

The
1999
Annual

Volume 1
Training

Jossey-Bass
Pfeiffer

620. THE AFFINITY DIAGRAM: INTRODUCING A TOOL

Goals

- To introduce the concept of an affinity diagram.
 - To demonstrate the use of the affinity diagram.
-

Group Size

Ten to thirty participants.

Time Required

Twenty to thirty minutes.

Materials

- A gummed name tag for each participant.
- A felt-tipped pen for each participant.

Physical Setting

A room with enough space for the group members to move around during the activity.

Process

1. Introduce the activity as a creative way to demonstrate how the affinity diagram works. Give one name tag and a felt-tipped pen to each participant and ask each to privately write the name of a famous person—alive or dead, real or fictional—on the name tag. (Five minutes.)
2. After they have all written names, ask them to place their name tags on the *backs* of the individuals sitting to their right. (If the participants are sitting in any type of configuration other than circular, someone will have to walk the end person's name tag over to the "first" person.)

3. Ask the participants if they remember the game "Twenty Questions." Say that the next step is like "Twenty Questions" in that they can ask only closed-ended questions of one another until they guess the names written on the name tags on their backs. Ask the participants to stand. Encourage them to mingle and to ask different people different questions. Tell them that when they have guessed their names, they can move their name tags from their backs to the fronts of their clothing. (Five minutes.)
4. After five minutes, if you still have some participants with name tags on their backs, tell the other participants to offer those persons "clues." Within two minutes, all participants should have moved their name tags to their fronts. (Two minutes.)
5. Call time and reconvene the group. Explain to the participants that they now have a list of famous people and that such a list is often generated by brainstorming. Say that the next step is to do a "silent sort," which is the real power of the affinity diagram. Explain that, during the silent sort, each of them is to silently move and stand next to a "famous person" with whom his or her own famous person has an "affinity" or something in common. Explain that once they move, they are not to look around to see if there are better "fits." Tell them that it is okay to make "clusters" of famous people and that, if they do not have anything in common with others, it is okay to stand alone. Tell them that you will give a fifteen-second countdown when it appears to you that they are close to being finished. Say that when the countdown is over, they should stop moving.
6. Allow the participants to sort themselves in silence (you may have to reinforce the silence with a few "shhhhs") for three or four minutes. Then start counting down from fifteen to zero aloud. When you reach zero, remind them that they must stop moving. (Five minutes.)
7. Move to each cluster (or individual standing alone) and ask for a word, phrase, or statement that captures the flavor or essence of the famous people represented. (Five minutes.)
8. Reconvene the group and say that this process models the affinity diagram tool. First, a list is generated by brainstorming, research, or some other method. Then the items on the list are sorted, for example, by customer type. The result is an "affinity diagram," similar to the participants' physical clustering.
9. Guide a discussion of the activity. The following questions may be helpful:
 - What happened during the process?

- What do you see as the greatest benefit of using the affinity diagram process?

- How could you use the affinity diagram tool on the job?

(Five minutes.)

10. Conclude by stating that the affinity diagram is a tool that they can use when they have a large number of items that must be sorted quickly.

Variations

- If pressed for time, omit the "Twenty Questions" part and just ask the participants to place their name tags on the fronts of their clothing.
- This activity works well as an energizer if the group members already are familiar with the affinity diagram.

Submitted by Kristin Arnold.

Kristin Arnold maintains a private consulting practice. She specializes in facilitation services and training, with an emphasis on strategic planning, strategic partnerships, collaborative problem solving, and team building. Ms. Arnold has extensive experience as both an internal and external consultant with a wide variety of manufacturing and service industries, as well as the government sector.