

Creative Group Discussions

All groups have discussions. In some groups, the discussions are lively and interesting, with everyone sharing ideas and having fun as well as accomplishing the task they are discussing. Other groups have discussions that are heavy and burdensome for the leader and no fun for the group. What makes the difference between this “high flying” and “lead balloon” approach?

Why Do Groups Have Discussions?

Most groups set their goals and decide how the group will go about meeting those goals through group discussion, allowing more members to participate in the decision. If you have more people participating, then you will, theoretically, have more creative thinking and can generate choices for problem solving or group direction.

How Does Discussion Help the Group?

Group members usually learn how other members think, what concerns they have, and what directions they feel are important from group discussions. Group members are more committed to decisions made together if they have shared in a discussion. If the group is open to hearing all sides, a discussion encourages informed decisions.

What Causes Those “Lead Balloons”?

1. **Poor Presentation of Problem.** If the problem sounds boring, negative or favors one solution, people respond negatively. “We’ve been having such poor attendance, maybe we should not meet for a couple of months.”
2. **Lack of Knowledge.** If no one knows enough about the subject or there is little interest, it’s hard to have a good discussion.

3. **Ideas Rejected.** Some groups habitually reject ideas; that often causes members to fear criticism. If you brainstorm a lot of ideas before beginning to judge them, group members will feel free to participate.
4. **Size of Group.** If the group is large, some members won’t speak up. They may feel their ideas are silly, won’t be welcome or are shy about talking in front of people. Some people need time to think about how they feel and can’t decide things immediately. This may mean that just a few people will dominate the discussion.
5. **Arrangement of Group.** Group arrangement can make a difference. It is usually easier to discuss things if you can see the other members of the group. If the leader is standing behind a table with the group seated in rows, it is more difficult for the group to discuss freely.
6. **Apathy.** Sometimes people “go along” with what the group is discussing just to avoid problems. They don’t like to see people upset, so they choose what they think they should favor. This can lead to the whole group continuing a project they don’t want to do.

How to Lead High Flying Discussions

Present the problem in a positive way, without offering any suggestions for the solution to the problem. “We have been having a small attendance lately. What can we do about it?”

Choose discussion topics that are familiar. If a topic that needs to be discussed is unfamiliar, then provide background when you present the problem.

If the group is often negative, use methods of discussion included in Creative Group Discussion Activities that have rules that avoid

making judgments on suggestions until later in the decision making process.

If the group is large, use methods of discussion included in Creative Group Discussion Activities that break the group into small groups or have people work individually. Allow time for people to respond. Sometimes you need to even postpone the discussion to a later meeting.

Arrange the group so eye contact is possible. If the group is small, a circle that includes the leader is best. If the group is large, make some decisions in small circles and then share in the whole group.

If the group tends to go along with decisions but not want to work, set up the work plan in the same meeting, deciding who will do what and when. Then, if no one wants to do it, it will be apparent right away it was a poor group decision.

Group Discussion Statements

There are many types of statements that group members make when they have a discussion. When members recognize the types of statements that are part of a discussion, they can choose statements that are helpful. Most of us have used these types of statements in our group discussions instinctively but may find them more useful if we understand how they help a group.

1. **Input Statements** may provide:
 - Factual information: “We had 26 requests for service last week.”
 - Opinions: “We can’t fill that many.” “We are getting too much publicity.”
 - Definition of terms: “We don’t consider that a request has been made until we receive a deposit.”
 - Action proposals or suggestions: “Let’s work out a list of priorities, so we can decide which orders to fill.”

Input statements may deal with an external problem, the way the group works or relationships among group members.

2. **Orienting Statements** help group members agree on the answer to this question: “If this discussion is successful, what will we have accomplished when we finish?” Orienting responses will help members focus on common goals – “Would you help me relate your comment to our topic?”
3. **Summarizing Statements** describe the issues on which members agree and disagree. Summaries are especially helpful if recorded publicly on a blackboard or a pad of newsprint.
4. **Clarifying Statements** help the group understand a member’s contribution. Such statements include paraphrasing and giving examples.
5. **Procedural Statements** deal with the group methods and include the amount of time given to various agenda items, the methods used in analyzing a problem, and the size and divisions of subgroups.
6. **Surveying Statements** are made to learn each member’s reaction to a summary statement. They include testing for agreement and polling the group.
7. **Process Check Statements** are statements that invite the group to examine and discuss the way it is working. A group may be helped to examine its lack of progress by considering danger signs such as nit-picking, jumping from topic to topic without reaching decisions, carrying on private conversations during meetings, and attacking ideas before they are fully described.
8. **Climate Building Statements** establish a friendly atmosphere, making it easier for silent members to participate.

