHESIVE STICKERS AS VOTING AIDS

Description

Proposed alternatives are listed on flip charts. Each individual is given several self-adhesive stickers (such as colored dots). The participants put the stickers beside those items they consider to be of greatest importance. Votes are tallied and the alternatives receiving the highest number of votes are further considered. There are many variations to this technique. For some reason, groups seem to enjoy working with the stickers much better than using markers to check off list items or raising their hand for voting.

Method

1. Determine in advance how many stickers each person will receive for voting. Here are some options for determining how many votes to give each person:
   a) Use the “20-80” rule. The “20-80” rule is a spin off from the Pareto Principle, which suggests that 20% of your work produces 80% of the results. To use the rule, count the total number of alternatives and give each person a supply of stickers that is equal to 20% of the total number of alternatives. If you have 40 alternatives, each person gets eight stickers.
   b) Give each person the number of “dots” you have chosen in a above.
   c) If you want to do rankings, give each person the number of stickers that corresponds to the number of alternatives you want ranked. For example, if you want them to rank the top five alternatives in priority order, give them five stickers and ask them to number the stickers from 1–5.

2. Use scissors to cut up the right number of dots for each participant.

3. Pass out the dots and establish the rules for voting. The most common rules are:
   a) You have _____ minutes to spend all your votes. If you haven’t used them by the end of that time, you lose them. “Use ‘em or lose ‘em.”
   b) Distribute your stickers across all the alternatives, but you may only vote for each item once.
   c) You can give your stickers away to anyone you want whom you think may be more qualified to evaluate the alternatives, or you can give them away for any reason.
   d) No cutting of the stickers into fractional parts.

4. (Optional.) Remind the group that one rule of decision making is that oftentimes the only major difference between a slow decision and a fast decision is the amount of time it takes.
5. Set your timer to go off 1 minute before the end of the voting.

6. When the timer goes off, remind everyone that they only have a minute to “Use them or lose them.”

7. Either count up the votes yourself and record them on the flip chart, or ask members to count them up and write the total beside each item. One quick way to tally votes is to assign one member to each flip chart page and have them work on adding up the votes for the alternatives.

8. Circle the top 20% of the vote-getting items and see if the group agrees to work with these items for further consideration. In some cases, all these alternatives may be accepted as the decision of the group.

Notes
1. Exercise caution in the use of this technique. It is meant as one tool for decision analysis. Sometimes it is overused or does not really deal with many of the complexities involved in an issue. It is best used for narrowing down a list of alternatives for further consideration of some alternatives. Ideas that are especially creative but not well understood can get “lost” in the speed of the process. The wise facilitator will watch out for this and look for ways to resurrect the ideas in subsequent phases of decision analysis.

2. If you haven’t used this method before, you may tend to dismiss it as too gimmicky. The best advice in this case would be for you to try it first. Most likely, you will be pleasantly surprised to find that even the most tough-minded types have a good time with it, and see its advantages.

Variations
1. You can first establish a list of voting criteria with the group. Establish the list of criteria for consideration in making the vote, and post the criteria so that participants can refer to them as they vote.

2. You can repeat the process to more carefully consider the alternatives. You complete the first round of voting and then ask group members to share why they voted the way they did or to advocate for one or more of the alternatives. (You can also have an advocacy discussion before an initial vote.) A second vote is then taken, usually using a lesser number of stickers to force group members to assess their highest priorities.

3. You can assign monetary value to the stickers. For example:

   Red dots = $1,000
   Green dots = $500
   Black dots = $100

Then you might say, “Assume you have $5000 to complete this project. You have to allocate your money to the alternative strategies having the highest payoff. You have two red dots, six green dots, and five black dots. Put those dots on the alternatives that you would invest in.”

If you want to get elaborate, you can purchase play money and glue sticks and have people use the money as stickers. Or spray the list of alternatives with adhesive and have people stick the play money on the flip chart page.
4. You can use different kinds of stickers to have members vote on different kinds of things. For instance, each person gets a cowboy-boot sticker to select the first alternative he or she would use to “kick off” the project. Or each person gets one heart-shaped sticker to indicate which alternative represents the real “heart of the matter” and the heart sticker receives the most voting weight.

The variations for using the stickers are endless. The use of the stickers injects a lightness into the decision-making process and adds a “fun” element to decision analysis. The technique loosens groups up and makes them far more able to make decisions quickly with far less conflict.

5. You can first proceed through the entire list of alternatives to see if anything on the list needs further clarification before voting. Restrict this conversation to clarification only.
A FACILITATOR’S GUIDE TO
PROBLEM SOLVING

Most of us have experienced problem solving as a one-step process—just solve it! There is much more, however, to really effective and accurate problem solving.

**DEFINITION**

Problem solving is creating change to bring actual conditions closer to conditions that are desired. A problem—therefore—is a discrepancy between current conditions and desired conditions.

There are two aspects of problem solving:

- Problem Analysis
- Decision Making

*Problem analysis* consists of identifying barriers to achieving goals and determining the forces that bear on those barriers. *Decision making* consists of determining goals and choosing courses of action to reach those goals.

Problem solving is a fundamental process that remains the same regardless of the nature of the problem. Of course, the complexity of the process changes with the nature of the problem. The model in this guide is a road map to guide you through problem analysis and decision making in a systematic way. It will also help in avoiding many of the pitfalls that you may have experienced in the past.

**GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

The problem-solving process is based on the following principles:

- The most powerful action in problem solving is a **clear definition of the problem**. A shared understanding of the problem and the desired outcomes is fundamental. Many a process has become derailed because participants are working on solving different problems!
- Problems have **many causes**, not just one. Problem analysis is the search for the underlying root causes of the problem. Often the ‘presenting problem’ is not at all the real problem to solve. The process helps identify causes and find the second-third-fourth-(and more) right answers.
- Valid decisions depend on adequate information. Adequate means accurate, clear, and complete. To draw an analogy, the recipe (process) depends on the ingredients (information).
- Working with others often results in better solutions. A group of informed people working on a problem as a team can compress into a few hours work that might take months for only one person. In addition, teams working within the problem solving process tend to identify more creative approaches than do individual people working by themselves.
- Getting good results from the process requires that those who must carry out the action to understand and be committed to it. Those involved in the problem should participate and share in the authority and responsibility for the solutions. A solution might be technically sound, but politically unreliable, or those who are responsible for implementing it may not be committed to or capable of doing so.
- Create a supportive environment for process participants in order to foster a trusting relationship and allow open communication about the problem and people’s perspectives.
SIX-STEP PROBLEM SOLVING MODEL

This model provides a step-by-step process for any type of problem solving. The process is designed to work with groups as well as individuals. For more complex problems, the model may be used in successive rounds on aspects of the problem through Step 4; then the various choices can be integrated into a coordinated action plan in Step 5.

The key is to develop a problem statement that clearly describes the current condition that you want to change (also referred to as the “as is” condition). All those affected in the situation and participating in the problem solving process should participate in this step. Clear communication and agreement results by putting the problem statement into writing and obtaining everyone’s agreement.

Next, identify the “to be” or desired state. This statement includes the goals or outcomes desired when the problem is solved. This statement, also developed with all the participants, provides focus and direction to measure the progress of the group. It also helps align the remaining steps of the process to the desired outcomes.

2 IDENTIFY POTENTIAL CAUSES & GATHER DATA

There are three parts to this step:

a. Identify potential cause(s)

b. Gather data and determine most likely cause(s)

c. Identify root cause(s)

First, identify all potential causes that may be contributing to the problem or current situation. The longer the list, the more likely you will identify the real causes. The worksheet suggest tools which will help you with Step 2.

Next, narrow down your list to the most likely causes. Confirm ideas by gathering and/or application of available information and data. Use some of the tools suggested along with team consensus to those causes that contribute most to the problem. Remember the 80/20 rule (Pareto Principle) … 20% of the causes are responsible for 80% of the problem. Find the 20%.

Finally, dig for the root causes: the causes which truly underlie the problem. Understanding this will help you focus on solving the real problems rather than simply treating the symptoms. For each of the most likely causes dig down by asking “Why” several times until the group is sure they have the root cause(s).

Use the model as a guide to your process. Depending on your situation, steps may be skipped, combined, abbreviated, or lengthened. The point is to follow a process; consider the guiding principles mentioned above; and insure the “Litmus Test” questions in each step have been addressed.

1 DEFINE THE PROBLEM

This step has two parts. First, develop a clear statement of the problem to be addressed. Recognize that often you need to go beyond the “presenting problem” to examine what is the real problem(s) to be solved. The presenting problem is the initial statement or description of the problem, usually referring to the symptoms of the problem.
IDENTIFY POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Based on the root cause(s) identified, generate an extensive list of possible solutions. Quantity is more important than quality here. It’s important at this stage not to dismiss or evaluate any of the ideas. The variety of perspectives of the group is most valuable here in identifying creative alternatives and approaches to the problem.

Ask the group to examine the list with an eye to identifying the most likely alternatives for final consideration. Ideas may be expanded or altered during the discussion. The worksheets will help you evaluate ideas. Remember, the goal here is to identify a handful of the best ideas on the list, not to select the final solution.

SELECT THE BEST SOLUTION(S)

Identification of best solution(s) involves two steps:

a. Develop evaluation criteria and weights

b. Apply the criteria and choose the best solution(s)

At this point groups are tempted to jump to a solution—sometimes a wrong or less useful idea. First, determine the criteria the alternatives should be evaluated against. If some are more important than others, the criteria can be weighted. Make sure each criteria is clearly defined so all participants have the same idea in mind. Then apply the criteria against the solutions and list out the results in resulting order. The list should clearly identify the best solution(s).

PUT SOLUTION(S) INTO ACTION

Now create an action plan to implement the selected solution(s). Action plans should be detailed and break the action into specific—doable—measurable or observable—steps. Detail is critical here. Action plans typically include each step, a description, who is responsible, timeframe, expected result or outcome, and resources required (funds, people, equipment).

It is advisable at this step to also create preliminary contingency plans, particularly for critical steps in your action plan. Be prepared to implement alternative options when things don’t go as expected.

IMPLEMENT SOLUTIONS AND EVALUATE PROGRESS

Monitor the implementation of the action plan and collect data to determine if the solution is working. Watch for indicators that the action plan is faltering. Respond immediately by altering the plan or implementing contingencies.

Finally, evaluate the results. Ask your team these questions:

a. Did the solution(s) work?

b. Was the action plan complete?

c. Were you working on the best solution?

d. Were you right about the cause?

Depending on your answers, you’re right back at the beginning of the process to address the next problem.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

Let’s take a look at some of the things that get in the way of effective problem solving. We have all experienced both successful and frustrating examples of problem solving in our work lives. Here are the most significant root causes of ineffective problem solving:

GROUP DYNAMICS As individuals, we are often confronted with problems—some serious, many not so serious—and somehow most of them get resolved. When there are several individuals involved, interpersonal and group dynamics can complicate the problem solving process.

