Writing on Walls

A Team Technique for Message Development

2019 MAMIAF, Overland Park, KS

What Is Writing on Walls?

A group approach to message development through which teams create a **visual display** (on a wall or computer screen) to assist with organizing and synthesizing the evidence.

Example of Visual Display from Writing on Walls

Why do Writing on Walls?

- Creating a visual display helps the team to:

  - be open to different and better ways to present findings (rather than sticking to original research questions)

  - identify connections within and across report objectives

- Working together as a group:

  - Leverages expertise and perspectives across group

  - Encourages team to confront and resolve issues earlier

  - Obtains earlier buy-in on report structure

Course Objectives

At the end of this course, you will be able to

- Explain how writing on walls can help teams develop a sound message.

- Identify tips and practices for

  - preparing for writing on walls,

  - building and reshaping the wall display,

  - translating the wall display into a message outline, and

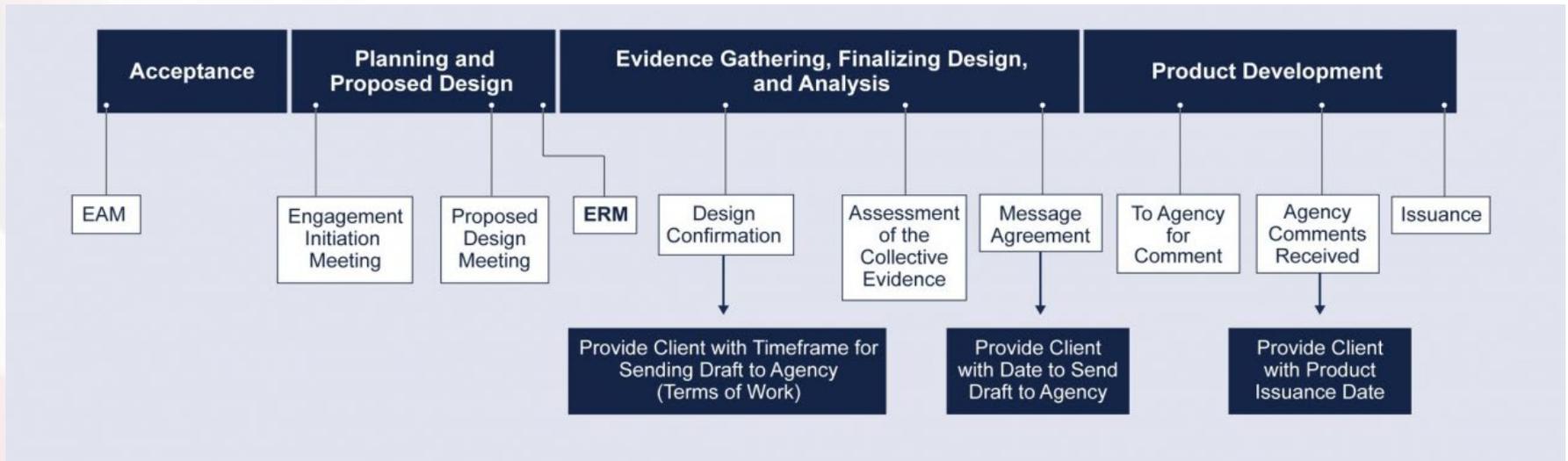 - facilitating writing-on-walls sessions.

Part I

Introduction to Writing on Walls

A Closer Look at Writing on Walls

- An approach to message development through which teams create a visual display (on a wall or computer screen) to assist with organizing and synthesizing the evidence.

- This visual display can help the team to

    - identify relationships within and across objectives,

    - consider evidentiary support for potential findings and recommendations, and

    - develop an optimal organizational structure for the message.

GAO Engagement Phases

- Writing on walls sessions typically occur around 3-4 weeks before the Message Agreement meeting.

- This allows time to translate the visual display into an outline that can be used for that meeting.

How Writing on Walls Works

The wall has vertical divisions.

Objective 1	Objective 2	Objective 3

How Writing on Walls Works (continued)

Team writes pieces of evidence on paper and posts them to the wall.

