

Facilitating group discussion using Talking Paper: an overview

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'I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand'.

Chinese proverb

Background

The Talking Paper Process is one of many approaches available for facilitating group meetings and communication. It evolved from the pioneering work of Metaplan (GmbH), a German consultancy group, and the cross cultural and environmental work of Sandra and John Fowkes in South Africa. It is also referred to as Facilitated Visual Gathering.

The process seeks to achieve:

- Participation of all present
- Freedom of expression for participants
- Making visual the development of the discussion
- Accuracy of the record of discussions held
- Consensual solutions

The approach recognises that in any discussion there are three key components:

- **content** - what it is that is being talked about
- **process** - the way in which the discussion is held
- **feeling atmosphere** – individual and group emotions and reactions to the discussion and the issues.

A facilitator handles the way in which the discussion is held - the process. The facilitator's task is to assist participants to concentrate on the content of the discussion. The facilitator also assists participants to acknowledge issues, express reactions and emotions in constructive ways and to use insights gained from the visual discussion into the evolving process.

Stages of brainstorming using Talking Paper

As with most facilitation techniques there are distinct stages to the approach. The underlying reason for having different stages is to optimise the thinking of group members. There are distinct types of thinking, none of which can exist at the same time.

Silent generation of ideas

A question is posed and participants write their responses on separate cards. This is the visual element of the facilitation method. Generating the ideas on cards is done without any discussion. This is to encourage proactive thinking and to avoid the reactive responses typical of many interactive meetings. These cards are the participant's guarantee of an equal opportunity for participation.

Collation and clarification of ideas

The facilitator, effectively separating the idea from the person who generated it, gathers the cards. The cards are placed on large adhesive posters in full view of all participants, making the discussion visible. Participants guide the facilitator in clustering together those cards carrying similar meanings. In this way a total picture of the discussion emerges. Any queries or clarification of the cards are also recorded and displayed with the relevant cluster.

The adhesive, repositionable glue used on the posters allows the cards to be moved and grouped. This is Talking Paper's special feature. This flexibility liberates the process from any 'linear tyranny' and messiness of recording ideas as on a flip chart. Participants can arrange and re-arrange cards to show the relationships that they see between ideas. This way of working visually with ideas comes to more closely resemble our patterned way of thinking and so makes the exploration of ideas more effective.

Stages 1 and 2 encourage 'divergent' thinking in order to generate a diversity of ideas.

Evaluation of ideas

In this stage, the nature of the thinking changes to 'convergent' thinking. Using any form of ranking or rating, (for instance: dot voting, histograms) the diverse range of ideas is narrowed down. Because of the visual display, the

ideas can be evaluated without at the same time 'evaluating' the person who generated the idea.

Selection

Now the third type of thinking, 'emergent' thinking is applied to select the priority ideas. These can then be used as input to action plans. The posters produced during the session can be photographed using a digital camera and form part of the record of the discussions. This permits participants to re-visit the posters and check the accuracy of any formal record of the discussion.

The total Talking Paper brainstorming process

- Encourages active participation by all
- Promotes pro-active thinking
- Optimises use of the different types of thinking
- Protects anonymity of participant's ideas in tense situations, reducing fear of retribution
- Gives a clear record of the discussion and of key points
- Prevents cyclical discussion by keeping the focus of attention on the issue, and
- Ensures that the emotional energy generated is used creatively towards collective resolution and decisions.

In summary, the Talking Paper method:

- Manages the process of communication so that resources, especially peoples' time, expertise, emotions and energy, are used effectively
- Can be used as a conflict management tool because it separates people from their ideas; explores ideas in a 'neutral' space; makes it less possible for people to dominate and play out hidden agendas

Due to its flexibility its applications are as wide and varied as the creativity and skill of the facilitators.

References

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