

## **Chapter 2. INVOLVING PEOPLE FACE-TO-FACE THROUGH MEETINGS**

### **B. SELECTING AN ORGANIZING FEATURE FOR A MEETING**

Nearly every meeting focuses on discussion, whether people are giving opinions, debating issues among themselves, or challenging an agency by questioning fundamental assumptions. Meetings can be exploratory (for instance, “design-ins” where participants draw on maps to illustrate community values or activity patterns) or consensus-building (including collaborative problem-solving).

Specific techniques for organizing meetings are useful in helping people think about and discuss issues, how they are personally affected, and how proposed solutions impact community life. They help make meetings more creative, stimulating, and engaging. Appropriate, well-organized meetings also enlighten people about an agency approach and its openness to community involvement.

Traditionally, meetings often begin with a presentation by one or several speakers, a slide show, or a simple video, followed by discussion. Some meetings focus on developing solutions to pending problems or suggesting alternatives to existing situations, and their productivity may be enhanced by the use of non-traditional meeting structures.

Organizing features, as described below, are tailored to participants’ needs and interests, as well as to the specific goals of a meeting:

- Brainstorming;
- Charrettes;
- Visioning; and
- Small group techniques.

While the choice of meeting types and frequency lies principally with an agency, it often helps to work with participants or community leaders to determine the best times and formats. People feel more involved if asked for advice and if meetings fit their needs and their styles of communication.

## BRAINSTORMING

### What is brainstorming?

**Participants “brainstorm” when they come together in a freethinking forum to generate ideas.** As now used, brainstorming is no longer an unstructured method of eliciting ideas from a group. Used properly—either alone or in conjunction with other techniques—brainstorming can be a highly effective method of moving participants out of conflict and toward consensus. For example, the Cape Cod Commission in Massachusetts used brainstorming to develop goals and objectives to guide transportation planning.

### Brainstorming has these basic components:

- Generating as many solutions to a problem as possible;
- Listing every idea presented *without* comment or evaluation;
- Grouping and evaluating ideas to reach consensus; and
- Prioritizing ideas.

**Experience suggests that each task can be further subdivided** to improve understanding of the overall process and its results. For example, ideas may need clarification for the group to grasp and evaluate, or the role of brainstorming in issue resolution may need to be explained. As a basic means of involving people, it has few peers if carried out successfully.

### Why is it useful?

**Brainstorming brings new ideas to bear on a problem.** The freethinking atmosphere encourages fresh approaches. Creativity is enhanced, because individuals are encouraged to bring up *all* ideas—even those that might appear outrageous. Even imperfectly developed thoughts may jog the thinking of other participants. In Atlanta, Georgia, a brainstorming effort produced future options in the Vision 2020 process.

**Problems are defined better as questions arise.** Alternatives appear in a new or different perspective. Novel approaches to an issue can arise during the process. Brainstorming gives participants a sense of progress and accomplishment and helps them move onto more difficult tasks.

**Brainstorming helps reduce conflict.** It helps participants see other points of view and possibly change their perspective on problems. It may not be useful in resolving deeply felt conflicts but can help set the stage for a different technique if an impasse has been reached. Civility is required of each participant. (See [Negotiation and Mediation](#).)

**Brainstorming is democratic.** All participants have equal status and an equal opportunity to participate. No one person’s ideas dominate a brainstorming session. Brainstorming heightens the awareness of community and sensitizes individuals to the behavior of the group and its participants. It helps mold participants into a working group.

### Does brainstorming have special uses?

**Brainstorming demonstrates an agency’s openness to new ideas** and its commitment to working with community participants. It leads to further study of unexplored ideas. It helps find common ground for consensus about a solution. Brainstorming has been used by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT) in exploring multi-modal alternatives in an interstate bridge reconstruction project in New Haven.

**Brainstorming is easily understood and implemented.** No special training is required for participants to express their ideas. All sides expect open and frank exposition of points of view. Argumentative behavior is discouraged and creativity appreciated.

### **Who participates? And how?**

**Anyone can participate in a brainstorming session.** It is useful to encourage participants from diverse backgrounds and interests in the issue to be discussed. Providing background information to participants bolsters the ability of each to contribute. Information should be distributed in advance of the session, if possible. Large groups can be divided into smaller subsets to promote full participation. (See [Small Group Techniques](#); [Public Information Materials](#).)

**People participate by bringing their ideas to the table, working in groups of 6 to 10.** All ideas are duly noted and recorded to reassure participants that their comments are being adequately considered. Participants can record ideas on newsprint or butcher paper, or the agency can supply staff to record their ideas. People can prioritize their ideas by using strips of colored adhesive dots (found in office supply stores). About seven dots per person works well. Working individually, participants use dots to indicate their preferences. The dots can be divided among several good ideas or concentrated on one idea that is very important. The sheets of paper with dots are an effective display of the prioritization and help identify the group's top priorities. Participation is furthered when notes of the meeting and subsequent events can be distributed to the participants.

### **How do agencies use the output?**

**Through brainstorming, agencies become aware of issues, problems, and detailed solutions** that might not otherwise come to light. New ideas assist agencies in crafting compromise positions and in setting priorities by using input provided directly by stakeholders. Shelburne, Vermont, and Flathead County, Montana, used brainstorming sessions to clarify and prioritize issues for new area plans.

### **Who leads a brainstorming session?**

**Brainstorming needs a facilitator or moderator,** who may be found within the group itself, agency staff, or an outside firm. Facilitators must be sensitive to group dynamics and be able to draw statements and positions from participants in an affable way. They must assure that all participants are heard and that civility is maintained. An agency staff person may be needed to assist groups that have difficulties with the process. (See [Facilitation](#).)

### **What are the costs?**

**Brainstorming is inexpensive.** The group leader can be an individual on an existing staff, but a person experienced in facilitating the technique is preferable. Depending on the issue to be discussed or the degree of anticipated conflict, an outside consultant may be a desirable addition.