Objective 1	Objective 2	Objective 3
Evidence #1 Evidence #4		
Evidence #2 Evidence #5		
Evidence #3 Evidence #6		
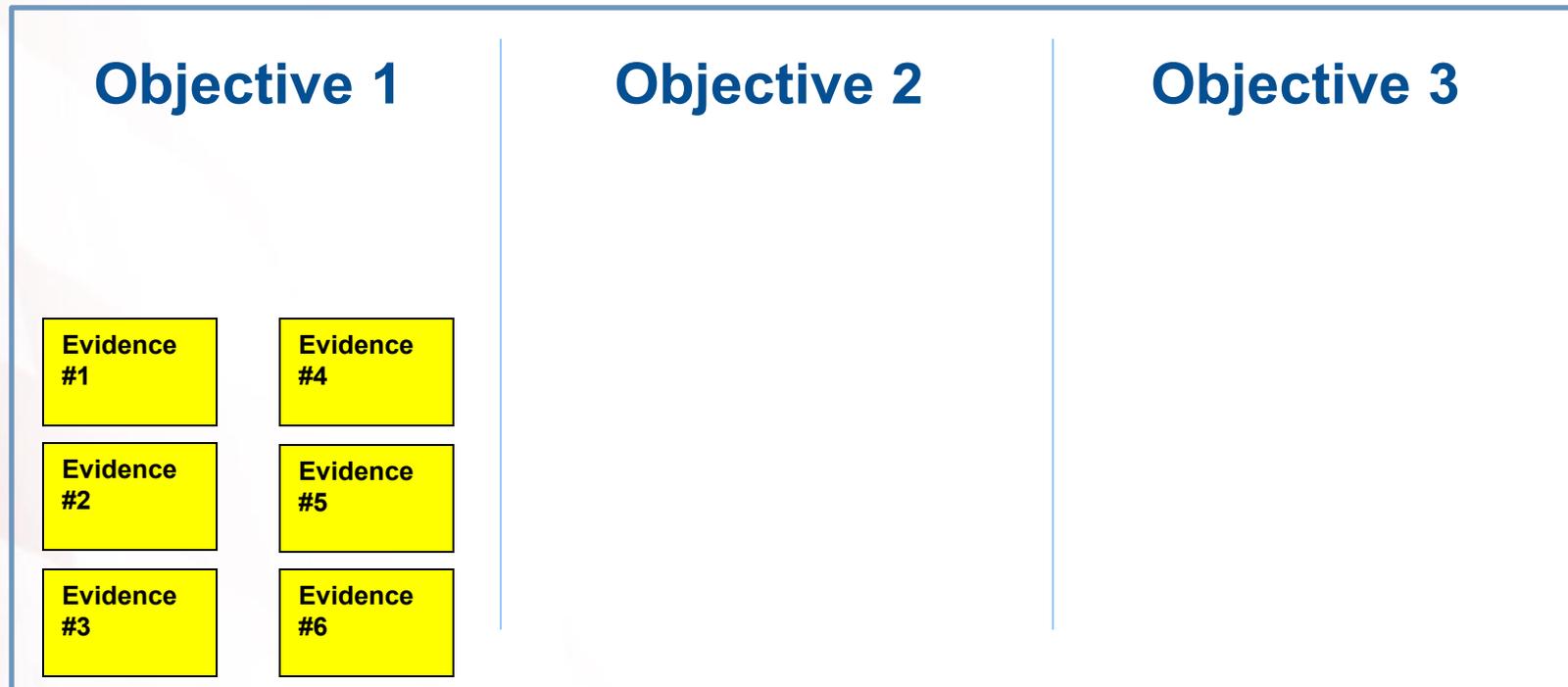
How Writing on Walls Works (continued)

Team arranges evidence to develop key points and message statements.

