

# Working with Groups: Generating Ideas, Making Decisions, and Enhancing Communication

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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 to help move the process forward. But just like a carpenter who needs the right tool for the job, groups often need specific tools or techniques to accomplish their work. Without the right tool at the right time, the end result may not be the *best* result.

People who work with groups, either professionally as a paid facilitator or as a volunteer, typically have a few techniques they like to use — their old standbys. As time passes they may be introduced to new techniques and so some of the old favorites will be replaced with new ones. Then comes a situation where the old standby is exactly what a group needs but the facilitator may have forgotten just exactly how that technique worked or what supplies were needed. Compounding the problem is that often the “how to’s” of a technique are not written down or can be difficult to find, even in the best office filing systems. Finally, it is sometimes helpful to just be reminded of some of the techniques that can be used, even the very simple techniques.

Herein lies the purpose for this publication. It is an effort to pull together in one central location some of the most commonly used group process techniques that help groups generate ideas and make decisions. Some might

consider this a “toolbox” of basic group facilitation techniques.

Many of the directions for implementing these techniques have been modified from user to user over time. The authors made a concerted effort to reference all publications and Web sites and obtain copyright approval for reprinting purposes. To make it easier for the user, supporting references for each technique can be found immediately following the description.

Several of the techniques listed are found in readily available publications while others may be less commonly known or used today. One unique aspect of this publication is that the authors tried to categorize the techniques by function(s) as to the way groups:

1. gather data or ideas
2. organize or prioritize
3. make decisions
4. enhance communication

When people come together in groups, they commonly will want to use one or more of these techniques as they proceed with their work. By listing the techniques in this way, it is hoped users of the publication can better select the right facilitation tool for the job. *Table I* lists the techniques that will be explained or noted in more detail within this publication.



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**Table I. Basic tools and techniques that are helpful when working with groups**

| <i>Tools and Techniques</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Gather Ideas or Data</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <i>Categorize/Prioritize</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <i>Make Decisions</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <i>Enhance Communication</i> |
| Generating Ideas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brainstorming</li> <li>• Brain drain</li> <li>• Story boarding</li> <li>• Data dump</li> <li>• Idea writing</li> <li>• SOAR analysis</li> </ul> Generating Data <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Various research methods</li> </ul> | Categorizing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affinity mapping</li> <li>• Mind mapping</li> <li>• Fishbone diagram</li> <li>• Worst-Best</li> </ul> Prioritizing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nominal group technique</li> </ul> | Nominal Group Technique<br>Decision Making Matrix<br>Fist to Five<br>Standard Processes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coin toss</li> <li>• Authority                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- without consultation</li> <li>- after consultation</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Expert</li> <li>• Average of group</li> <li>• Majority rule</li> <li>• Minority rule</li> <li>• Consensus</li> </ul> | Fish Bowl                    |

## Things to Consider Before Getting Started

### Who should facilitate the meeting or session?

- It may be necessary to use a person from outside the organization as a facilitator rather than relying upon the elected/appointed chairperson to manage the process. Oftentimes, the chair is expected to be neutral, and if someone from the outside facilitates the meeting the chair is free to give suggestions and/or express opinions.

### Where should I hold this meeting?

- Choose a room that is user-friendly. A room set up with chairs facing the front indicates you want people to listen to a speaker. Seating in a circle says that all members of the group can look at the speaker and speak to each other. A semi-circle of chairs facing a blank wall can be used for people to speak freely and for a public record to be generated at the blank wall. Use a large flip chart or stick notes to a wall to record public input.

### What should be the role of the facilitator?

- If you are acting as a facilitator, you are responsible for helping a group generate ideas and come up with decisions. Co-facilitation often is a good idea — one person can continue to facilitate and pay attention to the group while the other person does the recording on the board, flip chart etc. Facilitators commonly

generate or contribute to the ideas being shared. As a courtesy, the facilitator who wants to contribute to the process should ask permission from the group. Co-facilitators also can help balance power, conversation, and ideas between all the participants, reducing the likelihood of one person dominating the discussion.