Creative Group Discussion Activities

Everyone will enjoy the group more if they take part. Good group discussion can ensure this. There are many methods to help all members participate in the discussion and add to the alternatives the group can consider. These are included in the supplements.

- A. Brainstorming – a method for producing a lot of ideas without judging them.
- B. Brain Drain – similar to brainstorming, but a competition between two smaller groups to produce a lot more ideas.
- C. Nominal Group Technique – individuals in the group give ideas that are compiled and then rated by each person in the group, using a point system.
- D. Quick Discussion Techniques – Several different techniques for having discussions in a short time period.
- E. The Futures Wheel – helps group members think systematically about the consequences of a future situation.
- F. Open-ended Statements – unfinished sentences that group members complete by themselves and then share in a discussion.
- G. Idea Search – a way for individuals to look over an idea carefully, trying to discover many different angles or ways to see it.

Setting Group Goals

One measure of group effectiveness is how well a group accomplishes its goals. Initially, all groups were established to satisfy the members' common need or to pursue a common cause. But, as time passes, group members frequently lose sight of their goals.

Groups are always changing. If the group fails to set new goals regularly, it will dwindle down and end.

Some signals that a group may be stagnating are:

- 1. Group has the same leadership – no one else wants to be president or leader.
- 2. There is no effort to get new members.
- 3. The same people do the same things.
- 4. The group has the same events and activities with decreasing interest shown by members.

Group discussion can be used to set goals and decide which activities the group will pursue. Using methods that include all members and generate many ideas will help the group be more creative. It can then select a few ideas toward which to work. This will help the group stay goal-oriented.

Brainstorming

Purpose

Brainstorming is a method used to generate an idea list from a group in a short period of time. It is designed to encourage participation by all members. This method usually produces creative, liberated new ideas useful in solving the problem or issue at hand. Goal: Produce a quantity of ideas.

Process

1. Choose recorder to write ideas generated on newsprint.
2. Set time limit or maximum number of items before you begin.
3. Present topic clearly. Write it on newsprint so all members can see. Give available background information.
4. Ask people to offer ideas as rapidly as they can. May ask for clarification, if idea not understood by group.

RULE: No idea can be judged, discussed or rejected.

5. Make sure group members understand that ideas will be evaluated after brainstorming is finished.
6. Write down on newsprint all ideas presented. Write word for word if possible.
7. Move rapidly from one idea to another.
8. To encourage group participation take only one idea from each person. This is

especially important if one or two people are dominating the idea sharing.

9. Evaluate ideas, prioritize, and return to brainstorming if more ideas are needed.
10. Proceed with the decision making task.

Summary Comments: Brainstorming with a group releases many ideas in a way that seems to spark other thoughts. The non-judgmental gathering of ideas breaks down barriers among people and avoids blocks such as “We’ve tried that before...It didn’t work,” etc.

Brain Drain

Purpose

Brain drain is an effective method for helping groups learn how to use their own resources in a very short time. Brain drain promotes controlled competition between groups. This competition encourages individuals to think beyond their usual way of thinking and come up with more creative ideas.

Process

- Select one goal or problem statement.
- Write it clearly so that everyone may read it. Check to make sure that everyone understands the question or statement.
- Break into small groups (no more than seven per group).
- Each group receives papers/pens and selects a recorder.

STOP Find out which group has the most ideas.

- Each group is given one more minute (DON’T REPEAT YOUR IDEAS) to continue finding new ideas. Groups are encouraged to beat their record.

STOP Find out which group now has the most ideas.

- Each group is given one more minute.

STOP Find out which group has the most ideas.

Now add up all the ideas from all the groups. Each group is then asked to report on its ideas. In three minutes the total group has arrived at _____ ideas. Positive reinforcement should be given to the total group for finding so many creative ideas.

A group leader can use this technique to help a group in problem solving and creating alternative ideas for solutions.

The next step is to sift through the ideas to find which ones are feasible alternatives.

Nominal Group Technique

Purpose

To obtain many ideas from several people on a problem/issue in a structured format.

Process

This technique is a structured variation of small group discussion methods. The process prevents the domination of discussion by a single person, encourages the more passive persons to participate and results in a set of prioritized solutions or recommendations.

1. State an open-ended task (e.g., “What are some ways we could encourage employees to carpool?”).
2. Have each person spend several minutes in silence individually brainstorming all the possible ideas they can generate, and jot these ideas down.
3. Have the groups collect the ideas by sharing ideas one person at a time. Record

them on a flipchart. No criticism, but clarification to questions is encouraged as response.