Objective 1

Message Statement

Key Point

Key Point

Evidence #1

Evidence #4

Evidence #3

Evidence #2

Evidence #6

Evidence #5

Objective 2
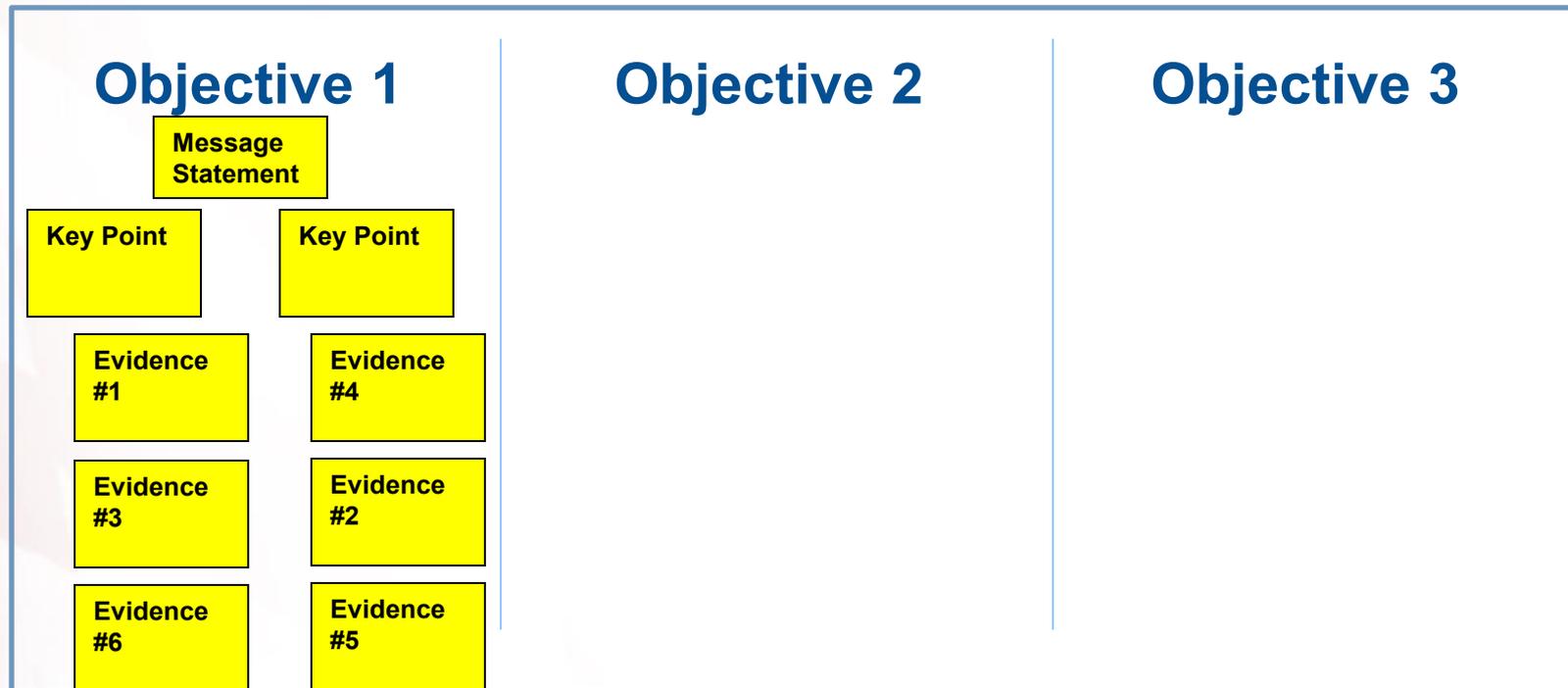
Objective 3

How Writing on Walls Works (continued)

Team repeats process for other objectives.

Objective 1

| Message Statement (yellow) |
Key Point	Key Point
Evidence #1	Evidence #4
Evidence #3	Evidence #2
Evidence #6	Evidence #5

Objective 2

| Message Statement (green) |
Key Point	Key Point	Key Point
Evidence #1	Evidence #2	Evidence #7
Evidence #3	Evidence #6	Evidence #8
Evidence #4		Evidence #9
Evidence #5		

