

Association of Scottish Community Councils



Breakout Groups

Facilitation Tool Kit

Introduction

Breakout groups have three great advantages. First is that they are a means of bringing people to the information rather than simply bringing information to people. Second is they get people moving around and talking. And third is real work can be accomplished much more quickly in a small group than trying to do it with a large group. We find the only limitation for breakout groups is the meeting facility itself: some just cannot accommodate splitting into multiple groups and having adequate space to work, hear each other, post findings, etc.

Definition

A large group divided into smaller ones to discuss a question or do an activity and then report back to the whole group.



Essentials

Breakout group is a term used to describe the division of a gathering of people into smaller clusters. It is a means of rapidly and actively gathering a large amount of newly generated information that can be reported back to a large audience.

A breakout group may range in size from 4 to 15 people. If the meeting facility is adaptable and there is sufficient time in the program, there really is no limit to the number of breakout groups. Be warned that the more breakout groups there are, the greater the challenge of facilitating.

Once divided, each group responds to a question or completes an activity.

Following an allocated amount of time, everyone reassembles to hear all of the small groups present summaries of their discussions.



How to Use It

1. Prepare the space

Anticipate before a meeting begins the number of breakout groups and where they will meet. Is the room large enough, and the number of groups small enough, that people can pull chairs into clusters to work? Is there access to adjoining or separate rooms where groups can go? Determine where people will go and then, at each station or in each room, set up an easel with flip chart and a supply of felt tip markers.

2. Prepare the participants

At the appropriate point, the facilitator should describe the breakout groups. If every group is going to work on the same item, go over it including encouraging people to ask questions for clarity with everyone present. If different groups will be working on different items, present it all so each group has a full idea of what is happening. Tell them how much time they will have to work and that they need to be prepared to give a brief summarisation (2 to 5 minutes). Each group needs a scribe, a reporter, and a facilitator. (These roles do not have to be filled by three people; one person can be, for example, both scribe and reporter.) Define those roles and functions if necessary. Then divide the group; counting off by numbers can help assure a better mixture. During the breakout the facilitator should roam among the groups to answer any questions and announce time remaining at the 10- and 5-minute marks.

3. Prepare to report

Plan a break following the end of the working session. This gives each group

time to organise its information for presentation or to give the information to the facilitator if that is who will be presenting. The presentation should focus on the highlights of the breakout group's discussion: key topics, conclusions, recommendations, issues, and process.

4. Report back

When each group is ready, or time is up, call the whole audience back to attention, choosing one group to go first. Remind everyone of the amount of time for each presentation (2 to 5 minutes) and stick to it! How each group reports back depends largely upon the room. Here are two some alternatives:

- If all of the groups were in different parts of the same room, the whole group can move between stations. At the first station, introduce the reporter and allow him or her to begin. Monitor the time; when completed, thank the reporter and quickly move the group to the closest station. Begin next report. Repeat this process until all the small groups have reported.
- If the breakout groups were in different rooms have everyone assemble back in the main meeting area. Call the reporter from the first group forward to the front of the room to give his or her 2- to 5-minute summary. Monitor the time, thank the reporter and call the next group up. Repeat process until all the small groups have reported.



A point to remember: If everyone worked on the same question, and time is getting short, ask the reporters to highlight different insights or

ideas and not to repeat things mentioned by a previous group.

Use It If.....

You want to give everyone a chance to contribute to the discussion. Some who may not express themselves in a large group will speak in a smaller group.

You are looking for ways to alter the pace of a long workshop. This gives people the chance to move around, meet, and talk with different participants.

You have a lot of material to cover but not a lot of time. Each breakout group can cover a separate question or issue; their findings will give the whole group a jumpstart on resolving or acting upon it.

Do Not Use If....

Your group is less than five people or the breakout groups will be larger than 12 people.

Your facility cannot accommodate smaller groups either with separate rooms or because the meeting room cannot be rearranged.

You do not have legitimate questions, issues, or activities for the small group to accomplish. People will quickly see this as a waste of time; this will damage your credibility and progress for getting real work accomplished.

