

Splitting into small groups

Why sub groups?

The larger the number of participants the more certain it is that working in sub-groups will be more effective. The choice of how to form these depends on the sort of output expected of them.

Apart from the fact that it is more difficult to help large groups be effective, there are a variety of process reasons for wanting participants to work in smaller groups, sometimes called sub-groups or 'break-out' groups. These include:

- *wanting participants to work in more detail than the full group 'plenary' allows*
- *to allow more participants to 'have their say'*
- *to enable several subjects to be discussed at the same time*
- *to explore the range of different opinions in the large group*
- *to gain the joint informed opinion of a number of specialists*

Having decided that, for some combination of these reasons, there should be sub groups, four variables need to be considered: **size**, **management**, **task** and **composition**. They are all related. Ideally they should be thought of together but, as size and management are more process related and task and composition are more content related, they can be considered in pairs.

Size

Research has shown that groups of up to seven can be creatively effective, but that this drops off sharply over that number.

Management

Small groups of up to nine or ten members can be generally left to organise themselves. Larger groups will benefit from the services of a facilitator. In both cases they should be given the instruction to first choose someone to report back to the others at the end and then get on with the work.

Task and composition

The choices here are concerned with whether or not the sub-groups should all be given the same task, and to what extent the membership of the sub-group should be a mixture of like or unlike people (views, professions, organisations, interests, cultures, genders, etc.).

In general, mixed groups are appropriate for producing more creative outputs, while those with more similar people in them can sensibly be asked to formulate their joint opinion.

The allocation of the same task to all sub-groups tends to provide in-depth results on a specific theme - as opposed to the greater range of results on a variety of themes that can be expected from giving them different tasks.

Rhizome is a co-operative of experienced facilitators, trainers and mediators. We work with co-ops, and campaigning and community groups across the UK, and with those national organisations that support activism and participation in all its forms.

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Breaking into sub groups

Here are just a few techniques for dividing into small groups:

Technique	Group size	Materials
Numbering off: count round the group. If you want 4 small groups, count 1,2,3,4...1,2,3,4 and so on. Asking participants to say their own number will help them remember which group they're in.	Any	None
Strangers: find an appropriate number of people who you don't know so well.	2-4	None
Jigsaw: give each participant a piece of jigsaw and tell them to find the people with the pieces to complete their puzzle.	Any, if jigsaws have right no. of pieces	Several jigsaws. You can use cut up postcards or playing cards
Energiser: participants are asked to form groups of various sizes at speed, several times over, finishing in groups of an appropriate size for the next activity. For example, with a group of 17 that you want to work in small groups of 2-3 people you might ask them to form: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> one group of 10, one of 7, then eight groups of 2, one of 1, then two groups of 5, one of 7, then three groups of 4, one of 3, one of 2, then finally five groups of 3, one of 2. 	Any	None
Pack of cards: a combination of jigsaw and energiser techniques: deal everyone a playing card from a deck of an appropriate size (e.g. just the picture cards). For example, you could ask them to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> form a group with others of the same number (e.g. all the Jacks) form a group with others that make a run in the same suit (J, Q, K, Ace of spades) form a group with others that make a run in the same colour but any suit (J, Q, K, Ace). 	Groups of 4 or 5	Playing cards (or could use 'happy families' cards to same effect)
Opposites: ask people to form pairs based on an opposite (colour of hair, colour of eye, not wearing the same colour as you, glasses/ not wearing glasses).	Pairs	None
Corners: ask people to go into a corner of the room according to the criteria you choose. For example: <p><i>“this corner if you were born in January to March</i></p> <p><i>this corner if your birthday's April to June</i></p> <p><i>this corner if it's July to September</i></p> <p><i>the final corner if you were born in October, November, or December.”</i></p>	4 groups of approx equal size	
Mode of transport: divide by the mode of transport in which you reached the meeting or workshop.	Unequal	None