

Idea-Listing

Recommended Uses

1. *Jumpstarting a discussion.* Idea-listing will help a group to rapidly identify many aspects of the subject even when they're just beginning to think about it.
2. *Showing the members of a polarized group that there are actually more than two competing opinions in the room.* Idea-listing will draw out a wide range of thoughts on a given topic. This tends to happen even when there is an "us versus them" atmosphere in the group.
3. *Searching for a better understanding of the causes or elements of a problem.* When a problem is more complicated than it originally appeared, use idea-listing to explore questions like "What's really going on here?" or "What are some influences we have not yet considered?"
4. *Generating a list of innovative or unconventional solutions to a difficult problem.*
5. *Bringing a large group back together after people have been working in small groups.* Idea-listing is the fastest way to collect the fruits of their various discussions. The group then has more time to go into depth on topics of interest.
6. *Providing structure when a topic feels overwhelming, unwieldy, or out of control.* By listing ideas, participants can see the breadth of the whole group's thinking. They can start sorting out the issues, and prioritizing the elements they want to tackle first. Thus, idea-listing is often an important first step in reducing the complexity of a difficult task.

Procedure

1. *Hang large sheets of paper on the wall.* Hang more paper than you think you will need because groups often produce many more ideas than you expect.
2. *Ask for a volunteer to serve as the chartwriter.* The job of the chartwriter is to write down everyone's ideas without censoring or improving anything.
3. *Go over the following ground rules with the group:*
 - Anyone may put anything on the list that seems relevant to them.
 - No arguing about whether or not something belongs on the list.
 - No discussion, just calling out ideas – participants will have time for discussion after the idea-listing is finished.
4. *State the group's task in the form of a question.* For example, "What are our options for reducing our budget?"
5. *Start listing ideas.* Ask people to call out their ideas one at a time. If anyone begins arguing or discussing an item, politely remind the whole group of the ground rules.
6. *Don't panic when the pace slows down.* This is often temporary. It usually means people have emptied their minds of the obvious ideas and they are becoming more thoughtful as they search for less obvious ideas. If you push people at this stage, they often feel pressured, and many will stop thinking.
7. *Toward the end of the allotted time, announce "Two more minutes."* This often produces one final burst of ideas.

Dealing with Difficult Dynamics

Problem	Typical Mistake	Effective Response
Domination by a highly verbal member	<p>Inexperienced facilitators often try to control this person. “Excuse me, Mr. Q, do you mind if I let someone else take a turn?”</p> <p>Or, even worse, “Excuse me, Ms. Q, you’re taking up a lot of the group’s time...”</p>	When a person is over-participating, everyone else is under-participating. So, focus your efforts on the passive majority. Encourage <i>them</i> to participate more. Trying to change the dominant person merely gives that person all the more attention.
Goofing around in the midst of a discussion	It’s tempting to try to “organize” people by getting into a power struggle with them. “Okay, everybody, let’s get refocused.” This only works when the problem isn’t very serious.	<i>Aim for a break as soon as possible.</i> People have become undisciplined because they are overloaded or worn out. After a breather, they will be much better able to focus.
Low participation by the entire group	Low participation can create the impression that a lot of work is getting done in a hurry. This leads to one of the worst errors a facilitator can make: assume that silence means consent, and <i>do nothing</i> to encourage more participation.	Switch from large-group open discussion to a different format that lowers the anxiety level. Often, idea-listing is the perfect remedy. If safety is a major concern, small group activities are very important.
Two people locking horns	A lot of time can get wasted trying to “resolve a conflict” between two people who have no intention of reaching agreement. People often use one another as sparring partners, in order to clarify their own ideas.	Reach out to other members and say, “Who else has an opinion on this issue?” or, “Let’s step back for a minute – are there any other issues that need to be discussed?” Remember: don’t focus your attention on the dominant minority, focus on the passive majority.
Whispering and side jokes	Facilitators commonly ignore this behavior in the hope that it will go away.	<p>With warmth and humor, make an appeal for decorum. “As you know, those who don’t hear the joke often wonder if someone is laughing at <i>them</i>.”</p> <p>If the problem persists, assume there’s a reason. Has the topic become boring and stale? Do people need a break? Or the reverse – maybe <i>everyone</i> needs time for small group discussion.</p>