4. Then have each individually evaluate and rank the ideas, awarding points for the last five. The best idea gets 5 points, the next best 4 points, etc.
5. Tabulate points within the group and prepare a group report on the ideas receiving the highest score.
6. Allow time for brief group presentations.

Quick Discussion Techniques

Purpose

To create an opportunity for active participation even in very large meetings by scheduling a brief discussion period.

Process

Ask people in assembly to pair up with someone next to them.

Variation 1: In two minutes each they are to talk about the most important idea that has been expressed and what action the organization might take in relation to it. While one person talks, the other should just listen.

Variation 2: Instead of alternating as talkers and listeners, allow for four minutes of dialog. (Optional: announce when two minutes are up and remind pairs to give partners equal time.)

Variation 3: Combine previous two versions. Spend one minute apiece talking as in #1 and two minutes in dialog as in #2.

Other Ideas for Providing Active Participation Under a Tight Time Schedule

- Request single sentence comments.
- Conduct survey through show of hands. Establish core groups (5-10) who work together and meet periodically during program.
- Select discussion questions to be precise without constraining.
- Identify discussion leaders to help small groups focus.

The Futures Wheel

Purpose

This activity helps group members assess the consequences of a future event or situation. It is especially useful in sharing a common understanding of what may be a preferable future.

Process

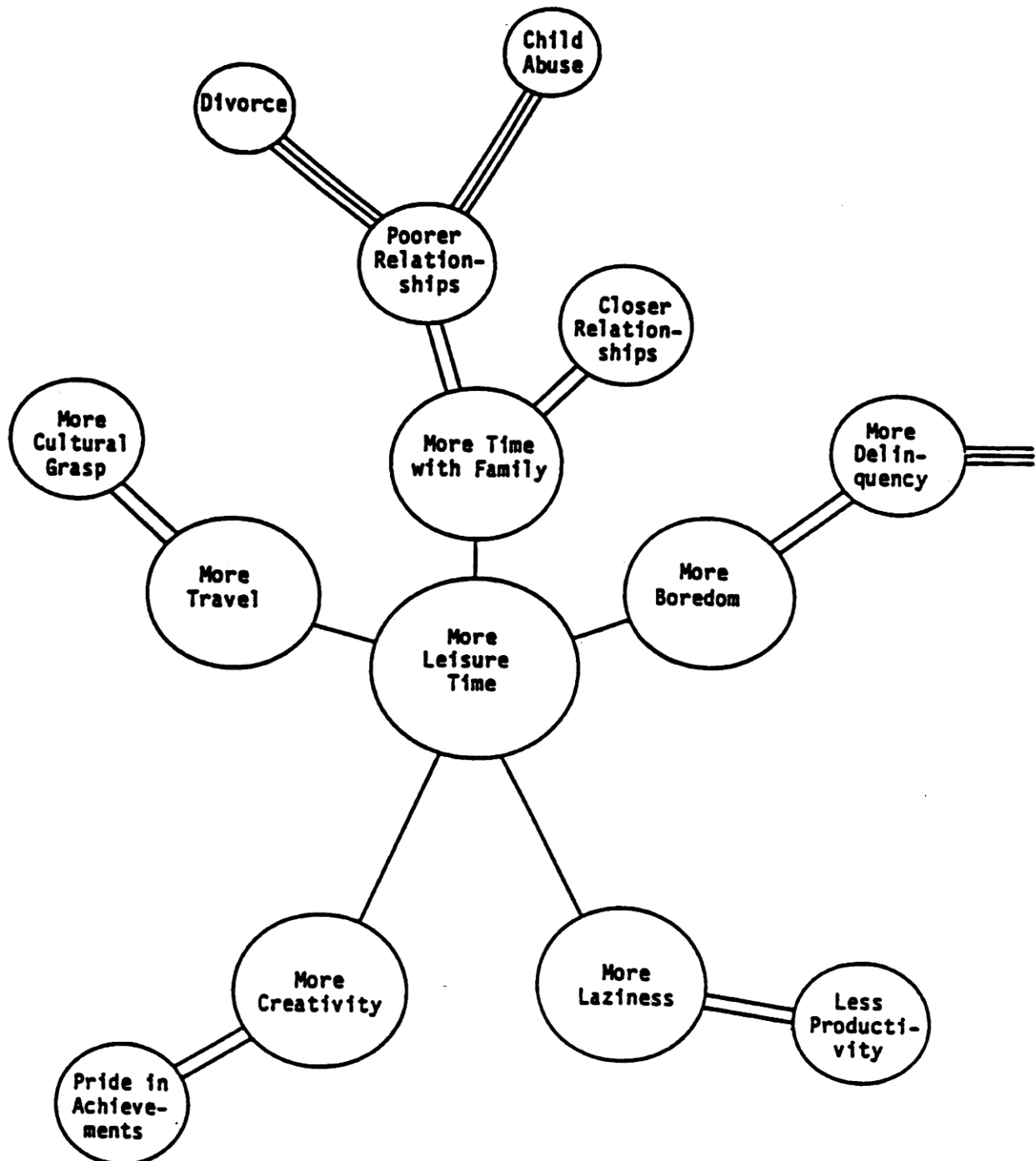
1. Discuss the need to understand the implications of a future event.
2. Ask the group to select an image, trend idea or event and write the word in the center of the page of newsprint.
3. Use brainstorming to generate (primary) consequences directly associated with the event and write them down at the end of lines drawn outward from the center.
4. Continue brainstorming listing now consequences of the primary events.
5. Continue with identifying consequences of the secondary events.
6. Display futures wheel(s) and report to large group if applicable.

