

# Transportation Outreach Planner

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## Public Outreach Strategies

### Small Group Techniques

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#### Recommended Target Groups

##### Education

College Education  
High School Diploma  
No High School Diploma

##### Language

Creole  
Other  
Spanish

##### Disability

Hearing Impaired  
Other  
Physically Challenged  
Sight Impaired

##### Income

Low Income  
Middle to Affluent

##### Vehicle Ownership

Non-vehicle Owner  
Vehicle Owner

##### Race and Ethnicity

Race and Ethnicity

## Age

Seniors

Working Age Adults

Youth

## Strategy Class

- General

## Strategy Types

- Educational

## Description

Small group techniques are often used at large meetings to help engage people and stimulate discussion. Such techniques are particularly useful for obtaining public feedback on complicated, multifaceted issues. Generally participants are divided into small groups (sometimes referred to as breakout groups) of no more than 20 people to discuss a specific issue, develop ideas, or provide recommendations for the larger group to consider. The small groups allow for people to participate with more ease and encourage an exchange of ideas. Although there are a variety of techniques that can be used with small groups to facilitate dialogue, most of the techniques share the following characteristics: <sup>1</sup>

- A group leader or facilitator is assigned to facilitate discussion and report recommendations
- The group is given a specific task or objective to accomplish
- Input and ideas are obtained from all members
- The group develops findings or recommendations and reports back to the larger group

## Special Uses

Small Group Techniques can be used to: <sup>2</sup>

- Encourage participation and interaction among participants
- Make meetings more productive and interactive
- Structure discussions and facilitate consensus building
- Provide a non-threatening forum to discuss controversial issues
- Review complex technical issues

## When to Use

Small group techniques can be used any time an agency wants to actively engage the public in dialogue and discussion. They can be used at the beginning of a process to help identify community priorities and concerns. They can also be used to obtain creative solutions and recommendations to difficult problems. In general, small group techniques can be effectively used to encourage public involvement in meetings and events. <sup>3</sup>

## Cost

### \* Low (up to \$999)

The cost of applying Small Group Techniques is minimal since such techniques are generally part of a larger meeting or event. Costs include staff time, facility rental, equipment, supplies, and printing. Additional expenses may include hiring a facilitator. In many cases, agencies may be able to reduce expenses by using donated space and by asking facilitators to provide the service pro-bono.

Low (up to \$999)

\*

Moderate (\$1,000 to \$9,999)

\*\*

High (\$10,000 to \$50,000)

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Very High (Above \$50,000)

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*Disclaimer:* The cost estimates provided are intended to be a guide. Project costs will vary depending on the size and nature of the project.

## Time

### \* 1 to 3 months

It can take approximately one to three months of staff time to undertake Small Group Techniques. Preparing the material for the exercise, inviting the participants, reserving the location, and obtaining the supplies for the event can take time. Writing the meeting notes and preparing a summary of the event can also be time consuming, depending on how many groups are involved.

1 to 3 months

\*

6 months to a year

\*\*

Multiyear

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*Disclaimer:* The time estimates are approximations. The duration of a project may vary depending on various factors, including size and budget.

## Implementation Guidelines and Suggestions

The following serve as recommended guidelines and suggestions for using Small Group Techniques:

- **Determine the Small Group Technique to be used based on the desired outcome.** The following is a description of the most commonly used Small Group Techniques and their applications:

### Techniques for complicated or controversial issues:

**Roundtables** are meetings of stakeholders who are brought together to examine an issue from various viewpoints. The stakeholders can include experts, residents, business owners, and community leaders. The goal is to encourage a thorough discussion of the issue. Roundtables are generally part of a larger meeting. <sup>4</sup>

**Study Circles** (or Small Circles) are often used to discuss critical or complicated issues. In this technique, participants attend a series of structured meetings and are given assigned readings and tasks in order to hold informed discussions and develop recommendations. Members represent different viewpoints and backgrounds, and everyone has an equal voice. It is possible to hold multiple study circles at the same time and bring the groups together to develop joint recommendations. Such a technique is useful in large-scale planning efforts. <sup>5</sup>

**Conflict Utilization Questionnaire** uses surveys to identify ways of dealing with controversial issues. Prior to meeting, a group of no more than 20 members complete a questionnaire. The group discusses the survey results and provides recommendations for dealing with the conflict. <sup>6</sup>

**Relationship Diagrams** are used to discuss problems. In this technique, participants identify issues or problems and post them on a blank wall. They are then asked to post factors that affect the issue or problem. The postings are reorganized so that related topics are together. Participants are asked to analyze the relationships and use colored tape or strings to show cause-effect. The items that have the most tape or strings attached are often deemed to be the root cause of the problem. <sup>7</sup>

