



Photo: Madeleine Prutzer

Listing and sorting of thoughts

Used when we want to put forward ideas, knowledge, problems or involve a group discussion, that will allow everyone to have a say. You then structure the thoughts under various headings so as to make things clear.

This method can be used in many contexts; during meetings, for producing action plans or forming workgroups, or for evaluating and improving projects.

Time

1 to 2 hours, depending on the number of participants in the small groups and the number of small groups.

Number of participants

Ideally 4 to 6 people per small group. The large group can be up to 50 people with no major problems, but larger will also work.

How

1. The issue that you will be considering is important. It needs to be clear, and it needs to seem relevant. It may look at what the group will be working with, or what involvements, problems or opportunities are available. It may also be an evaluation of what you are pleased with what is concerning you (see also tool no. D5 Follow-up and improvement).
2. Divide yourself into small groups, 4 to 6 people per group. This can be done in advance with large groups. Decide on a time when the large group will reconvene.
3. Start by spending 5 to 20 minutes reflecting on an issue. Sit on your own, in peace and quiet, and concentrate on the task in hand. Note down your thoughts on pieces of paper (Post-it notes or other pieces of paper). Just write one thing on each Post-it note. (You can limit the number of notes to 3 or 4 if you want to speed up the process.)
4. The small groups then get back together. You then go round everyone in the group so that everyone can talk about their notes and place them on the table. This task is most enjoyable if



you allow every person to put forward one note at a time and then move on to the next person. As a result, you will go round the whole group several times until all the notes have been laid out and explained. It is important to bear in mind that this is not an opportunity for arguing about what is right and what is wrong. All you have to do is put forward everyone's thoughts. The best way to do this is simply by listening to one another and asking questions in order to help the person speaking to clarify or develop their thoughts.

5. The group sorts the notes into piles relating to similar things. Everyone in the group must agree. If not, you have to create more piles. You then allocate a heading to every pile which summarises the contents of the pile. The best idea is to write this heading on a slightly larger piece of paper that can be read from a distance.
6. The large group then reconvenes. The small groups tell the others what they have come up with and tape the heading notes onto a board or wall so that everyone can see them. If you like, you can attach the small Post-it notes to the heading notes so that they can be included. It is best if the entire large group gathers around the board so that everyone can move around and remain closer to the others. The heading notes on the wall can be re-sorted so that headings that belong together, in the opinion of the large group, can be put together.
7. By all means end with a Reflection on how work has gone (tool no. A10).
8. The information is documented by taking photos and/or by writing it out so that the results can be sent to all participants and to people who were unable to attend, and they can be shown to new members. These results provide a foundation for further work, and it is handy to be able to go back to them. The notes made by the groups should also be photographed or written out so that they can be included in the documentation so that everyone knows what is going on.

What is needed?

- It is an advantage to have an experienced process leader, but the process can be led by anyone in the group.
- Post-it notes or other pieces of paper, pens and tape.
- Marker pens that can be seen from a distance.
- A camera for documenting the information.

Things to bear in mind

- Everyone's thoughts are valuable, and it is important to give everyone the same opportunity to speak. In the small groups, you can nominate one person to make sure that everyone is given about the same amount of time and that you do not end up bogged down in arguments and discussion.
- It is a good idea to point out that the things you write on the Post-it notes are just to help jog your memory. There is no need to deliver beautifully formulated thoughts in these notes. In the small groups, you can go on to explain what you mean by telling people about it. Help is also available here, in that the group will ask questions so that you can develop your thoughts.
- Give clear instructions and set aside time for dividing up the group, dividing people into small groups and then reconvening.



Further reading

- L4C Learning for Change. Section: NGT – Nominal Group Technique. Page 12.
<https://legacy17.org/Files/Article-related/L4C.pdf>
- Community Planning Handbook. Section: Methods/Briefing workshop. Page 34.
http://library.uniteddiversity.coop/REconomy_Resource_Pack/Community_Assets_and_Development/The_Community_Planning_Handbook-How_People_Can_Shape_Their_C.pdf