Idea Generation Tools: Brainstorming, Affinity Grouping, and Multivoting

Brainstorming, Affinity Grouping, and Multivoting are tools for generating, categorizing, and choosing among ideas of a group of people.

Using these techniques to generate, categorize, and choose among ideas has a number of benefits:

- It allows every member of the group to participate.

- It encourages many people to contribute, instead of just one or two people.

- It sparks creativity in group members as they listen to the ideas of others.

- It generates a substantial list of ideas, rather than just the few things that first come to mind; categorizes ideas creatively; and allows a group of people to choose among ideas or options thoughtfully.

This tool contains:
- Steps in Brainstorming
- Steps in Affinity Grouping
- Steps in Multivoting

Institute for Healthcare Improvement
Boston, Massachusetts, USA

Idea Generation Tools: Brainstorming, Affinity Grouping, and Multivoting

Steps in Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an idea-generation tool designed to produce a large number of ideas through the interaction of a group of people.

1. The session leader should clearly state the purpose of the brainstorming session.

2. Participants call out one idea at a time, either going around the round in turn, which structures participation from everyone, or at random, which may favor greater creativity. Another option is to begin the brainstorming session by going in turn and after a few rounds open it up to all to call out ideas as they occur.

3. Refrain from discussing, complimenting, or criticizing ideas as they are presented. Consider every idea to be a good one. The quantity of ideas is what matters; evaluation of the ideas and their relative merit comes later. This tool is designed to get as many ideas generated in a short period of time as possible. Discussing ideas may lead to premature judgment and slow down the process.

4. Record all ideas on a flipchart, or on self-adhesive notes (see Affinity Grouping), so that all group members can see them.

5. Build on and expand the ideas of other group members. Encourage creative thinking.

6. When generating ideas in turn, let participants pass if an idea does not come to mind quickly.

7. Keep going when the ideas slow down in order to create as long a list as possible and reach for less obvious ideas.

8. After all ideas are listed, clarify each one and eliminate exact duplicates.

9. Resist the temptation to "lump" or group ideas. Combining similar ideas can come later (see Affinity Grouping).

Steps in Affinity Grouping

Affinity Grouping is a brainstorming method in which participants organize their ideas and identify common themes.

1. Write ideas on individual cards or adhesive notes (see directions for Brainstorming).

2. Randomly place cards on a table or place notes on flip chart paper taped to the wall.

3. Without talking, each person looks for two cards or notes that seem to be related and places these together, off to one side. Others can add additional cards or notes to a group as it forms or reform existing groups. Set aside any cards or notes that become contentious.

4. Continue until all items have been grouped (or set aside). There should be fewer than 10 groupings.

5. Now discuss the groupings as a team. Generate short, descriptive sentences that describe each group and use these as title cards or notes. Avoid one- or two-word titles.

6. Items can be moved from one group to another if a consensus emerges during the discussion.

7. Consider additional brainstorming to capture new ideas using the group titles to stimulate thinking.

Steps in Multivoting

Multivoting is a structured series of votes by a team, in order to narrow down a broad set of options to a few.

1. Generate a list of items (see directions for Brainstorming).

2. Combine similar items into groups that everyone agrees on (see directions for Affinity Grouping).

3. Number each item.

4. Each person silently chooses one-third of the items.

5. Tally votes.

6. Eliminate items with few votes. The table below will help you determine how to eliminate items:

Group size (number of people)	Eliminate items with less than "x" votes
4 to 5	2
6 to 10	3
10 to 15	4
15 or more	5

7. Repeat the Multivoting process with remaining items, if necessary.