Groups flounder as the members and leaders struggle to move ahead in the problem solving effort. Some counterproductive behaviors may surface. Some members will digress to other matters (“That reminds me . . .”). Digressions may happen when the people want to avoid a subject it needs to address. Sometimes members will focus on
placing blame for the problem rather than staying on task in the problem solving effort. ("The real problem is inflation, which makes our dollars worth less.").

**NOT USING AVAILABLE INFORMATION** Problem solving is, in many ways, simply a process of information management. Social scientists have discovered that in trying to solve problems, we often fail to make use of information that we already have. Like a computer, the brain consists of two components: a storage unit and a processing unit. Although the storage unit can hold a great amount of information, the capacity of the processing unit is quite limited. The average person can effectively manage no more than about seven independent variables of information at one time. When a problem begins to exceed this level of complexity, people overlook elements, perceive the wrong elements, or fail to make the right combinations of elements.

**THINKING PROBABILITIES - NOT POSSIBILITIES** Effective problem solving suffers when we don’t take advantage of our creative faculties in searching for answers. The processing unit of the brain consists of both critical and imaginative functions. The critical function analyzes, compares, evaluates, and selects relevant information. As a result we tend to look at probabilities only—those events or solutions that will likely happen based on our past experience.

The imaginative function generates, visualizes, abstracts, and foresees combinations of information. Creative thinking allows us to imagine possibilities—those actions or solutions that we could create without framing them in what will probably happen. Both synthesize information, but the imaginative function creates ideas whereas the critical function delivers judgments. Both functions must operate mutually for successful problem solving.

**OVEREMPHASIS ON JUDGEMENT** For most of us, judgment grows with age while creativity dwindles. The formation of adult habits and a critical self-image often limit our creative abilities, while education and work often promote the development of only judicial faculties. This overemphasis on judgment creates a tendency to see only the negative side of situations. In creative problem solving, we need to turn off the critical function and use the imaginative function. Otherwise, premature judgment often limits creative possibilities or can even completely eliminate potentially important or valuable ideas from being generated.

**JUMP TO SOLUTIONS** It’s easy—by exercising our judgement skills—to jump to solutions. We identify what we think the problem is and based on our prior experience, then identify the solution we feel best addresses our assessment of the problem. Sometimes that works. Often, however, we have made our decisions without adequate information or involvement of those who understand the root causes of the problem. The end result is a solution that doesn’t address the problem, or lacks buy-in from those involved, rework to readdress the problem, and a high level of frustration among all those impacted.

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**Facilitator @Work**

**Problem Solving**

- Make sure the problem is clearly defined and understood by all participants
- Confirm ideas on causes with data
- Ask WHY five times in looking for the root causes
- Avoid solution jumping - use data and criteria to make decisions on solutions
- Encourage the group to think creatively throughout the process - think possibilities
VALUE CONFLICT Conflict can strengthen and enhance relationships, or it can destroy them. Since we tend to regard conflict as negative, the first step toward constructive conflict is to recognize both positive and negative aspects.

Positive outcomes of conflict include:
- Opens communication between people
- Replacement of old goals with more relevant ones
- Increase innovation through a greater diversity of viewpoints
- Groups and individuals achieve greater awareness of their own identities
- Leads to innovative and better solutions to problems
- Strengthens relationships and interpersonal skills
- Improves problem solving skills
- Provides an opportunity to release aggressive urges

Negative outcomes of conflict include:
- Misallocation of limited resources (time, money) to circumvent conflict
- Produces barriers to communication, cooperation and understanding
- Lowers productivity and diverts energy from accomplishing program goals
- Negative impact on mental and physical health
- Creates an “us vs. them” environment
- Produces irresponsible behavior and distortion of goals or motives

VALUE CONSTRUCTIVE CONTROVERSY Thoughtful dissent (what may appear to be interpersonal conflict) results in reaching better decisions. Conflict resolution is not about eliminating disagreements, diversity of opinion or alternate viewpoints that are crucial to good decision making. Good leaders build dissent and controversy into the decision-making process so that people are more willing to speak out and offer ideas contrary to their own. Take the time—and encourage others—to listen to the ideas, information, facts, or concepts that are contrary to your own. Too often ‘conflict resolution’ takes the form of suppressing all disagreements, rather than using them as decision improvement opportunities.

BEFORE WORK ON A CONFLICT Keep in mind these ideas before you start working with a group on an issue:
- Be sure it’s a real problem worth spending the time to resolve
- Look for root causes of the problem—not just the symptoms or personalities
- Prepare the group to work towards a mutually agreeable solution—not just winning their individual point of view.
- Prepare them to listen and understand each other’s points of view on the issue.
- Keep some perspective. Disagreement and conflict are expected (even desirable) in the workplace. Relationships are not destroyed—and are often enhanced—by working towards mutually agreeable solutions.
- Remind participants that it’s all right to disagree, and the other person is not wrong to disagree with them.

LISTEN FOR PERSPECTIVE Helping participants understand each other’s perspectives is key to finding resolution. Encourage members to use reflective listening techniques such as:
- Paraphrasing
- Repeating Back
- Nonverbal Indicators

Help participants understand each other’s frame of reference. Seek out the background and life experiences on which they base their perspective.
STAY OBJECTIVE  In the heat of the discussion it’s easy for you or the participants to display feelings and emotions to a point they block the possibility of resolution. Work on not letting your own feelings block you from effectively facilitating the group. Encourage the use of “I messages” and other techniques to talk about feelings rather than acting them out.