**Material needs are minimal.** A quiet room is essential. Materials should be on hand to provide necessary data and background information. Although this information need not be overly detailed, questions are certain to arise, and it is preferable to be able to respond appropriately. Potential materials include:

- Large newsprint or butcher paper, with markers to record ideas;
- Boards to display applicable data;
- Large, easily visible maps;
- Overlays to allow sketching on maps; and
- Adhesive dots for prioritization.

### **How is brainstorming organized?**

**Careful management facilitates a brainstorming session best.** Agency staff people organize and implement a brainstorming session. Staff needs are minimal but may include a facilitator and probably an assistant for physical management of charts and recording of ideas. Resource people should be present for responses to questions.

**Initial efforts include planning** the brainstorming session—defining the precise issue to be addressed, identifying potential participants, deciding on the process and schedule to be followed, and determining anticipated outcomes of the session so that players will know the scope and stakes involved. It is also important to detail for participants how the agency expects to use the results.

**Effective brainstorming sessions are small (6 to 10 people).** If the group is too small, participants are not stimulated to generate ideas; if it is too large, the more vocal few may dominate the meeting. At large meetings, participants are divided into groups. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) held five subregional sessions at key milestones. Roundtables of 8 to 10 people at each event used brainstorming to generate regional plans that fit within given financial scenarios for future transit options.

### **A brainstorming session usually has a simple agenda:**

- Introductions with brief outlines of participants' backgrounds;
- Discussion of the brainstorming process and how it fits into the overall process;
- Generation of ideas, listed without evaluation or criticism;
- Clarifying and explaining ideas, as required;
- Review, grouping, and elimination of redundant ideas;
- Prioritization; and
- Presentation of each group's results by the moderator to the larger group.

### **How is it used with other techniques?**

**Brainstorming is always a stage of a larger process.** It is frequently used when an agency is starting a lengthy or complex undertaking with a separate element for public involvement. It can be part of a focus group—to open discussion and introduce participants; it can be part of a charrette—to establish the points of view of participants; it can be used in civic advisory committees—to establish a consensus on a project; and it can be used in public meetings. (See [Focus Groups; Charrettes; Civic Advisory Committees; Public Meetings/Hearings](#).) Brainstorming was used in conjunction with public opinion surveys to design a public involvement program for the Albany, New York, area. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).) In Pennsylvania, community members used brainstorming to select representatives for a civic advisory committee.

## **What are the drawbacks?**

**Facilitation can pose unique challenges.** A single questioner can disrupt proceedings by continuously raising questions and suspicions about the motivations of participants or sponsors. Unassertive participants may be neglected without active solicitation of their participation. Opponents may refuse to consider each other's ideas.

**Unspoken attitudes may affect results.** Individual participants who feel diverted from more apparently purposeful tasks become impatient if they feel the process is a waste of time. It is essential to focus brainstorming on issues that make sense to the participants and to clearly explain how the results will be used. People who feel they are being controlled or patronized often withdraw from full participation. Agency staff members who feel that the process is leading nowhere may not respond appropriately to questions from participants.

## **For further information:**

- Atlanta Regional Commission (Vision 2020), Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2500
- Cape Cod Commission (Cape Cod Regional Plan), (508) 362-3828
- Capital District Transportation Committee, Albany, New York (public involvement program), (518) 458-2161
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, (206) 684-1357
- Connecticut Department of Transportation, Environmental Planning Bureau (Q Bridge Study), (860) 594-2939
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, Bureau of Environmental Quality, (717) 783-4580

## CHARRETTES

### What is a charrette?

**A charrette is a meeting to resolve a problem or issue.** Within a specified time limit, participants work together intensely to reach a resolution. The sponsoring agency usually sets the goals and time limit and announces them ahead of time. A leader's responsibility is to bring out all points of view from concerned local residents as well as agency representatives and experts.

### Here are the usual components of a charrette:

- Definition of issues to be resolved;
- Analysis of the problem and alternative approaches to solutions;
- Assignment of small groups to clarify issues;
- Use of staff people to find supporting data;
- Development of proposals to respond to issues;
- Development of alternative solutions;
- Presentation and analysis of final proposal(s); and
- Consensus and final resolution of the approach to be taken.

### Why is it useful?

**A charrette is problem-oriented.** The breadth of background of participants assures full discussion of issues, interrelationships, and impacts. Its time limits challenge people to rapidly, openly, and honestly examine the problem and help potential adversaries reach consensus on an appropriate solution. (See [Negotiation & Mediation](#).) For example, charrettes were used to formulate alternatives to a controversial highway project in Knoxville, Tennessee, and a downtown plan for Jacksonville, Florida, by guiding business and civic leaders and neighborhood people to a recommended solution.

**A charrette produces visible results.** It is often used early in a planning process to provide useful ideas and perspectives from concerned interest groups. In mid-process, a charrette helps resolve sticky issues. Late in the process, it is useful to resolve an impasse between groups.

**A charrette enlarges the degree of public involvement** in transportation, reducing feelings of alienation from government. It offers people interaction with public agencies and allows questions to be asked before decisions are made. It supplements, but does not replace, other kinds of public involvement.

### Does a charrette have special uses?

**A charrette calls attention to an issue.** It can dramatize:

- The need for public attention to resolve an issue;
- A deliberately participatory problem-solving process;
- A public agency's openness to suggestions;
- A search for all possible approaches to a question; and
- A democratically-derived consensus.

**Charrettes generate alternative solutions to problems.** The setting encourages openness and creativity. All suggestions from the group—however outrageous—should be examined to encourage thinking about better approaches. (See [Brainstorming](#).) In New Hampshire's Community Stewardship Program, for instance, volunteer experts are invited by towns to help assess strengths and weaknesses of town planning.

## Who participates? And how?

**Anyone can participate in a charrette.** A wide range of people with differing interests should attend. Traditional participants represent organized groups, but individuals with any stake in the issue should be encouraged to attend. (See [Minority, Ethnic, and Low-income Groups](#).)

