

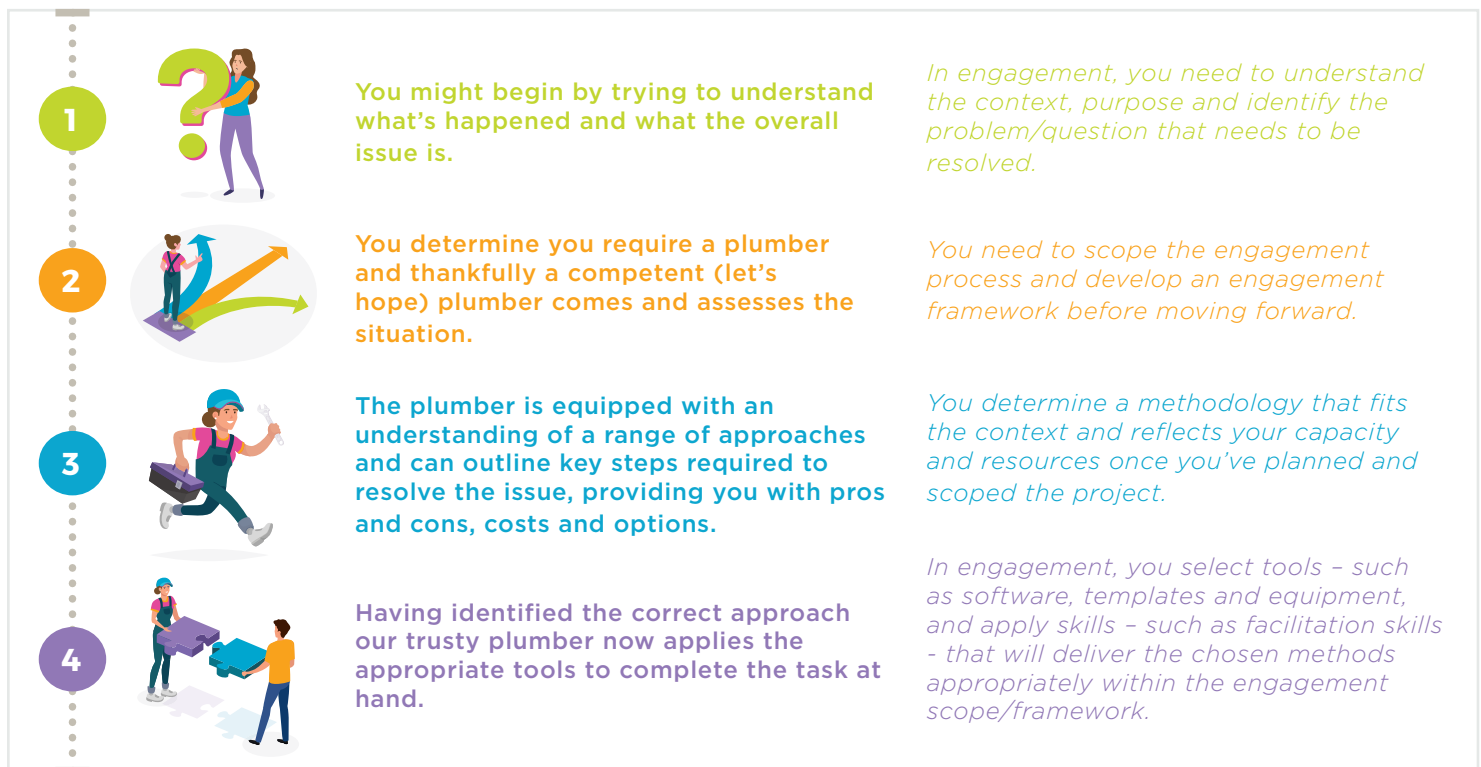
# THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB

## SELECTING THE RIGHT METHODS AND ACTIVITIES IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

### Decoding the language: method vs. tool and how these concepts interact

Deciding on the appropriate engagement frameworks, strategies, methods tools and techniques all feels a bit confusing at times. Add to this mix the array of software and digital applications we're all currently playing with, and the challenges we face around online engagement are compounded.

To make it even more overwhelming, people often use different terms interchangeably, and sometimes we can mix up or blur the lines between key engagement concepts. To clear this up a little, let's start with an analogy to help separate some of these elements. Imagine you have a maintenance issue in your home environment - a burst pipe.