MODEL EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS You model the way and encourage resolution when you apply good communication skills during the discussion:

• Listen and make sure the others knows you’re listening
• Maintain eye contact
• Use the person’s name
• Take notes, if appropriate, to show interest
• Don’t interrupt — let the person fully express their thoughts and feelings
• Ask questions to clarify and confirm details
• Stop talking and listen again

ONE ISSUE AT A TIME  Maintain your focus on the point of conflict. There will be a temptation for participants to bring up other unresolved issues from the past in an attempt to divert attention or catch others off guard. This can start a second conflict unrelated to the first. If an unrelated issue is raised do not respond except to indicate that it is not what you are discussing now. Suggest placing it in a parking lot to deal with at a later time.

Often these other issues become insignificant once the key conflict is resolved. One exception is if the secondary issue is, in fact, the root cause and is blocking the resolution of the current issue. If so, suggest moving to resolve the secondary issue first.

SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND  When facilitating the group, a key facilitator role is to help participants find or seek common ground. Often there is much more agreement than disagreement, however that participants may not see that common ground. Constantly search for and point out areas of agreement or common ground among the participants. Help the group pinpoint the specific areas of conflict by highlighting where there is in fact agreement.

TIMING  Find a time when all parties are ready and willing to work on dealing with the conflict. Give everyone a little time to deal with anger or the “heat of the moment” and prepare themselves to deal with the issues. Finding the right time helps prevent unnecessary defensiveness, resentment or personal animosity that occurs when one of the parties feels dragged into the discussion.

REATIONS TO UNINTENTIONAL REMARKS  In the heat of a discussion things are said that are regretted an instant later. This is particularly true when the issue is of deep personal significance to one or both of the parties. It occurs because often people don’t know precisely what they think or feel until they hear themselves verbalizing these feelings or thoughts. When such a questionable comment is made determine whether it accurately conveys what the speaker meant. If not, everyone should ignore it and move on. If yes, it may indicate a root cause of the conflict and should be further explored.

DISCUSSION TECHNIQUES  Try these facilitation techniques to engage the group:

• Ask those who disagree to paraphrase one another’s comments. This may help them learn if they really understand one another.
• Ask each member to list what the other side should do. Exchange lists and find seek options which all parties can live with.
• Search for cause not blame.
• Have the sides write 10 questions for their opponents. This will allow them to signal their major concerns about the other side’s position. And it may lead to a resolution.
• Remind group members they sometimes may have to admit they are wrong. Help them save face by convincing them that changing a position may well show strength.
• Ask each party to list the five strengths and five weaknesses of each other’s position. Exchange lists and discuss. This may well help each side understand each other’s perspective and interest.
• Have each party prepare a sheet outlining its self-image and its image of the other group. Exchange the lists and have both groups meet separately to discuss what led to the image. Groups share their thoughts with
each other then prepare an action plan to reduce the discrepancies in the images.

- Seek closure at the end of the discussion by summarizing points made and agreements.

**SAVING FACE** Being ‘right’ and devastating one’s opponent may be personally satisfying. However, this approach produces only momentary satisfaction and can be very costly by precluding any solid resolution and spawning future retaliation. The longer a conflict goes on the higher the ego involvement and the greater the need to save face.

Everyone should keep this in mind when seeking resolution, but above all opponents must be allowed to save face. This is particularly critical when it becomes clear one party cannot win a particular argument. The person who allows a graceful retreat accords the opponent the respect that is deserved. This approach usually results in some degree of appreciation from the opponent which is valuable in reaching a consensus on a resolution and in future encounters.

**FOCUS ON INTERESTS NOT POSITIONS**
Focus on what is wanted rather than why it is wanted. Clearly establish what each party wants and how the objectives differ. Spending energy on why each party wants what he or she wants is a waste of time and an invitation to a psychological melee. In fact, few people know exactly why they want what they want. Most are not too concerned with their own motivation—for them, it’s simply enough that they want it. The best strategy for participants is to avoid asking or answering queries about motivation and instead concentrate on accomplishing the specific goals of each party.

**HOT BUTTONS** Be aware of your own hot buttons—those words, phrases, mannerisms, or approaches which raise your defenses and block facilitation and objectivity. When they occur consciously set them aside.

Try to identify hot buttons of various participants and avoid those trigger points. A key role of facilitators is protecting personal attacks among participants. When you observe abuse of hot buttons call the participants to account for that behavior.

**AVOID SIMPLISTIC SOLUTIONS** When an issue is resolved too quickly or a simple but incomplete resolution is agreed to, the negative side effects are usually more painful and damaging in the long run than the original issue itself. Unfinished elements do not go away and will surface later, or a party who later feels unsatisfied with the resolution will feel free to create future conflict on the same issue. The easiest solution is not always the best one because it tends to treat symptoms and thereby obscure the real problem.

Allow enough time for the participants to explore the disagreement and all possible resolutions. As each piece of an agreement is reached check for other options. Look for any signs of concern and check if all involved can live with it. Abandon ideas—no matter how good they may appear—that receive little commitment or enthusiasm. Search for the second or third or fourth ‘right’ answer.

**KEEP YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR** A conflict can be viewed as serious and grim business. However it’s important that participants not lose their perspectives. One of the best ways to retain perspective is to use positive humor. A well timed humorous remark (about content not parties involved) is a great way to recognize the humor of the situation. Participants may be unable to control their laughter and may find the conflict has disintegrated. It’s important for participants to remember to take the issues and conflict seriously—not themselves.