**How people participate depends on the charrette leader.** An experienced leader assures that a range of views is heard. The leader invites people to take a stance and present their points of view. All participants are assured an opportunity to speak out, and the leader encourages even the most reticent participant to speak up without fear of rebuke or ridicule. The open, free-wheeling charrette format encourages enthusiasm and responses.

## How do agencies use the output?

**A charrette sharpens agency understanding** of the perspectives of interest groups. Early in project formulation, a charrette offers a glimpse of potentially competing demands and can be a barometer of the potential for consensus. Thus it helps generate alternatives and identify issues. In Minnesota and Alabama, for example, State agencies respond to the needs of individual towns by providing experts for weekend charrettes.

## Who leads a charrette?

**A leader experienced in charrette techniques is a must.** To avoid chaos in a charrette, a high level of discipline is required. The charrette leader should be familiar with group dynamics and the substantive issues the group faces. The leader tailors the setting, background materials, and issues to the goal of the charrette and elicits participation from all group members within the allotted time. One or two staff people should be available for support to the leader and to supply data and information.

**A steering committee usually makes arrangements for a charrette.** It may be composed of representatives of Federal and State transportation or other agencies, consultants, affected municipalities, and community groups. The steering committee should agree upon a leader for a charrette.

## What are the costs?

**A charrette involves significant resources.** The chief items are sufficient space and background materials and an experienced leader. Graphics must be used so that participants quickly comprehend the problem and envision alternative solutions. Background materials must be available at the start of the charrette so that no time is lost in investigating the problem. Preparatory work leading to a charrette is intensive, whether done in-house or by an outside specialist.

**Staffing** should include:

- A leader experienced in the charrette technique;
- Staffers who understand the derivation and use of the data;
- Staffers who have worked on the problem; and
- Staffers who have worked with applicable policy.

**Materials** can include:

- Large maps;
- Overlays to allow sketching on maps;

- Boards to display applicable data;
- Large newsprint pads and markers to record ideas;
- Photographs of sites;
- Handouts of basic goals/time limits/meeting ground rules; and
- Printed background information with background data.

### How is a charrette organized?

**Organization depends on the issue's complexity and the intended length of the event.** This work includes:

- Obtaining agreement on the process;
- Obtaining agreement on timing;
- Determining potential participants;
- Finding an experienced charrette leader;
- Managing special funding, if required;
- Seeking out resource people;
- Sending out invitations and background material well in advance;
- Finding an appropriate space for meeting;
- Handling required publicity;
- Setting up space to encourage informal discussion; and
- Portraying issues clearly in both verbal and graphic form.

### Is a charrette flexible?

**A minimum of four hours is essential** for a charrette focused on a modest problem. While the average ranges from one to several days, some agencies hold one- and two-week charrettes or organize them as multiple sessions over a period of time.

**A charrette occurs at any time in a planning process, but preparation is crucial.** Advance work can take a month or more, depending on the issue to be discussed. Charrette materials are flexible and should be tailored to the focus of the meeting.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**A charrette combines effectively with other techniques.** When matched with a civic advisory committee, it focuses on solving a specific problem. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).) Paired with the visioning process, it is an attractive means of eliciting ideas. (See [Visioning](#).) A charrette also focuses on a single issue raised during a brainstorming session. (See [Brainstorming](#).) In Portland, Maine, a two-day charrette on the long-range plan followed a transportation fair. (See [Transportation Fairs](#).)

### What are the drawbacks?

**Because it focuses on a specific problem to be resolved or issue to be addressed, a charrette is usually a one-time event.** Thus, the invitation list and timing must be thoroughly considered and discussed to maximize interaction through broad-based participation. Goals must be made clear so the expectations do not exceed possible results. The depth of analysis from a single short session can be disappointing. Follow-up work must be carefully considered both before and during a charrette.



### **When is a charrette most effective?**

**A charrette can resolve an impasse.** During such a use, neutral participants should be involved to bring fresh ideas for consideration. When a problem is immediate, a charrette is effective because people are vitally interested in the outcome. For maximum effect, a charrette should have the approval of elected officials, agency heads, and community groups. A charrette is also useful:

- Early in the project;
- Following a brainstorming session;
- When focus on a single issue is required; and
- When a range of potential solutions is needed.

### **For further information:**

- American Institute of Architects' Regional/Urban Assistance Team (R/UDAT), (202) 626-7358
- American Society of Landscape Architects, Community Assistance Team, (202) 686-2752
- Minnesota Design Team, Minnesota Department of Trade & Economic Development, (612) 297-1291
- New Hampshire Community Stewardship Program, (603) 271-2155
- Portland, Maine, Area Comprehensive Transportation Committee, (207) 724-9891
- Urban Land Institute's Panel Advisory Service, (202) 624-7133

## VISIONING

### What is visioning?

**Visioning leads to a goals statement.** Typically, it consists of a series of meetings focused on long-range issues. Visioning results in a long-range plan. With a 20- or 30-year horizon, visioning also sets a strategy for achieving the goals. Visioning has been used to set a long-range statewide transportation plan in Ohio, a statewide comprehensive plan in New Jersey, and a regional land-use and transportation plan in the Seattle, Washington, region. The Governor of Georgia, acting as “Chief Planner,” used it to create long-range goals for the State. Central Oklahoma 2020 is a visioning project for a regional plan.

**Priorities and performance standards can be part of visioning.** Priorities are set to distinguish essential goals. Performance standards allow an evaluation of progress toward goals over time. In Jacksonville, Florida, a community report card is used to determine priorities; each target for the future is evaluated annually. In Minnesota a statewide report card was used to evaluate the current status and set up goals and milestones for the future. Oregon established benchmarks to measure progress toward its long-term goals.

