Exercises and Activities for Stakeholder Convenings

Convening stakeholders can be an incredibly valuable process and an opportunity to bring new ideas and perspectives to the table, to create shared understanding of challenges and opportunities, and craft more effective and lasting solutions. Using activities and interactive sessions as part of your agenda can help foster dialogue, stimulate creative thinking, unearth new ideas and accelerate the course of action.

This handout highlights several tools and exercises that the Rocky Mountain Institute have found to be helpful and effective. These resources are organized into 3 sections:

1. Tools to build understanding
2. Tools for reflection
3. Tools that support action

Want to learn more about planning an effective stakeholder convening? Check out Gather - The Art & Science of Effective Convening, http://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/bellagio-center/gather-art-science-effective

1. Tools to Build Understanding

Iceberg Exercise

OBJECTIVE: The iceberg will help participants start thinking on a whole systems level. Only 10% of an iceberg is visible from the surface while the remaining 90% lies below the waterline. Translate this idea to the topic of the meeting, the problem you’re addressing is the 10%, to get to the underlying causes, you must dig down to the 90% that isn’t tangible: the patterns, structures, and mental models that manifest themselves in the visible problem.

HOW IT WORKS: Draw the iceberg on a flip chart and have your participants populate the chart with Post-its containing ideas and observations about the problem in question.

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• **Events**: one-time occurrences that tell us something about the problem you’re addressing (ie. newspaper headlines or stories)
• **Patterns**: repeating events. With enough time, all significant events will show up in some sort of pattern
• **Structures**: something that underlies a pattern and is truly structural (ie. policies, laws, rules, geography, etc.)
• **Mental Model**: an idea, belief, or paradigm: why does the structure exist?

For maximum impact, look for leverage points at the levels of structures and mental models. This is where action will cause a systemic impact.

**FOR MORE DETAIL** on the Iceberg Exercise, see Northwest Earth Institute, *A Systems Thinking Model: The Iceberg*, [http://www.nwei.org/resources/iceberg](http://www.nwei.org/resources/iceberg)

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**Harvesting and Clustering**

**OBJECTIVE**: Helping a group to organize its ideas.\(^2\)

**HOW IT WORKS:**

1. Divide the room into small groups.
2. Provide each group with 3-5 Post-It notes of the same color (either regular or hexagon). You don’t want fewer than three or more than five per table.
3. Working in their small groups, ask the participants to record their insights regarding a central question that has been posed onto the Post-It Notes. Each insight should get its own Post-It note.
4. Once the small groups have recorded their answers, ask all the attendees to form a semi-circle around a blank wall.
5. Ask one participant per group to read their responses out loud, placing their Post-Its on the wall as they go. (In the beginning, the sticky notes should be spread out on the wall, with no attention paid to organization.)
6. As subsequent groups read their responses, they begin to cluster similar ideas together.
7. A few volunteers work with a facilitator to refine the clusters of ideas. Each cluster will get a name, which a volunteer or facilitator will write on a sticky note of a different color. It is useful to for the larger group to take a break after they place their sticky notes, giving the volunteers time to work.
8. When the break is over, a volunteer will walk the participants through the categories.

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MATERIALS:

- Post-It notes, either regular or hexagons.
- Two colors, one for the insights and one for the categories.
- Markers

2. Tools for Reflection

Peer Input Process

OBJECTIVE: Gaining rapid feedback from a diverse community in order to speed up success.

HOW IT WORKS:
The peer input process taps into the collective wisdom of a group to gain rapid feedback on a question or challenge. It’s a structured exercise that allows those deeply embedded in working through a problem to invite new questions and alternate perspectives. The peer input process can create a robust and nuanced portrait of the problem or idea at hand, one that can dramatically accelerate a project’s eventual impact.

1. Introduction (5 minutes): A facilitator introduces the purpose of the session, the party seeking input, and the steps in the peer input process.
2. Unpacking (5–20 Minutes, depending on group size): Those seeking input share their issue or challenge. The presentation should conclude with a concrete question posed to the group explaining where help is needed.
3. Questions (5–20 Minutes)
   a. **Clarifying Questions:** Peers are given an opportunity to ask very precise questions. The answers should help them gain a better understanding of the problem so they can better assist with it.
   b. **Coaching Questions:** Peers ask deeper questions, which should be recorded but not answered by those seeking input. Coaching questions usually start with ‘why’ or ‘how’ and are raised in the spirit of helping others improve their idea.
4. Re-Group and Discussion (20 Minutes): Those seeking input now have a chance to consider the questions raised, think about how to incorporate feedback, and work through possible project revisions.

The peer input process not only pairs a project’s complex challenges with a wider variety of solutions, but also opens up new avenues for rapid improvement.

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Weaving Our Thinking Together

OBJECTIVE: Clarifying individual and group thoughts on a question.

HOW IT WORKS:

• Pose a question to the group and ask participants to first spend a few minutes in silence reflecting individually, making notes to record their thoughts. Sample questions: What is becoming clearer to you about ______? What new insights are emerging?

• Ask participants to get into pairs and share their reflections.

• (Optional step) Ask participants to now work in small groups (groups of 4–6 are ideal) and distill their thinking into their best three ideas.

• After an appropriate amount of time, return to the large group and ask a few people to share their reflections on the original question; or ask groups to share their three ideas in plenary.

WHEN TO USE IT: This exercise is useful at almost any time during a meeting. It is an efficient way to focus thinking and conversation and allows everyone to speak and share their thoughts. The activity is also useful in supporting introverted thinkers who may prefer to think before they talk.
3. Tools to Act

LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®

OBJECTIVE: To enable “thinking with your hands” which can improve collaboration and creativity.

HOW IT WORKS:
LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® is a model building exercise that is helpful for addressing complex challenges. The LEGO® works as a catalyst — when used for building metaphors, the models serve as a basis for group discussion, knowledge sharing, and problem solving, and help foster creative thinking and unique solutions. Rocky Mountain Institute successfully uses LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® as an introduction to rapid cycle prototyping and to create a common understanding of the current system teams are seeking to shift.

LEGO SERIOUS PLAY GROUND RULES:
• Everyone Participates
• If you don’t know what to build, just start building
• There is no one right way to build
• Your model means what you say it means
• Always tell a story referring to your model
• Start building individually; then combine with your team

“You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.” – Plato

FOR MORE DETAIL ON LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®: http://www.lego.com/en-us/seriousplay/

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