- It is important to describe the purpose of the meeting early on and help the participants set their own agreed-upon ground rules for the session. Sometimes this is called “setting the stage” for the meeting or setting “house rules.”
- Allowing people time to think and even write before you ask them to speak is a good practice. This is particularly helpful to people who may be shy or who feel intimidated. Use small cards or sticky notes to help participants write down their ideas first before sharing them with the larger group.
- Sometimes due to power, status, or personality type, people tend to dominate a conversation reducing the productivity of the overall group process. As a facilitator tell the group members that you will call upon them one at a time for their ideas. This technique, called “round robin” style, can often help curb talkative people.
- Keep group memory. Write down the ideas on large sheets of paper so that it is easily readable. This can be much better than waiting for minutes after the meeting. It also may be valuable to have another person (not a member of the group) record the ideas.

## Any hints for recording input?

- When ideas are recorded, use the participant's words. Do not abbreviate or condense words, which may lead to misinterpretation of the idea. If clarification is needed, ask the person who initiated the idea exactly what was meant. To keep the meeting flowing smoothly, it may be necessary for two people to record, with each alternating ideas. Speed is important if the group is large or the number of ideas generated is numerous. You may want to switch recorders so they also can participate in the idea generation process.
  - Collect all ideas before you assess any of them. (Many times the first idea expressed in a meeting is given a lot of attention and time.) To avoid leaving out additional ideas, collect all ideas and present or publicly record them before discussing any of them.
  - A collection of 20 to 30 ideas probably will account for the majority of those produced by the group. One rule of thumb is that approximately 60 percent of the ideas generated will be able to be used by the organization or community if it chooses to do so. If the group is very large, ask permission to go around the group twice in round robin style to collect ideas. That will help the group give the most important or best ideas first. After two passes, you could then ask if there are any more ideas that should be added.
  - It is often helpful to: 1) number each item in consecutive order; and 2) alternate colors of marker ink when recording ideas so that people sitting farther away can distinguish the difference in the ideas.
- Besides recording on flip chart sheets, it also may be possible to record the ideas with a computer connected to a projector with a screen. In this way you are saving time by recording the input into a word document, which can then be printed or emailed later. It also is possible to use computer software designed for group process work to create diagrams, graphics, links, or outlines as well as to show relationships.

## Tools and Techniques to Gather Ideas or Data

### Brainstorming

This technique is designed to encourage participation by all members. The goal is to generate a quantity of ideas in a short period of time. This method typically

produces very creative ideas that are useful in problem-solving situations. One of the benefits is that it is a non-judgmental way to gather ideas. Brainstorming helps to break down barriers among people as well as it avoids instant roadblocks such as “we’ve tried that before,” “it didn’t work,” etc.

- Basic rule: No idea can be judged, discussed, or rejected during brainstorming.
- Set a time limit before you begin. Present the topic clearly and write it on paper for all to see. Give background information if necessary.
  - A recorder needs to be chosen to write down all of the ideas, word for word if possible.
  - If the group is fairly large you may want to use two flip charts and two recorders and alternate ideas written on charts.
- Encourage people to throw out ideas as rapidly as they can.
  - Move rapidly from one idea to another. Build upon the ideas from what already has been posted to magnify or to narrow the focus.
- If one person seems to dominate, ask each person for suggestions. All members should participate.
- Once ideas have been generated, ask for clarification, if needed.

After the brainstorming session is finished, evaluate and prioritize the list of ideas. Be careful to keep the discussion focused on the ideas and not who suggested the idea.

### Variation: Popcorn Brainstorming

This is a simple tool for groups to use when you feel that everyone is comfortable in contributing to the effort. Just open up the floor for ideas and take them as they come. No specific topic need be mentioned, or you can identify a general topic. Summarize ideas as necessary and record them on a flip chart.

Note of caution: When both employees and supervisors are in the same group, employees may feel obliged to agree with their supervisor, reducing the level of input or number of ideas. To overcome this situation, employees can sometimes be grouped separately from immediate supervisors.