Objective 3

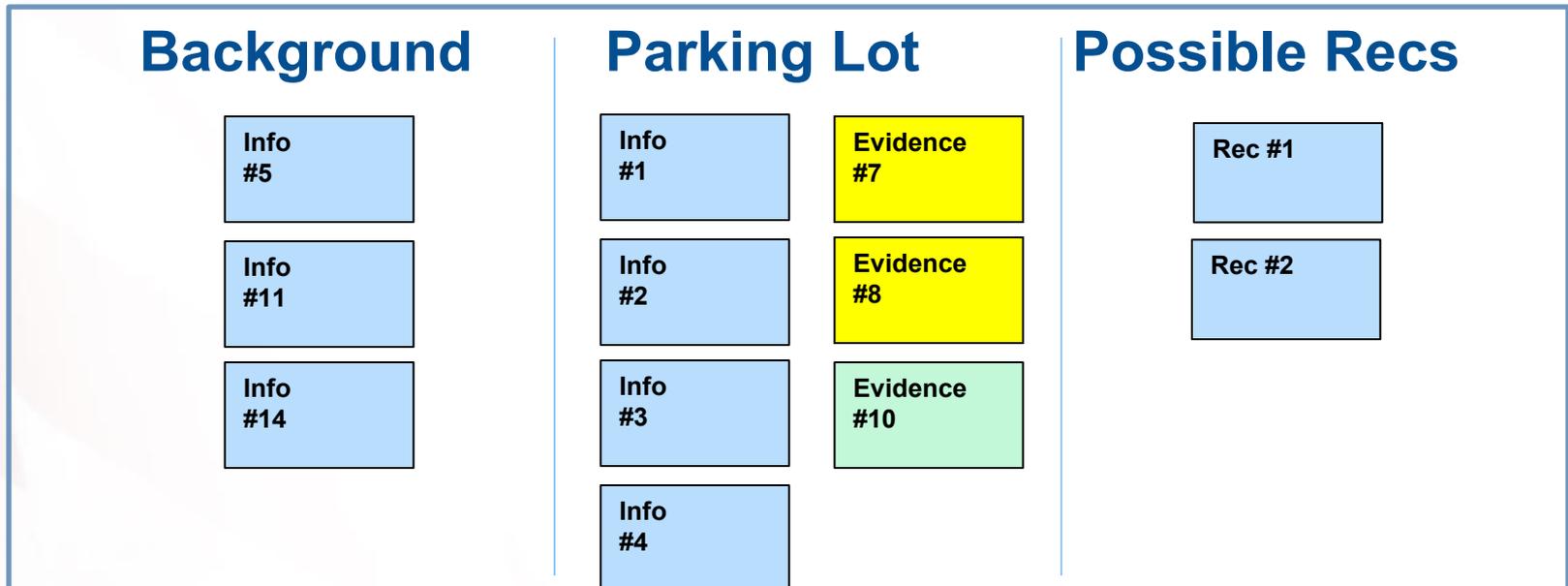| Message Statement (pink) |
| Key Point |
| Evidence #1 |
| Evidence #2 |
| Evidence #3 |
| Evidence #4 |
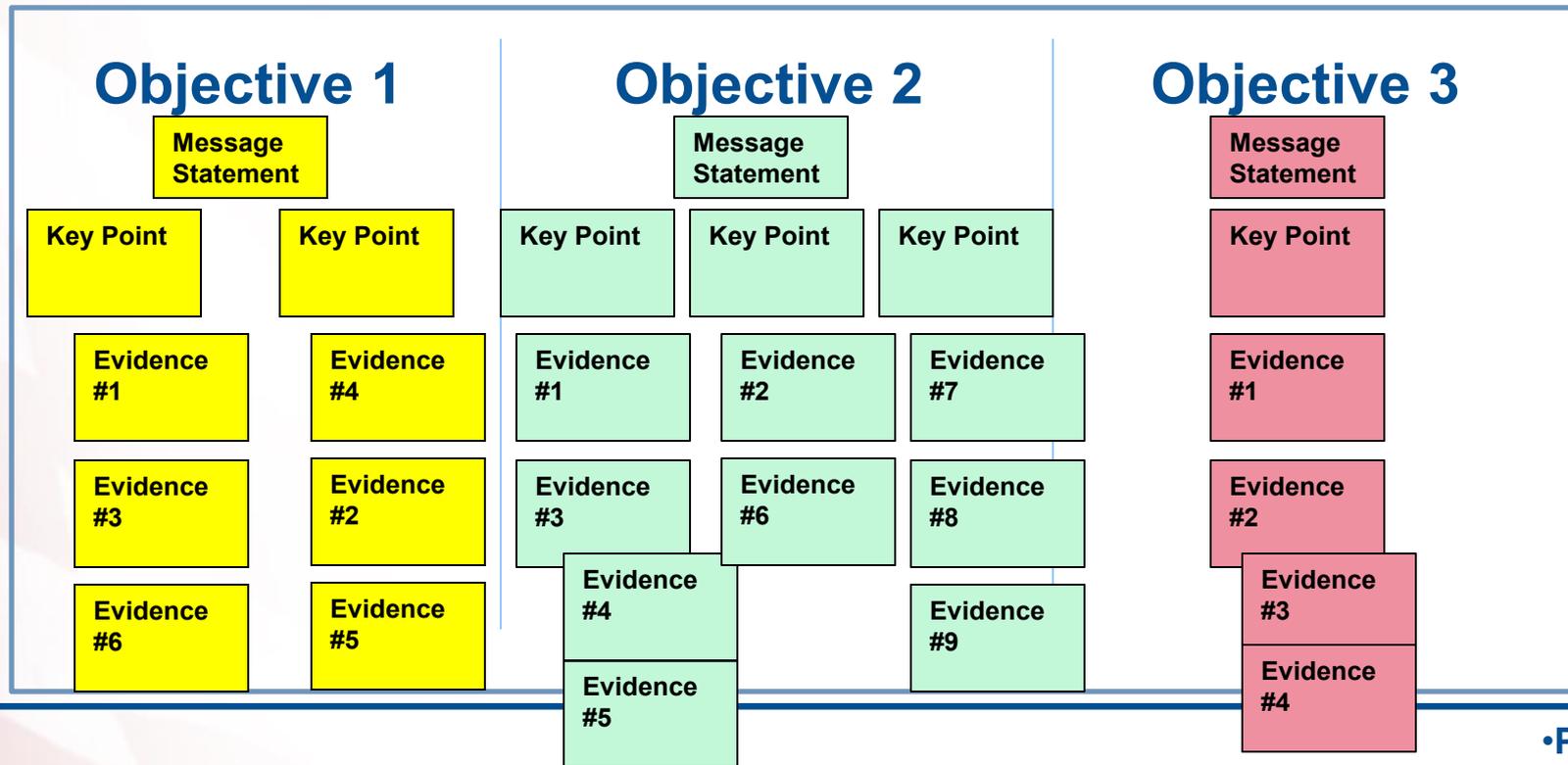
How Writing on Walls Works (continued)

