

Affinity Diagram

When a team wants all voices to be heard as members explore options and possibilities or wants to bring clarity to a problem that is uncertain or hard to understand, this tool is a way to organize and consolidate information that the team has generated through brainstorming. It takes data that has been provided as input and makes sense of the themes or threads that run through the team's thinking. It assists teams in at least three ways: (1) making decisions, (2) finding solutions, and (3) creating plans.

The following list describes the process for creating an affinity diagram.

1. Clearly identify the problem or question to be addressed. For example, a district's or campus's planning team may use an affinity diagram to organize ideas about its improvement goals.
2. Using index cards or sticky notes, each team member legibly writes, in large print, one thought or idea per card or note. (It's helpful for each team member to use the same color of marker.)
3. Collect all cards, reading aloud one at a time and randomly placing them on the wall for all team members to see.
4. Once all cards are on the wall, the team clusters the index cards by noticing similarities, repetitiveness, and relatedness. All cards must fit into a group, and cards may be added if the group determines something is missing. Through discussion, the team may also recognize the need for a new cluster.
5. Once all cards are in a category or cluster, the team names the category or cluster. It is helpful to use a different color of index card for the name. The result will look similar to the illustration following this list.
6. Depending on the problem or question that initiated the affinity diagram, the team moves forward with appropriate action, such as prioritizing categories for an action plan, engaging in deeper study of a category, making a decision about next steps, and so on.