### Why is it useful?

**Visioning offers the widest possible participation** for developing a long-range plan. It is democratic in its search for disparate opinions from all stakeholders and directly involves a cross-section of constituents from a State or region in setting a long-term policy agenda. It looks for common ground among participants in exploring and advocating strategies for the future. It brings in often-overlooked issues about quality of life. It helps formulate policy direction on public investments and government programs.

**Visioning is an integrated approach to policy-making.** With overall goals in view, it helps avoid piecemeal and reactionary approaches to addressing problems. It accounts for the relationship between issues, and how one problem’s solution may generate other problems or have an impact on another level of government. It is cooperative, with multi-agency involvement, frequently with joint interagency leadership.

### Does visioning have special uses?

**Visioning uses participation as a source of ideas** in the establishment of long-range policy. It draws upon deeply-held feelings about overall directions of public agencies to solicit opinions about the future. After open consideration of many options, it generates a single, integrated vision for the future based on the consideration of many people with diverse viewpoints. When completed, it presents a democratically-derived consensus.

**Visioning dramatizes the development of policies** to get people involved in specific topics such as transportation infrastructure. In Ohio, the Access Ohio program was designed to establish goals and objectives for development of transportation projects and programs. Other States that have used visioning to establish long-range goals include Kansas, Georgia, Texas, Florida, Iowa, Oregon, and Minnesota.

### Who participates? And how?

**Invitations to participate are given to the general public** or to a representative panel. A broad distribution of information is essential. This information must be simply presented, attractive, and rendered important and timely. It should also include clear goals of participation and show how comments will be used in the process. (See [Public Information Materials; Mailing Lists](#).)

**Community residents participate through meetings and surveys.** A typical method of involving local people is through a questionnaire format, seeking comments on present issues and future possibilities. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).) A report card filled in with community opinions was used in Jacksonville, Florida. In Minnesota, opinions were elicited through small or large public meetings at locations distributed equitably throughout the state. In the Research Triangle region of North Carolina, participants drew pictures of their vision of the region's future and of transit opportunities in words and pictures on wall-sized sheets of paper.

### **How do agencies use the output?**

**Visioning helps agencies determine policy.** Through widespread public participation, agencies become aware of issues and problems, different points of view, and competing demands. Drafting responses to comments aids in sharpening overall policy and assists in focusing priorities among goals, plans, or programs. Visioning also helps bring conflicts to the surface and resolve competing priorities.

### **Who leads a visioning process?**

**A chief governmental official can lead visioning.** In several States, the Governor has made visioning a cornerstone of State policy planning for infrastructure investments and State operational departments. The governors of Oregon, Texas, Iowa, Minnesota, Georgia, Florida, and New Jersey have fostered visioning for their States.

**Agencies also lead visioning projects.** Statewide agencies led new visioning projects in Maine and Hawaii. Regional agencies led visioning projects in Jacksonville, Indianapolis, and Seattle.

### **What does visioning cost?**

**Visioning costs vary.** The chief items are staff time and materials sufficient to set up and carry out the program. Staff people should include a leader committed to the process, a community participation specialist who is well-versed in the applicable policies, and staffers who can interpret and integrate participants' opinions from surveys and meetings. Meeting materials are minimal but can include large maps and newsprint pads and markers to record ideas. If forecasts of information are developed or if alternative scenarios are to be fleshed out, research and preparation time can be extensive.

### **How is it organized?**

**A specific time period is scheduled** to develop the vision statement. The schedule incorporates sufficient time for framing issues, eliciting comments through surveys or meetings, recording statements from participants, and integrating them into draft and final documents.

**Visioning staff members are typically assigned from existing agencies** that are familiar with issues and essential contacts to be maintained. In Minnesota and New Jersey, staff was assigned from the State planning office; in Jacksonville, Florida, from the Community Council/Chamber of Commerce; in Ohio, from the Ohio Department of Transportation.

### **Is it flexible?**

**Visioning is extremely flexible** in terms of scheduling and staff commitments. Scheduling takes weeks or months. Staff is temporarily or permanently assigned to the project.

**Preparation for visioning is crucial** and touches on many complex issues. Advance work is essential to give time for staff to prepare the overall program, agendas, mailing lists, questionnaires, and methods of presentation and follow-up. (See [Mailing Lists; Public Opinion Surveys](#).) The visioning program should be carefully scheduled to maximize local input and response time prior to selecting final policies.

### **How is it used with other techniques?**

**The visioning process involves many techniques** of public involvement. In the Seattle area, the visioning process on regional growth and mobility futures included the most extensive regional public involvement effort ever conducted in the area: symposiums, workshops, newspaper tabloid inserts, public hearings, open houses, surveys, and community meetings. (See [Conferences, Workshops, and Retreats; Public Meetings/Hearings; Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses; Public Opinion Surveys](#).)

**Visioning leads toward other public involvement techniques.** As a policy umbrella, it can precede establishment of a civic advisory committee and guide its work in reviewing individual projects or programs. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).) It leads to brainstorming sessions or charrettes to solve individual problems. (See [Brainstorming; Charrettes](#).) Visioning is often the basis for public evaluation and implementation; it led to performance monitoring of State agency activities in Oregon, Minnesota, Iowa, and Texas, followed by reports to the public.

### **What are the drawbacks?**

**Time and staff requirements are significant** to maintain contact with numerous community participants and carry the program forward. The numbers of participants varies from 100 community leaders in Jacksonville to an estimated 10,000 residents in Minnesota. Listening to participants can consume several months' time. Full-time effort is required of staff when the process is in motion.

**The staff needs patience** to deal with so many diverse views and individuals, time and schedule requirements, and complex issues and interrelationships. Finally, visioning is a one-time event and remains on a generalized policy level; there is a substantial risk that the resulting document will not satisfy all interest groups.

### **When is visioning most effective?**

**Visioning is of maximum use at an early point** in the establishment or revision of policies or goals. Used in this way, it demonstrates openness to new ideas or concepts suggested by the public. For maximum effect, a visioning project should have the active support of elected officials, agency heads, and community groups.

