

***Basic Facilitation Skills and Tools***

Groups often come together to generate ideas and make decisions. This sounds like an easy task and often it is when the stage is set correctly and appropriate tools and techniques are available. But just like a carpenter who needs the right tool for the job, groups often need specific tools or techniques to help get their work done.

There are many group facilitation tools and techniques available. The basic tools listed here are seen as potentially useful with groups working on specific sustainable projects or community-wide initiatives.

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***To Enhance Communication: Fish Bowl***

Sometimes there are situations where people are hesitant to talk about the real issue bothering a group. To overcome such a stalemate, the fish bowl activity can be a helpful technique to encourage participants to share opinions in a non-confrontational way.

**Tools Needed**: 3x5 cards, pens, some kind of container for the cards

**The basic process is**:

1. First, ask participants to write down their thoughts on a 3-by-5 card with regard to the following questions: 1) how you feel about this situation? and 2) why do you feel that way? Participants are not to include their names on the card.
2. Gather the cards and put them in a fish bowl or some container.
3. Encourage participants to sit in a circle or horseshoe arrangement if possible and have people randomly pick out cards. It is unlikely they will pick out their card but even if they do, the technique still works.
4. Going around the room, ask people to read the card out loud and then ask the group to discuss it.

There are several aspects of this activity that encourage group communication:

* The process of writing the issue down can bring clarity to the problem for both the writer and the group. It also allows the concerns to be recorded on a flip chart for future discussion.
* It is helpful to separate the person who identified the issue from the person who shared it with the group. People feel freer to express themselves when they know the comment will be anonymous.
* As a facilitator, it allows you to ask questions to help the group problem solve. “What do you see as the problem? What do we agree/disagree with? What are our differences?”
* Toward the end of the group discussion, you may be able to divide similar concerns into themes and then later work on one of the themes or issues.
* One note of caution: if you think there is a potential literacy problem within the group this technique shouldn’t be used.

Reference: Community Development Academy – Building Communities from the Grassroots. (2001, March). *Dealing with conflict*. University of Missouri course notebook, (1)9.

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***To Gather Data or Ideas: Data Dump***

Need to quickly find out what a group knows about a particular topic? Data dump functions as a quick survey that, with continued effort, can help identify fact from opinion on a particular subject.

**Tools Needed**: Sticky flip chart paper, markers, blank wall space

1. Identify the main categories of information the group wants to know. For example, if the subject was the impact of a new highway corridor on the community, initial categories/questions might be:

 Economic benefits

 Economic costs

 Environmental benefits

Environmental costs

Social benefits

Social costs

1. Write the name of each category at the top of a blank sheet of flip chart paper. Hang the labeled sheets side by side on a wall with the group facing them. If the topic or the group is large, enlist some people to help record.
2. Ask the group to brainstorm about each category. Encourage people to reduce their comments to key words and phrases. Add extra sheets of paper as needed.
3. When the group has completed a data dump on each category, go back through the lists and circle any words or phrases that people want clarified. When all words or phrases are identified, go through them one by one and ask for further explanation.
4. Now is the time to identify any further information the group needs: categories with little or no information shared, items that were doubted or hotly debated, and categories that were missing that the group now wants to investigate. Develop a new list for these topics.
5. Decide as a group on how to get the information that is still needed.

Reference: University of Minnesota Facilitation Resources (2001). *Making group decisions*. In partnership with Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. (5) 23.

**Variation: F & O**

Post the blank category sheets around the room and have individuals write on the paper what they know about each topic. As above, when the group has finished, review the lists for words or phrases that need more explanation and have participants clarify those statements.

Once this has been completed, ask participants to take 5 to 10 minutes and mark on the paper if their statements are fact “F” or opinion “O”.

Fact: The person can produce objective data to prove an assertion (e.g., price lists, item counts, technical specifications).

Opinion: No objective data can be shared within a reasonable cost and time frame to support the assertion.

As a facilitator you need to encourage the group not to jump to conclusions and favor fact over opinion. Simply ask the participants to label them so people know which is which. Share with the group that not all important information is objective and not all facts are valuable. An informed opinion is very valuable.

Reference: Kearny, L. (1995). *The facilitator’s toolkit: Tools and techniques for generating ideas and making decisions in groups*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press.

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***To Gather Data or Ideas: Story Boarding***

This is also sometimes called “snow cards” due to the resulting blizzard of cards/ideas.

**Tools Needed**: Large sticky notes (4-by-6 inch), markers, blank wall

This technique originally was developed by the Disney organization as a way to bring together creative people to begin the process of designing a cartoon film.

1. Divide the group into smaller groups if it is very large. Hand out several sticky notes to each person and put markers on the table.
2. Ask everyone to silently and independently write all ideas about the topic on their sticky notes. Encourage them to write down thoughts in quick phrases in order to get ideas out quickly. They should write or print large enough to be able to be seen from a distance.
3. At a specified time ask the people to paste their sticky notes on a wall. Sometimes it can be helpful to first have them report in round robin style. Continue the report back until all ideas are shared and then post the notes on the wall.
4. Categorize the topics under themes or broad headings. Everyone can help with this task. As a facilitator, it may be helpful to initially put up sticky notes as titles to help start the organization of ideas. Participants should feel free to get involved and give suggestions. This is like putting a large puzzle together.
5. After most of the ideas are grouped, look for categories that can be merged and renamed. Let people think about these and when they feel it cannot be reduced anymore, review the main categories. This technique is a simple way to show the diversity of ideas within the group on a topic and how the topics can be organized into more manageable categories for future action or discussion.

