

Something other than talk: communication beyond words

Facilitating group discussion using Talking Paper: an overview

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'I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand'.

Chinese proverb

Background

The Talking Paper Process is one of many approaches available for facilitating group meetings and communication. It evolved from the pioneering work of Metaplan (GmbH), a German consultancy group and the cross cultural and environmental work of Sandra and John Fowkes in South Africa. It is also referred to as Facilitated Visual Gathering. The total process enhances dialogue, planning, participative learning and decision-making in groups. It works across a range of cultural settings and communication styles.

What is Talking Paper?

Talking Paper uses coloured cards in a range of shapes as markers for ideas, affinities, differences, themes and decisions. It is a visual process. Participants write down their ideas in words, symbols or pictures. The cards are placed on large adhesive posters. Guided by participants, ideas on cards can be clustered, moved and reordered depending upon the purpose. A key feature of the process is that diverse ideas can be appreciated and examined, while separating the idea from the person who generated it. A visual map is created that reflects the thinking of all participants. The quieter voices have equal space to contribute. The completed posters can be photo-reduced to A4 size and distributed to participants as an accurate record of proceedings.

Values

A Talking Paper process focuses discussion on ideas rather than personalities and encourages people to become problem solvers. It is time saving, makes visual the development of discussions and so improves accuracy of minutes and records. The processes embody values of participation and a commitment to the idea that decisions and agreements are more likely to result in action when made by all of the people affected. People can communicate on an equal footing, plan, prioritise and make agreements. Ideas can be generated anonymously, significantly reducing power imbalances within the group. Participants can achieve commitment to a course of action that brings together values, purpose and practice.

There are organising principles unique to individuals and groups that can be hard to experience. *Talking Paper* is a tool that allows people to access and experience them. Because the process offered does not depend upon the spoken word as a prime vehicle to facilitate dialogue, each person is challenged to reach for an inner dialogue with her/himself and from that place with each other. Thus people's deeply held beliefs, values, fears and striving for a sense of connection with others is glimpsed and sometimes achieved.

Applications

Talking Paper is a facilitation resource that is used extensively for enabling disparate members of large and small groups to communicate on an equal footing. Applications include: brainstorming and creative thinking, project management, planning and prioritising, creating safe spaces for telling of stories in a group, working with disputes, supervision and coaching, recording a discussion, and classroom teaching.

The processes are designed to be non-threatening and economical for managing material in large groups, recording all ideas and issues, working in cross cultural settings, managing group process when things get hot, and working with people who may hurt from negative past learning experiences and from trauma.

How does it work?

The process seeks to achieve:

- Participation of all present
- Freedom of expression for participants
- Making visual the development of the discussion
- Accuracy of the record of discussions held

The approach recognises that in any discussion there are three key components:

- content - what it is that is being talked about
- process - the way in which the discussion is held
- emotions of participants - their reactions to the discussion and the issues.

A facilitator handles the way in which the discussion is held - the process. The facilitator's task is to assist participants to concentrate on the content of the discussion. The facilitator also assists participants to acknowledge issues, express reactions and emotions in constructive ways and learn from insights gained.

Stages of brainstorming using Talking Paper

As with most facilitation techniques there are distinct stages to the approach. The underlying reason for having different stages is to optimise the thinking of

group members. There are distinct types of thinking, none of which can exist at the same time.

Silent generation of ideas

A question is posed and participants write their responses on separate cards. This is the visual element of the facilitation method. Generating the ideas on cards is done without any discussion. This is to encourage proactive thinking and to avoid the reactive responses typical of many interactive meetings. These cards are the participant's guarantee of an equal opportunity for participation.

Collation and clarification of ideas

The facilitator, effectively separating the idea from the person who generated it, gathers the cards. The cards are placed on large adhesive posters in full view of all participants, making the discussion visible. Participants guide the facilitator in clustering together those cards carrying similar meanings. In this way a total picture of the discussion emerges. Any queries or clarification of the cards are also recorded and displayed with the relevant cluster.

The adhesive, repositionable glue used on the posters allows the cards to be moved and grouped. This is Talking Paper's special feature. This flexibility liberates the process from any 'linear tyranny' and messiness of recording ideas as on a flip chart. Participants can arrange and re-arrange cards to show the relationships that they see between ideas. This way of working visually with ideas comes to more closely resemble our patterned way of thinking and so makes the exploration of ideas more effective.

Stages 1 and 2 encourage 'divergent' thinking in order to generate a diversity of ideas.

Evaluation of ideas

In this stage, the nature of the thinking changes to 'convergent' thinking. Using any form of ranking or rating, (for instance: dot voting, histograms) the diverse range of ideas is narrowed down. Because of the visual display, the ideas can be evaluated without at the same time 'evaluating' the person who generated the idea.

Selection

Now the third type of thinking, 'emergent' thinking is applied to select the priority ideas. These can then be used as input to action plans. The posters produced during the session can be photographed using a digital camera and form part of the record of the discussions. This permits participants to re-visit the posters and check the accuracy of any formal record of the discussion.

Synthesis

The total Talking Paper brainstorming process:

- Encourages active participation by all
- Promotes pro-active thinking
- Optimises use of the different types of thinking
- Protects anonymity of participant's ideas in tense situations
- Gives a clear record of the discussion and of key points
- Prevents cyclical discussion by keeping the focus of attention on the issue
- Ensures that the emotional energy generated is used creatively towards collective resolution and decisions.

In summary, the Talking Paper method:

- Manages the process of communication so that resources, especially peoples' time, expertise, emotions and energy, are used effectively
- Can be used as a conflict management tool because it separates people from their ideas; explores ideas in a 'neutral' space; makes it less possible for people to dominate and play out hidden agendas
- Is flexible, and so its applications are as varied as the creativity and skill of the facilitators.

Due to its flexibility it has proven effective in a wide range of sectors: community, education, industry, commercial, eco-tourism, government in local, cross-cultural and international settings. It is as effective from the back of a truck in the bush as it is in an Executive Boardroom. It is effective for group discussion between people with diverse communication styles, non-traditional communication and complex needs.

References

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