**A PROCESS FOR CONSTRUCTIVE FACILITATION OF CONFLICT**
A systematic process for dealing with conflict and disagreement is vital to producing desirable outcomes. Follow these six steps:

1. **DIAGNOSIS** Identify the root cause of the differences or conflict.

2. **CONSIDER OPTIONS** Explore differences and discuss alternatives which meet the goals and objectives of all parties.

3. **PLAN** Select a strategy from the options and create an action plan for
implementation. Write out the plan with specific agreements and consequences for not living up to commitments.

4 DO Implement and monitor the plan while maintaining a tone of mutual respect and goodwill.

5 CHECK Meet again to evaluate the success of the action plan in resolving the conflict and verify the agreement is being honored. Make changes or take corrective action. Reinforce each other's positive behavior.

6 ACT Learn from the experience and apply the process in other conflict or disagreement situations. Continue working on the agreement, action plan and relationship.

TEST YOUR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

☐ Do you view conflict as an opportunity for growth, rather than a contest to win or something to avoid?

☐ Have you recently questioned or changed a deeply held belief?

☐ Can you remove yourself at times from a conflict situation, putting yourself in the place of a neutral observer?

☐ Do you search for cause rather than blame?

☐ Do you search for common ground more than differences?

☐ Are you as interested in learning from the other party as you are in making your own views known?

☐ Do you rely on your own good judgment rather than allowing group loyalty to stand in its way?

☐ When the other party is talking do you focus on their needs and concerns rather than your own?

☐ Do you maintain eye contact with the speaker?

☐ Do your responses allow open expression of the other party's view rather than judging them?

☐ Do you give feedback by asking questions and paraphrasing?

☐ Do you look for clues of agreement or discomfort in the other party's body language?

☐ Do you allow -- even encourage -- the other party to point out your own erroneous assumptions?

☐ Do you make every effort to hear the other party and establish good will before stating your needs?

☐ Do you clearly express your own needs?

☐ Are you sensitive to the best time to meet?

☐ Do you look for options agreeable to both parties?

☐ Do you invite the other party to explore other options by asking "What if..."

☐ Do you establish boundaries—the minimum you can accept and the maximum you can give?

☐ Do you work with the other party to establish an action plan for mutually established goals and behavior changes?

☐ Do you check for agreement and understanding on agreed on resolutions?

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT For each of the questions you indicated your answer was 'No', use this as an opportunity to create an action plan to enhance your conflict management skills. In the space below list up to three areas where you want to improve. Be specific on the behavior you want to change.

1. __________________________________________

2. __________________________________________

3. __________________________________________
Regardless of how well a session is prepared, there are always things that can go wrong. Here are some common facilitation dilemmas and strategies that can help.

**SCENARIO 1  THE GROUP RESISTS BEING FACILITATED**

The group desperately needs structure for its discussions, but doesn’t like following a step-by-step process. They insist they don’t want a facilitator. Members say it feels too formal. Sometimes there’s a controlling chairperson present and he or she rejects the idea of having a formal facilitator.

**Strategy:** Facilitate from your seat at the side of the table. At appropriate moments, offer the group methods for tackling parts of the discussion. Informally act as timekeeper. Facilitate the discussion innocuously: ask questions, paraphrase, synthesize ideas and include quiet people, just as if you were up at the front of the room. Make notes on regular paper and offer your summaries when they’re appropriate.

**Potential facilitator mistake:** Accepting that the group doesn’t want process help and letting them flounder. While it’s always best to be able to “officially” facilitate, it’s possible to help a group by covertly playing the process role. Some attention to process is better than none.

**SCENARIO 2  EARLY ON IT APPEARS THE AGENDA IS WRONG**

In spite of data gathering and proper planning it becomes clear that the entire premise for the meeting is wrong. The group legitimately needs to discuss something else.

**Strategy:** Stop the meeting and verify your assessment that the existing agenda is now redundant. Take time to do agenda building. Ask members what they want to achieve at this session. Prioritize the issues and assign times. Take a fifteen minute break to regroup and create a new process design. Ratify the new agenda with the members. Be flexible and stay focused on the needs of the group.

**Potential facilitator mistake:** Forcing the group to follow the original agenda because of the energy and preparation that went into creating the design.

**SCENARIO 3  THE MEETING GOES HOPELESSLY OFF-TRACK**

Members are usually good at staying focused but have now gone totally off-track and refuse to return to the planned agenda.

**Strategy:** Stop the off-topic discussion and determine if members are aware that they’re off topic and if they’re comfortable with this. If they decide they want to stay with this new topic, help them structure their discussion. Ask:

*How long do you want to devote to this?*
What's the goal of this new discussion? What tools or methods should we use?

You should then facilitate the new discussion. If at any point they decide to return to the original agenda, ‘park’ the current discussion and return to it at the end of the meeting to determine what should be done with it.

**Potential facilitator mistake:** Stepping down from the facilitator role because the group isn’t following the planned agenda, or allowing the group to have a lengthy off-topic discussion in an unstructured manner. Trying to force the group back on topic when members feel a pressing need to discuss something else creates unnecessary conflict.

**SCENARIO 4 GROUP MEMBERS IGNORE THE PROCESS THEY ORIGINALY AGREED ON**

There is a clear process for the session, but the members simply ignore it. When you attempt to get people to follow the agreed method, they revert to random discussion.

**Strategy:** Let them go on this way for a while, then ask the following questions:

*How's this going? Are we getting anywhere?*

Once a group has recognized that it isn’t making progress, members are often ready to accept a more structured approach.