### Variation: Sticky Note Brainstorming

The process is fundamentally the same as a regular brainstorming session except you give individuals sticky notes to write down their ideas vs. doing it in a group

atmosphere using a flip chart sheet. After the designate time has elapsed, the notes are gathered and posted.

The premise behind this technique is that sometimes people feel more comfortable and will contribute more openly if they have a level of anonymity.

Reference: <http://www.education-world.com/admin/greatmeetings/greatmeetings015.shtml>

### **Variation: Brain Drain**

This is a quick and fun way to get a significant number of ideas. It is especially useful in a large setting where you can cluster people into smaller groups so that they can compete with each other as well as the clock.

The first step is to write the goal or problem clearly on a flip chart or white board so everyone can read it. Break people into small groups with no more than seven per group.

1. Each group should identify a recorder. Markers and plenty of paper should be available.
2. State that each group will have three minutes and encourage members to write down as many ideas as they can.
3. Stop them after the three minutes. Ask each group how many ideas were generated. Keep a tally of ideas generated by each group. Find out which group has the most ideas and encourage every group to beat that record.
4. Encourage them to build on their ideas.
5. Give them two more minutes, stop and ask for the number of ideas from each group. Acknowledge the record and then go for one final minute.
6. At the end of the third countdown, add up all of the ideas and get a final total. Some of the ideas will be duplicated and that is OK because each group generated the ideas.
7. Ask for an oral report of three ideas from each small group. After the first report have subsequent groups only report on two or three ideas not previously mentioned. (Note: If the initial groups share all of their ideas during the report, the last group probably will have nothing to share.)
8. A variation might be to give all participants an index card. Have them write their ideas down for a limited time, then divide them into groups to share their ideas while someone writes them on flip chart paper. Ask the small groups to identify their top five or so ideas that will be presented to the total group.

Reference: University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Family Community Leadership Handbook. (2004). University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension.

### **Story Boarding**

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

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. The only tools needed are markers and large sticky notes (4-by-6-inch sized sheets).

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.

### **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.

1. Identify the main categories of information the group wants to know. For example, if the subject was the impact of a large employer moving into the community, initial categories or questions might be:
  - economic benefits
  - community costs
  - job quantity and quality
  - housing and household needs
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. 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 down 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 five 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 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 often 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.

#### **Idea Writing**

Idea writing is a little different than the previous techniques listed. Rather than being used during a face-to-face group meeting, this tool encourages communication over a longer period of time and/or at a distance. It can be thought of as having a group conversation via the written word.

Idea writing allows the group to comment on ideas generated by a facilitator as well as other participants. It is a way to not only develop ideas, but work toward identifying the details behind the ideas.

1. First identify a question or an idea that everyone understands. Start the conversation with some comments that are important in moving the discussion forward. One way to do this might be to set up the question and space for a response in a table (see *Table II*). Another way to do this would be to just list the statement or question and leave space for people to respond.
2. E-mail is a great tool to use to implement idea writing. Documents can be easily sent “reply all” to further the conversation. Once the project gets started most of the work comes from the participants, not the facilitator. Wiki’s and blogs can be used for idea writing in a similar way.

As an example, “*What are some of the key things we want to have happen in this project so that the process and the end results are the best that they can be?*”

**Table II. Example of a question and response format**

| <i>Participant's Comments Here</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <i>Facilitator's Comments Here</i>                              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><i>Everyone needs to participate to make this work.</i></p> <p><i>I think a timely turnaround will really help.</i></p>                                                                                                           | <p>The best way to keep this project moving forward is ...</p>  |
| <p><i>We need good input – all the time!</i></p> <p><i>Well... I really want to see that everyone contributes.</i></p> <p><i>I'd hope that we can come up with three options in a timely fashion – let's say within 60 days?</i></p> | <p>One thing we want to make sure we do on this project ...</p> |
| <p><i>You are so right about this one... no one wants to be discouraged during this process. That will kill the whole thing.</i></p>                                                                                                 | <p>Comments and suggestions should be positive.</p>             |

Note: This technique should not be used with a group where several participants might have low-literacy levels.

