Affinity diagram

An affinity diagram is an analytical tool used to organise many ideas into sub-groups of common themes or common relationships. Essentially it is an individual brainstorming process where each person completes a post-it note and then the whole group identifies the common themes. It can be used at the start of a project for visioning and setting objectives or principles.

See examples of the affinity diagram tool at www.sixsigmadaily.com/the-affinity-diagram-tool.

Embodied positioning

If you want to know where people stand on an issue and how fixed that position is, you can ask them to physically to stand in a quadrant that best reflects their opinion. Alternatively, you can ask them to stand along a continuum from "strongly oppose" to "strongly support". Skilful questioning by the facilitator and listening to others' reasons for their position can result in people moving to a different place.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming tools are used to help spark ideas and then to gather and organise these. The rules for effective brainstorming include:

- let the ideas flow freely – quantity not quality

- resist the urge to judge or evaluate – in brainstorming there are no wrong or bad ideas

- ensure that everyone participates – go around the table or use a technique like the affinity diagram to make sure everyone's voice is heard

- encourage thinking outside the square – be humorous and creative

- resist the urge to give explanations or tell stories – you just want ideas to take you forward

- resist the urge to debate or argue – you are not looking for consensus

- create a safe environment so everyone feels comfortable to participate.

There are lots of brainstorming tools and apps on the internet. Two useful sites are: www.ideafacilitators.wordpress.com and www.sixsigma.com.

Criteria-based evaluation

A criteria matrix is used to evaluate ideas against a set of criteria. This practical technique can be useful when you have a set of comparable ideas and are seeking clarity or wanting to determine priorities. The technique requires the ideas to be as unambiguous as possible. The ideas are listed on the vertical side of the matrix and the criteria along the top of the matrix. Participants can then rate the ideas (for example, 5 = high priority and 1 = low priority).

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Storyboarding

Storyboarding is a technique used to organise and visually display information. The technique is utilised for planning actions (or stories). It can take many different forms. Start with a simple, concise statement or question and brainstorm the answers. The ideas are then grouped and headers are created for each grouping. Storyboarding is often used to enhance the group process to visually solve a problem as a team. It can also be used to:

- stimulate divergent thinking

- organise problem-solving

- generate a plan of action.

Storyboarding works best with a small group, ideally between five to eight people. However, it can be used with large groups that are divided into smaller sub-groups.
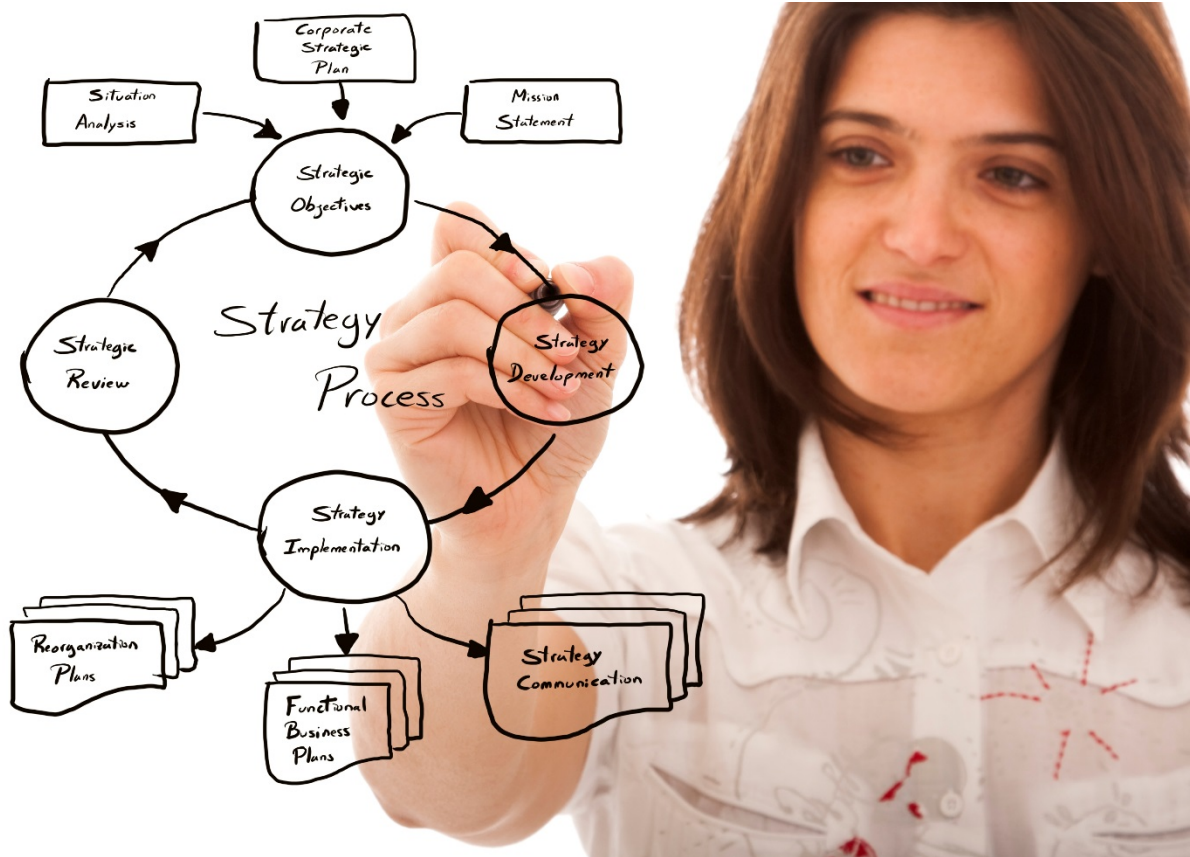