### Techniques for consensus building:

**Decision science** is used for building consensus or identifying alternative solutions. In this process, the group begins by identifying all the elements which they can agree on. Once they develop the consensus items, they are then able to focus on the issues which are unresolved. A facilitator helps the group to explore the unresolved issues and develop various alternative solutions for policy makers to consider. <sup>8</sup>

**Delphi** (or policy Delphi) uses expert advice to help small groups reach consensus. In this process, surveys are given to a panel of experts. The results are tabulated and given to the panel to review and rate. The process is repeated until common concepts and recommendations are identified by a majority. <sup>9</sup>

### Techniques for brainstorming and visioning:

**Force Field Analysis** calls for groups to develop two lists. In the first list, members identify forces that are "driving" change. In the second list, they focus on forces that are "restraining" change. The group then

discusses ways to minimize the restraining forces and maximize the driving forces. <sup>10</sup>

**Nominal Group Process** is a technique used to generate creative ideas. It is based on research which indicates that people are more creative “when they work in the presence of each other but do not interact.” <sup>11</sup> The research suggests that when people interact, their ideas are affected by group dynamics. In this technique, a facilitator poses a question and participants write down their answers. They are then asked to post one idea for everyone to see. Time is given to discuss the merits of each idea, but participants should not argue their point. After the discussion, participants select and rate the ideas and the results are posted for the group to review. <sup>11</sup>

**Role Playing** is used to help to obtain public feedback on project alternatives. Scenarios are developed and participants are assigned roles. Often, they are asked to consider solutions for dealing with a specific problem. Through role playing, participants get an opportunity to consider different perspectives and solutions. <sup>12</sup>

- **Determine if a facilitator is needed or if a leader needs to be selected from the group.** Some small group techniques require a facilitator to lead the discussion in order to ensure that the process stays on track. In other cases, leaders may be chosen by the group. What is important to remember is that the leaders/facilitators must have a clear understanding of their responsibilities.
- **Develop a method for documenting and reporting the discussions.** In most cases, groups are given flip charts and asked to assign a member to record the main ideas being discussed. This allows everyone to see what is being written and serves as a means of documenting the discussion. When it is important to have a complete record of the small group discussion, agencies can assign a staff person to take notes or record the proceedings.
- **Participants need to have a clear understanding of the process, their role, and the purpose of the exercise.** It is important for people to understand why they are being asked to participate in the small group technique in order to ensure cooperation and participation. They also need to have an understanding of what they will be doing and how the agency will use the results of the group exercise.
- **Establish the ground rules for participation to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to express their thoughts.** It is important for all members to be treated equally and to feel that their opinions are respected. It is also important to prevent more vocal individuals from taking over the dialogue. To prevent this, agencies need to explain the ground rules from the start.
- **Make sure the facilities can accommodate the small group activities and that there are sufficient supplies for the activities.** Prior to applying the small group techniques, agencies need to ensure they have sufficient easels, flip charts, magic markers, tape, and other supplies that are needed for the group activities. It is also important to make sure the meeting space can accommodate the group activities and that all equipment and displays are available.
- **Follow up with small group participants to let them know the status of their recommendations.** After the group process is complete, it is important to keep participants informed of the status of their recommendations. This keeps people interested and involved, and encourages greater participation.

## RECOMMENDED TARGET DEMOGRAPHICS

Small Group Techniques can be used on any demographic group. They can be customized to any group and can be organized to respond to specific issues. They are particularly useful in obtaining input from hard to reach populations, since the group discussions can be organized at any location and time. When using such techniques, agencies should strive to have representation from various backgrounds and viewpoints in order to ensure the discussion reflects various perspectives. <sup>14</sup>

## Lessons Learned/Challenges

Below are key points to keep in mind when implementing small group techniques: <sup>15</sup>

- **Representation from diverse groups is important.** Careful attention should be given to ensure that participants in the small group process represent a variety of different people and opinions so that recommendations are not one-sided.
- **Small Group Techniques can be applied to almost any meeting or event.** Such techniques have proved to be helpful in charrettes, visioning, and brainstorming meetings.
- **Everyone who participates in Small Groups should be treated as equals.** No one person should be allowed to dominate the process.
- **If time and resources are available, agencies should provide training to group leaders on how best to facilitate the group discussions.** The following are suggested strategies that can be given to leaders/facilitators to help them manage the group dynamics:<sup>13</sup>
  - Keep the group on the subject. Guard against the discussion losing direction or focus.
  - Clarify comments that are unclear by restating what was said and asking members to elaborate.
  - Encourage the participation of silent participants by asking them questions.
  - Discourage dominating members from monopolizing the discussion by asking others to participate.
  - Keep the group on schedule by reminding them of how much time they have left to complete the task.
  - Summarize the discussion points at the end to make sure all major points have been addressed.

