
Collaborative Facilitation

From GroupMind Express



www.groupmindexpress.com

How to use this guide.

GroupMind Express helps you leverage the collective intelligence of your group to make powerful choices. In using online collaboration, you need **process thinking** to be able to work effectively with a remote or dispersed team. Because you aren't there together in the workspace all the time, you have to be clearer about what you want everyone to do.

You can use this guide as an **introduction** to working online, and as a **reference** for understanding additional options when designing facilitation processes. For instance, there are sections on asking good questions, and on checking through a list of what you are trying to do.

The ideas laid out here can help you clarify and support the work you are doing with any online, collaborative system. Although we wrote them to help with GroupMind Express, they are good basic principles and they apply to any interactive group work.

A Facilitation Guide

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Executive Summary

What is this guide about?

This is a guide to help you coordinate the shared work of a group, and particularly, a group which is probably not situated together in one office. Hence the idea of *online collaboration*. By sharing a universally accessible work area, team members can work effectively together even though they are separated by function, location, time and culture. This guide provides you with concepts and methods to help your group work well together.

What is in it for you?

You have been selected to organize a work project and encourage a diverse group of individuals to pool their thinking, their experiences and their concerns, in order to arrive at a shared result that will benefit a larger group of stakeholders. This guide will help you consider the process issues you need to address so that your group can focus on their work, and can work together easily. You can use this material to

- 1) plan out how you will structure your project,
- 2) get started with using some online tools,
- 3) help your group move through the steps they need to accomplish their objectives.

If you are new to online work?

We assume that most people have not done much work in an online, collaborative setting. While work concepts are the same, everyone in your group will need help in getting used to working in a “virtual space.” So we will help *you* take some simple steps to help the group stay organized and get used to communicating in a new way.

If you are not a facilitator in daily life?

Most people are not trained as facilitators. Some managers are natural at helping people work together, and some are not good at this. You might have had some experience leading a group, or you might not – either is OK. This guide will suggest some models for how a group moves through steps in achieving its goals; it will suggest some roles and methods you can use (which can be shared by many people in your group) to work together to gather creative thinking, to arrive at decisions, and to check that you are staying on course.

The basics about GroupMind Express.

While you may use this guide to work with any online tools for your project (or even just a telephone and email), this is also a preface for thinking about work with a particular collaboration platform which we develop and support. GroupMind lets you work through any browser with a set of tools that help share ideas, come to agreements, maintain a central set of documents, and track your task progress over time. You can survey outside stakeholders, brainstorm a list of improvements or possibilities, use the group’s collective intelligence to develop a set of shared priorities, hold themed discussions, build graphic models of arguments or processes, rate a list of issues against several criteria at once.

With GroupMind collaboration, the group can easily see the combined results of their input on one page; this helps to bring the group together and to maintain a sense of progress as more issues are addressed.

Facilitation 101

The **main functions** of the facilitator are

- Keep the group focused on its goals
 - establish stepping stones
 - manage time, when to move to next steps
 - summarize key points and decisions
- Help the process work smoothly
 - encourage everyone's input
 - manage differing viewpoints
 - clarify issues with questions
 - maintain communication between everyone.

Facilitating a Project

When you coordinate a new project, think through four main areas:

1. Figure out what you want to do.
2. Understand how your process will function.
3. Consider how you will ensure the involvement of the right people.
4. Provide project context, and to the basic steps you will use.

What do you want to do?

This sounds simple, but it really is the most difficult and important part of designing a meeting or a series of steps. When you are considering a new process with a group, we suggest that you work backwards from:

- What is the best outcome you envision from your meeting, project, or survey?
Are you building buy-in, setting up a change process, focusing on internal improvement, trying to keep various functions involved with an objective?
- How do you want the group to become involved? Do they just make comments, or identify barriers, build agreement, assess confidence levels on specific issues?
- What are the major issues that you imagine will emerge from doing this process?
- How will the group work output be used or responded to by higher-level management? By other departments? How will the results affect everyone?

The answers to these kinds of questions will help you think up the *right focal questions*, so that the group will:

- give good answers (data which is interesting to all participants, taps the collective intelligence of the combined stakeholders, brings critical issues into focus, and helps the organization move toward its objectives)
- surface issues which need attention
- understand and integrate differing points of view
- build alignment around a set of key priorities.

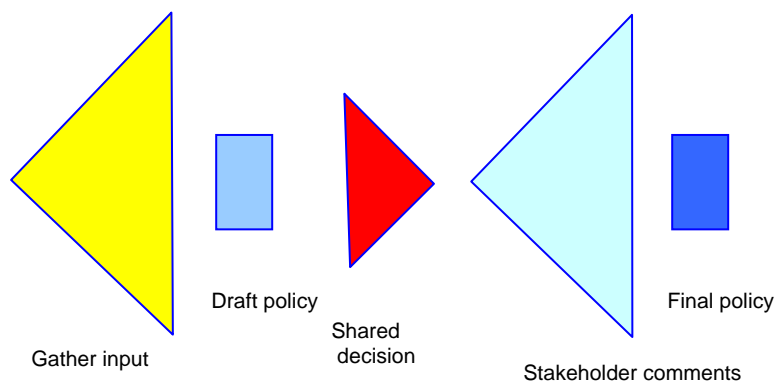
How will your process function?

You will design a series of steps, using some online tools. In each step, you want to *ensure participation* and input from the group, help them *understand the combined results*, and use these results to *move on to other steps*. (For instance, gather group opinion in a survey, then provide some background reading, then develop a discussion of key issues, then generate a list of possible solutions, then vote priorities for those, then assign follow up actions.)

