

Facilitation Difficulty: 

 ~40 min.

 10-20 people

 Preconference
in advance

Purpose – The Structured Charrette (or Reflective Charrette—see below) is best used in place of a typical brainstorming session when you want to improve a piece of work in progress and are feeling “stuck.” It prompts the participants to actively listen to a problem and to reflect and analyze before and during the idea generation phase, helping the presenter or group of presenters move beyond the “stuck place.”

Background – “Charrette” is a technical term originating in architecture. In non-education settings, a charrette usually refers to an intense period of design or planning by a group of people under deadline pressure, in which they consider all the stakeholders. The word “charrette” is French for “little cart,” which was used to collect plans from architecture students as they were rushing to finish their projects.

Group size – 10-20 people

Preparation – Preconference with the presenter or presenters in advance of the meeting, to ensure that the Structured Charrette will be the most effective protocol for the situation, and to develop a strong focusing question. Bring chart paper and markers.

Facilitation tips – Your job is to observe the protocol, direct the participants back to the focusing question after digressions, ask questions, occasionally summarize the discussion, and make sure all voices are heard. As the protocol progresses, this may include keeping a speaker’s list of people who wish to speak, and asking whether those who have not yet offered any suggestions wish to do so.

Potential pitfalls – You’ll need to be skillful to keep people focused, to ensure that all voices are heard, and to take care that no one dominates the discussion.

Optional modifications – The group may write their ideas onto Post-it® notes and give them (especially unvoiced ideas) to the presenter at the end of the protocol. Also, see The Reflective Charrette below.

Steps:

1. **Present** – (5 min.) Based on the pre-conference, the presenter (or presenters) describes their “stuck” project while the group listens and takes notes. The presenter provides context and brief, helpful background information about the project. They end with their focusing question which clearly states what they want or need from the Structured Charrette. Chart the focusing question and refer to it throughout the protocol to guide and refocus the discussion.
2. **Clarify** – (3 min.) Each participant may ask one clarifying question so they may more deeply understand the context of the situation. The presenter should answer them briefly. Remind the group that it’s impossible for them to know all the background information (which is why you limit the number of clarifying questions), and yet their perspective may be extremely helpful in the next steps.
3. **Separate** – (1 min.) The presenter should now physically move away from the group but stay close enough to hear, and ideally, turn so they aren’t making eye contact with anyone. The presenter should bring materials for taking notes. Instruct everyone to imagine the presenter has left the room, so they should avoid eye contact with the presenter and speak of the presenter in the third person. (“Jennifer said” or “They said” rather than “You said.”)
4. **Reflect** – (2 min.) Direct the group to silently reflect on and make note of any ideas related to the

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presenter's focusing question.

5. **Brainstorm** – (10 min.) The group discusses the problem and offers suggestions couched in “I wonder” language, while the presenter listens and takes notes. Suggestions come from a place of collaboration rather than criticism, and the intent is “to make a good thing even better.”
6. **Refocus** – (2 min.) After ten minutes of discussion, ask the presenter, “*Would you like the group to focus now on a particular idea or area of discussion?*” Invite the presenter to consider returning to the table and joining the group for the next steps, especially if they have specific questions around some ideas that were discussed. Often, the presenter chooses to stay outside the circle without adding any more instructions.
7. **Reflect** – (2 min.) Direct the group to silently process what has been shared so far and reflect on new ideas, guided by the presenter's recent direction.
8. **Discuss** – (7-10 min.) Return to discussion with or without the presenter in the circle, continuing to develop new ideas or build upon ideas that have already been shared.
9. **Summarize** – (5 min.) Bring the presenter back into the group (if they didn't return in Step 6). After a moment of reflection, ask them to briefly summarize the ideas they found most helpful or provocative, thank the participants, and relay any possible next steps as they prepare to “return to the drawing board.”
10. **Debrief and reflect** – (5 min.) Begin with the presenter, now speaking about the process as opposed to the content:
 - *How effective was this protocol in shifting you out of a “stuck place?”*
 - *How did it feel to sit away from the group and have them talk “about” you and your piece of work rather than “to” you?*
 - *Do you think that moving away from the group affected the outcome?*

After the presenter speaks, ask the group:

- *How did this protocol differ from other meetings or conversations you've experienced around similar projects or problems?*
- *How did it feel to you to speak “about” the presenter and their work rather than “to” them?*
- *Why do you think the protocol is set up to provide this “invisible curtain” between the presenter and the group?*

Optional modification: The Reflective Charrette builds in time for participants to silently generate more ideas between these steps, to avoid getting “stuck” on early suggestions. An example of how this protocol might work with reflection time built in:

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| 1. Present (5 min.) | 7. Brainstorm (5 min.) |
| 2. Clarify (2 min.) | 8. Reflect (2 min.) |
| 3. Separate (2 min.) | 9. Check-in (2 min.) |
| 4. Reflect (2 min.) | 10. Discuss (5 min.) |
| 5. Brainstorm (5 min.) | 11. Summarize (5 min.) |
| 6. Reflect (2 min.) | 12. Debrief and reflect (5 min.) |

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