Considerations when forming small groups

Variables

- Same task of different tasks?
- Group people like-with-like, or mixed?
- How many people? How many groups?
- Constructing the small groups
- Roles in small groups
- Some sophisticated small group techniques

Same task or different tasks?

Groups are sometimes asked to all do the same task. For example, there might be a list of ideas and the small groups are all asked to prioritise their top three. Or every group is asked to create a vision of success and then feedback.

Groups can also be asked to do different tasks. There may be a handful of topics which have been prioritised by the whole group, which are then allocated to small groups to work up in more detail. Or each group works on a different scenario. If the groups are each made up of similar kinds of people (see below), they might be asked to provide an expert judgment on a particular aspect of the wider agenda.

|		What task will they do?	
		The same	**Different**
How are the groups made up?	**Mixed**	• In-depth scoping of an issue. • Creative design of options and solutions, and criteria for assessing them. • Agree "trade offs" during negotiations.	• Explore a broad overview of the issues. • Identify common ground, under a number of headings or sub-topics. • Develop strategic visions, against scenarios.
	Similar	• Make value judgements about things. • Describe in detail the issue or topic from their own perspective. • Agree their own position or interests.	• Provide a detailed specialist opinion on their aspect of the topic. • Agree an expert judgement. • Develop specifications.

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.

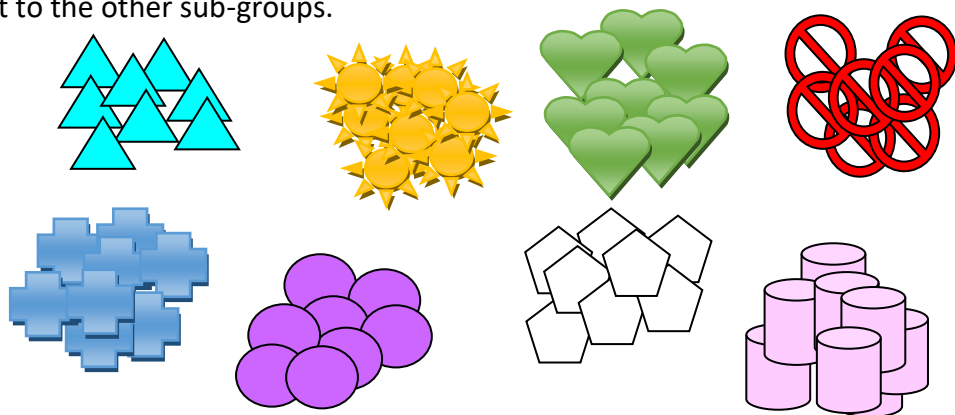### Group people like-with-like, or mixed?

Suppose this is the whole group:
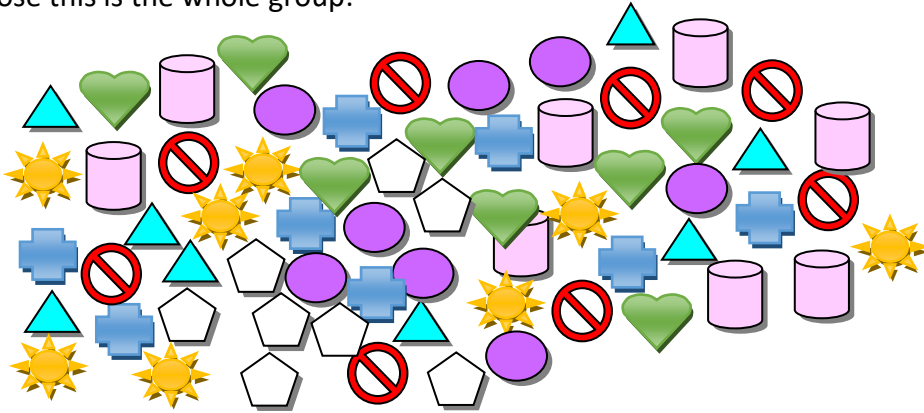
These are **mixed** sub-groups, each one is the same as the other sub-groups:
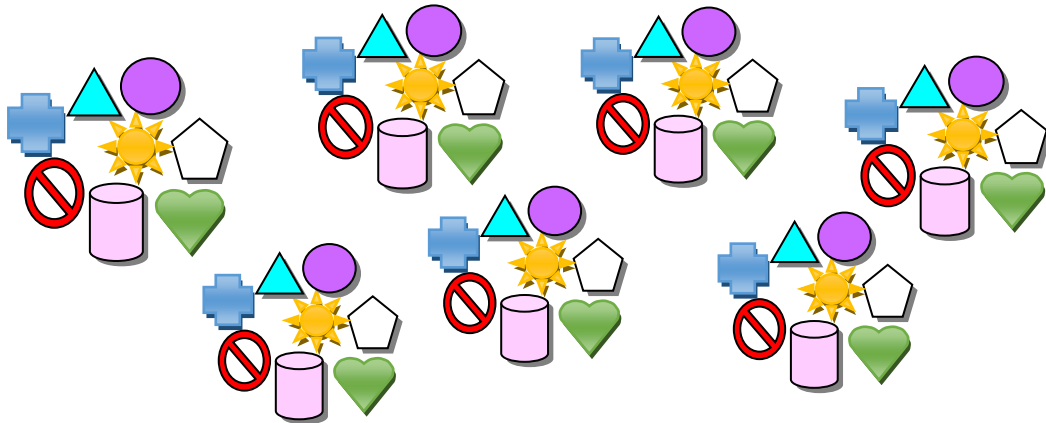
These are **similar** sub-groups, each one is made up of similar people, and each subgroup is different to the other sub-groups.