You should draw out the main steps, check to see which need what kind of input (both from the members and from outsiders) and review your map with someone else, so you get some perspective.

- Draw your steps
- Simplify your steps as much as possible
- Plan for group digestion of combined results at each stage

Here is a simplified diagram to help envision such steps. Note that steps can be divergent (widening input), convergent (focusing input), or developmental (building a document or a list of tasks):



Ensure the involvement of the right people

You will need to pick representatives from various stakeholder groups, give them a simple rationale for what the work group will do and why they will get benefits from participating, and check that they are willing to stay involved. You will need to balance the viewpoints in your group, so the main issues are represented.

Once you have a group, it is the ongoing communication within it that will make it effective or make it fail.

Introduce the context, and maintain communication

For the project as a whole, and for each new step you undertake, make sure that you explain the *what, why and how* so the group understands how they can participate. Because you are dispersed you should maintain updates and summaries by email. You will also need to set up specific times to review together what has been worked on. Your role as facilitator means you may need to over-communicate, to help the group stay connected:

- Email updates to the group
- Write summaries in discussions or in Instructions for new steps
- Encourage members to subscribe to key results pages
- Have regular check-up meetings (by phone or Skype.)

Some things to avoid

- Don't assume that everyone will stay connected
- Don't let material sit long on the site without reviewing it
- Don't let one person dominate discussion or tasks
- Don't let decisions be made without group input
- Don't leave roles unclear
 - In all cases in the list above, check with the group on your assumptions. Make these issues explicit, and get agreement (even though that may seem obvious.)

Final Thoughts

Learning occurs through trial and error. Support your team in trying things out.

- **Keep clarifying the questions you are working on.**
- **Encourage differing opinions.**
- **Communicate an extra amount (what, why, how & when.)**
- **Re-state issues and steps to ensure understanding by everyone.**

Collaborative Facilitation

Overview of Facilitation

The noted consultant and teacher Peter Block talks about the concept of “stewardship” as a different style of leading. He says, “Stewardship is a way to use power to serve through the practice of partnership and empowerment. This is the alternative to the conventional notions of strong leadership for implementing changes. The intent is to redesign our organizations so that service is the centerpiece, and ownership and responsibility are strongly felt among those close to doing the work and contacting customers.”

Facilitating group work involves the elements of both leadership and service

Purpose

The facilitator’s or coordinator’s purpose is to make the work easier for those who are involved in a collaborative project [from Latin: *facilis* (easy)]. This involves larger tasks such as leadership, vision and planning; it also involves smaller activities such as asking questions and summarizing involvement to date. In some cases this will be a very directive role, and in others, very much a background support, depending on the make-up of the group and the nature of the task.

Key facilitator functions are:

- Clarify the purpose of the current meeting or project
- Maintain the group’s focus on the task at hand
- Identify issues that are pending before the group
- Ensure participation by everyone
- Encourage different views
- Maintain boundaries of time, civility, and focus
- Ensure that a summary of issues and decisions is noted and kept updated in a central place

How these functions are accomplished will differ, based on the circumstances of the group. If you are the designated facilitator, it is your responsibility to serve the group’s process by ensuring that these functions are tended to by someone, although that is not necessarily you. In intact work teams, these roles should be shared and shifted over time.

One key issue that is often overlooked in collaborative work is establishing and maintaining a shared [sense of purpose](#). The group needs to review and agree on what it is here to do. *What is our role? What are our expected outcomes?* Do we have differing views of these? In our experience, it is very helpful to re-visit them questions regularly, to re-calibrate the group’s work (and correct the course) in light of its target or outcome.

Where there is a *small group* of experts with a clear agenda and due date, the facilitator may play such roles as timekeeper, scribe and summarizer -- as well as ensuring that all points of view are encouraged to have input.. Where there is a *group with more diversity of background* and less clarity of roles, the facilitator may well take the lead in establishing agreement about objectives, timeframes, assignment of roles and work directly to set up clear boundaries and expectations for the work and the group's process. Much depends on the type of project and the make-up of the project members.

Types of Group Projects

Most people are familiar with in-person meetings. Even in this modality, we have all seen examples of meetings which could benefit from better facilitation and planning. When we add the element of dispersed meetings – whether in same-time format or dispersed in time as well as place – then clarity of communication and facilitation of discourse become even more important to the success of the project.

In Person

Meetings require agenda control, moderation when a member dominates or veers off topic, and steps to draw the group together, such as collaborative voting and checks for agreement. Even in regular staff meetings, good planning will help to create a better outcome. Tracking issues on a flipchart helps to keep discussions on course, and creates a trail of ideas. Written notes should always be circulated or posted afterwards.

All of these issues are pertinent to working with groups online as well.

Online Synchronous (meetings)

Once meetings occur online, it is critical to plan backward from the desired result, and to build steps that will help the group move through iterations of *gathering information and making sense of it*, and of *planning, acting and evaluating*.

Some online meetings will allow telephone discussion by everyone, but larger meetings will be limited to speakers only, so it is important to provide at least one easily accessed area for written questions and comments, and that the speakers monitor this and respond appropriately to issues which are raised. In GroupMind, there is a provision for comments to be gathered beside the SlideShow which is being presented, in order to simplify this process. (We have found that written comments are important even in small meetings where everyone can easily talk, because additional ideas are captured, and having issues written down greatly improves the memory and cohesion of the group.)

Online meetings benefit from having a clearly stated list of agenda items, from which participants can link to the next interactive tool. It is usually good to have an introductory area in which all participants can sign in, so everyone gets a sense of who is on the call, what is their location and/or represented organization. Sometimes an “ice-breaker” exercise is useful to help participants become used to seeing their combined responses, and to create a sense of fun and inclusion for the members.

