

# ALTERNATIVES TO GROUP DISCUSSION

TOP TEN TIPS  
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*One reason why people don't like meetings is because they take only one form— large group discussion— which can have several drawbacks. Often it can allow one person to dominate the entire meeting space, or it can lead to physical and mental restlessness with all participants sitting and not able to participate at their fullest capacity. Yet there are lots of easy, fun alternatives to large group discussion that we don't think to use. Effective meetings often have a combination of group work and discussion, along with some of the following group-discussion alternatives, all of which can facilitate higher levels of participation, deeper engagement, and greater clarity.*

- 1. Small Group Work:** Splitting a large group into smaller groups allows the group to work on several tasks at once. For example, if the large group prioritized three goals to work on, you could split the large group into three small groups and ask each to develop objectives to achieve the goal.
- 2. One-on-One Conversations:** Sometimes an issue is so heated that everyone has something to say about it. Asking a large group to pair off gives all participants an ample amount of time to share their views and listen to views from someone else.
- 3. Gallery Walks:** A large group can split up into smaller groups and rotate to different parts of the room to review information put up on a poster paper. At each site, the small group reads what is on the paper and adds its own comments to it.
- 4. Individual Reflection:** A portion of a meeting can be used to ask participants to take a few minutes to write down their own views on a piece of paper. This is often a good strategy to use as part of a brainstorming session, with people writing their ideas down on post-it notes that then get reviewed by the whole group.
- 5. Role-Plays:** To gain a deeper understanding of the issues a group is discussing, participants can participate in a role-play to personally experience two different sides of an issue, each taking the role of someone with a different or opposed point of view, then forming arguments and statements to match.
- 6. Go-Round:** One strategy during discussion of a hot topic is to give everyone an opportunity to comment on the issue. Depending on the size of the group, you may want to set a time limit for each person's contribution to the go-round.
- 7. World Café:** Small groups form around tables where all have the opportunity to discuss an issue and write down their thoughts for others to later review. After discussion for a set period (20-30 minutes), the groups split up and move to new tables, allowing for quick cross-pollination of ideas.
- 8. Fishbowl:** This method has two to six meeting participants dialog with each other to discuss/debate an issue in greater detail while the rest of the participants view it from the outside. This can help give participants a new perspective on the topic.
- 9. Walking meetings:** This is a variation of the small group work method, in which groups walk and discuss at the same time. This activity is good for items needing further discussion, as opposed to decisions that need to get made.
- 10. Visualizing Information:** Visual meetings give participants the opportunity to draw images related to the discussion topic, whether it's done individually on a piece of paper or together on a giant piece of poster paper hung on the wall. It gives people the opportunity to visualize the issues under discussion. Having participants draw their vision of what the future looks like is usually fun, and aids participants in thinking differently about issues in order to come up with creative solutions.

## SPECIAL NOTE

If you decide to introduce any of these suggestions, take time after the activity to debrief. This is a good idea because these small-group activities usually generate a lot of ideas, thoughts and feelings. Bring the group back together and ask questions like, What did you learn? Or you could have small groups briefly report back on the work they generated, and solicit feedback from the larger group. Make sure, as you carry out these variations on your typical large-group discussion, to tie the content and ideas that come up back into your decision-making process.

*Ron Milam has over 14 years of experience facilitating meetings and developing leadership for over 50 organizations.*

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