"The Challenge of Convergence"

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Abstract

There is a need for most facilitators to consolidate a great volume of ideas generated with Ventana’s GroupSystems™ Brainstorming Tools. It is easy to generate ideas with great speed, but far less easy to bring them all together - a process called convergence. Traditional use of GroupSystems tools suggests that groups first brainstorm ideas using the Electronic Brainstorming Tool (EB), then organize these thoughts into categories using the Categorizer (CA) or Idea Organization (IO) Tools, and finally Rank Order Vote the final categories to prioritize and achieve consensus. The purpose of this paper is to present an alternative sequence in the context of what the author calls The Group Process: Diverge (brainstorm or collect ideas); Converge (consolidate, or make some sense of the ideas); Evaluate (typically vote in some fashion); Debate or Lobby (to gain a better understanding), and finally to Organize The Results (to develop presentable output).

During the first part of this paper, we will step back to look at the entire process of running a meeting with GroupSystems - a process we call:

The five divisions of labour of the GroupSystems facilitator

1. Meetings must be planned

I have a rule when teaching facilitators new to the GroupSystems tools: “Never accept the stated requirements of the Meeting Owner (Group Leader or Initiator) at face value”. They often don’t know what they want, and you are there to help them determine what it is (if anything) that you can do to help.

The art of active listening plays the key role during this meeting before the meeting. I often tell my initiators that I will ask a lot of ‘dumb questions’ (and some of them are!). Initiators will want to dump loads of data on you, sensing somehow that overnight, you will become an expert in their business and be able to tell them what to do. This data will include annual reports and even studies done by other consultants, one of which included an evaluation of IBM versus the competition (while I was still at IBM!). I scan the material to pick up vocabulary and get a feel for the organization, but that is all.

After some two hours of discussion, I’m ready to try on an agenda for size. The next major task is the ‘sale’ of the agenda, at the pre-planning, before the meeting to the participants, and at the beginning of the meeting with an often well coached initiator.

2. Meetings must be structured

Meetings need a people-agenda (PA). This will distinguish the term from tool-agenda. I believe strongly that a meeting needs to be structured independently of the tools. The best meeting structure is a series of questions.

The most simple PA and one that I use most frequently is:

a) Where are you going? (Objectives or Goals)
b) What problems do you have getting there? (Obstacles or Challenges)
c) How are you going to resolve these problems? (Solutions and Action Plans)

There are many meeting PA's from Strategic Planning through JAD and Business Process Re-Engineering. In my experience they are all built around the above basic meeting steps, however complex the entire process.

Examples of the problems caused by not recognizing the significance of meeting structure:

i) The worst I've seen is the EB question: "What are the problems of the world and your suggestions for improvement?" Here, the facilitator is trying to do both b) and c) above in the same session. A better approach would be to brainstorm the problems, identify those we can make recommendations for, and propose suggestions for these. The purpose of sequencing meeting agendas is to 'divide and conquer'; to split the meeting problem into discrete steps for easier and more logical resolution.

ii) Several years ago, at IBM, there were a series of meetings on the subject of workload, beginning typically with the EB question: 'What actions are required to reduce the workload?' These ideas were then organized into categories and voted on.

I maintain that each of these groups runs the risk of in fact increasing its workload! The group must first establish an objective (see a) above) for workload reduction (specific, time targeted, attainable) and then identify the root causes of their workload problems (see b) above) before attempting to propose actions. Doing this any other way could well be quite inappropriate given that actions are recommended and prioritized in the absence of group objectives and effective problem definition.

3. A better way to proceed - The Group Process

Once we have our set of questions ready, we can proceed into the meeting.

The Group Process applies to each question in the PA, and consists of a divergent phase followed by convergent discussion; this is in turn followed by evaluation, debate and organization. Further discussion on Group Process, the main purpose of this paper is left to the 'Challenge of Group Process' at the core of which lies the 'challenge of convergence', beginning on the next page.

4. The GroupSystems tools help the process

While I could (I would not unless my next meal depended on it) go back to flip charts, I remain solidly committed to making GroupSystems work with my groups, but not without a suggestion or two to the developers.

Anonymity, productivity, documentation - introductory benefits stated to those unfamiliar with the GroupSystems tools - are as ingrained as they ever will be. The tools work, and I work them.

The tools support the Group Process but not the structured agenda. An early mistake on my part had me attempting to map tools to agendas, which in my opinion doesn't work.

5. Follow up those meetings

I don't believe that we run away at the end of the meeting and never know what happened to the results. For what appears to me to be a critical decision, I will ask the senior executive whether I may call in a month to find out what transpired. A meeting without an agreed upon action plan with names and target dates is a waste of time.