Scenario-building

Scenario-building is a process used for planning in which basic trends and uncertainties are identified and a series of possible future scenarios are constructed, often with the aid of statistical analysis. This can also be used with groups in a workshop setting to explore the impacts of alternative proposals, inform and educate participants, and guide decision-making. Participants are invited to identify a range of possible alternatives, and highlight trends or emerging issues. They can then explore the impact of each trend and identify any potential intersections between trends.

Mind maps

Mind maps are a visual technique for exploring solutions to problems and are best used in a workshop setting. They are a graphical representation of a brainstorming process. The topic to be mapped is drawn in a circle in the centre of a whiteboard or flipchart. Lines that represent branches relating to that topic are drawn. Next, secondary and tertiary branches are developed. Graphics as well as key words are presented on each branch. Participants are encouraged to be creative when representing branches. Relationships between lines/branches are represented by connecting lines/branches. This technique is very useful for, but not exclusive to, those with a predominantly visual learning style.

Visioning exercises

'Community visioning' can help communities to imagine and come to grips with what might be a challenging scenario or to identify their contribution to shaping a positive future.

It is important to use storytelling, imagination and creativity to explore deeply and reach a holistic understanding of what is going on and what is desired by the community. It should not be confused with "strategic visioning" where the purpose is to help the community endorse a strategic plan.

You can read more about community visioning practices here: sarkissian.com.au/publications/earthscan-community-engagement-books-by-wendy-sarkissian-phd/creative-community-planning/community-visioning-and-heartstorming.

Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology is a useful tool for large group problem-solving, where participants contribute their own topics in order to 'foster conversation about questions that matter'. This technique is about creating an environment that feels like a café, a place where people feel safe to talk in small intimate groups about topics of interest and about possibilities. The meetings are characterised by self-organisation and a high degree of freedom from participants.

Open Space Technology meetings begin with all participants sitting in a circle, and no items on the agenda. The meeting opens with an agenda-setting exercise, after which the group self-organises into smaller discussion groups. Discussion group convenors are responsible for providing a report of the discussions, which is immediately added to a book of proceedings. At the conclusion of the meeting, or very shortly thereafter, participants receive a copy of the proceedings, including any action plan that was developed.

World café conversations

The 'world café' approach is related to Open Space Technology. Here the essence is to create an ambience in which participants feel able to explore the questions that are at the core of the issue being addressed. The deeper participants look into the questions, the more creative the solutions. This process was used to assist in the development of plans for a Cultural Centre at Marion City Council.

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