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Getting Your Meeting Unstuck

by Sue Pelletier | Jun 01 '04

WE'VE ALL BEEN IN STRATEGIC PLANNING SESSIONS WHERE WE SPEND seemingly endless hours fishboning and analyzing — without ever developing action steps or achieving results. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Facilitator Diane Wendt, CEO/president of AtEz, LLC, a coaching and consulting practice in Gilbert, Ariz., has used a tool called outcome mapping for more than 15 years with all types of groups and organizations to help them move beyond “problem thinking” and into an “outcome-solving perspective.”

“The problem-solving perspective spirals you down, which can help pinpoint the problem but won't necessarily get you to the desired outcome you want,” says Wendt. “Plus, it can leave you stuck on the details of the problem, instead of finding ways to move forward. It also can lead individuals or groups into being sidetracked or derailed from the real outcome they desire,” she says. “When you're coming from an 'outcome-solving' perspective, you focus on possibilities and opportunities instead of limitations or barriers to getting where you want to go.”

Flip the Question

The key is to “flip” the question, so instead of asking, “Why do I have this problem?” or “Who is to blame for this problem?” you ask, “What do I want instead of this problem?” By turning the question around, you also switch the focus from the problem to the outcome you want, says Wendt.

A flipped outcome should be positive. It also should be a goal you can realistically accomplish — one you have or can get the resources and time needed to achieve. In addition, it should be easy to tell when you've achieved it; and it has to be worthwhile, meaning the gains you will get as a result of achieving the outcome will outweigh the time and material costs involved. The outcome should also be representative of your core values.

Let the Chunking Begin

Once you've identified your outcome, you're ready to “chunk.” This entails finding “higher” outcomes, says Wendt. “You have to get to the ‘heart place’ if you want change to happen. The key question to ask as you chunk up, she says, is “What will achieving this outcome do for me?” For example, if your initial outcome is, “I want a clean, organized office,” you then ask what having a clean office will do for you. Your first chunk up could be that it would improve your access to information. Then you ask the question again, and the next chunk up could be that the improved access would let you improve your response time. That in turn could chunk up to a greater sense of accomplishment. Chunking up helps you get motivated to make the changes needed to get to your desired outcome.

Even the goal of a clean office can seem impossible to some, though. When the obstacles to achieving your desired outcome seem overwhelming, chunking down can help. The key question for chunking down is, “What stops me/us from getting the desired outcome?” Once you identify a barrier, then you ask, “What do I/we want instead?” So in the clean office example, one barrier could be not having any file cabinets, Wendt says. The next level — what do I want instead of not having file cabinets? — becomes easy to answer: Get file cabinets. Keep asking the questions and chunking down until you have a number of concrete, attainable actions you can take to move toward your desired outcome.

From Paper to a Plan

Once all the issues around your desired outcomes are “mapped” by chunking up and down, it's time to set an action plan. Note all the actions — the answers to your “what do you want to do instead?” questions — and set a date to have them completed. If you'll need any resources to meet

your deadline, note them along with the date.

At this point, Wendt says, take some time to visualize what your desired outcome will look, taste, and feel like once it's a reality. Say it's now six months from when you first did your outcome map: How do you know you achieved it? Using the clean office example, it should be pretty easy to visualize, but no matter what your desired outcome is, try to envision what it will be like once it's realized. Then start following your map to success.

While this is a great tool for meeting participants who are trying to find solutions to various problems, it works just as well for any problem in any context where you want to direct attention and energy from what keeps you from moving forward to all the places you want to go. As Wendt notes: "It's like music — you can't stay depressed while playing the banjo, and you can't stay stuck and use Outcome Mapping."

For more information on Outcome Mapping, contact Diane Wendt at (480) 703-3426; e-mail diane.wendt@atez.org; or visit www.atez.org.

Whose Idea Is This Anyway?

Outcome Mapping was developed by Bob Bostrom, PhD, the L. Edmund Rast Professor of Business at the University of Georgia, and president of Bostrom & Associates, a training, facilitating, and consulting company based in Columbia, Mo.; and Vikki Clawson, PhD, B&A's vice president and managing director.

For more information about outcome mapping, check out these resources:

- *Outcome-Directed Thinking: Questions That Turn Things Around*, by Bob Bostrom and Vikki Clawson; downloadable paper from www.terry.uga.edu/~rbostrom/
- *Using Outcome-Directed Thinking to Achieve Effective and Efficient Meetings*, by Bob Bostrom and Vikki Clawson; downloadable paper from www.terry.uga.edu/~rbostrom/

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