Team may identify opportunities to streamline message by combining information and revising objectives.
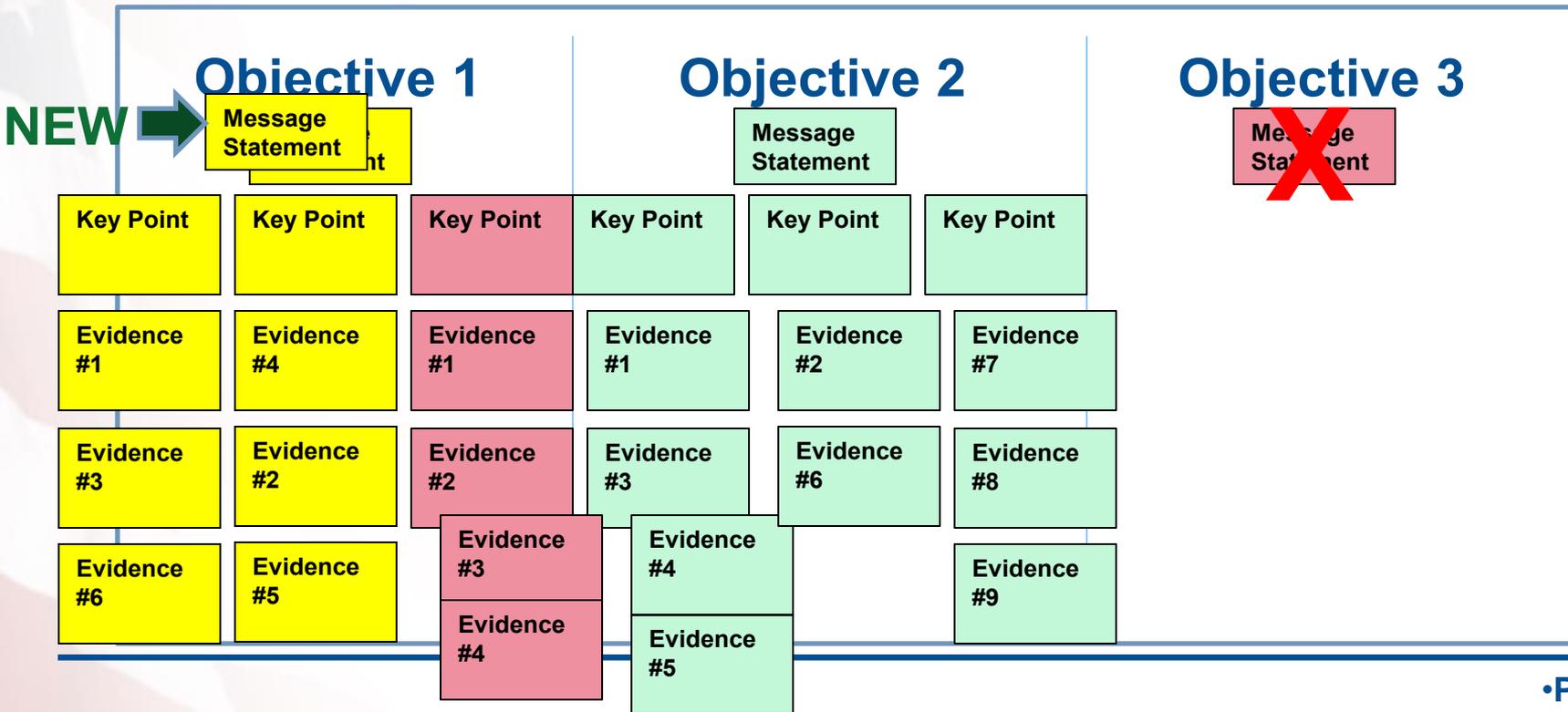
How Writing on Walls Works (continued)