Reference: Moore, C. (1996). *Facilitator training manual*. Presented at the Nebraska Office of Dispute Resolution Group Facilitation Training, developed by Western Network, Sante Fe, N.M. Chattanooga, Tenn.: Venture Publishing.

**SOAR Analysis**

SOAR analysis (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results) is a relatively new, more positive, asset-based technique than the traditional SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis. It allows for a more focused discussion on the positive aspects of organizational development and community assets. SOAR analysis leverages strengths and opportunities to

create shared aspirations and measurable results.

SOAR helps groups to:

- Reach for a vision.
- Serve the group's mission.
- Achieve goals and objectives by identifying measurable results.
- Develop a plan to help the group deliver on its mission and goals/objectives while reaching for the vision.
- Implement an action plan.

A comparison between the traditional SWOT and new SOAR techniques is listed below in *Table III*:

**Table III. Contrast between SOAR and SWOT approaches**

| <b>SOAR</b>                                                               | <b>SWOT</b>                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Strengths<br/>What are our greatest assets?</p>                        | <p>Strengths<br/>Where can we outperform others?</p>    |
| <p>Opportunities<br/>What are the best possible market opportunities?</p> | <p>Weaknesses<br/>Where can others outperform us?</p>   |
| <p>Aspirations<br/>What is our preferred future?</p>                      | <p>Opportunities<br/>How can we exploit the market?</p> |
| <p>Results<br/>What are the measurable results</p>                        | <p>Threats<br/>What/who might take our market?</p>      |

SOAR analysis can be conducted in several ways. One common approach is to:

1. Identify a situation that an organization needs to address. For example, perhaps it is a change in the organization's funding structure or change in community needs.
2. Hand out large sticky notes to participants and ask them to list the organization's strengths — one comment to each note.
3. Collect the notes. Post and discuss them as a group.
4. Next, do the same thing for opportunities, aspirations, and possible results.
5. The topics and sequence of topics should help the group better discuss the issue at hand and lead into a more detailed conversation about possible measurable results and outcomes.

Reference: Heartland Center for Leadership Development. (2004). *Discovering the future of your hometown – workshop manual*. Workshop sponsored by the Nebraska Department of Economic Development.

### Generating Data — Various Research Methods

New ideas and new information seem to go hand in hand. In group settings sometimes new facts generate new ideas and new ideas create the need for new facts.

Facilitators need to be reminded that there are two basic ways to obtain data: 1) from primary sources where you have to collect the information (ie. surveys, focus group interviews, one-on-one interviews, etc.) and 2) secondary sources where the information already has been collected for you (ie. governmental agencies like the U.S. Census, Department of Transportation, Department of Labor, and state agencies, etc). With the use of the Internet, secondary sources of data are readily accessible. Often a little research done at the right time can greatly enhance group discussions and ultimately decision-making.

## Tools and Techniques to Categorize and Prioritize

### Affinity Mapping

Affinity diagramming consists of placing related items together. It is an excellent tool to use when groups have a lot of ideas and need a way to get them organized.

There are two ways to accomplish this: 1) by handing out sheets of paper or sticky notes with pre-existing information on the paper and a few blank sheets for new

phrases or ideas; or 2) by using a computer and a projector to visually share the pre-existing information and generate new phrases in a word document. If the group is quite large, starting with paper could be a better way to get everyone initially involved. Then as items are grouped and the list reduced, a computer projector could be used to share the consolidated groupings.

The basic process is:

1. Begin by handing out sheets of paper or large sticky notes. The paper already can have words or phrases on it or individuals may write additional issues on the notes — one idea to a sheet.
2. Gather all participants around a wall or vertical surface. Sometimes windows can be used as a surface.
3. Encourage participants to place notes, one at a time, on the surface. As each note is put up, participants may add similar notes nearby if the subjects seem to be related.
4. When all notes have been placed and the groupings consolidated, naming each major area can help clarify the major components.