Reference: University of Minnesota Facilitation Resources. (2001). *Managing group interaction*. In partnership with Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. (4) 16.

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***To Help Categorize/Prioritize: Mind Mapping***

Mind mapping is a graphic technique that allows a group to identify multiple aspects of an issue and show an interrelated connection between several aspects. One of the benefits of mind mapping is that it allows participants to really see how the components connect to each other. If you think the issue will benefit from such a display, mind mapping is an excellent technique to use.

**Tools Needed**: In advance, tape large sheets of paper to a large wall. Easel paper or rolls of

 newsprint should cover a 6-by-10-foot section of the wall.

1. Encourage participants to stand close to the wall so that they can see and hear each other.
2. Have a member of the group draw a circle in the center of the paper and write in the issue your group has been assigned to work on. (If you’re really creative, you can draw an image that depicts the issue, rather than a boring circle!)
3. Determine the main themes around the issue. Have a couple of members of the group connect the main themes to the issue by drawing thick “branches” out from the center.
4. Add a second level of thought by creating sub-centers for sub-themes. Connect the sub-themes back to the main themes using smaller branches or lines.
5. Use color, when possible, to depict themes and associations and to make things stand out. Think three-dimensionally.
6. Use arrows, icons, or other visual aids to show links between different elements.
7. Put ideas down as they occur, wherever they fit. Don’t judge or hold back.
8. If you run out of space, add paper but don’t start over!
9. Be creative. Creativity aids memory. Don’t worry if the mind map looks messy. It should not be black and white or linear.
10. Get involved and have fun. Add a little humor, exaggeration or absurdity wherever you can.
11. An example of a mind map explaining the process guidelines can be seen below.

Reference: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind\_map

 Adult Activities

Local Foods

Energy Use Options

Youth Activities

Jobs

Medical

Daycare

Housing

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***To Help Categorize/Prioritize: Fishbone Diagram***

The fishbone diagram is very similar to the mind mapping technique. The difference is that the fishbone diagram is best used when a group focuses on identifying possible causes of a problem/issue. It is a visual way to identify the components of an issue or problem.

Tools Needed: In advance, tape large sheets of paper to a large wall. Easel paper or rolls of

 newsprint should cover a 6-by-10-foot section of the wall.

1. First, draw a rectangle (or any shape) on the right edge (and in the center from top to bottom) of a large sheet of paper. In that shape, write the name of the problem or issue.
2. Then draw a straight line to the left.
3. Next, place angled lines up from the straight line. These will represent bones similar to the backbone of a fish. On each of the lines, write a cause of the problem. Then you can write more specific details about causes on that particular bone of the spine. The entire diagram looks like a skeleton of a fish (see below).

Reference: <http://www.lpg.fsu.edu/charting/InstructionalStrategies/howto-tactics/ht-k5sfish.asp>

walking /bike paths

local

stream flows

grocery stores

cafés

schools

**Effect:**

**A sustainable community**

food producers

farmers markets

# Category:

Local Foods

business

home

public sector

# Category

Recycle & Reuse

infrastructure

business zoning

# Category:

Community Design

home

future community design

business

parks & recreation

# Category:

Water Use

public options

fuel choices

# Category:

Transportation

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***To Poll a Group: Fist to Five***

This technique, sometimes used as an informal straw vote or poll, can be a way to inject some fun into the decision-making process. However, you must be aware that everyone can see how each person votes. Because of this, many facilitators prefer to use this technique only for non-controversial issues and where the group will not harass someone whose opinion differs from the majority.

**Tools Needed**: Nothing!

The process is very simple. When it is time to vote, people do so by holding up their fingers (or fist) based on the designation as follows:

* Five fingers up - the person totally agrees with the idea or suggestion
* Four fingers up – kind of agree with it – I’ll go along with the idea
* Three fingers up – neutral – may or may not be happy about it, but can live with it
* Two fingers up – I don’t agree
* One finger up – I’m against the issue/idea
* Fist up – I’m 100 percent against what is proposed and will fight to block it.

For example, a unanimous vote in agreement with the issue would have all members hold up an open hand with all five fingers showing.

**Suggestion**: As a facilitator, when you call for a vote, you are looking for everyone to hold up at least three fingers (neutral position) to see if the group can live with the idea or suggestion. If someone holds up a fist (totally against the issue) or one or two fingers, then discussion needs to continue. It may be that the group needs to take a break while the facilitator or another individual speaks to a person privately to identify the concerns. For instance, the person may feel comfortable expressing his/her opinion to one or two people but does not feel comfortable speaking in front of a large group. If the person can be reassured that his/her concerns will be addressed and the concerns are brought back up in front of the entire group, then another “Fist to Five” vote can be taken. Try to resolve his/her issue until that person feels comfortable enough to raise at least three fingers (neutral).

Reference: [*http://www.freechild.org/Firestarter/Fist2Five.htm*](http://www.freechild.org/Firestarter/Fist2Five.htm)