# Using a Circle Map to Brainstorm and then Categorize

Purpose: A circle map diagram can be used to structure the thinking of a group when they want to brainstorm and then group their ideas into categories. Within the context of Unified Improvement Planning, this strategy can structure team brainstorming about explanations for their priority performance challenges.
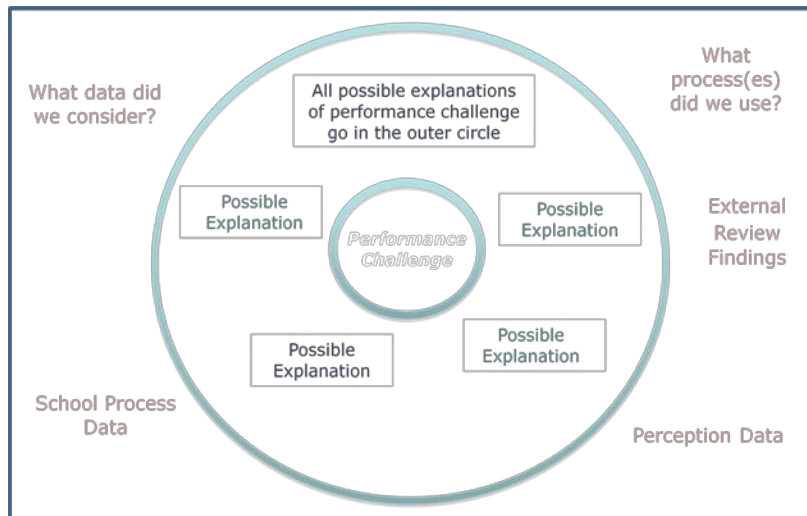
Materials: Large paper, flip chart page, or dry erase board; markers, pens, and sticky notes.

Steps:

1. Clarify what will focus the brainstorming activity

When using this strategy to brainstorm explanations for priority performance challenges, the priority performance challenge will focus the brainstorming activity.

2. Set up the "Circle Map"

The Circle Map includes three elements – a large circle, a smaller circle within that circle, and a frame (drawn around the outside of both circles). See example on this page. This can be drawn on a large sheet of paper, dry erase board, flip chart page, etc. Once these elements have been drawn, the priority performance challenge that is the focus of the brainstorming activity should be written in the center of the smaller circle.

3. Create a Frame

Identify what will "frame" the brainstorming. What additional data has the group reviewed (e.g. school process data, perception data)? Write these inside the frame and outside the large circle.

4. Focused Brainstorming

Around the center circle, team members will brainstorm all of the possible causes of that performance challenge. Using sticky notes, team members will list (one per note) possible causes of the priority performance challenge. During this process, it will be important to ensure every idea is captured and all "voices" are in the conversation. At this stage more is better. Then team members should post their sticky notes on the circle map (inside the outer circle, but outside the inner circle).

5. Categorize and Summarize

Next, the team will consider the causes that were identified and sort ideas into natural themes by asking: what ideas are similar? Is this idea connected to any other? To do this, team members will work in silence with each person moving sticky notes around to create groupings. Team members should keep moving notes until a consensus is reached. Then the group will discuss the groupings:

- If some ideas don't fit into any theme, leave as a stand-alone idea.
- If some fit more than one, create a copy and put in both groups.

Finally, the team should create a short 3-5 word description for each grouping.

Circle map used with permission from Thinking Maps, Inc. Specific training required before implementing Thinking Maps. For more information, visit www.thinkingmaps.com.