Separate wall sections may be used to (1) organize background information, (2) collect evidence that initially does not fit elsewhere (in the Parking Lot) and (3) track possible recommendations.

Background	Parking Lot		Possible Recs
Info #5	Info #1	Evidence #7	Rec #1
Info #11	Info #2	Evidence #8	Rec #2
Info #14	Info #3	Evidence #10	
	Info #4		

Virtual Writing on Walls

- Use a software tool (such as Visio or Microsoft Word) to organize the evidence and findings on a computer screen.

- Make sure all parts of the "wall display" can be viewed on screen and that the font size is readable.

- Share the computer screen using WebEx.

- If available, use a VTC room so team members feel like everyone is in the same room.

- Monitor energy levels. Shorter sessions or more frequent breaks may be needed.

In-Person vs. Virtual Writing on Walls

- Having everyone in the same room for writing on walls can have clear advantages but isn't always possible.

- Whether it's done in-person or virtually, the same principles apply for making writing on walls successful:

  - Advanced preparation ensures the team is ready

  - Facilitated discussion helps team to thoroughly assess evidence and stay on track

  - Collaborative process leverages ideas and expertise from all participants

  - Flexible and rigorous approach helps to focus the message.

Part II

Preparing for Writing on Walls

Preparation:
A Key Component of Writing on Walls

The engagement team needs to

- make decisions about (1) desired outcomes, (2) meeting logistics, and (3) who should participate, and

- individually review the evidence collected so the discussion can be meaningful.

Preparing to Write on Walls

1. What types of (a) outcomes and (b) meeting logistics should the team make decisions about beforehand?

2. What types of logistical problems should the team try to avoid? How could these problems be averted?

3. Why is it important for the team to complete all or nearly all of the audit work and analysis beforehand?

Who Should Participate?

- Core engagement team (Note: Discuss Director's preferred level of participation)

- Facilitator

- Communications analyst

- Stakeholders whose expertise is needed to help shape message

- Others?

Video: A DCM Case Study

- The video will provide an opportunity to observe an actual writing on walls session for a DCM engagement.

- The first video segment will cover the background of the DCM engagement and how the team prepared for writing on walls.

Video – Part 1: Background & Preparation

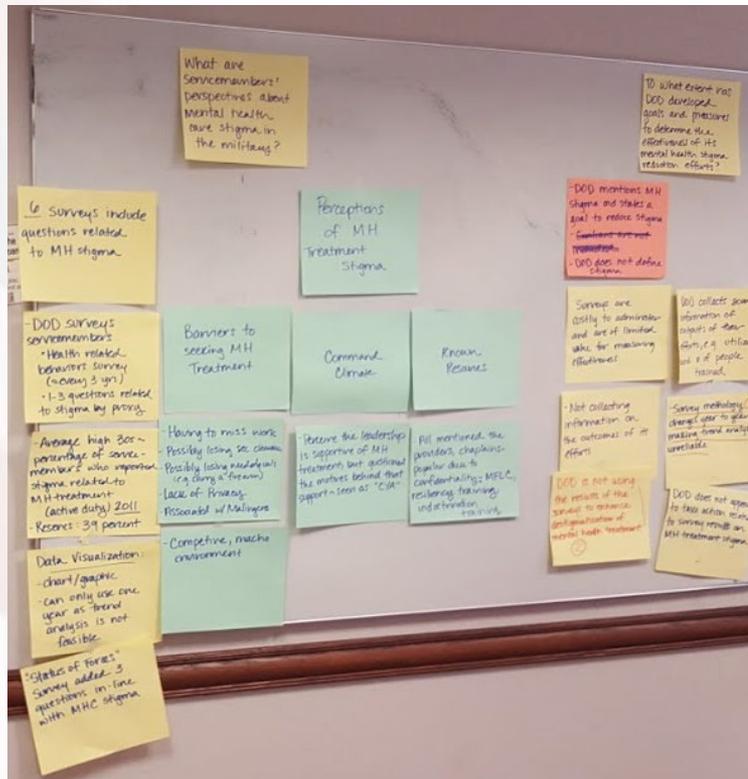As you watch the video, consider your responses to the following questions:

