
ELEVEN METHODS TO PROVOKE PARTICIPATION

By Mel Silberman

1. **Open sharing:** Ask a question and open it up to the entire group. Use this when you are certain that several group members want to participate. Its straightforward quality is appealing. If you are worried that the discussion might be too lengthy, say beforehand:
“I’d like to ask four or five participants to share...”
2. **Anonymous cards:** Pass out index cards and request anonymous answers to your questions. Have the completed cards passed around the group or otherwise distributed. Use this to save time or provide autonomy for personally threatening self-disclosures. The concise expression necessitated by the use of cards is another advantage of this method.
3. **Questionnaires:** Design a short questionnaire to be filled out and tallied on the spot. Use this to obtain data quickly and in quantifiable form. Feeding back the results immediately can be appealing to participants. You can verbally poll the group instead of using written questions.
4. **Subgroup discussion:** Break participants into subgroups to share (and record) information. Use this when you have sufficient time to process questions and issues. This is the best method for obtaining everyone’s participation.
5. **Seat partners:** Have participants work on their tasks or discuss key questions with a participant in the seat next to them. Use this when you want to involve everybody but don’t have enough time for small group discussion. A pair is a good configuration for developing a supportive relationship and/or working on complex activities that would not lend themselves to large group configurations.
6. **Whips:** Go around the group and obtain short responses to key questions. Use this when you want to obtain something quickly from each participant. Sentence stems are useful in conducting whips. Invite participants to pass if they wish. Avoid repetition by asking each participant to make a new contribution to the process.
7. **Panels:** Invite a small number of participants to present their views to the entire group. Use this, as time permits, to gain a focused, serious response to your questions. Rotate panellists to increase participation.
8. **Fishbowl:** Ask a portion of the group to form a discussion circle and have the remaining participants form a listening circle around them. Bring new groups into the inner circle to continue the discussion. Use this to help bring focus to large group discussions. Although time-consuming, this is the best method for combining the virtues of small and large group discussion.
9. **Games:** Use quiz game formats to elicit participants’ ideas or knowledge. Use this to pick up energy or involvement. Games are also helpful to make dramatic points that participants will seldom forget.
10. **Calling on the next speaker:** Ask participants to raise their hands when they want to share their views and request that the present speaker call on the next speaker. Use this when you are sure that there is a lot of interest in the discussion and you wish to promote participant interaction. When you are ready to resume your role as moderator, inform the group you are changing back to the regular format.
11. **Talking Stick:** A stick or feather, is passed around the group and only the holder may speak and the feather goes to the next person in the circle. A participant may pass the stick on without speaking but then cannot speak until the stick comes all the way around the circle again. Use this technique to insure everyone has an equal opportunity to speak and to allow for words without comment or reaction. It is useful in difficult discussions to allow all points of view to be heard and also as a way of concluding discussions. It is a slower process and you may need to say how many times people may speak or limit the passing to one or two rotations or until everyone has spoken.