

Why use stages of discussion?

Understanding stages of discussion will help your group processes and work be more effective and move towards decision-making.

What are the stages of a discussion?

1. **Open:** Clearly defines the meeting purpose. This is the time to gather input and suggestions from participants – an open discussion. All ideas are good at this point, so don't try and analyze what someone has said – that comes later.
2. **Narrow:** Focusing ideas into parts that are more manageable and seeing if they meet the purpose.
3. **Close:** Reach agreement on course of action, this may involve combining options – both/and scenario.



Effective discussion:
Open, Narrow, Close!

1. How to 'Open' the discussion

1. **State the purpose.** "We are here to find a solution for...", "We are here to decide how to ..." - any statement that will get the discussion started.
2. **How to proceed.** "Let's come up with 4 or 5 potential actions that will..." -an idea that will set the course of action – establish a set time for this.
3. **Brainstorm.** "Karen will write down the ideas as you call them out" - produce as many ideas as possible in a short amount of time.
4. **Clarify.** "What do you mean by...?", "Does anyone have a question about...?" – make sure everyone is clear on what is being suggested before you evaluate the ideas.

2. How to 'Narrow' the discussion

1. **Combine or eliminate like ideas.** "Can we combine X and Y as they are similar", "Can we eliminate Z as it has the potential to go beyond our contractual obligations?" – narrow down the choices, ask for clarification if needed and eliminate redundancy.
2. **Prioritize.** "Let's each chose our top 4 and see where that takes us" – lets the group see where others priorities are without having made a final decision and further narrows the choices. $N/3$ (number of choices divided by 3 = number of choices by participant) is a good way of establishing how many options one can vote on.
3. **Advocate.** "Does anyone feel particularly strong about a certain option?" – this can raise awareness of the details in a choice and can uncover strengths and weaknesses.

3. How to 'Close' the discussion

1. **Negative Poll.** "Is anyone not willing to take option 4 off the list?" – reaches quick agreement on an item.
2. **Build up/eliminate.** "What can we add to option A to make it more feasible?", "Can we combine elements of 2 and 3 to reach an agreement?" – creates a group suggested proposal, a more widely accepted solution and can facilitate agreement between opposing parties.
3. **Straw Poll.** "We have been working hard to get to this point. Can we check in with everyone to see how they are doing? Can we proceed?" – To test the level of agreement within a group and the commitment to continue.
4. **Both/And.** "Do we need to choose between the final options? Is it possible to try both?" – avoids a win/lose or either/or decision.
5. **Make a Proposal/Agree or agree to disagree.** "It looks like we can move on option 2", "It appears that we are at a stalemate, how would the group like to proceed?" – check for understanding and agreement, then the group moves forward with next steps and a solution...or not.