Online Asynchronous (projects)

When meetings or projects are dispersed in both *space and time* the connections between participants are more tenuous, and must be supported with greater communication, clearer expectations, and frequent check-in processes.

Here, it is important that the facilitator builds a sense of connection and trust.

Depending on the type of project this could take one of two forms:

In large forums, this is mainly a function of inclusion – responding to individual posts, building themes, and encouraging further response (both from online comments and from back-channel emails or phone calls.)

In *work teams*, there can be a “water-cooler” or *café* discussion area, in which members are encouraged to share more informal ideas: jokes, personal interests, side conversations – in the same way that this would happen over time in an office environment.

It is helpful for a team to get **regular indications** of 1) what step we are working on now, and 2) what the next step will be. This should be done both on the site in a prominent place and by email clarification on a regular basis. It is helpful for a dispersed team to “celebrate” the conclusion of a step before moving to another. Recognize members’ contributions and make sure everyone knows what the outcome of each step has been.

Action lists are very helpful for keeping a sense of context and a sense of momentum.

Blended (Combining online work with real-time meetings)

An effective method for group projects is a blended approach in which asynchronous project work is supplemented with meetings (either by telephone or in-person.) The advantage to this approach is that connections are cemented by more interaction, and yet participants can work at their own pace within clear boundaries.

It is quite possible to have very **short meetings** every 7 – 12 days, which mainly consist of reviewing the work done so far, and dealing with any bottlenecks or need for additional resources. Care should be taken by the facilitator to not have the real time meeting be taken up with arguments or issues which can be addressed in the tools. Group time should be for quick review and decisions about changes or assignment of new tasks.

In all cases, where online work is involved and members are not together in a room, the facilitator has additional work to explicitly maintain ongoing connections and communication between the group members.

Models

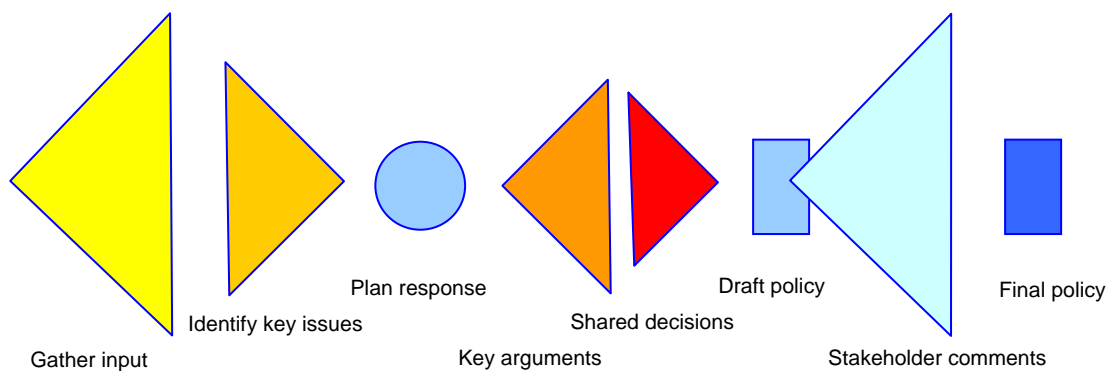
There are many models which can be helpful in working through group processes. Here we suggest only two, as theoretical constructs to help you visualize the flow of collaboration within a project or, indeed, within any one meeting.

Collaborative continuum. All the specific techniques can be viewed within a framework of what the overall steps in a collaborative process may be. Although your particular process may not involve all of the steps below, it is useful to think out how your group's work will fit on what we call the **Collaborative Continuum**:

1. **Gather Data**
2. **Analyze Data** (make sense of the material, categorize, prioritize, model the flow, etc.)
3. **Plan** (draft measures, elaborate processes, set strategies, build scenarios, develop a paper)
4. **Implement** (act on planning, assign tasks, deploy policies)
5. **Conclude or Evaluate** (gather feedback, revise policies, publish knowledge)

Rhythms of interaction. Another model which is useful for structuring facilitation is that of **Divergent → Convergent** iteration.

It is helpful to chart out group steps that alternate between gathering input and focusing on a summation, on priorities or on a decision. Visualize this as a rhythm moving back and forth between various versions of these input types, with planning or developing steps at appropriate points in between.



Use both models to help you think about the work you want your group to do. At what stage of the model are you *now*, and what are the different steps that will help your group gather shared information, plan an agreed outcome, and implement their findings?

Roles of the facilitator:

- To **create a space** in which creative group engagement can flower
- To **clarify themes** in a **discussion** -- especially where complicated arguments expand
- To **gauge** the **degree of agreement** around an issue or theme
- To **recognize** a participant's point, to **signal** that s/he has been heard and to make space for other members to speak
- To signal the **end of one phase** of a discussion/process and/or initiate another
- To **clarify** and confirm decisions or actions
- To **summarize** key points and **ensure accurate notes** are taken

Working collaboratively as a team requires special **clarity for processes** and setting certain **rules for interaction and conduct** within the team. A number of activities help to address the particular challenges of working collaboratively in a dispersed and culturally diverse context:

- **Clarify team roles.** Identify and establish clear roles and responsibilities within a team. These may change over time, but it helps greatly to be explicit about expectations of various members' responsibilities.
- **Set shared priorities.** Develop jointly shared group priorities in a smaller cohesive team and setting clear steps needed to reach the shared goal: When a group prioritizes a list of wants or issues, the outcome of this is *shared* need. These may change, of course, but they represent the group's shared assessment of where the critical attention needs to go now. Every member of the team feels as a significant part of creating the list of priorities. Similarly, when the team members participate in building the steps needed to reach the shared goal, and work on refining and clarifying these, there is a much stronger chance that these steps will be followed through, because they are shared and explicit; and thus the process will work because steps are detailed in relation to each other.
- **Encourage communication.** Use tools to automatically notify the team when there is a change to a key part of work: This keeps everyone engaged, and motivates continued progress. Do not assume that people will get your message with one email. Make your communication to the group redundant (through online postings, email messages, sometimes individual telephone calls.) The greater the dispersed nature of the group, the more important it is to over-communicate in order to build a sense of connection, trust and community.
- **Ensure working agreements.** Set team agreements for responding to communications from other members: turn-around times on responses to email and phone requests. Also, setting up agreements on giving/receiving direct feedback, since this is an important issue across cultures

- **Handle conflicts.** Develop a shared expectation for addressing disagreements or holes in thinking and establish agreed on methods for handling conflicts. Often, the facilitator will model a way of listening and not reacting, inquiring to get more information, and grounding the debate on issues rather than personalities, on concerns rather than positions.
- **Check assumptions.** Double-check definitions and inquire into the assumptions behind a statement. When decisions are made, it is helpful to double-check them for shared understanding of the criteria being used -- the definitions of the issues on the table, the way in which different members may be viewing a particular issue. This helps to bring issues into focus. In cases of disagreement or even when approaching a broader policy issue, it is often very instructive for everyone in the group to go through the process of clarifying what may be assumed to be common data or belief. This helps to ground a decision process in basing it on a shared pool of data.
- **Stakeholders.** Maintaining a relationship to other stakeholders (who are not a regular part of the team) can be the key to building up a transparent and trustful work environment, which will ultimately benefit the core team since it will get feedback on their differing positions from outside experts. Often, work teams can suffer from an internal focus (working on what they think is interesting, as opposed to checking what are the needs of the larger community.)

Planning and Follow up.

Consider that a great deal of the work of a meeting happens *before and after* the actual meeting. That is, the planning of the agenda, the decision on whom to invite, the “pre-meeting meetings” that inevitably set the stage for the issues and positions during the meeting, and the hard work of following up the actions that are agreed to.

Make sure that a reasonable cross-section of stakeholders has a say in these issues, to ensure the success of your project.

Deal with the major questions about a meeting or project: **What, Why, Who, When and Where.** (in online meetings, there is also the question of How, that is, what tools will be used to best drive to the expected outcome.)

Provide some mechanism to ensure that there is reasonable follow up for any planned implementation or distributed actions. Build in a *feedback survey* at the end of your work, so you can find out how your process was viewed by outside participants, or by your internal ‘customers’ (for whom you undertook the project.)

Methods

This is a review of some basic functions that a facilitator should call on. Many of these methods are supported by specific tools in GroupMind Express.

Ask questions, (to clarify positions, to bring out reasoning or assumptions, to tie conclusions to data, to provoke a thoughtful debate.)

Ask each member to respond to a key issue (In an in-room meeting, this can be going around the room. In a real-time but dispersed meeting, this might be assigning positions on a clock-face, and going around the clock. In an asynchronous group, this might be a survey or a period for response to a set of focal questions or themes.) The point is make sure everyone has a chance to give their ideas.

Ask to **brainstorm a list** of issues. (Clarify these for assumptions and definitions, perhaps categorize them, and then get the group to prioritize the extracted list.) Identify/**summarize key themes** in the discussion.

Ask for a **round of summary comments** on *one or two* key themes. This is a helpful way to involve the group in making sense of a previous step, such as a survey or a large discussion.

Separate differing threads of discussion. Hold off a tangential issue, or move it to its own discussion. It may be necessary to re-state key themes, and ask members to add key headlines to these.

Use a **parking lot** when appropriate – this is a method of recognizing an issue that needs attention, but not during this discussion. It can be listed on a flip chart, so that it is “parked” for later.

Develop a **survey**, so that all participants can see the combined results to a series of questions – include convergent questions that help to show how strong some issues are held by the group, or which of several possibilities is viewed as critical by them.

Categorize a large group of brainstormed issues, so the group can view a large list as an organized list, sorted by subject areas. For instance in working through a list of improvements, it may be helpful to sort the individual suggestions into categories, and then prioritize the categories, although the suggestions will still be important within those priorities.

Diagram a process or set of arguments, so that they make sense visually. A picture is worth many arguments about assumptions.

Use **voting or ranking** to develop a shared sense of the group's priorities. Often, people change their position once they see how their opinions fit within the whole. NOTE that it may be necessary to clarify the definitions of items on your list, especially once people see how others voted or interpreted. If there are duplicate issues, they

should be brought together, even after the vote. Once you have greater clarity and separation of definitions, have everyone vote again, this is usually satisfying and brings the group closer together on their shared views.

Set up an [action list](#), when appropriate. This ensures that there will be transparent follow up after a decision, which is often the most difficult part of a meeting. When there is a list to be updated which is visible to all, it can be quite motivating for those who are supposed to resolve or complete issues with “red lights” or low progress.

How to Ask Good Questions

At the core of facilitation online is the art of asking a good question. Questions frame the debate, bring out the nuances in unspoken concerns, and provoke the group to apply its collective intelligence to a specific issue.