Suggestions:

- Affinity diagramming is best used if the group work can be continued quickly. For instance, early in a meeting the group may place a set of issues into related topic areas and then it discusses several ways to address the issues later in the meeting.
- Encourage participants to place only one note at a time and to read their notes aloud while placing them on the surface. If others have questions, they can be asked at that time.
- All participants should participate. Sometimes a person may want to take control and start moving notes. It should be understood that the clustering of issues only is accomplished when everyone in the group agrees.
- Affinity diagramming can be hard work. As a facilitator you should schedule no more than two of these sessions during a workshop.

Reference: <http://www.infodesign.com.au/usabilityresources/general/affinitydiagramming.asp>

### Mind Mapping

Mind mapping is another graphic technique that allows a group to identify multiple aspects of an issue and



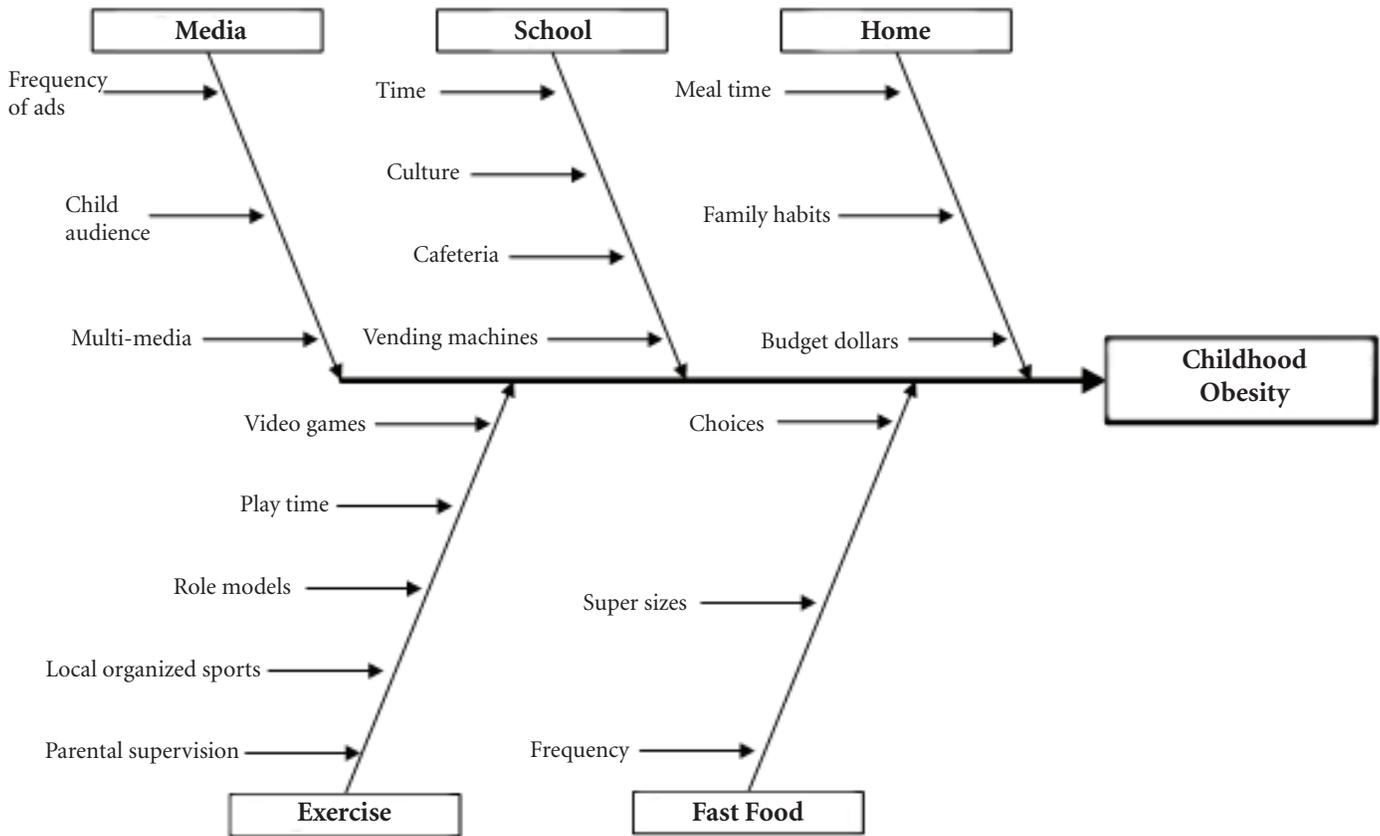


Figure 2. The fishbone diagram.

### 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.

1. First, draw a triangle (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 (Figure 2).

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

### Worst-Best

Sometimes groups get stuck on an alternative or option and they need a tool to help them move forward.

By listing the worst, the best, and what likely would happen, groups often can see that an option has less risk than imagined.

1. On a large sheet of paper, list the option being debated. Then draw two columns on the sheet:

|                                                                             |                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “If we implemented this, what is the <i>worst</i> thing that might happen?” | “If we implemented this, what is the <i>best</i> thing that might happen?” |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|

2. Then open it up for discussion and record all ideas that are given by the group. Use as many sheets of paper as you need to capture the comments.
3. Now ask, “If we implemented this, what *likely* would happen? Record the remarks.

Often the issues listed under the “worst” scenario can then be discussed further and the option modified to reduce the perceived risk.

Reference: University of Minnesota Facilitation Resources. (2001). *Making group decisions*. In partnership with the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. (5)24.

## Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

NGT is a good tool to use when there is a group of participants that may not know each other very well but still need to come to an agreement on priorities. The best size for NGT often is a group from five to 12 people. Larger groups can be divided into multiple smaller groups.