Variation – Cause/Effect Relationships

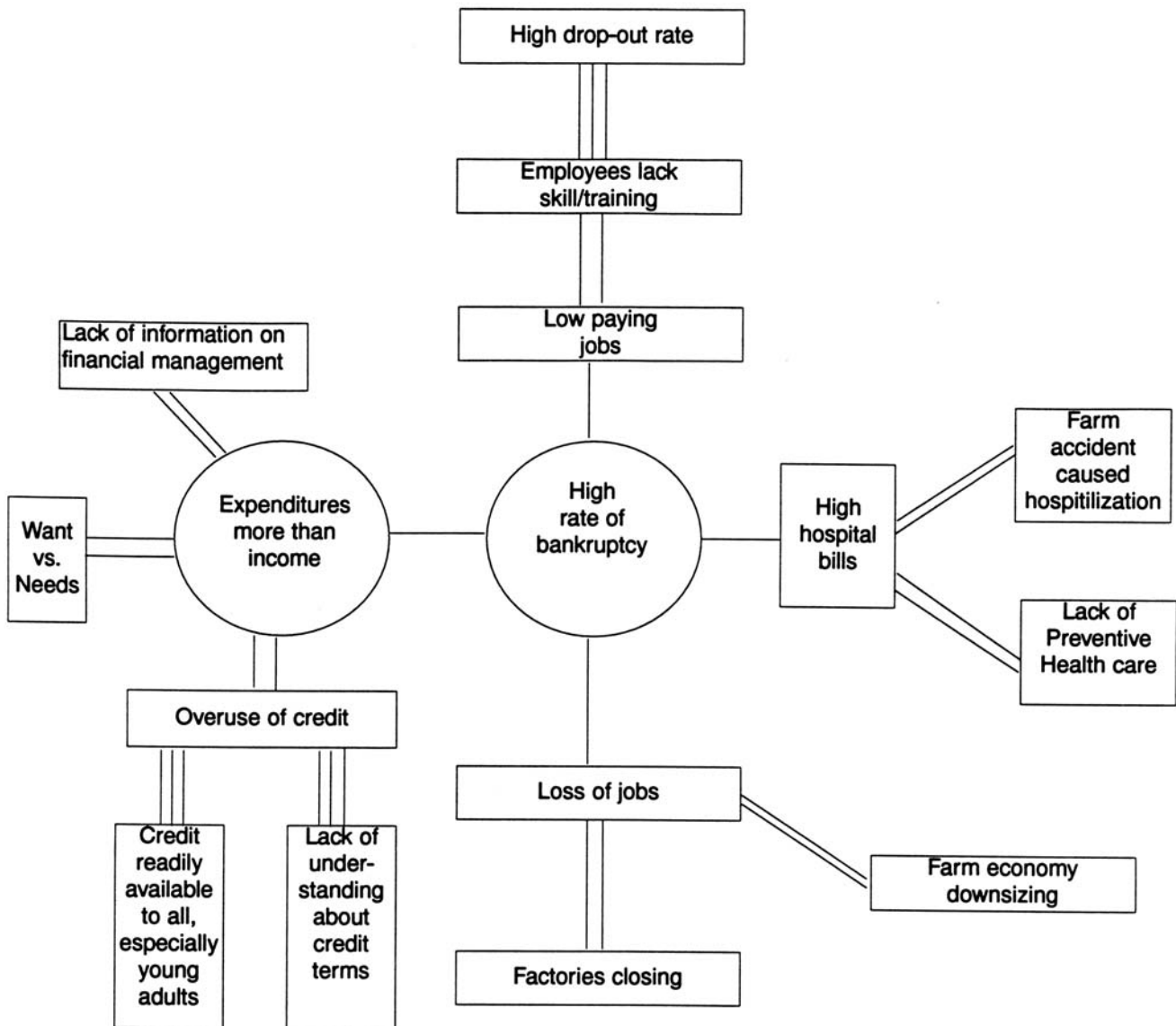
In the program planning process, it may be more beneficial to brainstorm cause/effect