Problem	Typical Mistake	Effective Response
Minimal participation by members who don't feel invested in the topic	Act as though silence signifies agreement with what's been said. Ignore them and be thankful they're not making trouble.	Look for an opportunity to have a discussion on "What's important to me about this topic?" Have people break into small groups to begin the discussion. This gives everyone time to explore their own stake in the outcome.
Poor follow-through on assignments	Give an ineffective pep-talk. Ignore it. "We didn't really need that information anyway." Put most of the responsibility on one or two people.	Have people do assignments in teams. Build in a report-back process at a midpoint before the assignment is due. This gives anyone having trouble a chance to get help.
Failure to start on time and end on time	Wait for the arrival of all the "people who count." This obviously means starting late – but hey, what else can you do? When it's time to end, go overtime without asking. If anyone has to leave, they should tiptoe out.	Start when you say you're going to start. (Waiting encourages lateness.) If you must go overtime, call a break so people can "phone home." If going overtime is recurrent, improve your agenda planning.
Quibbling about trivial procedures	Lecture the groups about wasting time and "spinning our wheels." Space out, doodle and think to yourself, "It's their fault we're not getting anything done."	Have the group step back from the content of the issue and talk about the process. Ask the group, "What is really going on here?"
Someone becomes strident and repetitive	At lunch, talk behind the person's back. Tell the person-in-charge that s/he must take more control. Confront the person during a break. Then, when the meeting resumes, act surprised when his/her anxiety goes through the roof!	People repeat themselves because they don't feel heard. Summarize the person's point of view until s/he feels understood. Encourage participants to state the views of group members whose views are different from their own.
Someone discovers a completely new problem that no one had previously noted	Try to come up with reasons why the group would not need to focus on that issue. Pretend not to hear the person's comments.	Wake up! This may be what you're been waiting for – the doorway into a new way of thinking about the whole situation.

Selecting High Priority Items from a Long List

Methods

Cast Five Straws

1. Each member gets five straw votes. S/he can distribute these straw votes any way s/he wants.
2. It's okay to cast all five for the same item. It's also okay to cast straws for five different items.
3. Half-votes are permitted, but not encouraged.
4. The top five items become the group's high priority list.

Greatest Hits

1. Divide the number of items on the brainstormed list by three.
2. Each person receives that number of choices to indicate his or her favorite items.
3. Everyone may distribute his or her choices any way s/he wants.
4. The top third of the list – i.e., the items chosen most often – becomes the group's list of greatest hits.

Choose As Many As You Like

1. Each person votes as many times as s/he wants.
2. Each person casts one vote for every item s/he wants the group to treat as a high priority.
3. All items that receive unanimous or nearly unanimous support become the group's high priority list. (Note: Most groups define near-unanimity as "unanimity minus one" or "unanimity minus two.")

Selecting High Priority Items from a Long List

Formats

Method	How To Do It	Major Advantage	Major Drawback
Item By Item	The facilitator reads down the list one item at a time, noting how many people raise their hands for each item. Example: "Okay, how many people like item #3? How many like item #4?" And so on.	Reduces awareness of the preferences of influential members.	With lengthy lists of options, this is usually a tedious, draining experience.
Person By Person	Each person takes a turn to state his/her preferences. Often a go-around is the simplest way to get this done.	Gives people permission to be assertive.	Those who go last have an unfair advantage – they can revise their preferences based on what others have said.
Everyone at the Wall	Everyone stands up, takes a colored marker, and puts dots beside his/her preferences.	People get out of their chair and move around. This often has a positive, energizing affect on the group's mood.	With short lists, this method is often overkill.
Secret Ballot	All items on the list are numbered. Participants indicate their preference by writing their chosen numbers privately on paper. Results are tabulated by two or more people.	Useful in highly controversial situations, especially when someone might make a different choice if his/her vote were going to be made public.	Reinforces the perception that it is not safe for people to reveal their preferences openly.

Working in Small Groups

Recommended Uses

1. *Breaking the ice – making it feel safer to participate.* People feel less reticent in small groups; it seems less public.
2. *Keeping the energy up.* It's physically energizing to get out of a chair and move around. Furthermore, working in small groups allows everyone to talk. Active involvement energizes people.
3. *Deepening everyone's understanding of a topic.* In small groups, each person has more time to explore and develop each other's ideas.
4. *Exploring different aspects of an issue quickly.* Small groups can work on several components of a single problem simultaneously. This is a very powerful use of small groups.
5. *Building relationships.* Small groups provide more opportunity for people to get to know one another personally.
6. *Greater commitment to the outcome.* Small groups support more participation. More participation means more opportunity to influence the outcome. When the outcome incorporates *everyone's* thinking, participants have a deeper understanding of its logic and nuance, and they are more likely to feel committed to its effective implementation. This is what is meant by "ownership" of the outcome.

