



Methods Toolkit

Thursday Policy Plenary Discussion Question Circle Process

Objectives and Context

- To hear different perspectives from a panel of policy experts
- To engage conference participants in lively discussion of policy issues and approaches
- To leave with a sense of community – that together we are grappling with the important issues and seeing possible solutions to our most difficult challenges
- To capture the ideas emerging from the group as part of the conference documentation

Number of Participants

Any number of participants from 10 to 1000+. One facilitator can lead any size group in a conference setting.

Timing

Depends on the size of the panel and the culture of how the participant group shares their thoughts – some cultures share thinking by revisiting something a few times during their story or conversation while other cultures tell a story or share experiences without revisiting elements. The former may take more time than the latter. In our example we had two hours including lunch; we chose to leave 45 minutes for lunch and then move to the process with 20 minutes for panel discussion, followed by 30 minutes of table discussions and concluding with the panel for another 20 minutes. If time were available this process could comfortably expand to two hours.

Materials

Handouts at the tables will provide a reminder of the overarching topic/question for discussion. It can be helpful to have pens and notepads at the tables.

Technology

While not essential to the process itself, web meeting technology is a valuable addition to allow for the capture of ideas and nuggets from the table conversations. When part of a larger conference process, live data capture from the tables to a shared electronic flip chart allows for the facilitator/moderator and panelists to monitor the table conversations while they are going on. This facilitates bringing back the conversation to the panel for their concluding observations. In this case the technology used was FacilitatePro from Facilitate.com using Internet access or LAN to network computers together in a shared online meeting space.

Pre-work

Selection of a topic and creation of the initial question. When using a question circle for a conference with a panel to get the process started it is helpful to allow time for the facilitator to interview the panelists and meet with them beforehand to explain the process. If using the process as part of a meeting it is helpful to have some interaction or conversation around the topic ahead of time to generate energy around the topic, stir thinking and provide a rich environment for the discussion.

Room Layout / Set-up

For a conference with a panel it is useful to have a stage or raised platform at the front of the room with comfortable chairs for the speakers. Microphones ensure that the moderator and panelists are clearly heard. A coffee table is useful if panelists will use laptops to monitor the large group conversation.

Participants are grouped in clusters or at tables of 6-10 people. Tables are not necessary but helpful when technology is used. It is important to be aware of the noise levels ensuring that group members are close enough together to be heard and that groups are far enough apart not to be overheard.

At each table there is a laptop with power adapter and power supply. One person the group is asked act as the recorder/scribe for the group. This can be pre-arranged or you can ask each table for a volunteer. Scribes are simply there to note down the ideas and key remarks that emerge from the conversation. The FacilitatePro software allows them to type notes in the equivalent of a Post-it Note and add ideas to a shared flip chart visible to the facilitator/moderator and panelists. Participants can ask that a particular comment not be recorded.

Instructions

Step 1: Panel Discussion

20 minutes

The moderator/facilitator introduces him/herself and the other panelists. S/he introduces the topic for discussion and then poses the opening question to the first panel member. For example:

Q: What do you think is the biggest challenge we face in Community Development in the next 10 years – especially given the immediate fiscal troubles that we are facing? What is needed in the policy field to address this challenge?

Each panel member will take turns to talk for 5-10 minutes each. At the end of each of their contributions they end with a question... **The question that I am left wondering/asking is...**

Note: While the moderator's initial question is carefully constructed, a participant's question to the next participant is not pre-formed. Instead it is one that naturally arises from their thinking at the time. The exact form of the closing question is not important. However, ending with a question rather than a statement will create a quality of dialogue and reflection that will support the discussions to follow at each of the tables.

When all the panelists have spoken – there may be more than one round of comments and questions if the panel is only two or three people – the moderator/facilitator will reflect briefly on what s/he has heard and then pass the questioning out into the group. **The question that I am left wondering/asking is...**

Step 2: Table Discussions

30 minutes

The conversation is thrown out to the tables. Participants are asked to take their turn around the tables so that everyone is given an opportunity to be heard. People are asked to be conscious of the 30 minute time allotted for this discussion, providing time for everyone to speak.

As each person finishes up what they are reflecting on they are asked to end their comments with a question: **And the question that I am left pondering is...**

Note: The questions left in the circle do not need to be directly answered or responded to. Rather these are questions of reflection as part of a dialogue. Any member of the group can pick up the conversation, moving on with what is on their mind and ending with their own reflection and question.

Comments and questions from each of the participants are noted by the scribe, in our case entering them into the web meeting tool to be shared with the moderator and panelists as the conversation proceeds.

Step 3: Panel Discussions

20 minutes

The conversation returns to the panel. They are asked to reflect on what they have seen emerge from the captured conversation at the tables such as: common themes, differences, critical policy questions or issues, something unexpected – a perspective you hadn't expected, something that got you thinking, what next in the policy arena, personal takeaways...

All the input from table conversations and the panel reflections will be captured and made available to the conference participants at the conference web site.

Source: Also called Inquiry Circle, this method was originated by Leilani Rashida Henry, Being & Living Enterprises, Ltd., in 2004 – www.beingandliving.com. These notes were adapted from notes by Lisa Heft, Opening Space – www.openingspace.net.

This Methods Toolkit handout was written by Julia Young, Facilitate.com – www.Facilitate.com