MEETING FORMATS

Open Discussion (Plenary)
Whole group discussion. In a group of about 8 or more, typically a facilitator calls on members who raise hands to get on the "stack" (speaker order list).

Go-Round
Each person gets a turn to speak to the group, in order by seat. Someone may pass if they are not ready to speak. May have time limit per person, either signaled by facilitator or pass around a timer so the person who just spoke can signal the next person when their time is up. No crosstalk or discussion until all have had a turn.

Council/Talking Stick
Similar to go-round because each person gets an opportunity speak, but usually done "popcorn" (speaking when one feels moved to) rather than seat order. Council is sacred space set aside from normal meetings and activities, with markers such as a candle, dim lighting, or meeting at a different time than usual to help signal the difference. Facilitator's opening remarks set the tone. Usually reserved for heavy issues.

Dynamic Facilitation (DF)
Extremely open-ended group discussion. Facilitator does not stack, and instead calls on whoever evinces the most energy. Facilitator does lots of reflection to whoever is speaking, verbally and/or writing on flipchart. There are 4 flipcharts going: Inquiries (what question are we trying to answer or problem to solve), Solutions (what might we do about it), Concerns, Data (information). Not a linear process, great for generating creative breakthroughs on "impossible" problems.

Brainstorm
People shout out ideas that are written up on a flipchart. May have 2 flipcharts going at the same time (with 2 scribes) so that sharing can move fast. No evaluation or criticism of ideas allowed, the goal is to generate as many ideas as possible.

Card-Storming (aka Snow Cards)
Brainstorming written by individuals onto cards or half sheets of paper (one idea per card) and passed in, instead of shouted aloud. Allows for somewhat more anonymity and therefore more likely variety of ideas.

Basket Share (Anonymous Cards)
An option in situations where people are not feeling safe to speak openly. Facilitator passes out cards to everyone and asks people to write down what issue(s) are up, or to write their response to the stated issue on a card. Cards are then passed into a basket, and each person draws one out to read aloud to group (or facilitator can read aloud).

Shelter Scale
Take the issue and translate it into a numerical scale, such as, "My level of support for this proposal is . . . (range of 1-7)." Then ask people to write their number on cards to be tallied. A bar graph displays the results particularly well.

Line-ups

For issues that have a natural continuum of opinion. Lay out a spectrum in the room, e.g. "Everyone who thinks our work requirement should be 1 hour stand at this end, 10 hours stand at the other end, and arrange yourselves accordingly in the middle." Ask everyone to stand up and place themselves along the line. A variation is to then fold the line at the halfway point, pairing up the two people at the extreme ends and so on down the line (until the middle people are paired with each other), and then ask the partners to have a short conversation about why they feel the way they do. Or use the line-up to count off to form mixed small groups.

Migration

Ask everyone to stand up in a crowd. Ask for someone who feels moved to express their opinion aloud. Anyone else who resonates with that expression moves to stand near that person. Then someone else speaks, and whoever resonates with that moves to stand near the second person (which may or may not include anyone from the first group). And so on. Carry on until the energy has been expressed. Inspired by Arnie Mindell's Process Oriented Psychology.

Switching Places

If two people are stuck in ideological positions in the meeting, ask them to literally change chairs and spend some time arguing for the other person's point of view instead.

Fishbowl

A subgroup discusses the issue in the center, while the rest of the full group sits in an outer circle offering silent support. In a **Heterogeneous** fishbowl, the varied points of view on the issue are included in a center group. There may also be an empty chair in the middle for someone from the outer ring to join in the discussion if they want to. In a **Homogeneous** fishbowl, everyone in a particular category (such as "working class") sits in the middle and talks about their experience; then everyone in the next category (e.g. "middle class" or "owning class") goes into the middle while the previous group sits in the outer circle. For Homogeneous fishbowls having two or more iterations for each category (that is, each group gets a second turn later) allows for more responsiveness.

1-2-4-All

Individual reflection, followed by sharing in pairs, then group pairs into fours, then share highlights in the whole room.

Open Space

An opportunity for people to work in small groups on whatever they feel passionate about. Core guideline: "Take responsibility for what you love." Can move to a new small group at any time, or initiate a new topic. An Open Space event may last anywhere from a few hours to several days, and can be used to support gatherings of hundreds of people to self-organize sessions in a very short amount of time. See www.openspaceworld.org for more info.