There are several variations of the process but the basic steps are as follows:

1. First, establish a question or issue to discuss. Each person should silently write down ideas independently. This gives *everyone* time to think and then say what they mean.
2. Ask each person, one at a time, to give ideas with little discussion. Have a co-facilitator write down *exactly* what is said on a flip chart or white board. Using colored markers can help participants see where one idea ends and another begins. After everyone has participated, ask if there are statements that need more explanation. Clarification is important. After everyone has participated, the list can be consolidated if there are several ideas that are the same and everyone agrees that they are similar.
3. The next step is to vote on the ideas with dots. Before voting, number the suggestions and explain that they will be voting on the idea beside the number of the idea. Listed below are some common guidelines for distributing dots.
  - If there are one to 15 ideas, have them vote for the top three best choices.
  - If there are 16 to 25 ideas, have them vote for the top five choices
  - If there are more than 26 ideas, have them vote for their top seven choices.
4. Participants have flexibility in voting. For instance, if someone thinks one idea is obviously the best, all the dots or votes can be placed near that number.
5. The actual placing of the dots can be done in two ways: 1) by everyone in the group at the same time or 2) if you think people might be influenced by others, the final list of ideas can be placed on a flip chart and the chart turned away from the group. Individuals come up one at a time and vote with the chart being turned back for viewing after everyone has voted.

NGT is a way to help a group feel productive in a short period of time. Ideas are generated by individuals and later voted on as the group's top three to seven options. This process also allows participants time to

think before they have to speak, the opportunity to take turns in sharing ideas, a way to record them on a flip chart, a method to clarify, and encouragement to share ideas before discussing them.

### Variation: Use of Colored Dots

Rather than using just one color of dots, several colors can be used to differentiate first, second, and third choices. Ask each person to write down the number of their idea as the top choice on a blue dot, their second choice on a green dot, and the third choice on a red dot. By writing the choice directly on the dot, they are less likely to change their minds when they come up to the flip chart to place their dots during the voting process. In this situation each person can only use one dot per idea.