Procedure

1. *Give a one sentence overview of the purpose of the next task.* Example: "Now we're going to discuss our reactions to Dr. Stone's last lecture." Leave the instructions vague for now (Clarify them in step 4.)
2. *Tell the participants how to find partners for their small groups.* Examples: "Turn to the person next to you," or "Find two people you don't know very well."
3. *Wait till everyone has formed their small group before giving further instructions.*
4. *After everyone has settled down, clarify the task at hand.* State the topic people will be discussing, then state the expected outcome. Example: "Dr. Stone claimed that married managers and single managers are treated very differently. Do you agree? What has *your* experience been? See if each of you can come up with two or three examples that have arisen at your place of work.
5. *If you have any instructions about specific ground rules or procedures, give them now.* Example: "One person should be 'the speaker' while the other person is 'the listener.' Then reverse roles when I give the signal."
6. *Tell people how much time has been allotted for this activity.*
7. *As the process unfolds, announce the time remaining.* Example: "Three more minutes!" When time is almost up, give a final warning. Say, "Just a few more seconds."
8. *Reconvene the large group by asking a few people to share their thoughts and learnings.*

Individual Writing

Recommended Uses

1. *Giving members a chance to collect their thoughts in preparation for open discussion.*
2. *Reflecting privately on something unusual or noteworthy that happened recently in the group.*
3. *Preserving anonymity.* People may hesitate to speak freely when their superiors or subordinates are present, or when they fear other group members will disapprove of their comments. Sometimes members are more willing to share their thoughts when they can submit them anonymously to the group.
4. *Allowing group members to collect their thoughts and feelings after tempers have flared.* When emotions go out of control, people can benefit from taking five minutes to write about the hurt and anger they may be feeling.
5. *Producing a first draft of a written product, such as a letter or a mission statement.* Each person writes his/her own rough draft version of the product. Then, those who like what they've written can share their drafts with the group.
6. *Obtaining one last round of input from everyone that the final decision-maker can consider after the meeting is over.*
7. *Evaluating a meeting, when time is scarce but constructive criticism is needed.*

Procedure

1. *Give an overview of the task.* For example, "We're going to take five minutes writing our thoughts about the problems with our performance review process."
2. *Ask everyone to take out a pen and paper.* (Note: Bring extra pens and paper. It's surprising how many people don't bring writing materials to meetings.)
3. *Wait until everyone has settled in.*
4. *Give detailed instructions about the task.* For example, "Many people are not satisfied with our performance review process. Your task is to clarify specifically what you don't like about it. First, write two or three problems with the policy as it now stands. Then, write about the ways you have been adversely affected by that policy." Be sure to let people know whether or not they will be expected to show their work to someone else. Note: It is very reassuring to say, "You won't have to show this to anyone. This is intended solely to help you clarify your own thinking."
5. *Let people know how much time has been allotted for individual writing, then begin.*
6. *Give a one-minute warning when time is almost up.*
7. *When time runs out, reconvene the group.* Allow ample time for discussion of the material that was generated during the writing period.

Structured Go-Arounds

Recommended Uses

1. *Warming up a newly formed group.* Newly formed groups usually need a more structured activity because the safety level is low.
2. *Structuring a complex discussion.* During open discussion, there are often several subconversations going on simultaneously. A structured go-around acknowledges this fact, and allows each person's pet topic to become the focus of group attention for a brief period of time.
3. *Making room for quiet members.* A go-around supports those who have trouble breaking into conversations.
4. *Gathering diverse perspectives when the membership consists of varied interest groups.* Go-arounds restrain members from arguing about the validity of each others' frames of reference.
5. *Giving initial reactions to a controversial topic.* When a topic provokes anxiety, many people turn inward; they rehearse thoughts to themselves to try to find the "right way" to say something risky. Meanwhile, the few who do speak up take all the heat. A go-around gives everyone time to collect their thoughts so they can share the risk.
6. *Returning from a break after a heated disagreement.* After any disturbing episode, a break followed by a go-around is an ideal method for allowing everyone to voice reactions to what occurred before the break.
7. *Closing a meeting.* This gives each member a final chance to express thoughts and feelings that might otherwise not be spoken – at least, not in front of everyone.

Procedure

1. *Have group members pull their chairs together to form a circle.* It is important in a go-around that every member see every other member's face.
2. *Give a one sentence overview of the topic to be addressed.* Example: "In a moment we'll each have a chance to give our reactions to the presentation we just heard."
3. *Explain the process.* Example: "We'll go clockwise from whoever speaks first. While someone is talking, no one may interrupt. When you're through speaking, say 'pass' or 'I'm done'."
4. *If there are particular variations in the ground rules, go over them now.* For example, some facilitators give people explicit permission to pass without speaking when it is their turn.
5. *After having gone over the ground rules, restate the topic.* If a more detailed explanation is needed, give it now.
6. *Give people an idea of how much time to take.* Example 1: "This will work best if each of you spends about a minute sharing your reactions." Example 2: "Take as much time as you like to give your impressions of why this problem keeps reappearing."