



Techniques To Elicit Ideas From The Group

By

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Facilitation techniques and methods

It's all well and good planning and having a great opening – but at the end of the day you are all there to produce an output or solve or a problem.

How are you going to do this?

You will do this by employing some techniques that you can use with the group to get ideas out in the open and to manage concerns.

The technique you use will have to be determined in the planning stage and it will depend upon the number of people, the type of output required, the objectives and also group dynamics.

Here are some of the most useful ones, however – never be scared to make one up on the spot.

Around the group technique

A technique to encourage contribution toward group decision making.

The facilitator begins at one end of the table.

Each person is given the chance to say how he or she views the issue, state their idea, etc.

If a person chooses to say nothing in this round, he or she says "pass."

Each person should be satisfied that he or she had a chance to influence the decision and declare a willingness or unwillingness to support it.

The term *consensus* means that support is derived from each person feeling heard and understood.

This technique helps build and maintain group cohesiveness.

The Constructive Response

A technique used to create a product from breakout groups' individual products.

This is a very simple and very effective technique used by facilitators.

Basic Version:

Using the *Go Around* technique, have each person:

1. Say what they like about the idea or proposal under consideration, etc.
2. Next, ask each person to state their concerns.
3. Assist and encourage people to find ways to overcome the concerns.

Alternative Version:

This technique is especially valuable when a facilitator has a large group and must break them out into smaller groups.

When each team brings their proposal or solution back to the whole group, use *the Constructive Response* to examine each group's proposal. On the easel or chalkboard, list the *likes* and list the *concerns* with each group's proposal. Place them with that proposal on the wall or hang them together using easels.

When this is completed, the facilitator begins the process of having the group come up with the final product. One of two things generally happens:

1. The group combines the *likes* from each sub-group and there is no further need for the *concerns* lists.
2. The group combines all the *likes* from each sub-group and uses the *concerns* list as a check to make sure the group product has avoided anything that has caused concern to someone. If there is a *concern*, the group talks it out.

Take Five

A technique to accommodate different thinking styles or preferences and help discussions begin quickly and on-track.

Individuals have preferences in how they think and make decisions.

Some people, extroverts, prefer thinking out loud. Introverts prefer thinking silently.

The *Take Five* technique guarantees those with an introverted thinking style the time and silence they need for organising their thoughts.

Understanding others without trying to alter or judge their behaviour is an ability in itself. Allowing for differences maximizes each person's ability to contribute.

After you begin the session by stating the purpose for bringing the participants together, acknowledge the differing preferences or styles that people will be using during the session.

Tell them you'll use a technique that will accommodate their different thinking styles.

When assigning members to breakout groups, suggest each person take a few minutes (like five) to organise their thoughts and ideas.

They can make a written list if they wish.

You may ask participants to do this before the session begins and bring their notes.

After this brief quiet period, the group then begins discussion.

This procedure permits those who need it, quiet time to organise their thoughts without distraction.

It's *a/ways* advisable to provide advance information about a meeting. Extroverts don't need it and probably won't even read it, but introverts DO and WILL.

Put It In The Hangar

A technique to avoid sidetracks.

During the session, it's easy for groups to get off the issue, or get sidetracked by other issues, ideas or even people.

Although such issues or ideas may later be determined to be relevant, their relevance is unclear at the moment.

To capture these, label a piece of flip chart paper as *The Hangar*.

Whenever a side issue or idea emerges, list it there. These issues can be addressed at a later time.

This technique captures all ideas and issues during a session.

It acknowledges the contribution or participation of each member, even if their idea or issue is not the primary one under consideration.

Brainstorming

A technique to generate ideas quickly.

Everyone is familiar with brainstorming.

The conceptual rules are:

- No criticism or evaluation
- Be unconventional
- Aim for quantity
- Hitchhike on other ideas

The practical rules are:

- Everyone contributes
- One idea per turn
- You may pass

Brainstorming can be modified and effectively used in certain situations which require the fast generation of ideas from a group.

In addition, varying the technique introduces a new way of brainstorming and of enjoying the unconventionality of these modifications.

Alternative #1

1. A time limit is set.
2. Each participant works alone.
3. Each participant puts his or her ideas on a 3 x 5" self-sticking note. Only one idea per note is allowed.
4. Each idea is posted to a wall, board, or easel.
5. At the end of the time period, the group uses grouping techniques, like the *Affinity Diagram*, to combine ideas.

Alternative #2. Same rules as above except:

1. Instead of self-sticking notes, each participant uses index cards. Again only one idea per card is allowed.
2. As they finish each card, participants say the idea out loud and throw the card into the middle of the group. The facilitator collects them as they're being thrown.

The alternatives have very real advantages for certain situations.

1. They take away judgement and censorship.
2. Pressure to perform is removed.
3. The volume of ideas generated increases.

Because *brainstorming* produces a lot of ideas without filtering, be sure you know what to *do next* with the product of the brainstorm and make sure that the participants know what is going to happen as well.

Nominal Group Technique (NGT):

A technique which combines brainstorming and the benefits of individual thought. NGT is a technique used to:

1. Identify processes.
2. Develop a process statement.
3. List the causes that reduce process effectiveness.
4. Prepare for data collection.
5. Identify solutions that improve processes.

NGT reduces the tendency of groups to evaluate ideas when they're presented.

NGT is a method of drawing out as many ideas as possible and then reducing the field of ideas to just a few.

The goal of NGT is to be as expansive with ideas as possible and then to select the most workable ideas the group can use to go on to the next step in the process.

