



The Charrette Protocol

Developed by Kathy Juarez, Piner High School, Santa Rosa, California; revised by Gene Thompson-Grove, January 2003, and by Kim Feicke, October 2007.

Purpose

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, Washington, 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.

Time

20-50 minutes

Roles

A group, ranging in size from three to six people, is formed to look at the work. The moderator or facilitator is chosen from among the participants. It is the facilitator's job to help the group stay focused on the requesting team's/individual's questions or issues, observe the Charrette, record information that is being created, ask questions along the way, and occasionally summarize the discussion.

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 2 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”).

Process

1. The requesting team/individual presents its “work in progress” while the group listens. (There are no strict time limits, but this usually takes 5 or 10 minutes.)

2. The requesting team/individual 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?” Sometimes, the invited group needs to ask 2 or 3 clarifying questions before moving on to Step 3.
3. The participants then discuss while the requesting team/individual listens and takes notes. There are no hard and fast rules here. Occasionally (but not usually) the requesting team/individual 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.”
4. When the requesting team/individual knows it has gotten what it needs from the group, they stop the process, briefly summarize what was gained, thank the participants and moderator, and return to the “drawing board.”
5. Debrief the process as a group.