### **Visioning is useful:**

- To set the stage for short-range planning activities;
- To set new directions in policy;
- To review existing policy;
- When integration between issues is required;
- When a wide variety of ideas should be heard; and
- When a range of potential solutions is needed.

**For further information:**

- Iowa Department of Management (Futures Agenda), (515) 281-3322
- Jacksonville Community Council (Quality Indicators for Progress), Jacksonville, Florida, (904) 356-0800
- Minnesota Planning (Minnesota Milestones), St. Paul, Minnesota, (612) 296-3985
- Ohio Department of Transportation (Access Ohio), Columbus, Ohio, (614) 466-7170
- Oregon Progress Board (Oregon Shines/Oregon Benchmarks), Salem, Oregon, (503) 373-1220
- Puget Sound Regional Council (Vision 2020), Seattle, Washington, (206) 464-7090

## SMALL GROUP TECHNIQUES

### What are small group techniques?

**Small groups have fewer than 20 or so members**, making it easier for people to actively participate. They meet as small gatherings or as break-outs of large meetings and offer many opportunities for creative, flexible interchange of ideas and lively, meaningful participation.

**Small group techniques help people participate freely and actively.** They include special activities or formats that help interest and engage people. They foster active participation and steer participants toward constructive activities and dialogue. They help avoid complaint-oriented or conflict-driven sessions.

### Small group techniques have certain basic characteristics:

- They emphasize active participation and interaction;
- They are usually run by a group leader or facilitator;
- They have a task, theme, or goal;
- They help reach consensus or develop priorities;
- They gather a range of ideas, opinions, and concerns;
- They are applied to either planning or project development;
- In a breakout group, a small group task reflects the larger group agenda; and
- Breakout groups report back to the larger group.

**Specific small group techniques covered in this section include** breakout groups, workshops, seminars, community juries, roundtables, study circles, conflict utilization opinionaires, decision science, delphi, dialogue facilitation, nominal group process, open space technology, Samoan circle, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats), synetics, and value analysis. Brainstorming is also used in small groups and is discussed as a separate technique. (See [Brainstorming](#).)

**The definitions given here are generated from common practice and various materials.** However, the techniques are far from standardized, and their names, conduct, and organization vary throughout the country. Some techniques overlap, or a “hybrid” meeting or process uses elements from each. The key to using them is to identify the element or structure that addresses the needs of the participants and the goals of the meeting.

### Why are small group techniques useful?

**They encourage broad participation and promote a sense of equality among members.** Individuals speak and are heard. Participants ask questions and comment freely.

**Small group techniques foster interaction between participants.** People are encouraged to speak frankly and openly. Ground rules, such as allowing only one person to speak at a time, help level the playing field between participants. Open and fair meeting processes promote give-and-take and interaction.

**They make a larger meeting more efficient and productive.** Break-out groups use various techniques to address a specific issue. Many ideas are brought forth in small groups that might not surface in a large gathering. The larger gathering becomes more productive as break-out group findings on specific topics are reported and incorporated.

**Small group techniques foster dissemination of information** to the broader community. Representatives meet in small sessions, cover issues, and report back to their constituents. The

Portland, Oregon, Metro holds small group meetings in neighborhoods throughout the region. Spokespersons from each group report back to their peers, their elected officials, and other people about transit issues.

**These techniques usually make meetings more fun and interesting.** The interactive nature of small group activities makes them spirited and engaging. People are willing to attend and participate when they know the session will be interesting and productive. The Dallas, Texas, Area Rapid Transit uses small group meetings to obtain candid reactions to innovative proposals. (See [Improving Meeting Attendance](#).)

**Small group techniques offer a strategy for achieving a meeting goal.** They help keep conversation on track or establish a step-by-step process for handling discussion. They help develop consensus or an action plan. To review elements of its 2020 long-range plan, the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) sponsored four issues groups—economic development, goods movement, and mobility and quality of life—made up of key stakeholders.

### Are there special uses?

**Small group techniques are useful on controversial issues.** They provide a non-threatening venue for all sides to express opinions and encourage mutual respect and constructive listening. They help reduce tension and defuse polarized groups.

**Small groups provide a forum for technical issues.** Complex issues and concepts receive needed explanation and review, because each individual has time to absorb material and ask questions. Participants feel more confident in an analysis if they understand the technical issues and methods involved. The Connecticut DOT used small groups of participants organized by modal interest (i.e., those favoring transit and those favoring highway options) to develop alternatives for repair or replacement of a major bridge.

**Small group meetings can re-charge a participatory process** with interesting and different ways of looking at a topic. Disenchanted group members are encouraged to rejoin if they see a way to achieve goals in a new and focused process. To critique and revise its public involvement program, the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) called together 60 community leaders and organized them into small groups to work on specific elements of the process.

**Participants affect the substance of plans and projects** through small group work. The Southwestern Pennsylvania Regional Planning Commission used a small group to simplify its Transportation Improvement Program for easier understanding by the public.

### How are small groups structured?

**The style, format, and organization of small group meetings vary.** Some techniques are familiar and regularly used; others (frequently with fancy names) are less common. Some use innovative, creative group processes.

- **Breakout groups** are subdivisions of a larger meeting to deal with specific issues. Small groups meet in separate areas—corners of a large room or several smaller rooms. Each group appoints or elects a discussion leader, and each participant has a chance to express an opinion. Afterwards, groups report back to the large meeting. In neighborhood meetings to discuss transit service issues, the Boston Transportation Department asked breakout groups to identify priority issues. After each group reported, the larger meeting set priorities to report to the regional transit authority. In Washington, D.C., breakout groups from sub-regions worked within a larger meeting on the area's long-range transportation plan and reported their area concerns to the larger group.

**Some small groups are established from the beginning**, instead of being formed from a larger group. The format is designed specifically to accomplish the goals of the session.