Tell the group that each color of dots will have a different weighted value. For example, the first choice (blue dot) will count three points; the green dot, which is the second choice, will have a value of two points; and the last choice (red dot) will only count one point. Explain to them that after they vote using the dots with different weighted values the ideas listed will be scored by counting the dots. Two different ideas may each get 10 dots. However, using the dots with different values will show a true indication of the group's priority.

Reference: <http://www.communitydevelopment.uiuc.edu/sp/Step5/Nominal%20Group%20Technique.pdf>

## Tools and Techniques to Make Decisions

### Nominal Group Technique (NGT)

Nominal group technique is one of a few tools that can play several roles. It not only helps identify ideas, but it assists in the prioritization and ultimately it allows for a vote to be taken. The process is explained in detail above.

### Decision-Making Matrix

When a group has been discussing an issue for some time and is having difficulty in making a decision, this technique often helps bring clarity to the discussion by identifying and stating the group's "must haves" vs. "wants."

Instructions:

1. Identify problem or issue.
2. Draw a large grid on a white board or a large piece of paper using the example in *Figure 3*.

3. List criteria you want to use to evaluate alternative solutions on the left hand side. Some of the criteria will be “musts” and some will be “wants.”
4. List possible alternative solutions across top of page.
5. Place X where you feel alternatives and criteria match.
6. Which alternative received the most X’s under “musts?” That is likely to be the group’s preferred alternative.

- 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.

**Figure 3. Alternative Solutions**

|                                   |  |  |  |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Criteria to Evaluate Alternatives |  |  |  |  |
| MUSTS                             |  |  |  |  |
|                                   |  |  |  |  |
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| WANTS                             |  |  |  |  |
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Reference: University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Family Community Leadership Handbook, (2004).

**Fist to Five (sometimes used as an informal straw vote or poll)**

This technique can be a way to inject some fun into the voting 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 votes and where the group will not harass someone whose vote differs from the majority.

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:

**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 doesn’t 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>

**Standard Processes**

There are several standard ways decisions are made. Sometimes as a group facilitator the group may generate alternatives but the final decision is made by others in positions of power or authority. Listed below are pros and cons of several common decision making processes from the very simple to the complex:

- Coin toss
  - Pro: coin usually available, quick, best used for simple decisions
  - Con: people have no commitment to the decision once it is made
- Authority without consultation
  - Pro: good for routine decisions or when a decision is needed in a crisis situation
  - Con: the authority might not have all the information, no group commitment, possible resentment from group members

- Authority after consultation
  - Pro: uses expertise within the group and can build group commitment
  - Con: information may be biased and selective, resentment may still linger
- Expert
  - Pro: advantageous when the expert has the technical information; group suggestions may not contribute much to the discussion and decision
  - Con: need to match expertise to the situation carefully, often as an outside person the expert may be seen as not knowledgeable about local conditions
- Average of group opinion
  - Pro: helpful when time is short and a decision is needed for something routine and members may have limited knowledge on the subject
  - Con: reduces the benefits of group interaction and builds little commitment to the decision
- Minority rule
  - Pro: good when a small group may have the needed information and when time is limited
  - Con: does not build commitment within the larger group and it may spark resentment and disagreements within the group
- Majority rule
  - Pro: helpful when time is limited, the group is well informed on the issue, an accepted custom in a democracy
  - Con: subgroups may feel slighted if discussion is cut off quickly and the benefits of continued discussion may be reduced
- Consensus
  - Pro: builds strong commitment within the group, enhances problem-solving ability within the group for future issues, benefits of group interaction are maximized
  - Con: takes a lot of time and effort, skill is needed by the facilitator and members to reach consensus, challenging to use in very large groups

Reference: Bryson, J. & Carroll, A. (2007). *Public participation field book*. University of Minnesota.

## Tools and Techniques to Enhance Communication

### Fish Bowl Activity

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.

The basic process is:

1. First, ask participants 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 name on the card.
2. Gather the cards and put them into 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 should not be used.

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

**This publication has been peer reviewed.**

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