WHAT IS VIPP CARD COLLECTION AND CLUSTERING?

VIPP Card Collection and Clustering is a facilitated process that involves the use of cards to quickly gather and organize ideas from a group of people. It is especially useful in situations where you expect to get a diverse range of answers or inputs, or for addressing potentially sensitive issues in a way that is both safe and equitable.

The process starts with a well-defined open-ended question. Participants write ideas onto cards and then cluster them based on similarities. The clusters can be prioritized as a basis for subsequent action, or they can be used for further discussion and development, as needed.

REQUIREMENTS:

- Facilitator
- Pin board and pins
- Flipchart paper
- Rectangular cards, in several colours (10 x 20 cm/ 4 x 8 inch)
- Marker pens (one colour only)
- Up to 20 participants
- 45 - 60 minutes

1 ‘VIPP’ refers to ‘Visualisation in Participatory Programmes’, a manual originally published by UNICEF in 1993 and later reissued, which included one of the first descriptions of the card collection and clustering method. The VIPP manual is a primary source for this article, which also includes adaptations and inputs from other sources. See References.
WHEN AND WHY TO USE

VIPP Card Collection and Clustering is best used in group settings to generate ideas quickly, to organize and prioritize ideas based on the input of the group, and to gather opinions. It is a more interesting way to accomplish these tasks than a routine plenary meeting, and usually generates significantly better results. It also levels the playing field and ensures greater diversity of inputs, by preventing the discussion from being dominated by only a few voices. All ideas and inputs are considered through the same open process.

Card Collection and Clustering is useful for:

- Generating creative ideas at an early stage of a workshop or a planning process, and assigning priorities. Once ideas are collected and clustered by theme, the clusters can be used as inputs into subsequent group work.

- Combining and harmonizing diverging ideas and opinions, for example if your group includes individuals from different departments, or people with differing professional or cultural backgrounds.

- Ensuring that more unusual or creative ideas are captured and documented, particularly if those generating such ideas are junior or ‘outsiders’ who may feel nervous in front of more experienced colleagues in plenary sessions.

- Helping to overcome the inhibiting influence of hierarchies, when input is needed from many people on a sensitive topic.

- Surfacing workplace issues. People can share their views anonymously by writing on cards. Managers can then gauge how people feel, and get a sense for whether opinions are isolated or are shared by several people, from the content of the cards and any repetition of similar views/themes.

Card Collection and Clustering is suitable for groups of 10 - 20 participants. Larger groups should first be divided into smaller ones of no more than 20 participants; each group does the exercise separately with its own facilitator.

HOW TO APPLY

Prepare in advance

1. Decide on the question. Make sure it is well-articulated, open-ended, relevant to participants and likely to provoke interesting responses. Also decide on what kind of inputs you will request from participants (which must be in the form of short ideas written on cards), and on how the inputs will be used after the exercise is complete.

For example, if your question is ‘What are the most important messages we should communicate to ensure the success of our project?’, then you might request participants to write only the essence of any suggested key messages on their cards. In this example, after clustering, the inputs would go
to the communications team for further review, refinement and eventual inclusion in communication materials, press releases, etc.

2. Invite participants, informing them that the meeting will be interactive. Optional: You can let them know the question in advance.

Set up the room

3. Arrange the chairs in a semi-circle, facing a pin board (on which the cards will be pinned and moved around during the clustering process). Cover the pin board from top to bottom with flipchart paper. Write the question clearly on the top of the flipchart paper.

When you are ready to start

4. Welcome participants. Briefly explain the process, read out the question, check that everyone understands it, and provide some background information on the projects/issues it relates to.

5. Distribute cards to each participant for writing their ideas (one per card), and give brief guidance on how to write cards. Refer to the tips below for card writing guidance. For groups of 10 - 15, give each person 3 - 4 cards. For groups of 16 - 20, give 2 - 3 cards each (see Tips below for the rationale). Leave a stack of cards in the middle of the room, so that someone with a really good idea can go and pick up another card.

6. Give participants time to think and write their ideas and responses to the question, individually and without discussion. This may take from 5 to 15 minutes depending on the complexity of the question.

7. Once all participants have finished writing, ask them to place the cards face down on the floor in the middle of the room or in a box (use a printer paper box or something similar). If the question asked is sensitive in nature, you may then shuffle the cards. This should help preserve some semblance of anonymity.