- **Workshops** are small groups that focus on one or more topics, working intensively over a short period of time. (See [Conferences, Workshops, and Retreats](#).)
- **Seminars** give participants an opportunity to learn about a particular topic and exchange information and viewpoints. A seminar usually focuses on a single topic. Often, a seminar offers a short presentation followed by discussion by a panel or participants. A seminar is distinctive in the high level of interest and knowledge participants bring to it. In Wilmington, Delaware, the Metropolitan Area Planning Coordinating Council began a larger meeting with a seminar with experts to stimulate discussion. Wisconsin DOT sponsored five issue-based seminars on land use, economic development, urban and rural issues, tourism, and freight shipping for its long-range transportation plan.
- **Community juries** consist of individuals impaneled to hear testimony related to a specific issue. Jurors, chosen for their impartiality, hear reviews of an issue by neutral experts. The jury discusses and deliberates and subsequently issues its findings. Always non-binding and with no legal standing, the findings of such juries can pinpoint “fatal flaws” or gauge public reaction. The Minnesota DOT assembled a community jury to determine public attitudes toward congestion pricing as a traffic-reduction measure. The jury met for five days of hearings with more than 20 witnesses and voted in favor of reducing traffic but against congestion pricing. The jury then voted for increases in the gas tax and for allowing its use in funding transit improvements.
- **Roundtables** are meetings, usually around a table, to examine an issue through discussion by all participants. Each participant is a stakeholder, so the issue is debated from many sides. Free discussion and diverse opinions are encouraged. Experts in a field can participate, as well as residents, business people, and interest groups. Roundtables are often breakout groups, focusing on one or more topics related to the entire issue or project. Seminars and workshops often use a roundtable format, but what is distinctive about roundtables is their emphasis on thorough discussion of an issue. The Kansas DOT, Albany’s Capital District Transportation Committee, and the San Diego Association of Governments use roundtables in many projects and long-range planning efforts. The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority held numerous roundtable discussions with community and business leaders to identify priorities for its regional transit plan.
- **Study circles** hold a series of meetings to discuss critical issues. Members are assigned readings and other tasks between meetings. The process is very structured, often using study guides and discussion questions developed by an agency or a steering committee. Participants discuss each facet of the issue in detail. The same group meets periodically to investigate and debate the issue. Participants are appointed or self-selected. In Lima, Ohio, 40 churches with Caucasian, African American, and other members held study circles led by trained leaders to discuss ways to alleviate racial tensions. Study circles on race relations have been formed in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana; Portsmouth, Virginia; and Columbus, Ohio.

### **How do people work within a small group?**

**Problem-solving strategies are essential for small group accomplishment.** Small groups need a specific format or process to achieve the goals of a meeting. These alphabetically listed techniques can be used within the specific meeting structures cited above:

- A **conflict utilization opinionaire** uses survey techniques to explore how individuals deal with conflict. It enables a group to use writing and discussion to deal with conflicts or controversies. Before addressing the project issue at hand, a group of 8 to 20 people meet and fill out a



questionnaire or complete a writing task to express their attitudes about conflict. They then discuss how staff or leaders should deal with it and suggest the best techniques for reaching consensus or understanding.

- **Decision science** is a process of reaching consensus or formulating alternatives. It narrows the focus of discussion to the distinguishing characteristics of various options. A group begins by agreeing on elements that are not in dispute. The group agrees on as many points as possible; for example, “We all agree that we should minimize the impact on the agricultural properties,” or “We think improved access to that abandoned factory will encourage economic development.” Eventually the group reaches points on which they do not agree. By laying a foundation of mutually agreed-upon assumptions, decision science enables subsequent discussion to directly target unresolved issues. The technique requires a facilitator to develop the consensus items and organize discussion to resolve an issue or formulate a group of alternatives. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service used this technique to develop water management alternatives and explore structural versus operational solutions to water resource issues.
- **Delphi** (also known as policy delphi) reaches consensus by asking a small group of experts to give advice. The results can generate further discussion at committee or public meetings. The delphi process begins when an agency distributes questionnaires to a panel of experts, whose responses are then tabulated. Results are sent back to the panelists, who reflect on their colleagues’ opinions and either alter their stances or provide reasons for holding to their own positions. This process is continued until basic concepts and elements of a project or plan are identified by a majority. The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) conducted a delphi process to define critical issues facing the region and to suggest possibilities for the future. These findings were presented at ARC’s Outlook Conference in May 1992 to launch the VISION 2020 public process. Delphi is considered a survey technique as well as a way of involving small groups.
- **Dialogue facilitation** lets participants speak on deeply-held personal beliefs about an issue. People hold conversations that are outside the bounds of the topic under discussion. They can focus around a meal as an icebreaker. Here, individuals do not know which side of the main issue other people are on; they chat about families, interests, etc. Participants then discuss the main issue—not as enemies or antagonists, but as individuals. Consensus is not expected. Rather, the goals are to open up communication and knowledge that differing opinions can be held. Using a principle of family therapy (you have to live together, so you might as well get along!), dialogue facilitation asks each person to participate in conversation.
- A **nominal group process** is a term used for several different methods of identifying issues and priorities. One variation, employed by the Pennsylvania DOT, uses index cards for participants to register priority issues and other information; the cards are then tallied or analyzed. In another variation, participants generate ideas silently as individuals, and then list them as a group. They discuss what each means and then silently and individually rank the ideas. Yet another method is to have experts discuss an issue with a small group and prepare suggestions for participants’ reactions. To develop priorities for watershed management, the New Jersey Water Resources Authority held successive small group sessions. In the first, after a brief presentation, experts and participants discussed the issue. In the next session, the experts presented in ballot form an array of personal concerns and opinions culled from the previous discussion. The group used the ballot to rank their collective views. The top quarter of the selected priorities formed the basis of a survey mailed to other people participating in the public involvement effort. The results helped to define the Watershed Management Plan.
- **Open space technology** is a method of assigning meeting leadership. The Colorado DOT used this to manage breakout sessions of a large group. Participants introduced a topic or concern, wrote it on a card, and posted it on the wall. Examining the cards to choose a topic, group members signed their names on the card of their choice. Topics with the largest number of names were chosen for discussion groups. People who introduced the topic were responsible for

leading a breakout session on it. The Colorado DOT chose issues from these sessions as part of a management review effort.