**Potential facilitator mistake:** Giving up and ceasing to watch for an opening to step back in and offer structure. Taking an ‘I told you so’ attitude if members admit frustration with their approach.

**SCENARIO 5 THE GROUP IGNORES IT'S OWN GROUNDRULES**

Members have set clear behavioral norms, but start acting in ways that break all of their own rules.

**Strategy:** Allow them to be dysfunctional for a while, then ask the following:

*How do you feel this meeting is going in terms of the rules we set?*

*Why do you think it’s so hard sticking to the rules?*

*How can we make sure we follow the rules?*

Implement member suggestions. If they don’t suggest anything recommend that one or two group members be in charge of calling the group’s attention to the rules any time they’re being ignored or broken. This puts the onus on members to police themselves.

**Potential facilitator mistake:** Making all the interventions yourself and failing to use peer pressure to manage behavior.

**SCENARIO 6 PEOPLE USE THE SESSION TO UNLOAD EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE**

The agenda is swept off the table as people start venting their frustrations about their job, other people or the organization.

**Strategy:** Often groups can’t focus on the task at hand because of pent-up feelings that have not been dealt with or recognized. In these cases it’s healthy to encourage participants to release feelings by getting them out into the open. The key is to
structure the venting so that it can be managed and the feelings can be channeled into appropriate actions.

Some useful questions for managing venting sessions include the following:

- How important is it that we share these feelings now?
- Do we need to have any rules (safety norms) about how we do this?
- How long do we do it?
- Are any of these issues problems we can solve?
- What can we do to solve these problems?

**Potential facilitator mistake:** Trying to suppress the venting process or letting it happen without any structure.

**SCENARIO 7** **NO MATTER WHAT TECHNIQUES ARE USED, NO DECISION IS REACHED**

The group has been discussing options for hours and no clear decision is emerging. The discussion is spinning in circles and precious time is being wasted.

**Strategy:** Stop the action and look at the decision method that is being used. There are many decisions that simply cannot be made through consensus or voting. Consider using another method like a decision grid that allows for a comparative rating of individual aspects of competing options.

Another approach is to analyze the blocks to making a final decision. Ask the question:

- What are all the things that are keeping us from making a decision?

List these and spend some time removing these decision barriers.

**Potential facilitator mistake:** Letting the group spin around for the entire meeting without checking the decision method and/or examining the decision barriers.

**SCENARIO 8** **MEMBERS REFUSE TO REPORT BACK THEIR DISCUSSIONS**

After a small group discussion, no one is willing to come forward and present the group’s ideas back to the larger group. There’s a real concern that one or several of the ideas are too sensitive and that there might be repercussions.

**Strategies:** Divide the presentation and have two to three members from each group share the spotlight. If there’s much material, the whole team can present portions back to the larger group. Also set the stage with the larger group by asking them to listen with an open mind and not react negatively to the presentation before having explored its potential.

**Potential facilitator mistake:** Taking the burden from the members and speaking for them. This shifts responsibility for the recommendations from members to yourself, and can result in members taking little responsibility for follow-up actions.
SCENARIO 9 **MEMBERS BALK AT ASSUMING ANY RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACTION PLANS**

People love discussing problems and brainstorming ideas, but when it comes to action planning, everyone is suddenly too busy or insecure about their ability/to complete the task.

**Strategy:** Ensure that it’s clear from the start that any problem-solving exercise includes action planning and that members will be expected to assume major responsibility for implementing their ideas.

Implementing action plans is often a growth activity if people can be given support and encouragement to stretch beyond their present capabilities. When people are concerned that they can’t succeed, ask them the following:

> What help training, and/or other supports do you need?

Work to provide those enabling resources.

If members have time barriers to participating in implementation, these need to be identified and problem solved. Organizations often ask the same hardworking people to be on every committee. If there’s any control over who is going to be asked to work on an activity, considerable thought should be given to whether these individuals have the time needed to devote to the activity.

**Potential facilitator mistake:** Letting people ‘off the hook’ too easily by not problem solving the blocks or letting the same people shoulder all of the work. The worst strategy of all is to take responsibility for the action steps yourself.
ABOUT RESISTANCE IN GROUPS

Because so many different types of people interact in groups, problems are inevitable. These difficulties prompt virtually every author who writes about facilitation to include a section on dealing with problem people or situations. The overabundance of such writing gave us pause for thought when it came to covering the topic in our book. We also considered that, based on our experience, 98% of all the problems anticipated by beginning facilitators simply don’t happen if the group sessions have been carefully designed and planned. In fact, one of the most important messages we can convey about such problems is this:

You handle the vast majority of potential group problems through careful design and planning, before the group ever convenes—not during the session by using an arsenal of tricks.

Having delivered that message, we must also acknowledge that even the most skilled facilitator will face some problems with certain group members or with unpredictably difficult situations. This guide identifies 16 of the most common problems that must be dealt with. Some are difficult situations involving the group, while others involve inappropriate or unhelpful individual behaviors. We have described each common problem by highlighting how it manifests itself in group situations; then we offer some facilitator actions for dealing with the challenge.

DIFFICULT GROUP SITUATIONS

1 Waning Group Energy, Interest, or Attention There are many reasons why a group might start to lose energy, including fatigue, the time of day, environmental conditions (heating, background noise), the content becoming less interesting or relevant for the whole group, individual members going off on a tangent, or unsurfaced differences that distract participants from the present conversation. The key manifestations of this situation are:

- Low participation
- Slow participation and pace; sluggishness
- Less feeling, passion, or energy in conversation; flat
- Nonverbal cues, including physical withdrawal, lying back in seat, turning away, staring off, or focusing outside the group

When you are confronted with this type of situation, try one or more of these options:

☞ Ask the group what is going on.
☞ Provide descriptive feedback on what you see; ask why.
Increase your own energy, animation, pace; alter voice tone/inflection.

