

Freelisting

Based on the work of Jacques Chevalier, Social Analysis Systems: <http://sas.cebem.org/misc/site/internacional/>

What is the goal of freelisting? *Freelisting* helps you create and organize the various elements contained within a situation or question, identifying those that are most important (using your own criteria), along with the ability to compare the results of different lists.



What are the guiding principles of freelisting?

- In any situation or question, *each person brings their own unique perspective* into it: what areas or domains are important, what elements are involved, and the relationships between elements and between domains. In short, people focus on what matters most to them, what seem most important in their world. Example: 13 people see an auto accident...how many versions are there of what really happened? The *truth* is often a composite of the various and differing points of view.
- *People have different views* of domains, elements, and the relationships between them. This may be the source of disagreement or misunderstanding between individuals or groups. Freelisting can reveal the underlying or less visible aspects that can so strongly influence problem-solving and decision-making processes.

Here is how to use Freelisting:

1. **Identify a topic, situation, 'burning question', or problem area** where you need to use Freelisting (examples – conflicting viewpoints, establishing team values or working guidelines or agreements). Define the topic or situation as clearly as possible, and clarify the purpose of your exercise.
2. Give several 5x7 index cards (3-4, for instance) to each participant. Ask each participant to **write down one relevant element on each card** (such as conflicts within a team, between neighboring communities, between authorities and businesses, between men and women, etc.). Each participant can also record on each card the order in which the element appeared in his/her list. Also, **describe each element briefly on the reverse side of the card.**
3. Invite participants to **share their element cards, one at a time**, with all other participants. Often, when sharing their card, participants will give a short description of what they mean and how there element is relevant. **Group those cards that mean the same thing into piles**, and then give a name to **identify each pile**. Participants may discuss and form the piles at the same time they are presenting the cards.
4. After all cards have been shared, **identify topics/themes that might be missing** or cards that may be missing in each pile. When the group agrees, the missing topic(s) / elements can be written onto cards and placed accordingly.
5. **Sort piles by importance** – Piles with elements that people mention most often are usually the most important. Count the number of cards in each pile and write that number on topic card. **Arrange the piles into three concentric circles** (making each circle as large as you wish), placing the highest number piles in the middle and the remaining piles in descending rank outward to create the three levels of circles. The circles represent **(a) core elements**, those that obtain the highest ranks, **(b) intermediary elements**, those with middle-range ranks, and **(c) peripheral elements**, those with the lowest ranks. NOTE: Elements that people view as more important tend to appear sooner in their list, i.e., the #1 card that they each wrote...notice the distribution of #1 elements.

Making this process work for you:

- Use only one ranking criterion (such as the number of times the element is mentioned).
- During the exercise, discuss and record the views that participants express.