Peeling the Onion
Defining a Problem Protocol

Developed in the field by educators.

Purpose
To provide a structured way to develop an appreciation for the complexity of a problem in order to avoid the inclination to start out by "solving" the problem before it has been fully defined.

Time
Approximately 45-70 minutes. The times for each step can be adjusted to fit the available amount of time and the number of people in the group.

Facilitation Tips
Most of us are eager to solve problems before we truly understand their depth. This protocol is designed to help us peel away the layers in order to address the deeper issues that lie underneath the surface. If the problem were easy to solve, it would not still be a concern to the presenter. The facilitator should keep to the times steps and gently remind people when they are giving advice too early.

The Protocol
1. The keeper of the problem describes the problem/dilemma and asks a question to help focus the group's responses. (10-12 minutes)

2. Clarifying questions from group members to the presenter (these must be purely informational). (5-8 minutes)

3. A series of rounds begins in which each participant speaks to the same prompt. During the rounds the presenter remains silent and takes notes. Facilitator may choose to repeat a round if new responses seem to be emerging. (5-7minutes per round)

   Prompts (in order)
   - "What I heard [the presenters say] is …"
   - "One assumption that seems to be part of the problem/dilemma is…" OR, "One thing I assume to be true about this problem is … "
   - "A question this raises for me is…"
   - "What if…?" Or, "Have we thought about…?" Or, "I wonder…?"

4. Presenter reviews her/his notes and reflects aloud on what s/he is learning. (The group members are silent and take notes.) (5-7 minutes)

5. *Now what?* Together, the presenter and participants talk about the possibilities and options that have surfaced. (5-10 minutes)

6. Debrief the process. How was this like peeling an onion? What about the process was useful? Frustrating? Interesting?(3-5 minutes)