

Facilitation Difficulty: 

 40 min.

 Up to 15

 No preconference

Purpose – To define the elements of a larger topic or task, or to deepen a conversation around a question or topic that has many answers or perspectives. This protocol works best when begun with an open-ended analytic question such as, “What do we need to create and maintain inclusive and mutually rewarding relationships with parents in this school?” It can also be used for planning purposes.

Group size – Up to 15

Preparation – Bring pens and sufficient post-it note pads (ideally the “super sticky” variety) for all participants. You’ll also need a few markers. Hang 5-7 pieces of chart paper on the wall side-by-side, taping them together at the edges for one large working space. Ideally, write your question or topic in the center of the space but do not reveal it until after the setup.

Facilitation tips – Don’t give people too many post-its or too much time to write ideas, or you’ll have too many post-its to sort! Ask people to write suggestions that are concrete as possible. Using the example of “What do we need to do to create and maintain an inclusive and mutually rewarding relationships with parents in this school?” Someone may write “Time to meet.” This is not nearly as helpful as “Schedule a meeting on the first Tuesday of every month for an ‘idea exchange’ with parents.”

Steps:

1. **Setup** – Explain that this protocol is to be done in silence, and that participants should write their ideas on the post-it notes, one idea per slip of paper. Read/reveal the question on the Affinity Map and set the timer for silent brainstorming. (2-4 min.)
2. **Place Post-its** – Instruct the participants to bring their post-it notes to the chart paper, continuing in silence, and randomly place them on the Affinity Map. (1 min.)
3. **Categorize** – Directions for this step might sound like this: *“Which ideas go together? Continue to work in silence as you move post-its near others that have an affinity, that seem to belong together. You can move your ideas and those of others, freely. Everyone’s ideas became the group’s ideas the moment they were placed on the chart paper. Do not be offended if someone moves your ideas to a place that you think they do not belong. Feel free to move a post-it again if you see a stronger affinity elsewhere. I will stop us when most of the post-its are in groups.”* (5-7 min.)
4. **Label** – Ask for a volunteer to read aloud an affinity group of post-its. Ask the volunteer, *“Do you think all the post-its here belong in this group? If not, please move them to the group where they belong.”* Hand the volunteer a marker and ask, *“How would you title this group of ideas? Write down the title and draw a line enclosing the ideas within this group.”* (The volunteer may get input from the group for titling.) Continue this process until all the groups have been labeled and all the post-its have found a home. At the end, there may wind up being a group of misfits at the end labeled, “Outliers” or “Pot-pourri.” (15 min.)
5. **Discuss** – Have an open discussion using questions such as the following to help participants make connections between the categories: (5 min.)
 - *What themes emerged? Were there any surprises?*

- *What is missing from our “affinity map”?*
6. **Next steps** – The group must now decide what their next steps will be. Commonly, participants will divide themselves into smaller groups, each one taking a “category” and developing: (8 min.)
- Next steps
 - A time line to get these steps accomplished
 - Resources needed to accomplish these next steps
 - Who is responsible for what (All of the “who, what, when, where, and how” questions)
7. **Debrief and discuss** – (5 min.)
- *How did this protocol expand your knowledge, or your perspective on the question?*
 - *Why did we do this activity in silence?*
 - *What did you think of the protocol? What worked for you, and what didn’t?*
 - *How might you use this protocol in your work?*