

HANDOUT 4.6 — INFORMATION-GATHERING TOOLS**Sequential Questioning**

Sequential questioning is an assessment exercise conducted in the form of a series of questions. These are posed to the whole group at the beginning of the information gathering portion of the workshop. Sequential questioning is used to uncover important information about the group, their positions, issues, or activities. This technique allows the facilitator to bring out unexpressed or new issues, test assumptions, and to challenge and create discomfort with the status quo.

This technique can be used to get people to express their negativity and cynicism of the process, which can create an obvious need to take action. This also helps the facilitator identify and anticipate issues that may continue to arise throughout the process. When done well, this technique creates a shared desire to make change happen.

While this technique is very useful to move from a group to a team, it also has a high potential to generate disagreement. If you plan to use this technique, also plan on making interventions and managing the discussion to ensure ground rules are followed and conflicts are dealt with before they go too far.

Technique:

1. Analyze the topic to be discussed and create about ten questions working from macro to micro issues. (Build questions around issues that were identified in interviews as you were investigating the problem and designing the process.) Use yes/no or closed-ended questions, or a list of items to be ranked on a scale. Each question should probe the situation in a challenging way, i.e. don't shy away from questions just to avoid conflict, to reveal honest information important to the issue at hand.
2. Write one question at the top of each sheet of flip chart paper. (Don't let people see the questions until you pose them.) Use the rest of the sheet to record reactions. Ask one person to respond first, record that response, then ask others if they agree or disagree, and why.
3. Discuss the responses until you and the group can formulate a summary statement about how everyone feels about each question.

NOTES:

Brainstorming

Participants “brainstorm” when they come together in a freethinking forum to generate ideas. Used in a planned format, brainstorming can be an effective method of gleaning public perceptions and ideas and moving participants out of conflict and toward consensus. Brainstorming can be used in many steps of systematic problem solving, including the information gathering, analyzing, and generating options steps.

Brainstorming has these basic components:

- generating as many ideas or solutions as possible to a problem
- listing every idea presented without comment or evaluation
- grouping and evaluating ideas

Brainstorming brings new ideas to bear on a problem. The freethinking atmosphere encourages fresh approaches. Creativity is enhanced, because individuals are encouraged to bring up all ideas—even those that might appear outrageous. Even imperfectly developed thoughts may jog the thinking of other participants.

Problems are defined better as questions arise. Alternatives appear in a new or different perspective. Brainstorming can help reduce conflict. It helps participants see other points of view and possibly change their perspective on problems. It may not be useful in resolving deeply felt conflicts but can help set the stage for a different technique if an impasse has been reached.

Civility is required of each participant. Brainstorming is democratic. All participants have equal status and an equal opportunity to participate. No one person’s ideas dominate a brainstorming session. Brainstorming heightens the awareness of community and sensitizes individuals to the behavior of the group and its participants. It helps mold participants into a working group.

Technique:

People participate by bringing their ideas to the table, working in groups of 6 to 10. If the group is too small, participants are not stimulated to generate ideas; if it is too large, the vocal few may dominate the meeting. At large meetings, participants are divided into groups. Usually each group has a facilitator.

A brainstorming session usually has a simple agenda:

1. Introductions with brief outlines of participants’ backgrounds
2. Discussion of the brainstorming process and how it fits into the overall process
3. Generation of ideas, listed on newsprint without evaluation or criticism
4. Clarification and explanation of ideas, as required

5. Review, grouping, and elimination of redundant ideas
6. Prioritization of the ideas

In conducting a gap analysis, participants can brainstorm all of the items that would be needed to create their perfect solution (the goal statement) to the issue. Then participants would analyze the list and identify existing items (and where/how to obtain them if the group does not have access to these), and, finally, generate a new list of “gaps.” They would then prioritize these using an evaluation method, such as those described in the next section.

There are a number of ways to brainstorm. Individually, in groups, orally, or on note cards (for confidentiality or anonymity). The facilitator should determine the most appropriate method for brainstorming based on the group composition, history, observation of their interactions, and the topic under discussion.

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Group Design Activities (Charrettes)

Another mechanism for generating options to address the problem is through the use of charrettes. This tool is especially useful in addressing problems that have a geospatial component (land use planning), or a physical/structural component (building design). “Charrette” is a French term meaning “small cart or wheelbarrow.” The term (as we use it here) originated at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts architectural school in 19th-Century Paris. There, teams of students were given challenging design problems to solve creatively under the pressure of time. The intense teamwork continued right up to the time when a cart or “charrette” was used to carry the students’ competition submissions from the studio to the rooms where the reviews would take place.

Today we use the term “charrette” for an intense design session in which a team concentrates on a particular problem and proposes solutions. It is an active approach that involves “learning by doing.” The charrette model is frequently used in the design professions as a means for applying theory and concept to a real problem. These sessions tend to gather energy, excitement and ideas (from Dover, Kohl & Partners, South Miami, Florida, <http://www.doverkohl.com>).

The sponsoring group usually sets the goals and time limit and prepares materials for the session. The charrette has a facilitator or leader whose responsibility is to bring out all points of view from participants.

The components of a typical charrette are the following:

- Definition of objectives or issues to be resolved
- Analysis of the problem and alternative approaches to solutions
- Assignment of small groups to clarify issues
- Small groups then map out or draw out their picture of the solution (e.g., where green space and residential areas should be located in a community plan)
- Development of alternative solutions (by having multiple groups developing charrettes for the same issue, guided by the goal statement)
- Presentation and analysis of final proposals(s) or designs
- Evaluation of the designs (techniques described in the next section)
- Consensus and final resolution of the approach to be taken

A charrette is oriented toward problem solving. The breadth of background of participants should assure full discussion of issues, interrelationships, and impacts. Its time limits challenge people to examine the problem rapidly, openly, and honestly and help potential adversaries reach consensus on an appropriate solution. A charrette produces visible results. It is often

used early in a planning process to provide useful ideas and perspectives from concerned interest groups. In mid-process, a charrette helps resolve sticky issues. Late in the process, it is useful to resolve an impasse between groups.

The charrette leader should be familiar with group dynamics and the substantive issues the group faces. The leader tailors the setting, background materials, and issues to the goal of the charrette and elicits participation from all group members within the allotted time. To avoid chaos in a charrette, a high level of discipline is required.

A minimum of four hours is essential for a charrette focused on a modest problem. While the average ranges from one to several days, some agencies hold one- and two-week charrettes or organize them as multiple sessions over a period of time.

The above information was taken from the Virginia Tech Department of Urban Affairs and Planning "Partnership and Participation in Planning" Web site. This site can be accessed at www.uap.vt.edu.

NOTES:

Analyze the Situation: GAP ANALYSIS

From the goal statement, and the information provided by participants (stakeholders, experts, agencies, etc.) the group can begin to analyze the situation. There are a number of different methods for this. One of the most common methods is **gap analysis**. A gap analysis works from the goal statement by answering the following questions.

Technique:

1. What is everything that is needed to achieve the perfect solution, as described in our goal statement? Identify everything that would exist in that solution (use brainstorming individually or in small and large groups to generate this list).
2. Of all these items, which already exist?
3. The remaining items on the list are those that need to be addressed or obtained to achieve the goal established by the group.

The group then generates strategies or solutions to close the identified gap(s). Use brainstorming or charrettes to generate the widest range of possible solutions. The list of possible solutions or strategies is then evaluated to determine which options are the best to pursue. Finally, a plan is developed to implement the identified strategy (-ies) to fill the gap.

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