How many people, how many groups?

In Open Space or Unconference approaches, a group of one is fine! That person gets the luxury of thinking about their topic uninterrupted. In self-facilitated groups which need to reach a conclusion of some kind, an upper limit of 7 or 8 people is helpful.

Depending on the space you have available, it may be that you cannot accommodate more than a particular number of small groups.

If each group is expected to share their conclusions with the rest of the group, then think about how to do this without everyone falling asleep by the third group. For example, ask each group to summarise its insights on a flip, and post all of the flips up for people to read. Or each group can be asked to agree its three key messages to feed back. Or use 'round robin' feedback.

Constructing the small groups

	How do you do it?	What's good about it?	What are the downsides?
'Forced random'	Using a rule or game to allocate people to random groups. Methods of doing this include counting around the room or giving out shuffled cards which are then grouped.	Can be a good way of changing pace and injecting some fun / problem solving. May need more preparation.	Loses the opportunity to deliberately mix or group people.
Mixed for a reason	This involves deliberately mixing people who don't normally work together or are from different organisations.	Gets people working with new perspectives and ideas. Can move people out of their ruts.	It may not be possible to get a good 'fit', with some groups being short of representation from a particular kind of person.
Grouped for a reason	Deliberately grouping people who do similar jobs or work for the same organisation.	The group may be able to agree things then and there.	Ruts and narrow perspectives can be reinforced. Groups may be of unviable size.
Choosing a topic.	Allow people to gravitate towards the topic or task that they are most interested in.	People go to where they are most engaged.	Ruts and narrow perspectives can be reinforced. Groups may be of unviable size. An important topic or task may get missed (this in itself may be a useful insight).
Free association	Allow people to choose their own groupings	One less thing for you to worry about. People are encouraged to take responsibility for making appropriate decisions about grouping.	Hierarchies and cliques can be reinforced. May expose some people to uncomfortable choices.

Roles in small groups

When people are in their groups, make sure they understand what they are being asked to do, and the time and resources they have available to them.

Groups can be asked to make sure that these roles are taken on by people in the group:

Timekeeper	Makes sure the group knows how much time they have used and how much is left.
Note taker	Makes sure that key points are recorded. Must be prepared to record key points as agreed by the group - not use it as an opportunity to push their own ideas!
Reporter	Will be the person who gives the feedback on behalf of the group.
Discussion leader	Makes sure that the group keeps focussed on the task in hand.

When people are working in small groups, you have a chance to take five, go to the loo and take stock of how things are going. But don't disappear altogether - visit the groups to check they understand what they need to do, and make yourself available for questions and to help out if they get stuck. Be a resource rather than an interfering busy-body - on tap, not on top.

Some sophisticated small group techniques

In **carousel**, groups move round from space to space, building on the work of the people who were there before.

In **Open Space** or **Unconference**, people propose topics and the groups are formed around the topics. People can move between groups.

World café also involves movement and building on previous conversations, but more fluidity than carousel. There's a general introduction to this approach here and a detailed description of a world café on climate change here.