General issues

- A good question means [framing an issue](#) so that people will feel encouraged to respond by thinking deeply and speaking from their knowledge.
- It means giving a clear [context](#) so the question can be understood with perspective. It means focusing on an [important issue](#) about which people have an interest.
- It means asking a [clear and specific](#) enough question so that participants are challenged to bring their experience and wisdom to the answer. It also means [not mixing separate issues](#) or confusing the audience.

Discussions

- Within a discussion (as well as in many other tools) a [good focal question](#) sets up members to think critically about the issue at hand, and provokes them to answer thoughtfully. Several examples:
 - *What specific issues might the U.S. be overlooking by its connection between de-funding Hamas as a terrorist organization and its desire to promote democracy in the Middle East?*
 - *Please list several separate ideas for improving the iPod, and give an example for each of how this change would improve its marketing position vs. its potential competitors.*
 - *If you had to re-write the policy that reduces world trade barriers, how would you address the issue of small farmers in Nigeria, France and Vietnam competing with corporate agriculture?*
- It might ask participants to frame their [answers as questions](#), such as “*What if*” or “*How can we*” so that others are encouraged to open to new possibilities in thinking.
- It may also suggest that participants frame their answers with a [headline](#) that makes the point. Then supporting argument or illustration can be added below this, but readers will clearly understand the argument as they scan the discussion.
- It may ask for [examples](#) or an illustration of the point, to ensure understanding or to provide data for debate.

Surveys

- In a survey, a good question poses a set of **specific conditions**, making it clearer and easier for the participant to agree or disagree. We like to state these in the emphatic positive and ask “To what extent do you agree with the following statements?” (Example: rather than ask *what do you think of Action A or Action B?* we suggest asking for agreement on a 5 or 7 point scale: *Action A meets our criteria for setting unambiguous standards of clinical care.* Then pose another specific issue for Action A: *We will meet our stated objectives within the time frame if we implement Action A.* This can be repeated for Action B.) In this way
- An **open-ended** question can then be used, at the end of such a section of questions, to ask *IF you rated any of these options as less than 4 on a scale of 5, what would we have to do differently to raise your rating?*
- **Ranking** questions should be used when you wish to force some issues to the top of a list, making people understand that there are trade-offs in priorities. (This would not be a good choice when all options are important, but need to be confidence checked. In this case, each issue should be rated on a Likert scale as to *How confident are you that this issue will effectively move us toward our goals?*)

Kinds of Questions

Focal question. Frame the issue to be addressed, focus the group on a specific task. Ask for a specific kind of response, where you have defined or provoked an issue. *What ideas do you have to improve the overall presentation of our value proposition? (Please state each idea separately.)*

Clarifying question. There are two major types – clarify **intent** or clarify **underlying assumption**.

Intent is to better understand the point the person is making, and to acknowledge or bring forward the contribution. **Assumption** is to (subtly) identify when a person is jumping to a conclusion, where the group needs to understand the background or reasoning. It can also help to get other members to state their assumptions so that the discussion can be held on the basis of shared data.

1) *David, are you arguing for developing a new standard to measure just the compliance of each region with the X policy? Is that right?*

2) *Laura, you are saying that Max’s draft would lose our position at the conference. Can you tell us how you arrived at that opinion?*

Distinguishing question. When an issue or debate has several parts, it is important to separate these into “chunks.” Help the group to see different pieces, and address each, rather than muddled and overlap the issues. *Does it seem that we are talking here about 2 parts of this problem? Could it be we should address the water quality and the community’s response to hygiene issues?*

Uncovering question. There are times when the facilitator needs to state the obvious about an unspoken dynamic in the group, as when the group is reacting to – but

avoiding talking about – a painful reality or a stakeholder’s dominant position. It may also be a call to discuss the group’s process rather than the technical subject at hand. *Does it seem to anyone that we are avoiding the issue of the concern over continued funding of this project? I wonder if there is an implied threat in the last reaction we received from the Secretary’s delegation to our suggestions. What do you all think?* Another way to say this: *does anyone else have a sense that there is an elephant in the corner of our living room? Can anyone tell me if they are feeling uncomfortable with what we are doing?*

People and Culture Issues

From an April 2004 issue of *IT Management*. Article by Drew Robb

Andreas Antonopoulos, a principal analyst for Nemertes Research LLC in New York City, is in the midst of a survey about uses of extranets. Interestingly enough, the issues are not technological. The primary barriers, it seems, are **process and culture**. Seventy-five percent of the IT executives surveyed said that 'people issues' were more important than technology in determining the success or failure of an extranet. "The most important problems companies experience when deploying extranets are related to the changes required in the business process, and the user acceptance of those changes," Antonopoulos continues. "Some companies have experienced cultural resistance to the changes that are perceived as disruptive by the user population."

Strategy First

Creating an extranet that people will actually use begins with an essential first step -- obtaining *broad agreement from all interested parties* on its purpose and the strategy to be followed to achieve that purpose. This must involve both a reason for the sponsors to set up the portal, as well as a benefit for the users to participate in it. It is not enough to assume that the purpose is so obvious that it doesn't need to be stated." Everything needs to start with a purpose." says Dr. Bill Bruck, Q2Learning's founder and chief architect. "Yet in every project I have seen, people assume that they know what the purpose is and that everyone else has the same idea."