1.   What challenges did this team face going into writing on walls?

_____

_____

2.   What did they do to prepare beforehand?

_____

_____

Part III

Shaping the Wall Display and Creating a Draft Outline

Writing on Walls in Action

In this part of the course, we will

- Discuss the role of a facilitator in writing on walls,

- Learn techniques to build and reshape the wall display, and

- Watch and discuss the next two segments of a video that takes us inside writing on walls sessions.

Effective Facilitator:
A Key Component of Writing on Walls

1. What are some advantages of having an experienced facilitator lead your writing-on-walls sessions?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Behaviors of an Effective Facilitator

1. What qualities and behaviors do you associate with an effective facilitator?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. What behaviors should a good facilitator avoid?


   _____

   _____

   _____

What is the Role of the Facilitator?

- Kick off sessions by discussing ground rules, outlining the plan, and as appropriate, checking in on where the team stands relative to its goals.

- Lead team through planned steps in a timely way.

- Ask probing questions to help clarify and firm up support for team's arguments, but try to let the team develop conclusions on its own.

- Monitor the participants to ensure balanced participation and defuse any tension. Call breaks as needed to maintain energy.

- Write information on sheets of paper, post them to the wall, and rearrange based on team discussion.
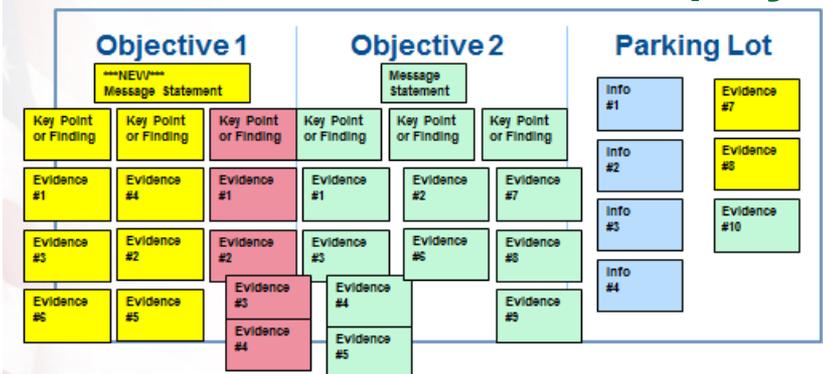
Building the Wall Display

- To successfully move from a blank wall to an effective visual display of the message, it helps to have a plan.

- Advance planning can help to provide a solid foundation for what could otherwise be a disorderly process.

From a blank wall…
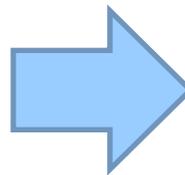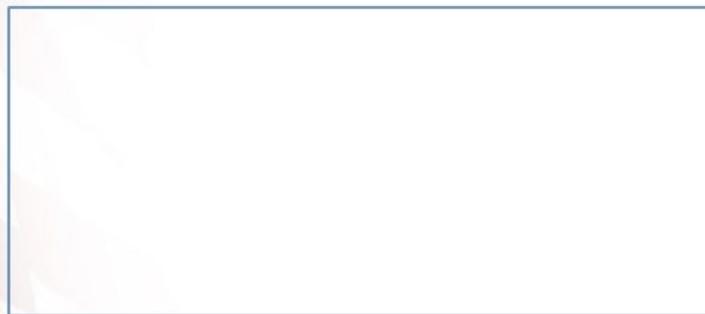
…to an effective visual display.

How to Go about Building the Wall

It helps to think in advance about:

- Where will the team start? With a single objective?

- Who will write on and post the sheets of paper to the wall?

- How will the team keep track of possible recommendations and key issues/debates it hopes to resolve?

