

# Facilitating Decision Making Online

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## **Learning Goals:**

- Understand the basics of divergent, evaluative and convergent process.
- Explore how to facilitate divergent, evaluative and convergent processes to help a group accomplish tasks online.

Once you achieve engagement and group formation, how do you move from "talk" to outcomes? How do we do decision making processes online?

Think about the many of traditional (offline) task facilitation processes. Most utilize some combination of:

- **divergent thinking** (i.e. brainstorming, visioning);
- **evaluative processes** (prioritization, "voting" dots, advocacy, etc.);
- **convergent processes** (voting, decision making, and consensus).

How do we facilitate these processes online?

## **Divergent Processes**

Divergent processes tend to work well in asynchronous online discussion environments, online synchronous meeting spaces (like WebEx and Elluminate) and in synchronous chat rooms. In synchronous environments, there is the group energy to spur creativity and enthusiasm. There is more time for reflection and space to explore in using asynchronous tools. There are visual records for sorting and reflection in both. In fact it is so easy to generate and post ideas, you can overwhelm a group in the divergent phase if you don't keep it organized.

Some divergent practices you can do online include:

- Brainstorm (asynchronously or synchronously) using traditional brainstorming methods (no bad ideas, no critique during brainstorming etc.)
- Use visuals to stimulate ideas – either material directly related to the topic at hand, or images that stimulate ideas using metaphor and free association. With today's photo sharing applications such as <http://www.flickr.com/>, you can select a set of photos tagged with key words and integrate that ongoing "feed" of pictures into your workspace to visually stimulate people.
- Use techniques such as Edward deBono's [Six Thinking Hats](#)

- Use small group breakouts (synchronous or asynchronous) and then compile ideas up to the larger group.
- Use games, such as “just three words” or “tell a story together” where people use constrained writing to force a clearer look at the idea or problem in question. (For more ideas see <http://www.thinksmart.com/>, [http://www.ideachampions.com/free\\_the\\_genie/index.shtml](http://www.ideachampions.com/free_the_genie/index.shtml) - there are some great free games on this last site. Try one!)

### **Evaluative Processes: sorting, grouping and ranking**

The next phase of evaluation can also be supported online, with links to source materials, space to have dialogs or debates on the merits of issues and plenty of places to store information. This is when organizing the material and facilitating through weaving and observation becomes important. Again, you can think about traditional evaluative processes you use offline (“Most Significant Change,” Future Search, Open Space, etc.) and create an online version. Some **techniques** include:

- Restating purpose.
- Creating tables, charts and summaries.
- Using **color** to distinguish between types of material.
- Creating separate spaces to store and comment on materials in "paired" topics.
- Ranking material.
- Putting materials on static web pages for wide review.
- Weaving points across topics.
- [Mindmapping](#).
- Noticing patterns.
- Making process transparent.
- Keep the group focused on the big picture **and** the current phase of the process (no more brainstorming, but not yet to decision making).

Note: This is a good time for the use of advocacy. While in brainstorming you did not want people to judge or advocate for an idea, in this phase you want to stimulate critical thinking practices.

### **Converging: Consensus, Voting and Decision Making**

The tricky part comes in on the convergent phases. There are a number of ways to attack this: tools and processes. Consider a combination of two or more. Some **examples of processes** include:

- Voting;
- Polling to test convergence;
- Consensus (full and non blocking);
- Advisory with a single person or small group making final decisions;
- “[Dotmocracy](#)” (dot voting system, traditionally used offline, but you can use this [PDF](#) as an attachment and do it online).

There are now a group of tools designed to help groups through this online convergence phase. They started with simple voting and polling tools, but now include tools that help group and prioritize and support a range of decision-making processes. This is a blessing to both facilitator and group. Polls are helpful for testing where a group is in the decision making process and for gathering info. They are not always a good choice for the actual decision making process -- just like offline.

Voting can also create imbalance in a group. On the other end of the spectrum is consensus -- which requires a lot of work offline and online. But surprisingly, the process is very similar. Polling can be used to determine if anyone is in a position to block, which identifies where there is more work needed towards consensus.

That said, technology will not overcome the weaknesses of poorly formed and supported groups. In fact it often exacerbates the problems. If you are interested in going deeper into this topic, take a peek at TJ Elliot's piece on "Guidelines for Effective Groups" piece in our resource area. As facilitators, we need to actively focus the group on these convergent tasks. Without that F2F eye contact, very clear agreements are needed to keep the process moving forward.