With a growing experience base behind me, I even dare to make recommendations myself, which gets me right out of the world of the un-involved facilitator and into the world of consulting.
The Challenge of Group Process

Brainstorming

Most meetings (either appropriately structured or not) start with brainstorming, and typically use what I refer to as the right-brained Electronic Brainstorming (EB) tool. From technographer to professional meeting facilitator (someone who can run a meeting with or without electronic tools), all have difficulty managing the output from such a session. In the early days we even tried to establish records for how long we could keep groups performing this task - the longest then was two and a half hours! More recent experience has taught us to reduce this time to a more manageable twenty minutes. In the absence of a meeting structure (PA), the results are often chaos. We hear from disgruntled groups: "What do I do with all this data?" I've even known facilitators who send participants away at this point with the happy thought: "Look at all the great ideas you've generated!"

Please don't think that I disagree with the right-brained EB process. If used at all, it seems to be best done as a prelude to a PA question as a 'reliever of strain' or a mental 'laxative' in order to begin the process of catharsis as groups immerse themselves in either emotionally taxing or complex topics. "Let's dump for a moment and then go back and see if we can't sort this thing out!"

The challenge of convergence

Many groups will now attempt to 'organize' the output of EB into meaningful categories immediately following brainstorming.

My very first experience with this over 5 years ago had a very dogmatic and arrogant group select their own ideas from the brainstorming reference file and try to 'append' everyone else's as subservient. All we did in retrospect was to turn the data on its side. After many futile attempts (as an experienced meeting facilitator, keep in mind) to 'organize the output of EB', I concluded that this was simply not a very good way to run most structured meetings.

Over the next few years, I was to discover that:

- There was a 'Diverge' process and there was a 'Converge' process in meetings. This process was going on almost subconsciously in all traditional meetings with all of the attendant problems of traditional meetings. With the advent of and the speed of electronic brainstorming, divergence happened too quickly, and often generated too much spurious thinking, although it must be recognized that amongst the grey hairs were the strands of gold, and amongst the chaff, the wheat.

- Not all questions in PA's needed so much divergent thinking. Some questions, especially mission statements and the like, needed a little divergence followed by a lot of convergence. I prefer the terms 'data collection' or 'idea generation' over the term 'brainstorming', as this latter often has implications not called for by the PA question.

- Focus was a perennial problem. Ask a group to brainstorm problems or issues, and you get
mostly suggestions for action: 'We need to...'.
- I discovered two major problems with the 'brainstorm/organize' approach:
  a) The 'gold strands/wheat' or what I prefer to call 'gems' got lost. We would ask groups to brainstorm or to ferret out some creative, original gems of wisdom and then immediately ask the group to bury them in buckets. "I don't want to talk about hot or cold or wet vacations; I want to talk about deep sea fishing and stream fishing." I believe that we organize ideas too soon in the process.
  b) When groups were asked to organize ideas they tended to think along traditional lines with no basis for a fresh approach. Asked to organize some 'problems' or 'issues', groups would look at the EB output and suggest that ideas belonged in management, product line, finance, and Human Resources categories, or some such similar but familiar grouping.

At the recent Ventana User Conference, a participant asked how you could 'converge' 200 ideas coming from the EB tool. In my usual spontaneous, impetuous and irrational way, I responded: "If you can't converge 200 ideas, then don't generate as many."

In retrospect, there may well have been some wisdom here. If there are 200 valid answers to a PA question, then perhaps it's not the answer that's too large - it's most likely that the question needs to be broken down into smaller, more manageable pieces.

The best answer I've found to the challenge of convergence is to manage the divergent thought that precedes it. Slow the process down! Keep the responses focused! A well trained process facilitator can help considerably. A technographer not only doesn't know what question to ask, but doesn't generally understand the answers. A professional facilitator knows what questions to ask, understands the answers, and further can help guide groups toward the right answers.

A process that works for both the beginning and the experienced facilitator:
- Have technically inexperienced participants (my most frequent audience) write down two or three key responses to the PA question on a piece of paper. Paper is a medium this group is comfortable with - they can devote 100% of their mental energies to this task.
- Transcribe their thoughts into Idea Organization. Generating Ideas and Comments seems to require two different areas of the brain - so focus on ideas first; do not allow comments initially - this is far easier on executive participants.
- Collect a few ideas at a time. Have the group discuss the initial ideas for meaning. The facilitator should be in edit mode on the facilitator screen. Discourage debate; discourage evaluation; encourage understanding; encourage discovery; seek common ground, seek clarification. Merge ideas; Get similar ideas together for discussion; Delete!!! (we aren't looking for recommendations at this point, sir, we're trying to identify problems); add a 'Dumping Ground Bucket' in order to retain those precious key strokes, but avoid inappropriate answers at this point; and all importantly EDIT the points to make them clearer for the group.
As a general rule of thumb, I figure if I don't understand the idea, then there's likely someone out there who doesn't understand it either!

