Affinity Diagram (KJ Method)

An affinity diagram is a way to turn a large, messy set of ideas or facts into a small number of clear themes. It is also called the KJ method, after its creator, the Japanese anthropologist Jiro Kawakita, who developed it in the 1960s. The method works with notes that the group sorts by natural similarity, rather than by categories decided in advance. This helps a team to see patterns that a long list hides. Four steps make it practical: collect ideas, group them in silence, name the themes and use the result.

1. Collect Ideas

The first step is to state the question clearly and collect ideas on separate notes. We write one idea on each note, in short and clear words, so that it can be moved on its own. Everyone writes freely, and nothing is judged or removed at this stage. A good session can produce dozens of notes, and that is helpful, because patterns appear when there is enough material.

Example: A family planning a holiday writes each wish on a separate sticky note: beach, museum, cheap flights, quiet hotel. Asking whether each note holds one idea, they split the note quiet hotel with a pool into two notes.

At work: Salma leads a support team that has received many customer complaints. Asking whether each note holds one idea, she asks the team to write forty notes, such as slow reply, wrong invoice and confusing website. Nothing is judged yet.

2. Group in Silence

The second step is to sort the notes into groups in silence. People move notes next to others that seem related, without discussing why, and anyone may move a note that does not look right. Silence prevents the loudest voice from deciding and lets intuition work. When a note keeps moving back and forth, it may hold two ideas, and we can split it.

Example: The family moves the sticky notes silently. Asking which notes feel related, they place beach, pool and sea view together, and museum with old town.

At work: The support team moves the notes without talking. Asking which notes feel related, the team joins slow reply, no answer and long waiting, and puts wrong invoice with billing error. After ten minutes, six groups have formed.

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3. Name the Themes

The third step is to name each group with a header note that summarises the whole group in a short phrase. A good header is a statement, such as customers wait too long, rather than a single word like service. Naming is a discussion step, because the team must agree on what each group means. Very large groups can be divided, and related groups can be placed under a bigger theme.

Example: The family names the groups: relax at the sea, discover the culture and keep costs low. Asking what single phrase sums up each group, they find that their wishes are really three themes.

At work: Salma and the team name the groups. Asking what single phrase sums up each group, they choose: customers wait too long, bills are wrong and the website is confusing. The forty notes now say three clear things.

4. Use the Result

The fourth step is to use the diagram to decide what matters. Teams often vote on the themes, for example with dots, and then choose where to act first. The diagram also shows the connection between ideas and themes, so that the decision can be explained to others. Without this last step, the diagram is only a picture and not a plan.

Example: Each family member places two dots on the themes. Asking which theme matters most, the family sees that relaxing at the sea wins and books the beach hotel first.

At work: The team votes with dots on the three themes. Asking which theme matters most and what to do first, the team sees that waiting wins. Salma plans a faster first reply for the following week.

Conclusion

In summary, an affinity diagram turns many scattered ideas into a few clear themes. Jiro Kawakita developed it as the KJ method in the 1960s. Teams collect ideas on separate notes, group them in silence, name the groups with short phrases and use the result to decide. Sorting by natural similarity reveals patterns that a long list hides. The method works best when the team stays patient and keeps judgement for the last step.

Sources

- ASQ: Affinity Diagram (quality resource) – https://asq.org/quality-resources/affinity-diagram
- Kawakita, J. (1967). Hassoho (Idea generation method). Chuokoronsha, Tokyo. The KJ method is named after the initials of Jiro Kawakita.

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