Take a short break.

Ask the group if this (what is being discussed at the time) is working, helpful, and on track.

Ask the group what it would like to do.

Have the group do something physical (walk, stretch, etc.).

2 Unresponsive Group  Sometimes, a particular activity or task seems to fall flat; members respond with only silence, a few superficial statements, or some form of questioning or whining about having to do the activity. There could be many reasons for such a situation, ranging from poor placement of the activity in the agenda sequence or a design that seems inappropriate, confusing, or too complicated, to resistance related to where the task is leading (e.g., sensitivity of a subject, political vulnerability, fear of retribution).

In these situations, it is often helpful to try one or more of the following:

Ask the group what is going on.

Provide descriptive feedback on what you see; ask why.

Try a different way to start the activity or discussion.

Take a short break; ask a few individuals why they are silent or do not seem to want to do the activity.

Ask the group if what has been proposed is needed, or helpful, or not possible right now.

Ask members if they have any suggestions as to how to do it differently.

Ask the group what it would like to do.

Ask individuals to respond.

3 The Group Keeps Going Off the Agenda  Some groups seem to have trouble staying on the subject or following the agenda. They may just lack discipline, or they may be thinking of other agendas (personal) or disagree with the agenda, or for some reason want to avoid the task.

When this group behavior occurs, try one or more of these options:

Refer people back to, and re-orient them to, the agenda.

Ask members if they feel the current discussion is helpful or necessary.

Point out the behavior and ask why the group is going off the agenda.

Offer to change or re-order the agenda.

Ask if the current conversation is important to everyone or if it can be postponed until after the meeting and then handled by a few members of the group.

Ask the group what is going on.
Take a break. Start back on the agenda after the break.

**4 Only Part of the Group Participates** Many factors can contribute to this problem, such as:

- The topic of discussion may be relevant only to some members.
- The group composition may be wrong.
- The participants may be intimidating others.
- Political barriers may be keeping some members from expressing themselves (e.g., hierarchy, unpopular differences).
- The quiet ones are “checked out.”
- The quiet ones are attentive and processing what they are hearing.

*In these kinds of situations, it can be useful for the facilitator to do the following:*

- Ask if others have information or opinions to share.
- Structure the discussion so that everyone gets to talk.
- Ask if the quiet ones feel connected to the discussion.
- Point out that only some people are contributing, and ask why.
- During a break, ask quiet members why they are not participating.
- Ask if the current conversation is important to everyone or if it can be postponed until after the meeting and then handled by a few members of the group.

**5 The Group Is Getting Highly Emotional** Sometimes group discussions get heated or highly sensitive. Emotions such as anger, hurt, or fear are openly expressed. Voices get louder. Tension and nervousness increase. Even tears appear. When a group gets emotional, it’s not necessarily a bad thing. It can just be part of someone’s passion, ownership, or commitment to specific ideas or views. It could also be part of healthy debate that is highly relevant to the task. On the other hand, it can become destructive when the emotional expression is personally hurtful, personality-based, or exceeds the bounds of the group and its work.

*When a highly emotional state emerges, it is often helpful to try these options:*

- Let it go. Watch how the group handles it. Determine if it is task-related and relevant to the group’s progress.
- Take a break. Ask everyone to relax and come back with some input.
- If you see people acting uncomfortable, ask why.
- If just a few are emotional, see if the discussion can be held privately or whether or not it’s really important for all to hear.
- If the conflict is escalating and not moving toward a natural resolution, intervene with a conflict resolution technique.
DIFFICULT INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIORS

Invariably, there will be people in the group who cause problems through inappropriate or unhelpful behaviors. While each situation is unique, there are some general guidelines to follow when dealing with such individuals in the group setting.

1. When possible, talk to them privately to point out the problem and coach them towards more desirable behaviors. Approach as a friend and ally, not as an authority figure.

2. Focus on a specific desired behavior.

3. Don’t judge a person’s behavior as right or wrong.

4. Try to maintain the balance between protecting the group from the distracting behavior and protecting the individual from undue attack.


6. Legitimize their feelings, perceptions, or rights.

7. Work with their issues when it will be productive for the group, or defer the issues to a time when the group is likely to perform well, despite the distraction.

8. Be sure to have ground rules and norms for participation, so that the group can self-monitor. Refer to the group for enforcement when someone is out of line.

In addition to the general guidelines, there are other specific actions you can take when a problem behavior pops up. Some of the more common behaviors and possible responses are listed below.

1. Dominating the Discussion  A person talks too often, too long, or too loud, making it difficult for others to participate.
   • Stop the person, thank him or her, and say you’d like to hear from someone else.
   • Call attention to the agenda and time frames.
   • Break eye contact. Move away from the person. Stop giving him or her focused attention.
   • Move closer and closer to the person, maintaining eye contact. Get in front of him or her. The problematic behavior will start to stand out (even to the person).
   • Summarize what the person has said and move to someone else.
   • Give the person a time limit.
   • Before the discussion starts, pose a standard for the length of comments. For example: “Let’s hear from a few people for no more than two minutes each.”
   • When you know in advance that an individual or individuals tend to dominate a group, propose a ground rule at the beginning of the session that everyone “monitor the air time.” Explain that for some, this means talking less; for others, it means talking more.
   • Introduce an inclusion activity to get everyone participating.
2 **Inserting Personal Agendas** A person continually inserts a concern, a disagreement, or an alternative or additional agenda item. This is often annoying if it’s repetitious and distracts from the group task.