- A **Samoan circle** derived its name very loosely, with only vague reference to the Pacific island group called Samoa. In fact, the formal structure began during a land use study in Chicago. Its purpose is to organize discussion of controversial issues or within large groups, instead of holding a free-for-all, no-holds-barred complaint session. It serves to identify stakeholders or to give priorities to actions to be taken or areas of agreement, although this is not a frequent used. A Samoan circle has no facilitator, chair, or moderator. Participants are expected to maintain their own discipline. They gather in two concentric circles—an inner circle with a table and four chairs, and an outer circle, with ample walking and aisle space. Everyone begins in the outer circle. The issue is presented, and discussion begins. Those most interested take chairs in the inner circle. Those less interested stay in the outer circle. All are able to move in or out of the center as the discussion flows or topics change. Each speaker makes a comment or asks a question. Speakers are not restricted in what they say or how they say it, but they must sit in the inner circle. Someone wishing to speak stands behind a chair; this signals those already in the circle to relinquish their chairs. No outside conversations are allowed. Comments are often recorded. Votes of opinions held by non-speakers are taken at the end, if desired. To close a meeting, empty seats are taken away one by one until there are no more chairs. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers frequently uses the technique for both internal and public meetings to define priorities and stakeholders in project planning. The Village of Northfield, Illinois, used it to organize discussion of controversial proposals for community development plans in a forum of 150 residents and officials. The technique was used in a meeting of FHWA officials and representatives of six Midwestern states in discussing ways to improve working relationships around environmental protection concerns related to projects and planning.
- **SWOT** (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis takes an analytic approach to a concept or issue, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, along with opportunities it represents and threats to its success. Using those criteria, the group evaluates chances for success or effectiveness. Priorities are resolved by voting and reaching consensus within the group. The Iowa DOT used the technique in establishing the basis for its strategic plan. In a related technique, force field analysis, a group defines “helping” or “hindering” forces and their effects on the group’s objective or discussion.
- **Synetics** re-charges a discussion by diverting it away from the issue being addressed. After discussing an unrelated topic, a group analyzes the dynamics of the side discussion to shed light on interpersonal relationships during discussion of the main topic.
- **Value analysis** helps evaluate alternatives and their consequences in terms of values (say, a clean environment or governmental cost reductions) widely held in the community. This technique is frequently used in the utilities industry. Participants compute the attractiveness of each alternative, assign points for each value, then total them into composite scores. The technique shows what values are in conflict and what trade-offs might be possible. It is often used in siting decisions—for example, by the Florida Power Corporation. It has been used by the Department of Energy in planning for a Tank Waste Remediation System in Washington State and for the Santa Barbara County (California) Oil Transportation Plan. The Oregon DOT has used it to evaluate specific agency actions in relation to project alternatives’ analyses. The Ohio Housing Finance Agency used it to establish suburban integration incentives in Cleveland.

### How do agencies use the output?

**Agencies use results to refine plans or projects and move a process forward.** Small groups generate information, ideas, and opinions. The Wisconsin DOT interviews small groups about preferences and viewpoints. Small groups are a way to achieve consensus.

**Small groups provide creative solutions or new ideas and scenarios.** In a small group session in Boston's Charlestown neighborhood, a local resident architect sketched out a bold idea that became the conceptual design for a major roadway reconstruction. Small groups foster further interaction between agencies and the public, often with a heightened level of trust.

### Who leads?

**Agency staff or outside experts lead small groups,** but training is necessary to lead them effectively. Training overcomes individual worries about acting as a discussion leader.

**Community people also lead small groups.** A neutral outside facilitator is important for small groups dealing with difficult issues. Some agencies offer training for local residents in leading discussions; others use outside experts. In Wilson, North Carolina, a local bank donated the time and expertise of several senior staff members to supplement agency managers. Working on the county's strategic planning/visioning process, the bank staff helped facilitate breakout groups focused on specific transportation topics.

**Small groups usually have one or two leaders.** Co-leaders are chosen from opposing sides of an issue to make sure all positions are adequately heard. This is important when no one group leader is viewed as neutral or objective on the issue being discussed.

**The choice of a leader depends on the complexity of the technique.** In cases where a specialized technique is attempted, it is important to have an experienced leader.

### What do small group techniques cost?

**While actual monetary costs are minimal,** staff time for preparation and management is sometimes considerable. The staff records events and reports back to a larger group or to the agency. A person is assigned the role of recorder to write down ideas on newsprint or blackboard. In some instances, agency staff facilitate. Triangle Transit Authority in North Carolina used staff members as facilitators of sub-groups analyzing transit potential and land use/development impacts of a new fixed guideway.

**Training staff or participants to run small groups is a factor.** Training improves productivity and leads to fewer meetings, thus offsetting training costs to some extent. One alternative is retaining consultants to manage small group sessions. Also, with minimal training, participants can play other roles that help cut outside costs, acting as recorders or reporters or in other support roles. These roles reduce the need for staff effort.

**Meeting facilities become a cost when a neutral location is desired.** To contain costs, publicly-owned facilities such as schools or colleges should be considered.

**Equipment, supplies, and refreshments usually have modest costs.** Adequate provisions engender good will between a sponsoring agency and group participants.

### How are they organized?

**The format and organization of small group work need to be carefully conceived.** Good preparation is necessary. The choice of technique must be targeted to the intended goals and topics of the meeting and whether the process is short- or long-term. The organization of the process should aim to achieve limited goals within a specified deadline. Policy-makers must be informed of the process and its goals to assist in its support.

