

Looking back to the future

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Looking back to the future serves to discover ideas for solutions, ways towards solutions and new points of view. The activity can be used in any kind of workshop, especially those held to create visions, to find ideas for new products and services and to process plans for complex projects. The scenic simulation methods foster engagement, spontaneity and creativity in the participants.

Setting

- 20 to 90 minutes depending on the number of roles and which version you are using.
- Suitable for groups from 4 to 25 people. Larger groups should be split and asked to deal with different sub-topics or to take different roles.
- You need some pinboards for the notes and a room with enough space.

Context and purpose

This process is helpful when teams have to come up with ideas to help their clients. It produces a lot of ideas from different points of view which serve as a basis for more detailed conceptual work to follow.

By looking back from the position of mastering the task, participants focus on the solution and on how they successfully coped with the challenges they faced.

Detailed description

1. Start

The facilitator shows statements of the workshop's goal in terms of visible results – for a project, an idea for a new product or service, changes to a work process, a new organisational structure. Examples include:

- *The help desk for XYZ is fully available in Bucharest.*
- *Our branch offers a choice of unrivalled products and services.*
- *The time taken for goods inwards inspection is cut by 30 percent*
- *The R&D co-operation unit is split into separate R&D branches in the different departments.*

2. Invitation

The facilitator invites the participants to experience how things will be when they have achieved the goal, in specific, concrete terms. That means standing at the peak of success and enjoying the view. Often it is easier to see the path to the peak from the top than it is from the valley below.

He tells the participants that everything they do in this step will serve as raw material for the detailed work later.

3. Prepare the space

Put two or three pinboards along one wall. Move the tables and spare chairs to one side and arrange the chairs (one for each participant) in a semicircle. Ask everyone to stand up anywhere in the room.

4. The Time Machine

The facilitator says

Now I invite you to an experiment - to a time jump! To jump to the time when you have successfully done what you set out to do. The result (...he mentions the visible result ...) has been achieved. Are you ready for this time jump?

The participants show they are ready by small gestures or words like OK.

Take a seat please... I am turning on the time machine NOW... plus 6 months... plus 12 months: now we are in (he says the month and year) ... plus 2 years... plus 3 years [The facilitator lets the time machine run for the appropriate time.] ... and now we are in (he says the month and year) ... and I'm switching it off NOW!

5. The Video

Now we are in [month and year]. Our plans have been successful. The result (...he mention the visible results...) has happened. Yes, it was a hard work for everyone involved. Of course, some challenging situations must have been mastered – you worked out how to do this. And now you are very happy about this big success... and maybe a bit proud....

And so the organisation wants to produce a small video to document the successful conclusion to this process. They want to do this by interviewing some of the people who made it happen - project managers, experts, developers, pilot clients [as appropriate]. The interviewers will be some of the important stakeholders (for example journalists from the trade press, public contributorities, customers' organisations...)

6. Assigning roles

The facilitator asks the participants to propose some typical roles of doers and interviewers. In total the number of roles should be about half of the number of participants, but not more than 5 roles of doers and 5 roles of interviewers. The participants (not the facilitator) decide who takes what role.

For the interviews, it is very important to talk about the way the project was successfully mastered. If you must talk about difficulties, please talk about how they were resolved. To strengthen the solution talk, I need two people to act as solution monitors. Their task is to stop the interviews if they run into problem talk (describing the problem and its causes in detail) and to lead the interview back on the solution trail. Who is willing to act as a solution monitor? Will the rest of you please act as observers and write down what you hear from the doers when answering the questions of the interviewers. Summarise what they say in key phrases on post-it notes. Those notes will serve later as source material for the detailed work.

The interviewers' questions should focus on

- What have we achieved?*
- What has changed since the beginning of the project?*
- What have you noticed, specifically?*
- How did we overcome some difficulties?*

7. Interviews for the simulated video

(It would be counterproductive to record this for real. It might lead to exaggerated acting out and reduce the spontaneity.)

The interviews are conducted in front of the semi-circle of chairs. On the stage there are chairs for the doers and interviewers.

7.1 Version for small groups.

(In this example the doers are called A and B and the interviewers X, Y and Z.)

As a warm up, the facilitator asks the doer to say something about his own role: *I am I have been in this job since.... my specific role in the project was*

After this warm up, the doers are interviewed using the questions above.

The facilitator and the solution monitors pay great attention, to make sure that the doers are talking in the present tense and are specific about everything that is different now that the plans have been completed.

The observers take notes and put them on the pinboards after each interview.

You can either draw the order of the interviews by lot or sequence the interviews so that A interviews X, then Y then Z, and then B interviews X, then Y, then Z.

7.2 Version for larger groups where there are many roles

The stage is set as if for a live discussion on TV. All the doers and interviewers are on stage. The interviewers can ask the doers questions in any sequence. The facilitator starts by asking each doer and interviewer to say something about their own role *I am I have been in this job since.... my specific concern for that intention is* This serves as warm up of the roles.

The facilitator and the solution monitors pay great attention, to make sure that the doers are talking in the present tense and are specific about everything that is different now that the plans have been completed.

The observers take notes and put them on the pinboards.

8. Coming out of role

The facilitator thanks all the actors for their work and asks them to come out of their roles with a movement of the hand and to sit on their chairs in the semi-circle.

9. Time machine backwards and short break

Sorry, we cannot stay in [month and year]any longer we have to return back to the present time. Attention please: sit quietly in your chairs ... I'll activate the reverse gear of the time machine NOW ... [The facilitator calls out each month and year as time reverses to the present day] ...OK.... we are back today again.... I'll turn the time machine off NOW.... Please get up and leave the time machine! Now we'll have a short break of about 10 minutes.

10. Sharing

After the break, the facilitator asks everyone to sit in a circle and to share what they learned about this future. *What surprised them? What was interesting? What was better than expected?* [The wording better than expected is important to reinforce the positive results - in contrast to for example, what worked well? or how was it?]

What happens next

The participants might collect the post-it notes and cluster them as they think appropriate. This activity results in a large collection of ideas from different perspectives to be used later in the workshop – for example structuring, assessment, making it more specific, prioritising etc.

Comments

This activity is one example out of many for solution focused scenic improvisations. It uses the psychodramatic methods surplus reality, role play and role reversal which I find especially effective.

The activity avoids focusing on things that might lead to failure. Such risks are not ignored: instead they are treated as difficulties and challenges which - looking back - were resolved. This allows a positive mood to be created without negating difficulties and risks.

Acknowledgements & references

The method was developed by the author of this contribution.

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Starting as scientist (PhD) in nuclear physics he worked for many years as line and project manager. Today, as Chief Manager of KORN AG, he works as an OD and PD consultant, coach/mentor and lecturer in universities focused on change, co-operation & communication processes in enterprises and complex projects. Further training in systemic management, solution focused work, systemic constellations, group psychotherapy, soziometry, sociodrama & psychodrama.

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