- Ask the person how what he or she is saying relates to the current agenda item.
- Record the point, thank the person, and move on.
- Ask the person what he or she wants the group to do with the input.
- Give the person a time limit

3 **Repeating the Same Point Over and Over** Sometimes people get so caught up in something they care about that they can’t let go of it and begin to sound like a “broken record.” This is often a variation of number 2 above.

- Acknowledge the importance of the point and the person’s passion, advocacy, or determination.
- Demonstrate that he or she has been heard and the point recorded.
- Explain how and when the point will be dealt with.
- Ask directly if the person can “let go of it for now.”
- Give the person a final time-limited opportunity to make the point.

4 **Talking Off the Subject** Sometimes people are out of synch with the agenda and regularly talk about things that are irrelevant to the group’s task or are out of sequence with the agenda.

- Ask them to relate what they are saying to the current agenda.
- Ask if the group can come back to their point and record it on a “parking lot” sheet.
- Ask others if they have anything to add to what the person said.
- Stop them. Tell them it’s not appropriate now. Bring it up later under a different part of the agenda.

5 **Having Side Conversations** There are always people who have to make private comments to one another or carry on another meeting with their neighbor.

- Invite them to share what is being said.
- Stop the conversation, be quiet, and look at the people talking.
- Ask them to stop.
- Ask if they would please join the group.
- Move closer to the people having the side conversation.
- Repeat the topic under discussion and ask if everyone can focus on having just one conversation at a time. Say, “Let’s have one conversation,” or “Let’s all focus on the same thing.”
- Point out that the whispering or talking is distracting.
6 **Being Constantly Negative or Antagonistic, or Presenting a Hostile Demeanor**

Some people are nay-sayers, doubters, and cynics. Nothing is okay and nothing will work. They always seem skeptical. Their negative expressions may be either verbal or nonverbal.

- Acknowledge their points of view.
- Make a special point of thoroughly paraphrasing their view the first couple of times they speak. Stick very close to their exact wording.
- Point out the negative pattern.
- Ask if there is any part of the work that they feel good about.
- Ask for their opinions about what is needed. Record the opinions. Ask the group to respond.

7 **Interrupting Others** When people cut off others who are speaking, or jump into a conversation too soon, they disrupt the flow of information and show disrespect for the other person. These interruptions can be verbal or highly distracting nonverbal expressions. Even when there is a ground rule against this, it still seems to happen.

- Enforce the related ground rule.
- Stop the interrupter and ask him or her to wait while the group allows the speaker to complete his or her thought or point.
- Ask people who feel impatient to write down their thoughts rather than blurt them out.
- This happens most frequently in larger groups, which tend to give members the feeling that they may not get a chance to speak. When your group has nine or more members, establish a hand-raising rule. As people raise their hands, say, “OK, we’ll hear first from [member’s name], then [member’s name], then [member’s name],” and so on. Make sure you follow through in calling on people in sequence.
- Be neutral and consistent. Don’t let some interrupt and not others.

8 **Non-participation** Some people remain silent in group meetings. They seem unable or unwilling to speak up. They may be timid, fearful of something, or unsure of themselves and what they have to offer. Sometimes they drop out, withdraw, or work on something else.

- Talk to them privately at another time. Find out their problem.
- Call on them by name. For example, “John, we haven’t heard from you on this. Could you share your thoughts with us?”
- Thank them when they do contribute.
- Turn to them when the agenda moves to an area that you know they can address with confidence, conviction, or expertise.
- Early in key conversations, have everyone respond briefly in turn to a specific cue question intended to stimulate discussion.
9 Attacking, Criticizing, or Picking an Argument. Some people go after other members or the facilitator to argue or personally attack. Sometimes this is just counterdependence, aimed at discrediting or trying to change what the group is doing.

Describe, nonjudgmentally, what the person is doing.
Ask if the criticism or judgment (attack) is based on something that has occurred in the meeting.
Stop any argument. Ask for and record a statement of each position. Engage other group members in discussing their positions.
Ask the person what the group could do to respond to his or her concern.

10 Clowning. Sometimes a person may overuse humor, act silly, or joke about everything. These are usually attention-getting behaviors if they are regular and patterned. Once in a while these behaviors can, of course, be helpful in infusing the group with energy.

Ignore the behavior and the person.
Ask the person to stop it.
Describe what is going on and point out its distracting quality.
Talk to the person privately, after the meeting or during a break.
If the person has really disrupted the meeting, take a break. Talk to him or her. Come back with a structure and focus on the agenda.

11 Attendance Problems. Some people repeatedly arrive late or leave early, miss meetings, or make a habit of ducking in and out. These actions disrupt the group, delaying or halting its progress.

Take the time to get an attendance commitment from the group. Enforce it.
Speak to the person outside of the meeting.
Don’t review anything or stop the meeting for such people.
Suggest either or both of these ground rules: “Members agree to support any decision made in their absence,” and/or “There will be no reviews for people absent at any time.”
Ask members to announce if, when, and why they have to leave, come late, or miss a meeting.
At the beginning of the meeting, review the scheduled times and ask if there is anyone who will not be able to be there for any part of the meeting.
Ask one of the group members to update someone on a break.
Have the group leader ask these members to come to meetings regularly. If they can’t do that, replace them. Ask those who can’t regularly participate to suggest replacements in the group. Avoid allowing “temporary” replacements to fill in for another member.