QuickTip – Affinity Clustering

An affinity diagram is an information organizing tool. It promotes creative synthesis by asking a team to identify and group similar items from a large list of possibilities. The resulting structured information can then be used in further convergence activities such as ranking and rating. Affinity clustering is often paired with a preceding divergence activity that generates many raw possibilities, like brainstorming.

When to Use

- You need to clarify or structure a large mass of information
- The problem is complex and difficult to understand
- You need to decide which ideas or information are important to the problem
- The problem requires or benefits from involvement of a group

Procedure

Before the session, write each of the ideas on a small "sticky" (sheet of adhesive note paper). Often, this has already been done during a brainstorming session. Place all of the stickies in random order on a large, accessible surface such as a wall or table. If the ideas haven't been discussed recently, the team may need time to re-read them.

The team members silently arrange the ideas into similar clusters (affinity clusters) by moving the stickies. If a team member does not agree with the positioning of a sticky, he can move it into another cluster with which it has a stronger affinity. No communication is allowed, since this might limit thinking on possible affinities.

This repositioning continues until the affinity clusters have solidified. Then the facilitator asks members to explain why they organized the ideas into these clusters. What makes the items in a cluster similar, and how do they differ from other clusters? These discussions may cause further rounds of repositioning.

After the team agrees on characteristics of each cluster, label and describe them. Examine the relationships between clusters to reveal underlying structure of the problem.

Considerations

1. Draw a "parking lot" in a section of the work area. If people repeatedly move a specific sticky, this indicates an important disagreement that should be discussed later. Move the contentious sticky to the parking lot for discussion after the silent clustering is done.

2. Do not label the clusters until after the team completely agrees on grouping.   Prematurely labeling emerging groups will limit the teams thinking.
3. The team may want to talk during the positioning.   Discourage communication until the clusters have taken shape and the change rate is low. At that point, there may be some left behind or parking lot stickies that need to be discussed.
4. You can use an online collaborative whiteboard such as Miro or Mural to do affinity clustering with virtual or hybrid teams.

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