Planning Guide for Structuring Collaboration

Think through these questions:

1. **Outcomes.** What are the key outcomes you want to achieve from the collaboration process? Besides the **actual deliverable** (policy, report, recommendations, finalized strategy, agreement by many governments on key principles), what **group result** do you wish for (clear areas of agreement, alignment of differing groups regarding shared objectives, dissemination and ownership of a set of standards or policies, resolution of conflicting interpretations, etc.)
2. **Stakeholders.** Who needs to be included in the collaboration process? Who will not need to participate, but will have a strong interest in the outcome of your work?
3. **Positions.** Can you draw a map of the various positions that you anticipate, and what their underlying interests are?
4. **Pre-work.** What groundwork can be set ahead of time? (Pre reading, conducting a survey of attitudes and critical needs, arranging for sponsorship, gathering a core team who will influence the overall group.)
5. **Steps.** Think through the steps that might be helpful in moving the group along a process of divergent and convergent steps. Try to think about this from their **different points of view** rather than from what you assume. Again, it may be helpful to draw this out as a map. Allow time between the steps, especially if you are planning an asynchronous event – not only do people need to find time to pay attention to your issue, they also will benefit from talking to others in their peer groups so that they digest the issues that are raised in your collaboration.
6. **Feedback.** Once you have an outline of your plan, ask for critiques from some colleagues who may have a different
7. **Communicate.** Make sure that you thoroughly communicate, before, during and after your event. Use headlines, use crisp summaries. Be specific about what you want people to do. Be as brief as possible, but make sure cut out jargon, abbreviations or unclear statements from your messages.

Addenda

1. Avoiding Online Conflict

By Michelle Moussou, with Nancy White, May 2004

From www.fullcirc.com (used with permission)

Diverse opinions are critical to constructive dialog. Diversity enriches a group. But there is a line between constructive critical thinking and behavior which demeans individuals and potentially destroys communities. It is a fine line with no obvious answer for a facilitator. The goal of this piece is to think about how to support diverse and divergent thinking while reducing the likelihood of personal conflict and group destruction. And this conflict often arises due to misunderstanding. So it is about conflict between people, not between ideas. This is an important distinction!

Before we discuss how to avoid online conflict, there are five key attributes of online communication to take into consideration:

- **Lack of physical communication cues** - We cannot see or hear the huge range of non-verbal cues we use during the course of conversation to discern if our audience is understanding, agreeing, disagreeing, getting uncomfortable or opening up. In cyberspace, we must explicitly ask for this information.
- **Potential impersonality of the medium (distance)** - Sometimes, when communicating online people may lose some of their inhibitions and say things they would not say offline. Social norms are less clear and more open to individual interpretation. Setting norms that we agree to use together can control this loss of inhibition.
- **Asynchronicity affects the way we experience and feel about messages** - When you have time to think about your response, you may be more thoughtful or you may let issues build up and get blown out of proportion. In online interactions, each of us may interpret periods of silence very differently. These subtle, unspoken issues can cloud communication.
- **Public vs. private spaces and perceptions** - People have different tolerances of what they think should be "public" or "private." These differences need to be taken into account when choosing to deal with issues in public and/or private spaces.
- **Limitations of writing and reading** - We are not all poets and most of us lead busy lives. Our inattention to detail in writing and our speed reading through topics can lead to misinterpretations. Be thorough. Be explicit.

Four Tips to Avoid Online Misunderstandings

1) Making "I" statements, not "You" statements

'I' statements are used when we feel strongly about something and we want the other person to be aware of how we feel. Use these statements instead of telling the other person what you would like them to do or not do. *"I would be more comfortable if you first stated your personal goals about the plan."* vs. *"You didn't state your agenda and confused the rest of us."*

'I' statements present our case without causing defensiveness in the other person. The effective 'I' statement includes three parts. 'When I see/hear (behavior), I feel (feeling). What I

would really like is (what is wanted)".

Example: *'When I see that my posts are not being acknowledged, I feel ignored. What I would really like is to have feedback on my input.'*

2) Checking assumptions

Assumptions are our interpretations of what we hear or read. They are the result of our trying to fill in information that is missing. Assumptions are almost always present. They are based on our own personal attitudes and beliefs. Checking assumptions is very important. Ask. 'In reading your statement, I am assuming that... Is that so?'

3) Actively "listening"/Reading

Building rapport with another depends on the quality of our attention during the act of communicating. Remember that the writer cannot see us nodding our heads or hear us saying "umm... hmmm."

Communication occurs at different levels. For messages to be accurately received every level needs to be acknowledged and understood.

- **Information**

As a speaker or writer, be as informative as possible. Provide background and details. As a listener or reader, ask open questions that help the other expand on the subject. Ask specific questions to get more details. Reflect back what you heard to check for accuracy.

- **Feelings**

Feelings are an integral part of our being. In some cultures, expression of feelings is discouraged, especially negative feelings. It is easier in face-to-face situations to listen to and pick up feelings. Visual clues and voice tones tend to give away signs that may be more easily suppressed when communicating in writing. As a speaker, or writer, make sure to express your feelings when you sense that they are 'nudging' you, using the 'I' statements.

As a listener, or reader, make sure to acknowledge those feelings when they are expressed. If feelings are not openly expressed but you sense something may be present, check it out, remembering that this is an assumption on your part. *'I am sensing that you may be feeling upset. Is that so?'* This may give you more information, but remember some people may not admit to negative feelings even if you ask.

4) Acknowledging perspectives

People's perceptions of reality can be very different and individualistic. We need to recognize that the other person believes as strongly as we do about the history of the events even when our views of what may have happened are quite different. These different personal perspectives are equally valid. We need to start by respecting the other person's perspective, discuss our views and come to a useful agreement.

When describing an event, say "From my perspective ..." This describes what was real for you without devaluing someone else's point of view. Everyone can contribute from his/her own perspective, adding to the richness of the interaction.

