Six commonly used stages

There are no hard and fast rules for how to structure the blank slate of your designer’s agenda. But most well-designed gatherings are structured around a particular series of stages.

The event begins with connection, establishes a shared language, and then presents a divergent set of views on the topic. Depending on the convening’s purpose, that divergence may be followed by the co-creation of new ideas, convergence on a certain set of answers, or even commitment to take action.

“A convening is a dance between joining and differentiation. People can only have a joining experience for so long before they need to differentiate. And, for the group to keep doing its work, that differentiation can only happen for so long before there needs to be some joining.”

—Convening Designer
**Connection**

**WHAT TO DO:** Welcome participants, give them the opportunity to connect with one another on a personal level, and help them establish a sense of group identity.

**WHEN IT’S IMPORTANT:** Important at every convening. Spend more time here if the group has never met, there is opposition within the group, or building networks is the primary purpose.

**SAMPLE ACTIVITIES**

**STRUCTURED GO-AROUND:** Participants take turns sharing introductions (clockwise around a circle, tossing a beanbag, or popcorn-style).

**GROUP TIMELINE:** Participants place themselves on a visual timeline of the group’s previous work.

**NETWORK-MAPPING:** Visually map the relationship connections among participants.

**STAND UP, SIT DOWN:** Have participants stand or sit in response to questions about their background.

**HUMAN SPECTOGRAM:** Describe two opposing perspectives that form a spectrum, and ask participants to line up along it to show where they stand.

**ASSET MAPPING:** Participants from an existing community build mutual understanding of one another’s capabilities and needs to find ways to support one another.

**APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY:** Participants interview one another about the strengths of the community or field.

**WORLD CAFÉ:** Participants rotate among small groups to discuss the topic, building on the previous conversation and sharing the results in plenary.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT EACH ACTIVITY, SEE THE LIST OF RESOURCES LISTED AT THE END OF THE SECTION.
Shared language

**WHAT TO DO:** Orient the group to the substance of the conversation—the state of play, relevant history, important facts, and other shared understanding that is foundational to the work.

**WHEN IT’S IMPORTANT:** Important at every convening. Spend more time here if participants understand the topic from very different angles, if they need to be caught up on recent changes, or if sharing learning is the primary purpose.

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**SAMPLE ACTIVITIES**

- **ASSET MAPPING:** (see “connection”)
- **APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY:** (see “connection”)
- **WORLD CAFÉ:** (see “connection”)
- **FACTS AND OPINIONS:** Create a separate list of facts and opinions about the issue in order to get information on the table quickly.  
- **JIGSAW:** Participants self-segregate into groups to discuss key themes, then re-form groups that contain at least one person from each interest group to report and reflect on their group’s ideas.
- **TRADE-SHOW PRESENTATIONS:** Participants split into several groups and rotate through multiple speakers.
- **FISHBOWL:** A small group sits in a circle and converses about the topic while participants listen—or join in by moving their chair to the middle.
- **SYSTEMS MAPPING:** Gather insights on the workings of a large social system, diagram them visually, and identify key levers for creating change.

To learn more about each activity, see the list of resources listed at the end of the section.
Divergence

**WHAT TO DO:** Give participants the space to spell out their perspectives and identify similarities and differences among them. Also, create opportunities for participants to brainstorm expansively about the topic at hand.

**WHEN IT’S IMPORTANT:** Important at every convening. Spend more time here if it is important for participants to understand one another’s perspectives in detail, or if sharing learning is the primary purpose.

**SAMPLE ACTIVITIES**
- **HUMAN SPECTROGRAM:** (see “connection”)
- **APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY:** (see “connection”)
- **WORLD CAFÉ:** (see “connection”)
- **FACTS AND OPINIONS:** (see “shared language”)
- **JIGSAW:** (see “shared language”)
- **TRADE-SHOW PRESENTATIONS:** (see “shared language”)
- **FISHBOWL:** (see “shared language”)
- **SYSTEMS MAPPING:** (see “shared language”)

**OPEN SPACE:** Participants volunteer to lead a discussion on a topic; others join the sessions they find most interesting.

**BREAKOUT GROUPS:** Divide participants into small groups either to work on parts of a large task or to work in parallel on the same task.

**RAPID PROTOTYPING:** Identify pain points, generate potential solutions, and flesh them out into plans for a testable prototype.

**SCENARIO PLANNING:** Participants contribute a range of perspectives about how the issue could evolve in the future in unexpected ways and construct narratives of the divergent possibilities.

**BRAINSTORMING:** Generate ideas by speaking off the cuff and treating all ideas as valid, using flipcharts and post-its in various combinations.

**ROLEPLAYING:** Some participants take on the role of key outside stakeholders and either brainstorm or provide reactions in that role.

**POPCORN REACTIONS:** Ask the group for quick, informal reactions to something they’ve just heard or done, to move the conversation forward without taking the time for a longer conversation.

