

Section 2.1 - Developing a Discussion: Topic Strategy

For most people, the idea of facilitating a group discussion is pretty intimidating. For those people, a good understanding of the discussion topic can greatly ease the stress they feel.

To Start

Start by asking yourself these key questions:

- What is the discussion topic?
- What needs to be accomplished by the end of the discussion?
- How do you lead the team towards meeting those needs?

Refining your Topic Statement

The discussion topic is generally straight forward; either a superior will provide one, or the topic will have been developed in a previous meeting.

Whatever the case, there needs to be a goal prepared for the discussion. A few questions you may want to ask yourself are:

- "What is the discussion topic asking for?"
- "What ambiguities are present in the topic statement?"
- "What level of detail is being asked for by the discussion topic?"

Try and develop answers to these questions in order to better prepare yourself for the discussion. You don't need to be an expert on the topic, but you need to be informed enough about the topic to ask relevant questions to stimulate the discussion. These questions are ones that you can use during the discussion. Try to make the questions provocative. Remember you want to stimulate thinking about the topic.

Tip: One way to help you in doing this is to prepare a series of flashcards with questions on them.

How to Accomplish What's Expected

What needs to be accomplished can range from clear defined goal, to an arbitrary outcome meant for you to determine.

Ask yourself what it's going to take to achieve the desired accomplishment.

While doing that, consider these questions:

- What can I do to create the context of the discussion? In other words, what do your classmates need to know to have a common frame of reference for the topic?
- What question(s) can I ask to stimulate multiple points of view. You need to develop several open-ended questions that are likely to stimulate a lively discussion. Some of these may be rather proactive. (For example, what are the key elements to being a family?) (See the topic: Framing the Discussion Questions)
- How can I bring closure to the topic? At some point, you will need to lead the team into a "wrap up" of the discussion. At this point you are trying to reduce the discussion to its overall essence. This doesn't mean that your group needs to come to an agreement. But you do need to capture what you and your classmates consider the key discussion points.

Measuring the Discussion's Progress

Ask yourself this question: At the end of the class period, when you are summarizing what was done, what would you include in that summary?

Bloom's Taxonomy, in the table below, can help you identify the types of actions you may want to elicit from your discussion participants, like analyzing the issues, understanding different points of view, or remembering others' comments.

On the right are verbs you can use to formulate discussion questions aimed at helping participants reach these goals. For example, when you have identified your goal on the right side of Bloom's chart, choose a few corresponding verbs from the left side of the chart and develop 1-3 specific discussion questions using those verbs (for example: for the goal of Analyzing - How would you differentiate between your opinions and those of the other students? Can you examine the strengths and weaknesses of each opinion?)

Once you have worked through each of these planning questions you should have developed a good approach for your discussion. In addition to answering these questions, a good practice is to set up a mock presentation outline of the meeting that will include a collection of questions that are aimed at finding the solution to the group's challenges or tasks. Essentially, the mock outline allows you as the facilitator to have a guideline for helping direct the discussion where you can present a particular set of questions to focus the groups thoughts in the correct direction and stay on track. In the following pages, we'll discuss some of the nuts and bolts of the actual discussion.

Bloom's Taxonomy

Remembering: can the student recall or remember the information?	Define, duplicate, list, memorize, recall, repeat, reproduce state
Understanding: can the student explain ideas or concepts?	Classify, describe, discuss, explain, identify, locate, recognize, report, select, translate, paraphrase
Applying: can the student use the information in a new way?	Choose, demonstrate, dramatize, employ, illustrate, interpret, operate, schedule, sketch, solve, use, write.
Analyzing: can the student distinguish between the different parts?	Appraise, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test.
Evaluating: can the student justify a stand or decision?	Appraise, argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, evaluate
Creating: can the student create new product or point of view?	Assemble, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, write.