Conflicts Happen

Conflicts are great opportunities for learning and growth. The stronger the emotion, the tighter the impasse, the larger the opportunity for learning about ourselves. Questions to ask yourself: what causes me to have strong reactions (usually hurt or anger)? When / where and with whom does it frequently happen?

For resolution to occur there needs to be a sincere desire by both parties to reach a win-win solution, without needing to prove right or wrong. This is the time to drop judgment, blame and defensiveness and open up the possibility of being creative, of finding new ways to respond, instead of reacting. This is the time to be adventurous, inquisitive, curious, playful, and courageous.

Some Questions

- As facilitators, what do we have to do to help the energy behind negative behaviors emerge more in support of the group, rather than detracting from the group?
- How do we enable the emergence of potentially important insights and issues from behind what we experience as the negative behaviors?
- How do we balance that tightrope between control and emergence, where conflict stimulates participation, insight and creativity, but may also be chasing away some participants who do not choose or know how to operate in that environment?
- How do we form group competency at conflict resolution?
- How do we tell people something they are doing is really bothering us?
- How do we know when to simply act in an authoritarian role to stop what has become "destructive" behavior?

These are questions with no single right answer, but many paths for exploration. Take time to think and talk about them.

Resources:

- [Online Interaction: Social Argument](#) compiled by M C Morgan, Dept. of English, Bemidji State University.
 - [Dispute Resolution And The Global Management Of Customers' Complaints: How Can ODR Techniques Be Responsive To Different Social And Cultural Environments?](#)
 - [John Suler's great article The Online Disinhibition Effect](#)
 - [Conflict in Cyberspace: How to Resolve Conflict Online](#), by Kali Munro, M.Ed., 2002
 - [A Netizen's Guide to Flame Warriors - Mike Reed](#) - a little humor to help the situation.
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GroupMind Design Wizard

This is a thinking aid, intended to help identify steps, functions and tools that should be involved to build an effective group process. It provides first, some overall areas of planning, then drills in further detail into actions within a meeting or a project. It is certainly not an exhaustive list; please add additional relevant options or decision trees.

1. Is this a **meeting** or an on-going **project**?
2. Clarify for yourself **what problem or opportunity** you intend to address.
3. What is the desired **outcome** of this meeting/project?
 - a. Deciding between several alternatives
 - b. Alignment of a larger group around key issues
 - c. Assign clear next steps with owners and dates
 - d. Airing a difficult issue
 - e. Learn from different things we are doing
 - f. Manage a change which is about to get underway
 - g. Formalize agreement on a path forward
 - h. Involve/evangelize an outside group (partners, customers, sponsors)
4. What is the desired **process** of this meeting/project?
 - a. Gather input from diverse group of stakeholders
 - b. Develop & focus down to an agreed upon set of priorities
 - c. Install & move a project to a set of clear sub-tasks
 - d. Present new information to a group and get them to digest it
 - e. Make a decision from several divergent scenarios
 - f. Decide what NOT to do
 - g. Work together to fashion a creative solution or write-up for an issue
 - h. Gather improvement data and suggest themes to pursue
5. How many **people** should be involved? From which groups?
 - a. Directly affected departments
 - b. Senior management sponsors
 - c. Other business units or organizations who have an interest
 - d. Up- or down-stream value chain members
 - e. Customers

6. What is the **time** frame?
 - a. 1 session
 - b. Several days
 - c. 1 week
 - d. 3 weeks
 - e. Several discrete meetings
 - f. Ongoing

7. What **tasks** will be involved?
 - a. Large meeting with presentations
 - b. Group planning
 - c. Setting up a community of practice
 - d. Assigning and monitoring project tasks
 - e. Analyzing issues by applying criteria
 - f. Sharing documents
 - g. Identifying key issues and generating viable solutions
 - h. Separate break-out spaces for sub-groups
 - i. Linking a set of higher level initiatives/themes to more detailed work
 - j. Ongoing publishing of information by various separate teams

8. How will the **results** of this meeting or project be **published** to a wider audience?
 - a. Summary communication
 - b. Formal report
 - c. Ongoing status updates
 - d. One of a linked set of milestones
 - e. Roll-out of programs:
 - i. Training
 - ii. Initiatives
 - iii. Metrics
 - f. Continued gathering of input from a large group
 - g. Continued work on parts of tasks by small group(s)
 - h. Repeated similar sessions with other stakeholders

[More detail on next page...]

For a meeting:

1. What should we cover at the meeting itself?
2. Who do we need to hear from?
3. What are the most pressing issues that need to be addressed?
4. What data should we gather ahead of time to help set the context:
 - a. List of issues
 - b. Set of possible solutions
 - c. Group ratings of:
 - i. Satisfaction
 - ii. Confidence in a particular direction
 - iii. Discrepancy between what is supposed to be done, and what actually gets done
 - iv. Organizational climate
 - v. Improvement in quality or efficiency
5. What data should be shared with everyone beforehand?
6. How will feedback or replies to the presentations be processed?
7. Should there be break-out groups?
 - a. How will their work be reported back?
 - b. How do they identify dependencies to other groups
 - c. Can others comment on their recommendations?
8. Are there multiple themes within the group work?
9. Are there various scenarios that will be considered?
10. How do we gather group input within themes or sections?
 - a. Who should participate in which sections?
11. Should there be a “game” format, to encourage participation and diversity of material?

