

Facilitating Structured Interviews Before a Group

Source; Adapted by Tim Dyer – The Johnmark Extension, from *The Little Book of Cool Tools for Hot Topics*

A relatively ‘safe’ process for allowing a group to explore differences is for a facilitator to interview several people in front of the whole group. This allows the interviewer to draw out key points of difference clearly and to do so in an ordered and structured way.

The great advantage of this means of exploring conflict is the capacity to facilitate appropriate content being brought out in the meeting in a logical manner. The interviewer gets to set the agenda and also has a degree of authority over process, including how long issues are discussed and the order in which interviewees speak.

Process

One or two carefully selected representatives for each of the views present are interviewed in some depth by an independent interviewer.

The interviewer needs to be well briefed on the issues and the group she or he is working with. The interviewer should be regarded as competent and trustworthy by the group so that the process has integrity.

The interview is structured, in that the questions (at least the main questions) are given to the interviewees well in advance, so they have time to prepare their responses. A time limit for responding to each question should also be provided.

Facilitation Guidelines

1. It is good practice to start on a personal and informal note with each interviewee so that the group gets to know them if they are not already well known to the group. Have an informal ice-breaker question ready to go.
2. Work through each substantive question or issue moving between those you are interviewing in different orders. Once everyone has spoken to the question seek to draw out the key differences in reasoning, assumptions and values before summarising and moving to the next question.
3. If you allow questions from the audience, it is good practice to have them submitted on paper or by text to a phone or tablet rather than stand and speak. If you have an assistant, this can help organise the questions and also allow for softening or rewording any questions which are unnecessarily antagonistic or inflammatory.
4. Have a facilitation plan if the audience begins to interrupt or call out. If this is likely put clear ground rules in place as the meeting starts.

Variations

This can be used with a single interviewee at a time. Take a break and then interview a second with an alternative view.

Use a listening chair. The person selected for the listening chair (ideally from a different viewpoint), at the periodic invitation of the interviewer summarises back to the interviewee what they have heard that person say.