

Alternative Brainstorming Methods for Problem Diagnosis

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The facilitator presents the process improvement opportunity for which problem diagnosis ideas are sought. The wording used by the facilitator should encourage specific, tangible diagnoses and discourage abstract ideas of theories.

The facilitator's role is to ensure that the group members understand the process improvement opportunity, the objective of the problem diagnosis brainstorming session, and the procedure to be followed.

There are at least three methods of brainstorming. The most familiar is *free wheeling*, where:

- Group members call out their diagnoses spontaneously.
- The facilitator records the diagnoses as they are suggested.

Advantages to the free wheeling approach are that it is very spontaneous, tends to be creative, and is easy to build on others' diagnoses. *Disadvantages* are that strong individuals may dominate the session or confusion may set in and some diagnoses can be lost when too many people talk at once.

In *round-robin* brainstorming,

- The facilitator asks each member, in turn, for a diagnosis.
- Members may pass on any round.
- The session continues until all members have passed during the round.

Diagnoses are recorded by the facilitator as in the free wheeling method.

Advantages of the round-robin method are the difficulty for one individual to dominate, discussion tends to be more focused and everyone is encouraged to take part; *disadvantages* are the difficulty for each of the participants to wait their turn, some loss of energy, reluctance to pass, and the difficulty of building spontaneously on other's diagnoses.

The *slip method* differs markedly from the other two approaches.

- The facilitator asks participants to write down their diagnoses on small slips of paper or index cards.
- The diagnoses are then collected and organized.

Advantages of the slip method are that the anonymity allows sensitive topics to surface, it can be used with very large groups, and it is not necessary to speak out; *disadvantages* are that it is not possible to build on the diagnoses of others, some diagnoses may be illegible or not understandable, it is slow and it is difficult to clarify diagnoses.

Regardless of the approach used, the alternative problem diagnoses derived from the brainstorming session must be thoroughly reviewed, carefully evaluated and thoughtfully synthesized into a *provisional working diagnosis* before moving on to the next stage of the process improvement analysis.