



Improving Group Performance Using a “Highlighting” Technique!

by Glenn Wilson

Recently, I had the pleasure of being involved in the initial phase of a six stage, new product development global initiative for a large publishing company. During an idea generation session, a global team of seven developed over 500 ideas for new products. Needless to say, the clients (shared clientship) and the sponsor were elated at the outcome. Numerous pictures of the team in front of all the ideas on the wall attested to this fact. They had worked very hard and seemed to be drained of all energy. Therefore, we took a break, followed by a fun activity to replenish the energy I knew they would need to focus on their plethora of ideas.

For the initial focus on all these ideas, I decided to use the “Hits” tool, keeping three pre-selected criteria in mind during their selection activity. These three criteria had been identified as “absolutes” necessary for any new idea to be seriously considered for development. I designed the activity to focus the ideas down to between 70-80 ideas, which it did. I then asked the team what they saw themselves doing with all these ideas. After a brief discussion, they decided that there seemed to be a lot of overlap between many of the ideas, and that they would like to combine those ideas into groups. As they had already “hit” on the ideas that seemed to have the greatest potential, using the compression tool “highlighting” was a logical direction in which to go. However, I knew we only had about 40 minutes to: complete the compression; continue to focus down to the top three issues with the highest probability of success; and put them in a format to be presented back to the other three teams and the global sponsor team.

The problem which I have always run into during a compression of such magnitude is the issue of time. It seems to take a tremendous amount of time for groups to read all of the options, identify the like combinations, sort them into those combining themes, and then restate the theme. What usually happens using the highlighting tool, is that everyone ends up trying to read all of the options (ones that everyone else has read) looking for overlaps and connections. This way of working tends to absorb a tremendous amount of time. The question that raced through my head was: How to accelerate the highlighting technique by not having everyone reading every option before going into a group discussion about what combinations he or she saw. Not only does this take time, but also the entire group usually works on only one issue at a time! So again, How to multi-task this issue of reading and sorting the vast amount of ideas into themes?

What emerged from my thoughts were instructions to the group suggesting that each one of them begin to read the ideas listed on the board. If they read two ideas that seemed to overlap, they were to pull both of them off and place them on an adjacent flipchart. They then were to read all of the other ideas looking specifically for any other ideas that may overlap their first two. What this in essence did was to get 7 pairs of eyes looking for 7 different themes (if they existed) at the same time. Once they completed identifying all of the combinations associated with their original pairing, they then were instructed to look at the remaining ideas left on the board and repeat the same process. Once all the pairs and combinations were identified, the team looked at the themes to identify any combinations or overlaps between the groupings.

This multi-tasking function not only reduced the time normally associated with group highlighting, but also provided an "expert" or "champion" for each of the groupings who would/could explain to the rest of the team why they saw the collection of ideas as a theme. Once agreed on by the entire team as to the final groupings, themes synthesizing the overlapping ideas were easily identified and restated at an appropriate level for each of the groupings.

Since this team was to identify new products for future use, the sponsor then focused the themes and additional individual ideas (those that did not fit into a theme) down to three selections. The group of ideas that made up each of the three themes (selections) was assessed individually for their novel and useful aspects, then combined to form a single product concept. Each of those three single concepts was then developed and strengthened using other CPS tools and techniques. Our group completed the exercise on time with a high level of quality and richness to the concepts. All three concepts were later selected as having the highest potential to become future-global-products for the company, and were moved forward for further market analysis and testing.