Video: A DCM Case Study (continued)

- The next two video segments will focus on the following aspects of writing on walls:

  - Techniques the DCM team used to build and reshape the wall display, and

  - Examples of how the facilitator led team discussions.

Video – Part 2: Building the Wall Display

As you watch the video, observe how the team shaped the wall display over the 3 half-day sessions. What were the significant developments?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

From Wall Display to Message Outline

- Once the team has completed its wall display, it can use it as the basis for a message outline.

- When drafting the outline, the team may need to refine ideas that remained in rough form on the wall.

- In addition, the team should review the four elements of a finding for possible recommendations.
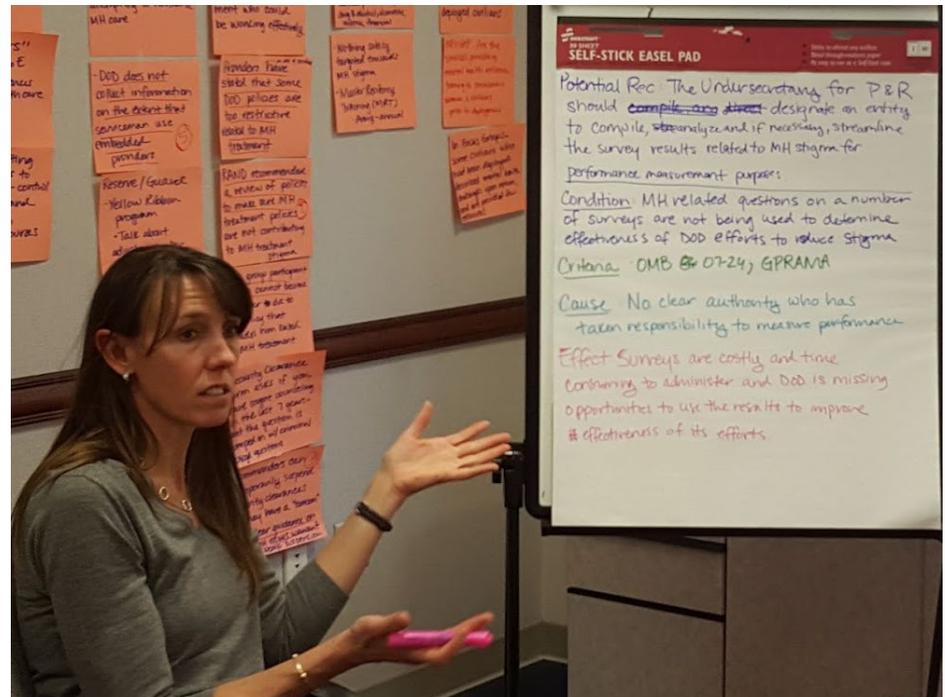
Video – Part 3: Facilitating Team Discussion

As you watch the video, consider your responses to the following questions:

1.   What did the facilitator do well in the video?

_____

_____

2.   How can writing on walls sessions help with developing recommendations?

_____

_____

Part IV

Final Thoughts and Application

Table Group Exercise

Discuss how you (as the AIC) would proceed to promote a constructive message development process under the scenario assigned to your table.

- **Scenario A:** One of your team's stakeholders has valuable expertise to share in shaping the message for one of the report objectives, but you are afraid that this person might dominate the conversation. In past meetings, this stakeholder has frequently talked for over 10 minutes at a time and interrupted others rudely.

- **Scenario B:** Your AD insists on leading the upcoming writing on walls sessions. You are concerned because this AD already has a clear idea of what the message should be and doesn't have a strong handle on the evidence.

Exercise (continued)

- **Scenario C:** An experienced Band IIB on your team is highly resistant to doing writing on walls and would prefer to simply create a report section based on the evidence collected for his research question. However, his research question overlaps significantly with other questions and both you and your AD agree that the report objectives will need to be completely different from the research questions.

- **Scenario D:** Your Assistant Director feels that the team's draft message outline is too long and does not reflect sufficient synthesis of the data collected. She strongly recommends that the team do writing on walls. Team members are scattered across HQ and three other field offices (Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco) and unfortunately, the team doesn't have travel funds to bring everyone to HQ.

Video – Part 4: Team Reflections on the Writing on Walls Experience

A few months after the writing on walls sessions, we asked some of the participants to reflect on the experience.

1. Which of their comments resonated with your experience developing the message?

2. What other lessons did you take away from this case study?