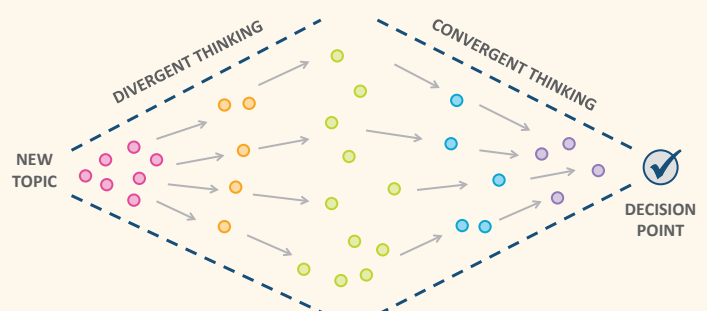
**Selecting the right approach to support a constructive dialogue is part art and part science.** There is no 'magic' solution, and no one tool or method that is 'best' or 'one size fits all'. As engagement practitioners we must remain cognisant of the planning and preparation required before we get to methods and tools. This work creates a blueprint that will guide us towards appropriate, fit-for-purpose activities. During COVID-19 we are continually having to adapt and experiment with these elements to ensure they help to deliver our engagement process effectively.

**Don't lose sight of your original intent and stay focused on our purpose, objectives and outputs, and the participant experience.**

It's important not to get tripped up by jumping forward too quickly or being distracted by 'shiny objects' - and there's a lot of them in the digital space! It doesn't matter how fancy or new a tool is. In fact, some of the 'shiniest' tools are overly complex, overwhelming, and unnecessary. This means that, often, simple is best.





### Mapping the right methods and tools into a participant gathering

To understand how a typical engagement gathering might evolve (online or otherwise), and to determine your methodology/tools, the 'Group Decision Making Model' from Sam Kaner can be helpful. It assists in method selection and sequencing (the linking of one step to another in a process) to ensure you are focused on maximising your rational and experiential aims for the session.



## Group decision making in an online environment

The table below overviews some top methodology tips against each step in the Sam Kaner model when applied to a typical online gathering.

STAGE	KEY METHODOLOGY TIPS
 <p><b>Initial Check In</b></p>	<p><b>Slow down</b> - We are at the start. We may need several check-ins or gatherings with the same group depending on the framework or strategy we have selected. Where possible take the time to enable people to see each other and begin to feel connected as a group. Have some waiting room or an interactive holding slide that allows a gentle sharing of what people are personally experiencing/thinking when arriving at the session. This is a great opportunity to start testing your tech and understand response capabilities in the group.</p>
 <p><b>Encouraging divergent thinking</b></p>	<p><b>Share the airtime</b> - Just like when we are conducting face-to-face activity work, it can be hard to ensure all voices are heard. You may need to support or seek alternative input pathways for those that don't have a mic or video to hand. Call out their comments in turn as you make space for all participants to contribute. Group size will determine how you process this. Large groups (over 30) work well in breakouts, others can quickly 'pass the ball' to each other to say hello and start sharing viewpoints.</p>
 <p><b>Working on converging our thinking</b></p>	<p><b>Mix it, mix it, mix it</b> - Keep building and connecting the thinking across participants. You might apply good summation, paraphrasing and summarising techniques or capture group insights using a mix of tools. The key here is to ensure we are enabling participants to explore, test or challenge some of their own preconceptions through learning from others.</p>
 <p><b>Moving towards a decision point</b></p>	<p><b>Decompress</b> - Invite them to take stock of what has been accomplished and what has not yet been addressed. You are likely to have more than you expected of the latter and you could require a regrouping or ongoing participation to keep moving forward with the work. Choose simple, easy to apply (and access) methods and tools that will build on this session, acknowledge the progress made and give people time to reflect on what they have done together during their the online gathering.</p>

## Reviews of existing online tools

The engagement community has been busy sharing, testing and reviewing an extensive range of online software and applying them to their work during COVID-19. Here are some of our favourite resources for tools that have been shared so far:

- 1** **Susanna Haas Lyons**

This list was initially developed in 2017 as part of IAP2 Canada whitepaper, Digital Engagement, Social Media & Public Participation written by Susanna Haas Lyons, Civic Engagement Specialist. This document provides extensive lists of online tools categorised by different types of application in digital engagement.  
<https://tinyurl.com/ycnpldhh>
- 2** **Jason Diceman**

Jason shares his criteria for assessing ideation tools and provides thoughts on his 'top picks'. This document can be accessed on Google docs.  
<https://tinyurl.com/ybkfled2>
- 3** **Involve UK**

This resource has been designed to help you navigate the overwhelming world of online engagement tools, and includes a digital tools database.  
<https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/digital-tools-participation-where-start>



*How have you adapted your methods and tools online to support memorable conversations?*

