



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Bringing the University to You

Fact Sheet 03-47

Idea Listing Technique

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Groups often struggle to find collaborative and structured processes for generating ideas and solutions to problems, issues, and concerns. This fact sheet describes Idea Listing (Kaner 1996), a technique that groups may use to facilitate discussions for generating innovative ideas for addressing problems.

What is it? It is a loosely structured process that helps a group search for a better understanding of an issue by eliciting diverse opinions and ideas on a given topic.

When should you use it? This is a helpful technique for a wide range of group challenges. For example, Idea Listing can be used when a group is discussing a new issue, or if group members have polarized positions on an issue. The Idea Listing technique may also be employed when a group feels that an issue or topic appears to be overwhelming, which might include land-use and complex community re-development issues. Idea Listing produces a wide range of ideas and is particularly helpful when a group needs to break down a complex issue into easily understood components or tasks.

What are the process steps that should be followed when using the Idea Listing Technique?

1. Arrange large sheets of paper (i.e., easel paper) on a wall. Groups often produce more ideas than they expect, thus a sufficient amount of wall paper is required. (*A good rule of thumb is to affix one sheet of paper to the wall for every two participants.*)
2. Select a facilitator (member or non-group member), who will lead the process and serve as a neutral party when conducting group discussions using the Idea Listing Technique.
3. The facilitator introduces a list of suggested ground rules (or “conversation principles”) to be followed. Following a discussion of the ground rules, the facilitator asks participants to honor them. Two important rules or principles include: (a) all ideas count, even the “crazy” ones and (b) no side conversations during the exercise.

Note: If the group is larger than 20, consider breaking into smaller breakout groups. Ask each breakout group to select someone to serve as chart writer, who records ideas generated by the group.
4. The facilitator states the issue or problem in the form of a question. An example of a specific question is, “*In what ways can our*

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board effectively respond to the challenges of the recently approved community plan?" The group is given an allotted time to respond to the question; however, when necessary, it is important that the group remain flexible in taking additional time. A group of 20 participants should be able to complete steps one through seven within 15 to 30 minutes.

5. The facilitator or chart writer asks participants to share their ideas, one idea at a time. These ideas are then listed on the wall paper or flip chart. If participants begin to discuss ideas while they are still being listed, the facilitator should remind them of the ground rule side conversations are not allowed.
6. If the group becomes silent at some point in the process, the facilitator should be patient and give participants adequate time to reflect and think about other possible ideas. Typically the initial ideas listed are the obvious ones; participants are often "silent" because they are searching for the less obvious ideas. The facilitator should not place pressure on participants to respond.
7. Near completion of generating ideas, the facilitator announces to the participants that "*Approximately two minutes remain for generating ideas.*" Sometimes this announcement may produce additional ideas.
8. The facilitator reads each of the ideas listed and discusses them for clarity, asking if ideas can be grouped in categories or themes. If so, the facilitator may want to rearrange the ideas, putting each theme or category on one a separate piece of paper. Another option is the facilitator, under the guidance of the group, may circle similar ideas with a specific color marker. For example, those ideas related to the category, "Information and Education" are circled in red. The facilitator can ask one of the chart writers to record the color-coded circled ideas on a separate piece of easel paper to post results in a more user-friendly format.

9. The facilitator asks the group what next steps they would like to take regarding the given topic. To help the group discuss some possible next steps, the facilitator might ask:

- *Do the grouped ideas lend themselves to a plan of action or strategies for the group?* The group may want to prioritize the categories or themes at this time and begin working on an action strategy.
- *Do the ideas listed add clarity to the issue, creating better understanding of group member's opinions?*
- *What would the group like to do with this information?*

Resources

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