8. Select a card at random and read it out loud. (Contributions in this process are meant to be anonymous, so if any card is unclear and clarity is required, the group discusses and re-writes the card. Identities of the writers are not revealed unless they voluntarily choose to identify themselves.)

9. Begin the clustering process:

   a. Pin the card on the pin board.
   b. Pick the second card and read it out aloud. Pin the card far away from the first.
   c. Ask participants to decide if the cards are closely related and can be pinned close together to form a cluster, or if they are different ideas that should be kept apart. Move the cards if needed.
   d. Repeat this process until all cards are pinned up. (Note: Sometimes two people may contribute similar or duplicate ideas. Do not discard such cards: They are a reflection of the importance of
10. Once all cards have been pinned, ask participants to review and revise the clusters if needed. By this time there should be several idea clusters on the pin board. Ask participants to step up to the pin board and take a closer look. Get them involved in the clustering process by assigning 1 - 2 volunteers to help with moving cards while the others provide direction.

11. Once the clusters have been finalized, draw a cloud circle around each cluster and ask participants to create a title/label for it. The idea clusters, and the specific ideas within each, can be taken forward as inputs for another session or used as a basis for planning or other work.

12. Optional: Prioritize the clusters through group discussion, or (if this does not give clear priorities) a vote. Or give participants each one coloured sticky dot and asking them to place their dot next to their suggested priority cluster. This method can help keep the energy flowing by participant movement and can also help ensure greater anonymity.

**TIPS FOR SUCCESS**

▲ A good question is an indispensable starting point. Good questions are:

- Open - that is, they do not have simple or obvious answers. Open questions are a fundamental means of promoting discussion and identifying the challenges and nuances of a complex situation.
- Relevant to the competencies and core interests of the participants.
- Clear and concise. You may need to write your question 3-4 times in order to make it short and easy to understand, while still keeping it thought-provoking.
- Strategic - pertinent to an ongoing significant project, activity or initiative.

▲ Rules for card writing:

- Think before you write.
- Only one idea per card, in no more than 3 lines.
- Use brief but clear statements. Avoid using too many keywords and acronyms, unless they are known to all other participants. Remember, your idea must be interpreted, saved and used after the session.
- Write legibly in large letters (both upper and lower case, as appropriate), using the broader side of the marker pen tip so that writing can be read from a distance.
To maintain anonymity, provide participants with only one colour of marker pens. Instruct them to adhere to the rules of card writing given above; this should ensure some degree of uniformity.

The Card Collection and Clustering process should be used sparingly, since despite its value it can become tedious if overused.

Try to strike the right balance between harvesting a rich set of ideas, and having too many cards to process and cluster. This is the reason for giving 2 - 3 cards each in large groups of 16 - 20 people, and 3 - 4 cards each in small groups of 10 - 15 people.

You may wish to take a digital photo of the final clusters in case cards are moved or lost when the boards are shifted. This also allows for easy sharing with others who were not present at the event.

VARIATIONS

Multiple questions: You can use Card Collection and Clustering to generate ideas for multiple questions. Assign a specific colour of card to each question, and run the questions through the process one after another. Use judgement as to how many questions to tackle: the process can become tedious with repetition, and participant interest will decline.

Subgroups: If you have several questions and plenty of participants, you can also divide the main group into subgroups and assign each one a question. Each group will require a facilitator. Follow the same process as above, then allow all the groups to see each set of clusters, one after the other in plenary, and add additional ideas.

Preassigned categories: If you know in advance that the responses are likely to cover certain particular topics or categories of response, then you can pin up cards with those categories before the session begins. Proceed with card writing as normal; then ask people to come up individually to pin their cards under the categories (to maintain partial anonymity, you can do this part of the exercise during a coffee break, and then continue the discussion afterwards). You will need to have an ‘Other’ category for any responses that don’t fit into your predefined categories.

Non-anonymous responses: If your topic clearly does not require, or benefit from, anonymous responses, then instead of collecting responses in a box and reading them out, you can ask participants in turn each to read out one of their cards and suggest a category for it. The group then discusses the categorization of the cards in a subsequent step. Before using this variation, be sure that the topic you are addressing is not a sensitive one, and that your participants will all feel comfortable sharing unusual, creative ideas openly in the group. If in doubt, use the standard (anonymous) method.
REFERENCES


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