Small Group Breakouts

Split into groups of 2-5 people for part or all of the time on agenda item. If done for a brief portion of a larger time slot on an item, sometimes called "zoom groups." To share some information back with the full group, it's often best to ask for highlights, because if you ask for "report-backs" from every group the reports often go on too long.

World Café

Rotating small group discussions. Typically 2-3 rounds of 20-30 min. each. In between rounds, one person stays at the same location as "table host," while others break up and travel to form new groups at other tables. May ask for highlights to share with the whole group between rounds, or wait until after several rounds. May change focus question on each round, or stay with the same question and go deeper. See www.theworldcafe.com for more info.

Wheel Pairs

Form two concentric circles of chairs; the inner circle facing outward and the outer circle facing inward. Then pose a series of prompts, such as questions or sentence completions. Each time there is a new question, people in one circle all shift one seat to the left, so that each person has a new pair partner to talk with.

Milling

A more open-ended pair series formation (as compared with wheel pairs, above). People wander around the room and on cue, find someone to pair with, and then respond to a prompt. May be used for one-way sharing (whoever feels moved to speak first does, the other person just listens) or both may take a turn.

Dot Voting (Multivoting)

Write up all the possibilities on snow cards or a flipchart. Give each member of the group a magic marker, or a pre-set number of sticky dots. Each person gets to place their dots on whichever items they most support. May allow multiple dots to be placed by one person on an item, or may require that each dot go to a different item. Useful for prioritization, such as choosing what topics to give time to in a meeting.

Lean Coffee

A way to cover a bunch of topics in one conversation. Brainstorm potential topics on post-its. Dot vote (2-3 dots/person) to prioritize topics and set their order. All post-its start out in an area labeled Options, then potentially move to Doing and Done. (You might also have 2 other areas for new post-its resulting from conversation: Epiphanies and To Do.) Set a timer for ~5 minutes, move the first topic from Options to Doing, and start talking. When the timer beeps, ask people to show thumbs for whether or not to continue this topic for another 5 minutes: up (yes!), sideways (ok either way), and down (i feel done with this one). When energy for the 1st topic wanes, move that topic to Done, and take the next topic on the list from Options.

Ranked Ballot

Write up all the possibilities on a handout. Ask people to number the items according to level of support. Easiest to tally if the highest number goes to the item one supports most, and the lowest number (1) to the least preferred item. Can also be done via email with all replies sent to one person to add up.

Read Aloud

One person shares a text aloud with the group. Most often the group's mission statement, or an inspirational reading.

Reports, Expert Presentations

One representative gives information to the rest of the group. One-way dissemination of information is often best done via writing or email. If using group interactive time, recommend strict time limits. Normally followed by Q&A.

List Pros & Cons

Choose one or two representatives from each proposal to help lay out what the advantages and disadvantages are of each proposal for group consideration.

Roleplay, Theater, Improv

One or a few members act out a relevant situation for the rest of the group to watch.

Nonverbal, Act out

Instead of describing a situation verbally, ask someone to show their impression *without words*. While there is often resistance or nervousness about this approach, it can be very powerful.

Draw Picture

Use pictures, symbols or diagrams to express a story or idea. Great for folks who are more visual than verbal. If multiple pictures are created at the same time, follow with an "art gallery" tour to view all of them.

Guided Meditation/Visualization

One person leads the group in first relaxing, then creating a mental picture or open-ended storyline, then gently bringing people back to present time. Used most often for visioning the future (e.g. "How might our community look 10 years from now?").

Inspiration from Nature

Good for when the meeting is stuck. Holding the topic of inquiry in mind, have everyone go outside and see what in nature calls to their attention. Each person sit independently for 10 minutes looking at the tree or sky or blade of grass or whatever being one has decided to focus on, and with the query in mind, see what wisdom, insights or feelings emerge. Then everyone goes back to the meeting and takes turns sharing what came up.

Chaos

Don't have a formal format. Just hang out. See what happens.

Silence

I saved the best for nearly last. Silence is used heavily in Quaker consensus process, and probably not enough by the rest of us!

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

AI is full on method, not just a format. It is defined as, "a process, philosophy, and life practice grounded in research demonstrating that focusing on what's working and aspirations for the future achieves more and does it faster and more sustainably than solving problems." The first main step consists of interviews focusing on positive past experiences and desires for the future. Formats used vary. Learn more at www.appreciativeinquiry.case.edu.