## Case Studies

The City of Oakland used small group meetings to obtain public feedback regarding the Oak to Ninth Project, a 64 acre waterfront project. They held nine small group meetings and invited 48 organizations to participate in the process (<http://www.oaklandnet.com/government/ceda/revised/planningzoning/MajorProjectsSection/oaktoninth.html>).<sup>16</sup>

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) used a variety of small group techniques to involve the public in a corridor study. The techniques were helpful in creating interest and encouraging public involvement (<http://contextsensitivesolutions.org/content/reading/public-involvement-16/>).<sup>17</sup>

## For Further Information

**Identifying Small Group Techniques for Planning Environmental Projects, A General Protocol:** This report provides planners with a protocol for identifying Small Group Techniques to use in planning projects. (<http://www.iwr.usace.army.mil/docs/iwrreports/96r29.pdf>).<sup>18</sup>

**Small Group Processes for Identifying Problems and Possible Solutions:** The article provides a guide for using Small Group Techniques to encourage public involvement and obtain feedback (<http://www.sharedvisionplanning.us/CPToolkit/Documents/IWRRReader-SmallGroupProcesses.pdf>).<sup>19</sup>

**Using Group Process Techniques to Improve Meeting Effectiveness:** The site gives recommendations and tips for using Small Group Techniques (<http://www.effectivemeetings.com/teams/teamwork/creighton.asp>).<sup>20</sup>

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), "USDOT FHWA/FTA Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making: Small Group Techniques," August 2002, 29, FHWA, 17 August 2011 <<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/contents.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup> FHWA, "Small Group Techniques."

<sup>3</sup> FHWA, "Small Group Techniques."

<sup>4</sup> FHWA, "Small Group Techniques."

<sup>5</sup> FHWA, "Small Group Techniques."

<sup>6</sup> FHWA, "Small Group Techniques."

<sup>7</sup> Creighton, James L., "Using Group Process Techniques to Improve Meeting Effectiveness," Smart Technologies, 30 October 2011, <<http://www.effectivemeetings.com/teams/teamwork/creighton.asp>>.

<sup>8</sup> FHWA, "Small Group Techniques."

<sup>9</sup> FHWA, "Small Group Techniques."

<sup>10</sup> Creighton, James L., "Using Group Process Techniques to Improve Meeting Effectiveness," Smart Technologies:

Effective Meetings.com, 30 October 2011, <<http://www.effectivemeetings.com/teams/teamwork/creighton.asp>>.

<sup>11</sup> Creighton, James L., "Small Group Processes for Identifying Problems and Possible Solutions," Public Involvement and Dispute Resolution, Collaborative Planning Toolkit, 30 October 2011, <<http://www.sharedvisionplanning.us/CPToolkit/Documents/IWRReader-SmallGroupProcesses.pdf>>.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), "USDOT FHWA/FTA Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making: Role Playing," August 2002, 29, FHWA, 17 August 2011 <<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/contents.htm>>.

<sup>13</sup> Crow, Mary Lynn, "Small Group Techniques," Active Learning: University of Texas at Arlington, 30 October 2011, <<http://activelearning.uta.edu/facstaff/assets/eduSmall%20Group%20Leadership%20Techniques%20-%20QEP.pdf>>

<sup>14</sup> FHWA, "Small Group Techniques."

<sup>15</sup> FHWA, "Small Group Techniques."

<sup>16</sup> City of Oakland, "Oak to Ninth," 30 October 2011,

<<http://www.oaklandnet.com/government/ceda/revised/planningzoning/MajorProjectsSection/oaktoninth.html>>.

<sup>17</sup> Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), "Public Involvement Technique: Involve - Small Group Techniques," 30 October 2011, <<http://contextsensitivesolutions.org/content/reading/public-involvement-16/>>.

<sup>18</sup> Capan, Donald, Keith W. Harrington, Timothy D. Feather, and F. Dale Brown, "Identifying Small Group Techniques for Planning Environmental Projects, A General Protocol," U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Institute for Water Resources, 30 October 2011, <<http://www.iwr.usace.army.mil/docs/iwrreports/96r29.pdf>>.

<sup>19</sup> Creighton, James L., "Small Group Processes for Identifying Problems and Possible Solutions."

<sup>20</sup> Creighton, James L., "Using Group Process Techniques to Improve Meeting Effectiveness".