

Affinity Diagram

Is...

A tool for organizing brainstormed lists into like categories—things that have an affinity for each other.

Use it to...

Involve an entire group in organizing and consolidating many ideas.

Applications

Developing an affinity diagram serves to:

- Help articulate elements of a vision
- Organize ideas for problem solving
- Group ideas into categories before multivoting
- Organize statements from interviews or focus groups

How to do it

The affinity process has six steps, which teams can modify to suit their purpose.

1. Use brainstorming to generate a list of ideas. Have people write ideas on sticky notes. The ideas should be concise and written clearly but large enough so that someone standing several feet away can read the ideas.
2. After brainstorming, have people post their notes randomly on a large sheet of paper.
3. Instruct people to start sorting the notes into groups or categories. This is a silent activity, so there shouldn't be any talking during the categorization process. Anyone can move a note into any category. Teams can move notes from category to category—it's OK to move them around several times until a category that makes sense to the whole group emerges. Place orphans (single notes unlike any others) off to the side.
4. Once there appears to be general agreement among the participants about the categories, allow members to start talking.
5. Finalize the categories—discussion may change some of the initial groupings.

6. As a group, write a succinct, concrete phrase that captures the theme or central idea for each cluster of ideas. Write this theme on a header card (a larger sticky note you place immediately above the cluster).

Tips for Creating Successful Affinity Diagrams

- Work in small groups (five or six people).
- The facilitator may need to give a few gentle reminders to remain silent. (Not being able to talk during the categorization step may frustrate some people.)
- The emergence of a group-defined organizational structure is what makes this process powerful. Random placement of the notes on the chart paper followed by the team working together to group ideas by categories as they emerge prevents people from assuming they already know the answers.
- Reassure participants that this is an opportunity for people who are not as comfortable talking to really participate on an equal basis with those who are more verbally confident.

Modification

Teams can use affinity diagrams to analyze any language data, such as interview or focus group notes. In those cases, teams select the statements for the affinity exercise from the notes or transcripts, not from a brainstorm. To do this well, first identify the key questions you want answered. Then have team members go through the notes or transcripts and highlight any statements they think relate to the key question. Transcribe these statements onto sticky notes and begin the affinity process.

Source: *The Handbook for SMART School Teams (Second Edition): Revitalizing Best Practices for Collaboration*, pages 113 and 116.

