



The Charrette: Overview

Original written by Kathy Juarez, Piner High School, Santa Rosa, California.

Revised by Gene Thompson-Grove, January 2003, NSRF.

History

The Charrette is a term and process borrowed from the architectural community. Its purpose is to improve a piece of work. As described by Carol Coe at Puyallup High School (WA), Charrettes are used to “kick up” the level of performance. Individuals or teams call for a Charrette when they are “stuck” — when the members of the team have reached a point in the process where they cannot easily move forward on their own. They bring their current ideas, or the actual work in progress, to the Charrette, and then ask the group to “work on the work” for them.

Using the Protocol

Charrettes are not normally held after the completion of a project. Instead, they are held in a low stakes/no stakes environment, where the requesting team has much to gain from the process and virtually nothing to lose. In short, Charrettes are used to scrutinize and improve work while it is still in progress, before it is ever placed in a high stakes environment. They can be used whenever an individual or small group has a design problem or issue.

One other consideration: the Charrette is used only when there is sufficient trust present in a group, and when the prevailing atmosphere is one of cooperation rather than competition. Underlying the successful use of the Charrette are two fundamental beliefs:

1. Individuals or groups working together can usually produce better work than individuals or groups working in isolation (“none of us is as smart as all of us”), and
2. There is no piece of work that with more time, thought and effort couldn’t be improved (“with learning there is no finish line”).



The Charrette Protocol

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The following list of steps attempts to formalize the process for others interested in using it.

1. A group or an individual from the group requests a charrette when:
 - a. the group is experiencing difficulty with the work,
 - b. a stopping point has been reached, or
 - c. additional minds (thinkers new to the work) could help move it forward.
2. A second group, ranging in size from three to six people, is formed to look at the work. A moderator/facilitator is designated from the newly formed group. It is the moderator's job to observe the charrette, record information that is being created, ask questions along the way, and occasionally summarize the discussion.
3. The requesting team presents its "work in progress" while the other group listens. (There are no strict time limits, but this usually takes five or ten minutes.) Sometimes, the invited group needs to ask two or three clarifying questions before moving on to Step 4.
4. The requesting team states what it needs or wants from the charrette, thereby accepting responsibility for focusing the discussion. This focus is usually made in the form of a specific request, but it can be as generic as "How can we make this better?" or "What is our next step?"
5. The invited group then discusses while the requesting team listens and takes notes. There are no hard and fast rules here. Occasionally (but not usually) the requesting team joins in the discussion process. The emphasis is on improving the work, which now belongs to the entire group. The atmosphere is one of "we're in this together," and our single purpose is "to make a good thing even better."
6. When the requesting group knows it has gotten what it needs from the invited group, they stop the process, briefly summarize what was gained, thank the participants and moderator and return to the "drawing board."