For a project:

1. Who lays out the overall purpose and objectives?
2. Are there several, equally important objectives?
3. Should team members add to or critique these objectives?
4. Is there a cause-and-effect diagram, or a process-flow diagram that should be fully understood by the entire team, relative to the project purpose?
5. Does each top-level objective have a team assigned to it?
6. Does each top-level objective have a sub-list of key tasks or objectives?
7. Are deliverables assigned to each logical chunk of this project?
8. Are appropriate owners assigned to each objective or task?
9. Should sub tasks require an indication of which large objective they support?
10. Are due dates and work-flow positions assigned, as appropriate, to tasks?
11. Is there a way to keep all members updated on the status of
 - a. Main objectives
 - b. Individual tasks within sub-teams
 - c. Important changes in status

- d. Approaching due dates
- e. Critical bottlenecks
- 12. Can members brainstorm and prioritize on barriers and solution sets?
- 13. Is there a way to look at a set of issues “through several sets of lenses”?
- 14. Can members record issues and discussions associated with individual objectives?
- 15. Can members easily see what new material has been added to their workspace?
- 16. Do key goals have space for targets and actual performance indicators?
- 17. Should goals or measures be balanced against a model (i.e., Balanced Scorecard?)
- 18. Can measures have regular assessments built-in to the monitoring process?

Possible Analysis Modes:

1. Develop and prioritize a set of issues
2. Pose a set of pros and cons
3. Extract themes or affinity groups from data
4. Develop a set of decision criteria
5. Analyze key issues/themes by multiple criteria
6. Arrive at a root cause
7. Understand and apply several risk factors
8. Build several scenario responses
9. Assess competence or confidence across several multi-item scales.

What are your modes?

- *(what kind of decision process might be appropriate?)*
 - *(how do you want your audience to compare or rate the alternatives you generate?)*
 - *(how will your outcomes be digested by the audience?)*
- (do you have follow-up steps ready?)*

Frequently Asked Questions about Group Collaboration and GroupMind tools.

How can I use these tools?

GroupMind tools help your team to *communicate across boundaries*, to *stay in touch about team projects*, to *gather information from various stakeholders*, to *involve the right people in planning*.

How do people usually start working online?

Organizations usually begin such work with either a survey, or an online meeting, where everyone can immediately see the combined results. Sometimes both of these, in sequence. This is an effective way of getting everyone on the same page, and identifying the main issues before a meeting or project.

Is it hard to get a site started?

You use a menu. Start with one simple step, like a survey. Choose which kind of question from a list, then write in the question. You can edit or change locations at any time. Set up folders to organize work areas, just like directories on your computer. More steps can be built as the team gets comfortable being online.

What's different about these tools from WebEx or a Bulletin Board?

1. You can build tools into an agenda. Push a button and move your data to the next step (from brainstorming to voting to an action list.) 2. We have convergent tools in addition to divergent ones. 3. These tools help your team gather information, plan with it, and track the actions after the decisions.

Are there some planning steps already set up?

You can select from a *menu of built-in templates*, if you don't want to set up your tools from scratch. The template menu helps you determine what sort of survey or meeting or decision process you might want to use. One button can create a folder that already contains a series of steps laid out as a problem-solving agenda. You can then review these, and change them however you wish (edit a question, change the order of the steps, add an additional vote, etc.)

How would a meeting work?

An online meeting involves a group dialing into a telephone conference line and entering a website (using individual logins.) Typically, one or two leaders present some material using the SlideShow tool to control a series of slides, while the group listens and enters its questions and comments in a Discussion.

Sometimes the group votes on a list of issues, and the leaders discuss the next steps that will occur with the top priorities.

Participants say repeatedly that they like being able to see everyone's responses in a "level playing field", rather than just hearing one or two brave (or dominating) souls speak up and give their comments.

What makes it “collaboration” rather than just another meeting?

Interaction. Input from a wide group of stakeholders. Focusing the collective intelligence of the group on results. Building agreement, building in action. Shared practices. Immediate feedback.

How does group input help?

By including interaction in a group meeting, teams get everyone involved, find that they raise issues quickly, and are able to build alignment across a wide group of players. Because people don't have to travel, more and shorter meetings can help to *raise needed issues quickly* and *make decisions with wide input*. This helps to make organizations more agile, and responsive to various parts of the value chain.

What about access to the site from various locations? Bandwidth?

Only a browser is needed. People can easily access the site, even with a dial-up modem. This means material can be shared by managers who are traveling, by members in any country, and by any customers you wish. If someone can't make the meeting, the material is there for their review at a later point.

Don't we complicate things by getting a lot of people giving input?

A key issue in organizations today is alignment – of those who have to get the work done, of managers from various functions and business units, of different parts of your value chain. When group members share the same material, and can see their own comments within the context of differing viewpoints, they are much more likely to understand and not resist the needed changes that are discussed. They are part of the solution.

[It is better to gather key input for a course correction from those who will have to implement the direction, than to set a course of action and then find out what doesn't work from problems in implementation and from resistance.]

What are the factors that contribute to success in collaboration?

See our *Lessons Learned* document. Work on issues important to all. Start simply, be very clear in your objectives and the steps in the process. Make sure participants see the results of their efforts. Provide opportunity for feedback.

Can I easily use a model or previous idea for a process in the online world?

Absolutely! It helps people to have a recognizable process. With GroupMind Express, it is easy to turn your model into a clickable map, and tie various stages of your process to specific tools.

Why do you call your tool GroupMind Express?

We believe that the GroupMind is a vast, mainly untapped resource in most organizations. Because our tools build on the combined results of the group's thinking, this resource becomes actively involved in planning. This accelerates the intelligence and agility your group uses to solve your business issues.

What kinds of functions do you cover with your tools?

Surveys, discussions, shared files, controlling power point presentations, project action lists, brainstorming, ranking priorities, issues analysis with criteria, dashboards, auto-notification, content publishing, building interactive websites.