**Small group techniques must respond to both agency and participant needs.** Agencies may want to solicit opinions, develop action items, and evaluate alternatives, while participants want to explore impacts, suggest various alternative actions, and make their voices heard. To remedy low attendance at large regional forums, the New Jersey DOT sent staff out to hear from certain populations about its long-range plan. Small groups met on Saturday afternoons in senior citizen centers, colleges, and center-city neighborhoods.

**Participants need to feel that a meeting is structured well enough to produce results.** Audiovisual techniques—video, overheads, displays, laptops—are just as important in small groups as in large meetings, particularly when technical information or concepts are being discussed. (See [Video Techniques](#).) They help engage participants, grab their attention, and establish a firm beginning. Meetings should be dynamic, fun, and interesting for participants. A method of summarizing, documenting, and reporting findings and agreements must be established before a meeting. Even a large meeting that is not well-attended can produce results when participants work in small groups to focus on specific issues or tasks.

**The process must be fair and open.** All participants need to have equal roles and be treated as peers. A group must be as inclusive of as many points of view as possible. Potential interests and stakeholders must be identified before assembling a small group, so that no one is ignored. If a large number of interests are represented, agencies often hold more than one small group session.

**A method for selecting leaders must be determined before a group meets**—whether leaders are to be appointed or chosen by the group. In some cases, it is appropriate to train small group leaders and clarify the responsibilities they are to undertake.

**Participants need to understand the process, their role, and the expected outcome** of a meeting. As in a larger session, the context, purpose, and goal of a meeting should be carefully explained and understood. If the process is unusual, participants need an animated leader to explain it and carry it forward.

**Specialized and unusual techniques have specific guidelines for implementation** that should be carefully explained to a group. Before beginning a meeting, it is essential to review the use of small groups, the proposed format, and the procedures, as well as possible issues that may arise and the results anticipated.

**Adequate facilities and supplies are important.** Groups use easels with newsprint and markers to record ideas. Refreshments help create a comfortable, informal atmosphere. Equipment such as overhead projectors aids in reviewing a proposal. Breakout rooms are desirable for small-group sessions that are part of larger meetings. Supplies must be available for specific techniques, such as cards for the open space technique.

**Implementation validates both the findings and the process.** If follow-up is required, staff or appropriate parties make sure it is done. A small group that is part of a larger gathering should be linked back to it. Pennsylvania DOT held large public meetings for its statewide pedestrian and bicycle plan, breaking into smaller facilitated sessions. Participants identified critical design problems as they affect cyclists and pedestrians. The groups then offered possible solutions and reported their key findings to the large group.

### **How are they used with other techniques?**

**Small groups must be integrated into an overall public involvement strategy.** A regular series of small group meetings ascertains participants' views. Small group meetings are held periodically to update community groups and interested people on the progress of a planning effort or project development. Such meetings supplement larger group meetings by developing detailed information or exploring specific issues.

**Small groups adopt techniques available to larger groups**, including charrettes, facilitation, visioning, and surveys. (See [Charrettes](#); [Facilitation](#); [Visioning](#); [Public Opinion Surveys](#).) Alternative dispute resolution techniques such as mediation are used when an impasse is reached. (See [Negotiation and Mediation](#).)

**Small groups can meet by teleconferencing.** The use of telecommunications brings people together without the need for extensive travel. (See [Teleconferencing](#).)

### **What are the drawbacks?**

**Preparation takes time and extends a project or planning process.** But small groups also save time in the long run if they provide opportunities for many people to participate and become familiar with a proposal's its elements and impacts.

**Small groups require care and feeding.** Space must be available and notices distributed promptly and to the right people. Staff often lead meetings or record their progress. Agencies sometimes provide a neutral site and refreshments for the group.

**The support of small groups requires a commitment from both the agency and the public.** Both need to be assured that small group meetings are worthwhile, productive, and needed and that the results will be of use in the overall process of public involvement. It is sometimes appropriate to have agency officials participate in small groups or observe the process to demonstrate its utility.

### **Are they flexible?**

**Small groups are inherently flexible.** They are used in a variety of situations, with a number of different organizing techniques, at various times in the process, at nearly any location, and with a wide variety of participants. They are organized to respond to specific issues and participants. Also, small groups meet just about anywhere. Many meet in public agency offices, schools, or universities; some in private business facilities. Staff members from the New Jersey DOT have met with small groups in private homes. (See [Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events](#).)

**Small groups contribute to almost any larger process.** The intended use of small groups must be identified early in a meeting process so interested people can comment. In a large meeting, breakout sessions should be identified on the agenda.

### **When are they used most effectively?**

**Small groups are effective at many different times in a process.** They are effective at the beginning to alleviate polarization and early perceptual problems. When a process stalls, small groups re-start public involvement or move it forward. They are used before issues reach an impasse, or if participants are feeling excluded. They are used in either planning or project development to prioritize issues or work on action items.

### **For further information:**

- Breakout groups: Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, Washington, D.C., (202) 962-3200
- Community juries: Minnesota Department of Transportation, (612) 296-3000
- Decision science: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (415) 989-1446
- Delphi: Atlanta Regional Commission, Atlanta, Georgia, (404) 364-2575
- Dialogue facilitation: Public Conversation Project, Cambridge, Massachusetts, (617) 491-1585

- Nominal group process: Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, (717) 783-1068
- Open space technology: Colorado Department of Transportation, (303) 757-9163
- Roundtables:
  - Capital District Transportation Committee, Albany, New York, (518) 458-2161
  - Kansas Department of Transportation, (913) 296-2252
- Samoan circle: Dallas Area Rapid Transit, (214) 749-2581
- Seminars: Metropolitan Area Planning Coordinating Council, Wilmington, Delaware, (302) 737-6205
- Study circles: Study Circle Resource Center, (203) 928-2616
- Value analysis:
  - Oregon Department of Transportation, (503) 986-3455
  - Washington State Department of Energy, (509) 376-1065