relationships rather than consequences of an event. Discussing “What caused this effect?” “What are the secondary causes,” etc., may help the group to decide at which point intervention (education) would be most effective. (See example.)

Future/Consequences



Cause/Effect Relationships



Open-Ended Statements

Purpose

Open-ended statements are unfinished sentences that help individuals reveal and explore their attitudes, beliefs, actions, convictions, interests, goals, and purposes.

Process

1. Develop a list of unfinished sentences that relate to the goals and values of the topic under study. Eight to twelve statements work well. Statements can often be in pairs – what you like and don't like – but the last statement or two on the page should be in a positive note.
2. Give each participant a copy to fill out silently, without sharing ideas with others.

3. After each person has completed a copy, you can lead a discussion of the sentences, encouraging people to share their answers.

Sample Open-Ended Statements

(Could be used with officer groups)

1. When I'm in a group, I like to _____

2. When I'm alone, I like to _____

3. The hardest thing about being a group officer is _____

4. The easiest thing about being a group officer is _____

5. When I'm in charge _____

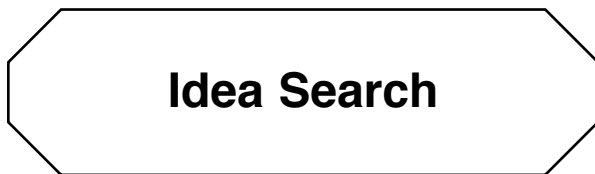
6. When someone else is in charge I _____

7. Group members like to _____

8. I like group members to _____

9. Our group doesn't go well when _____

10. Our group goes well when _____



Idea Search

Purpose

To help people look at ideas in depth from different perceptions. To increase the number of ideas and broaden understanding.

Process

1. Give each person the form. Explain the categories:

Idea, Trend, Problem – This column should have a short description of the social or cultural problem and the way the person views the problem. This can be an individual problem or the whole group can work on the same problem.

Cultural – This should have the persons views of how society sees the problem.

Emotional – How does society feel about this idea? Is it one that society has strong rules or taboos about?

The Broad Picture – Look at the problem in as large a sense as you can. Use any method to think big – more people, other countries, multiplying the impact.

The Narrow Picture – This is an attempt to see the problem, trend or idea in a small sense. Taking it apart, looking at it in just the opposite way that was used in The Broad Picture. Thinking of it under a microscope.

How Do You Feel? – What emotions do you have about it? Would you want others to know how you feel?

2. Have each person fill in the form individually, thinking about the questions in that column. Use the last section to fill in their idea, trend or problem.
3. After they have finished, have group members discuss each column, sharing their thoughts as they wish.

IDEA SEARCH

IDEA, TREND, PROBLEM	CULTURAL	EMOTIONAL	THE BROAD PICTURE	THE NARROW PICTURE	HOW DO YOU FEEL?
<p>State your idea or problem. Then ask yourself the questions in each column. Write down your thoughts.</p> <p>Example: <i>Young adults coming home to live with parents</i></p>	<p>What do people think about this? Any taboos or problems? Is it good or bad?</p> <p><i>Our society values independence. Lose freedom? Can families live happily together?</i></p>	<p>How does it make you feel? Any risks? Who does it affect? Is it worth the feelings you have?</p> <p><i>People feel sorry that kids can't make it on their own</i></p>	<p>What can you add? Can it be stronger, bigger, more valuable, multiplied? Can more people, things, countries, be involved?</p> <p><i>Other countries! do it all the time! Support group for people in this situation? Rules to help?</i></p>	<p>Can you take something away? Do it differently? Try the opposite? Divide up?</p> <p><i>Could families divide costs? Do you work? Days of responsibility, could young band together?</i></p>	<p>Is it important to you? Would you want others to know how you feel? How does it use your time and other resources?</p> <p><i>Want to help but don't want to do all the work. would hide feeling if upset.</i></p>
<p>Your idea:</p>					

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