The facilitator guides the group through the NGT steps.

1. Group members silently generate a list of ideas on paper.
2. All ideas are recorded on a large sheet of paper. Once group members appear to have finished listing their ideas silently, the facilitator will begin by having the member to the immediate right or left give the first idea on his or her list. The facilitator will write the idea, exactly as expressed, on the paper. Initials of the individual giving the idea may be placed on the sheet by his or her idea if further

clarification may be needed. Otherwise, don't pin ideas to people. Let ideas become group ideas.

Items should be numbered and written so that they may be easily read by the entire group. When an idea is recorded, it shouldn't be explained or clarified, merely posted. This process continues with each member giving one idea per turn, until all of the members' ideas are exhausted.

3. Once all items have been clarified and are understood, the group participates in an anonymous vote on the ideas.

The voting is accomplished on secret ballots, which are then passed to a group member to be read and recorded. After tabulation, the group can easily see which of the items is of greatest interest to the group. The natural by-product of this step is that the group's attention is directed to the items that received the largest number of votes.

If votes are evenly distributed, that fact captures the group's attention. The purpose of this step is to determine where group interest lies. Remember that all items listed, no matter how few votes they may have received, remain candidates for future consideration until the group decides otherwise.

4. The group discusses remaining items, if necessary. At this point, all group members should understand what is meant by each item on the list. If a member has strong feelings about an item that was not selected, the member should explain to the group why he or she feels so strongly. If the individual feels strongly that the item should be placed on the selected list, place it there.

6. When all discussion has been exhausted, the group ranks items selected through a weighted voting process. Once again, each member will cast an anonymous paper ballot, but this time each vote will be weighted on the basis of the total number of items included in the vote. For example, if five items are included in the vote, each member will give five votes to the item that is most important, four votes to the second most important item, and so on.

Multi-voting:

A technique to reduce the number of ideas to a manageable size.

The objective in Multi-Voting is to reduce the number of ideas, not to arrive at a final choice.

It can be used when brainstorming has generated too many items to be addressed at one time.

1. Group members vote for as many ideas from the list as they wish, but may cast only one vote for each item.
2. The list is trimmed by half, with those ideas having the fewest votes dropped.
3. Each member votes for half of the remaining ideas.
4. The voting process continues until the predetermined number of ideas is reached.

The Affinity Diagram:

A technique to organise facts or issues into groups or clusters.

This technique is useful if the problem or issue is highly complex and needs the total involvement of the group.

First, present the problem or issue to the group.

Then do Brainstorming.

Set a time limit like seven minutes.

Ask members to silently generate as many ideas as possible.

Have them place each idea on a separate self-sticking note.

Give members big markers so the word or phrases they write can be read easily.

When the time is up, place all self-sticking notes on a wall.

Ask group members to begin organising them into groups or clusters that appear to have some sort of relationship.

As the groups or clusters are developed, each begins to have a closer relationship with the issues or facts placed with them.

Each member is free to change the self-sticking notes.

When it appears the group members have reached consensus and are satisfied with the relationships, the information can then be used to continue work on the issue or problem.

This technique works very well for a comprehensive agenda item like developing organisational values, as well as for a very specific agenda item like defining all the tasks needed to complete a work activity.

This technique isn't for problems or issues that require immediate solution.

Group Evaluation:

There will be times when you'll be working with groups who need to evaluate themselves.

The information will help you and the group to modify activities, resolve conflicts, make better use of time, or solve problems differently. There are a variety of ways to do this.

One simple way is to decide which areas would benefit from evaluation.

The following is a list of commonly used categories:

- Goals
- Commitment
- Procedures and Guidelines
- Roles
- Participation
- Trust
- Conflict
- Hidden Agendas
- Timing
- Level of interest
- Synergy
- Feelings
- Problem solving Methods
- Facilitation (yes, ask how you're doing also!)

Develop a rating scale for each area.

We suggest a rating scale of one to five to keep it simple.

Have one be the low end and five be the high end.

For each end, give an appropriate description so everyone understands what's being asked.

The following are examples to help you design your own:

Facilitation

1 2 3 4 5

Inappropriate amount of Just the right amount direction direction

Trust

1 2 3 4 5

Low level of trust High level of trust

The rating scale evaluation can be used for a group that's been working together for awhile.

It can also be used as a diagnostic tool for a facilitated session designed to improve the teamwork of the participants.

Before the session, the questionnaire can be given to the participants.

Ask them to complete the evaluation anonymously.

Explain to them that this information will be used to discuss how to improve the group's working together.

Another evaluation format is a list of questions that allow each person to state their thoughts about each question.

This method takes longer to do and will require time to compile the results. However, it provides more in-depth information than the rating scale.

The following is an example:

How Well are We Working Together?

1. How did you feel when you first formed this group (or team)?
2. How do you feel now?
3. Which of the group's (or team's) goals do you think you've achieved?
4. What unresolved conflicts do you think this group (or team) needs to address?
5. What prevents you from being more committed, interested or participate more?
6. How can the facilitator help your group (or team) move forward?
7. Does your group (or team) need any additional ground rules or procedures?
8. What isn't happening that, if it did happen, would make your group (or team) more successful?
9. What are the three best things about your group (or team)?
10. What is the one thing you'd like to see happen that you think is impossible for your group (or team)?

About MTD



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Sean McPheat is the **Chief Executive Officer** of the multi-award winning **MTD Training Group**.

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