- Keep the process in a loop. Generate ideas and discuss. Diverge and Converge. Stay in the loop until the group feels that the ideas are all out. Keep apples or oranges in the list; don't mix them. Develop an audit question to test that the group is at the end of this PA question: if we achieve all these objectives, will we fulfil our mission? if we overcome all these obstacles, we be successful? if we meet all these requirements, will be at end-of-job? if we do all these things, we will overcome the obstacles?
- If NEED BE, open the comments feature. Consider closing off ideas. Consider closing off ideas and comments. Now that the ideas are 'public' there's little additional benefit in anonymity.

The answer to the challenge of convergence lies in the successful management of divergent thought. People often ask me where this technology is going. If we could only see inside each others' heads. If I could feel the way you feel. If I could understand the growth and hard knocks you've experienced. If I had the knowledge you had. The ultimate answer might lie in a Human Area Network (HAN), where we're all connected by wires (or wireless) and have free access to all the (unclassified!) areas of group wisdom, data and conscience!

Evaluation or voting

As suggested above, it may be too early to organize these ideas and subject them to premature burial in a prematurely named category. So with the marvel of technology, let's put our judgemental hats on as a group and evaluate the ideas, but before we organize them.

Alternative Evaluation is my favourite way to do this, as it allows multiple perspectives on what are often complex ideas. Which ideas would produce most revenue, increase morale, be easiest to implement (with recognition that we just may have to bite some bullets sooner or later), satisfy our shareholders, meet with our value system, etc.? What is our current performance? Which will provide the greatest levels of customer service? A large ETC. is in order.

Tackle the list in several ways. Vote: Do you agree or disagree with the items on the list? Given 100 units of business energy available to this group, where should we allocate our attention? Which 'n' of these items are most in need of attention at this time? Another large ETC.

I've discovered that groups may have to loop through this particular exercise more than once to build what I call a secondary level of understanding of the ideas. We thought we understood after the converge phase, only to be surprised at where other members of the group ranked/rated/evaluated/voted/poll the ideas.

Debate or Lobby

What now emerges is what I call the debate or lobby phase of the process, and one which is critical to building consensus. The facilitator must continue the role as catalyst. The group might agree, but they may be wrong! The facilitator must ensure that the group recognizes polarization as healthy! Groups must talk in this phase!
Following debate, the group might well be led back to a re-evaluation in order to build consensus.

Many will argue that at this stage we will find strong divergence of views on a particular matter or item under discussion. Experience has taught me that polarization at this stage results most often from lack of understanding, and not from opposing views.

In my early days at IBM, I learned that "planning is simply the analysis of alternatives". Too many groups fight over the alternatives, when the real fight should take place over the criteria. If the criteria are well thought out, and reflect the overall group objectives, most decisions are relatively simple.

**Organization**

I believe that a group is now (and only now) ready to organize the ideas they have just evaluated.

Three things can happen with the evaluated list.

1) The top 'n' ideas we need to consider, the 'gems' we were seeking, are discovered at the top of the list. There is usually no duplication or overlap. We can take these directly into the next question on our structured PA.

2) There are clusters of ideas which suggest a new and important way of looking at the items on the list, other than the traditional view which we may well have taken after brainstorming, but before voting. Doing organization before voting means that the group has no 'hooks' onto which to hang their ideas - hence the group will by nature 'hang' items on familiar hooks. New and creative 'hooks' emerge after prioritization, especially when the criteria have been fully developed and ranked according to enterprise values.

3) Some combination of 1) and 2) above.

Of note is the fact that the positioning of items in the list will often permit creative new superset ideas, or categories. An example: During a recent demonstration, after participants had generated some ideas for new business they might venture into, and evaluated these against 'potential profit', 'risk', and 'fun', these three ideas emerged to the top:

- Make our own beer
- Open a sports bar
- Teach the two-step

It didn't take the group long to figure out that they needed a two story building where they would make the beer on the top floor, and pipe it down in draft form to the sports bar on the main floor and thirsty two-steppers in the basement.

Using a chauffeured approach, the facilitator will guide the group in this fresh insight, developing categories that make sense and copying prioritized ideas into the category. This seems to be the fastest and most simple way to use the tools.

