

Working with Groups:

Affinity Mapping

Affinity diagramming consists of placing related items together. It is an excellent tool to use when groups have a lot of ideas and need a way to get them organized.

There are two ways to accomplish this: 1) by handing out sheets of paper or sticky notes with pre-existing information on the paper and a few blank sheets for new phrases or ideas; or 2) by using a computer and a projector to visually share the pre-existing information and generate new phrases in a document. If the group is quite large, starting with paper could be a better way to get everyone involved. Then, as items are grouped and the list reduced, a computer projector could be used to share the consolidated groupings.

The basic process is:

1. Begin by handing out sheets of paper or large sticky notes. The paper already can have words or phrases on it, or individuals may write additional issues on the notes — one idea to a sheet.
2. Gather all participants around a wall or vertical surface. Sometimes windows can be used as a flat surface.
3. Encourage participants to place notes, one at a time, on the surface. As each note is put up, participants may add similar notes nearby if the subjects seem to be related.
4. When all notes have been placed and the groupings consolidated, naming each main area can help clarify the major components.

Suggestions for success:

- Affinity diagramming is best used if the group work can be continued quickly. For instance, early in a meeting the group may place a set of issues into related topic areas and then discuss several ways to address the issues later in the meeting.
- Encourage participants to place only one note at a time and to read their notes aloud while placing them on the surface. If others have questions, they can be asked at that time.
- All should participate. Sometimes one person may want to take control and start moving notes. It should be understood that the clustering of issues is accomplished only when everyone in the group agrees.
- Affinity diagramming can be hard work. As a facilitator you should schedule no more than two of these sessions during a workshop.

Reference: <http://www.infodesign.com.au/usabilityresources/affinitydiagramming/>

Source: *Working with Groups: Generating Ideas, Making Decisions, and Enhancing Communication*, by Phyllis I. Schoenholz and Cheryl A. Burkhart-Kriesel, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, EC478, 2008, The Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture. Adapted with permission.