

Association of Scottish Community Councils



WordStorming

Facilitation Tool Kit

Introduction

Word Storming is an excellent way to get people engaged, to gather a lot of ideas, and to break down barriers of communication. Not everyone will feel this way; some will say this type of exercise is a waste of time delaying getting to work. We find even the strongest sceptics will loosen up and participate if they understand the purpose of an activity and how it is leading everyone towards realising the goal. Take time to explain how the information collected in the group Wordstorm will be used – or if it is just for fun, say that and watch what happens. Usually everyone joins in.

Definition

Generating ideas and gathering information through a free-flowing, energetic, creative exchange.



Essentials

Wordstorming is an exercise in free-thinking. It usually involves a facilitator, who may also act as a recorder, and a group of people who are informed about the topic. A question is asked and everyone is encouraged to respond. All ideas are recorded with no judgments made.

The Wordstorming technique can also be used just for fun as an icebreaker, to introduce the concept of Wordstorming, or simply just to get people talking. In this case, a facilitator should encourage people to think quickly and call out whatever comes to mind regarding the topic in question.

The philosophy of Wordstorming is that quantity breeds quality; the more suggestions, the better. For this reason, and to ensure total participation, it is important to make sure everyone present has an opportunity to speak.



How to Use It

1. Basic technique

- Break into small groups of 15 people or less.
- Have chairs arranged in a single circle to allow everyone to see each other.
- Set aside a specific amount of time.
- Describe the questions that the group will be responding to and check for understanding.

Caution everyone not to discuss the merits of each idea reminding them that will happen later or in subsequent meetings. Record all ideas on a flip chart. Print large, legibly and fast! Repeat key words and phrases and be sure to ask the speaker to clarify ideas you do not understand. Build on and expand ideas. Push the group to consider other ways of looking at the issue, to stimulate more ideas.

2. Alternative approach:

- **Silent Thinking and Writing:**

Present the question or statement and ask people to spend 5 to 15 minutes concentrating on their own thoughts and writing down their responses. These responses can either be handed in and a facilitator reads them to the group or an open session can begin where everybody shares. (This may be a good step if people seem especially reluctant to speak and express their ideas.)

- **Round robin:**

Each person is systematically called on in turn and shares one idea at a time until either there are no more ideas or the time limit is reached. Try reversing the direction of calling on people.

- **Popcorn:**

Ideas are called out randomly, quickly.

- **Discussion Wordstorm:**

Have a discussion about the question or issue for a specific amount of time, say 5 to 10 minutes. Then run the Wordstorm, describing key ideas that came up.

- **Post-it Notes®:**

Each person is given 5 minutes to think about a response to the question or issue. (Alternatively, have people work in pairs to generate ideas.)

They are to record their responses on as many Post-it Notes® as necessary. Each person, when called upon, gives the notes to the facilitator who reads them and sticks them on the wall or a flip chart.

Similar ideas are then grouped.

3. Icebreaker to demonstrate Wordstorming

Describe either an imaginary problem to be solved, such as "ways to reduce paper" or "how to get people to come to a public meeting" or use a current event or issue that is particular to that community (but is not related to the resource or the project). Have everyone take a turn

around the room in round-robin fashion stating humorous, infeasible, unwise, or outlandish ways to achieve the desired goal – the crazier the better. Write the responses on a flip chart. After everyone has had an opportunity to provide at least two responses, the facilitator guides the discussion. Identify any trends that were noticed such as one idea building on a previous one, unrestricted thinking, breaking into new territory, concepts of creativity, how some items could be adapted to really solve the problem, etc. Use these trends to illustrate how fresh, new thinking will be required in this planning process.

Use It If.....

You want get people comfortable expressing themselves with each other and sharing ideas even if they do not agree.

You have a group that has come together to solve a problem or develop a plan.
You want everyone to feel involved in contributing to work that is being done.

Do Not Use If....

Your group does not trust the facilitator, the topic, or each other. This can especially happen if the project is highly controversial.

You want people's honest opinions. Once people begin to hear other's speaking, they can begin to influence each other. Consider interviewing in small groups or conducting a survey instead.

You already have the "answer." Never ask a roomful of people to express their ideas and then try to manipulate the responses to fit your own agenda.