To learn more about each activity, see the list of resources listed at the end of the section.
Co-creation

WHAT TO DO: Using the group’s shared language and divergent views as raw material, participants work together on one or more new outputs such as options, designs, prototypes, solutions, paths, plans, or principles.

WHEN IT’S IMPORTANT: Important at most but not all convenings, when there is a collective task for the group to accomplish. This is typically true when the primary purpose is to innovate, develop foresight, or align and act—but often not when it is to influence.

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

BREAKOUT GROUPS: (see “divergence”)
RAPID PROTOTYPING: (see “divergence”)
SCENARIO PLANNING: (see “divergence”)
DYNAMIC PLANNING: Participants from multiple stakeholder groups provide input into a collaborative “charrette” that develops a variety of options and refines them into to one that is mutually agreeable.20
SYSTEMS MAPPING: (see “shared language”)
OPEN SPACE: (see “divergence”)
JIGSAW: (see “shared language”)
POPCORN REACTIONS: (see “divergence”)

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT EACH ACTIVITY, SEE THE LIST OF RESOURCES LISTED AT THE END OF THE SECTION.
Convergence

**WHAT TO DO:** Prioritize and refine what has been created and note areas of remaining divergence. Build toward a shared overall understanding of the issue and develop specific options for action.

**WHEN IT'S IMPORTANT:** Important at some convenings, when there is need for participants to come away with some greater degree of shared perspective. This is typically true when the primary purpose is to influence or align and act.

**SAMPLE ACTIVITIES**
- **WORLD CAFÉ:** (see “connection”)
- **SYSTEMS MAPPING:** (see “shared language”)
- **ROLEPLAYING:** (see “divergence”)
- **BRAINSTORMING:** (see “divergence”)
- **THREE HORIZONS:** Generate or evaluate proposals under the headings of basic hygiene, new ideas for focused exploration, and novel experiments.21
- **BREAKOUT GROUPS:** (see “divergence”)
- **RAPID PROTOTYPING:** (see “divergence”)
- **POPCORN REACTIONS:** (see “divergence”)

To learn more about each activity, see the list of resources listed at the end of the section.
Commitment

WHAT TO DO: Refine and finalize the options, come to the appropriate degree of alignment and closure on the issue, define next steps for participants, and choose a method of staying accountable to these goals.

WHEN IT’S IMPORTANT: Important only for convenings that require follow-up action, typically when the primary purpose is to influence or align and act.

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

DYNAMIC PLANNING: (see “co-creation”)

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION ON NEXT STEPS: Participants work independently to list ideas, create a first draft of the output, or reflect on their personal next steps.

THE GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT: Give participants a numerical scale for indicating their level of agreement and use it to measure support for each idea.

DEFINING GOALS AND MILESTONES: Place the goal and three to five milestones on a long sheet of butcher paper, then break into groups to list the steps required for each one.

SYSTEMS MAPPING: (see “shared language”)

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT EACH ACTIVITY, SEE THE LIST OF RESOURCES LISTED AT THE END OF THE SECTION.
SAMPLE ACTIVITIES: RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

7. Ibid, pp. 73.
10. Ibid, pp. 95, 113, 149.
12. Ibid, pp. 95, 111, 149.
23. Ibid, pp. 278.
Many of the activities described above involve moving back and forth between plenary conversation and smaller group work. These stock designs are a good place to start, but it’s easy to move beyond them and develop your own custom approach. The basic tool to master is the template—a piece of printed material with instructions for the breakout group to follow and a place for them to capture what they produce. It is often possible to give breakout groups detailed enough instructions that they can self-facilitate, with the facilitator floating between groups to answer questions as needed. One of the most common formats for a template is a flipchart-sized sheet, that can be easily taped up over a flipchart pad sitting on an easel next to the table.

**STARTING POINTS**

- **BREAK DOWN THE PROCESS** into simple steps that the group can understand, discuss, and complete with minimal help.
- **BE REALISTIC** about the amount of time it will take the group to complete each step.
- **END THE STEPS** with clear instructions on how to report out quickly, or how to create any other form of output that you expect the group to produce. When the report-outs begin, be explicit and firm about the need for brevity.

- **FOR WORK IN SMALL GROUPS,** consider two template sizes: a flipchart template (approximately 25x30" placed on a flipchart that is mounted on an easel) or a tabletop template (placed on the table and sized to fit). Letter-sized templates can also be useful for individual activities.

- **LARGER TEMPLATES** on banner or bond paper can be useful for extended work or to capture a substantial output. These can be mounted on 4’x8’ foamcore, held up with a pair of easels, or taped to the wall if one is available.

- **SIZE THE FONT** to be legible from the distance at which the template will be viewed, and leave space for large handwriting.

- **HIGH-RESOLUTION PHOTOS** are an easy way to capture the content of a filled-out flipchart.

- **TEMPLATES** can easily be combined with large sticky notes that capture multiple answers to a question, as can be seen at the top of the example to the right.