I see the following advantages:

a) There is fresh insight into the way should organize our ideas or view ourselves.
b) The categories are prioritized quite naturally.
c) The ideas within each category are in priority sequence. We have retained the 'gems'.

What follows is a real-life example of the differences between the results of doing the organization after the voting instead of after the brainstorming. The reader should conclude that the categories in this particular case were somewhat vague when the organization was done after brainstorming, and that the final list, developed after voting, was crisp, meaningful and succinct.

A software development and marketing group got together to focus their energies through the development
of some critical success factors and to make some recommendations for action.

They identified some 70 areas requiring attention. A random sampling follows:

- Actively seek customer input to requirements.
- Develop a consistent, organization wide view of customer needs.
- Learn to respond to customer phone enquiries and service requests.
- Develop an effective way to route and track problems across the company.
- Study the problems of end-user design.
- Segment our markets.
- Identify and prioritize our market opportunities.
- Optimize our advertising and sales channels.
- Focus on customers outside of the U.S.
- Release products in smaller functional increments.
- Develop a 'workstation style' product approach.
- Incent our managers to take risk.

When the group first attempted to organize the data WITHOUT prioritization, the following categories were selected.

Customer Requirements
Offer Solutions
Services
Competition
Customer Relationships
Usability
Market Planning
Pricing
Marketing
Development
Investment
General

Examination of this list will show that it is closer to an organizational chart than to a set of critical success factors.

The group then evaluated the list of 70 against 3 criteria that mapped to the organization's objectives using the Alternative Evaluation Tool of GroupSystems.

The following set of Critical Success Factors then emerged from the top of the evaluated list (albeit, after some editing):

We must:

- Make it easier for our customers and channels to get our products.
- Apply 'ease of use' principals to our products.
- Simplify product choices for our customers.
- Actively capture, use and validate customer requirements.
- Build long term customer relations by involving customers in our development processes and increasing customer empathy.
- Value price our products

Examination of this list will show a set of broad recommendations (CSF's) for which the group can now develop action plans. They will more easily be able to bring focus to their activities and develop a set of programs to achieve them.

This list is to the point, meaningful to the group, and actionable.

Summary and Recommendations

It would appear that the sequence of brainstorm, organize and vote has some built in limitations which can frustrate both participants and facilitators and provide results that at times may be less than optimal.
An alternative sequence, which calls for groups to brainstorm, prioritize and organize would seem to permit groups to follow a natural and logical progression. The built-in loops permit groups to continuously monitor their progress in responding to questions in a structured set. It allows groups to overcome an inherently human weakness when it comes to understanding the meaning of written communication.

This revised sequence needs to be understood in human and not technical terms.

1) Managed Divergence. Generate ideas - put some thoughts on the table. This may well be preceded by an 'freewheeling' brainstorming session that gives groups an opportunity to 'dump'.

2) Facilitated Convergence. Consolidate the ideas into an understandable set - seek a first level of understanding. Both divergence and convergence should be done in a spirit of caring, even loving (although this may not appeal to all groups), adventure, creativity, warmth - non-evaluative; non-judgemental; non-confronting. Test the list for completeness. Elaborate for clarification if necessary. Loop through divergence and convergence until the group is satisfied that the ideas for discussion are 'on the table' and understood.

3) Guided Polling or Voting. Improve our understanding of the ideas by voting or evaluating - take a peek inside the collective head to gain secondary, even tertiary levels of understanding. Voting results quickly demonstrate where we agree and where we are polarized, and hence identify the areas we need to debate. The group feels a purpose, a sense of accomplishment! Focus on the criteria!

4) Debate. Confront! Allow for greater depths of understanding of the issues/points at stake. Loop through voting and debate to build consensus. A lack of understanding is most often at the root cause of polarization, therefore seek understanding.

Discuss/argue the differences in the group's understanding until a thorough consensus has been reached - make the decision, and move on.

5) Organize the prioritized set of ideas into categories - most often this will permit fresh thinking within the group, but the output will also serve as a vehicle for later communication of meeting results throughout the organization.

This author proposes as a solid approach to working with groups in a structured meeting environment, to take each of the questions in the set and to diverge, converge, evaluate, debate and organize giving due consideration to the amount of divergence required, the most appropriate form of evaluation, the depth of the debate and the requirement for organization.

The training that is provided to beginners in the use of electronic tools must include more than tools. Training must recognize the skills that need be built for pre-planning; good meeting structure or agenda design; group process - this is in fact, how facilitators use the tools to run meetings; the art of leading debate and building consensus; and finally the task of following up.