

The future, backwards

Type : **Open Source Method**

Family : **System**

This technique was developed as an alternative to scenario planning and is designed to increase the number of perspectives that a group can take both on an understanding of their past, and of the range of possible futures. It can be used to discover what entrained patterns of past perception in an organisation are determining its future. It can be used to compare and contrast different aspirations as to the present and the future. It can be used to generate multiple turning points or decision points for use in the social construction of the Cynefin Framework. It can be used as a device to generate or prompt for anecdotes, to lead into mapping and many other purposes.. It is one of the primary workshop tools within Cognitive Edge and one of the most popular. If the instructions are followed it is easy for participants to understand and generates considerable energy within the group. It can be delivered at varying depths of detail and duration, taking from an hour to half a day to complete (obviously with different levels of processing and detail).

Preparation

A key early decision is if you are using the method on multiple groups (to compare different outputs) or with one group. Ideally a comparison. Multiple groups do not have to carry out the process on the same day, however they must not see each others results.

Wall space or tables depending on the size of hexies in use should be checked in advance. Small hexies and a large sheet of butcher paper can be run on a table for multiple groups, or you can use larger hexies on a wall space which should be backed with paper.

Hexies should be used as follows

If you have seven colours

1. Current State (CS)
2. Turning points backwards from CS
3. Heaven
4. Hell
5. Turning points backwards from heaven
6. Turning points backwards from hell
7. Accidents on hell or heaven pathway

If you have less

1. Current state
2. Turning points backwards from CS, heaven and hell
3. Heaven & Hell (marked)
4. Accidents

Flow of events

Step	Comments
<p>Warn that the process requires them to go through a series of stages without knowledge of the outcome until the process is finished.</p> <p>There is no right or wrong answer</p> <p>One idea or turning point per hexi.</p> <p>Please do not look at what the other groups are doing.</p>	<p>Use the slide build by build to demonstrate the process. Ensure colour coding on the slide matches hexies that you hand out.</p> <p>Watch for people disengaging or dominating the process.</p> <p>Make sure that the whole group is active in discussing each decision</p>
<p>Each group should then be told to identify one to three descriptions that for them summarise the current state of affairs (CS). Each of these descriptions should be written on a single hexy and the results clustered two thirds to the right and in the centre vertically.</p>	<p>Its a common confusion for the group to think that each member should produce their own CS statements when the group as a whole should discuss and agree the CS</p> <p>It is important to check correct placement of the CS hexies in the work area otherwise everything gets difficult!</p>
<p>Each group is now told to identify the most significant event in the immediate past which shaped the CS and to describe it on a single hexy to be placed to the left of the CS cluster.</p>	
<p>Once this is complete AND NOT BEFORE each group is asked to repeat the process for the most significant event that preceded the one that they have just identified and continue crating events ONE AT A TIME going as far back into the past as they consider appropriate.</p> <p>Make it very clear that this is a single track backwards from the CS cluster, not from each CS item.</p>	<p>The tendency to produced a track from each of the CS events is common and needs to be watched.</p> <p>It is OK to allow them to bifurcate pathways to the past, but ask them to avoid it and keep to one or two at most.</p> <p>DO NOT define a time period for the exercise - different groups will use different periods and this itself can be interesting. This instruction applies to all stages of the process.</p>

Step	Comments
<p>Each group is then asked to recall the discussion they had over the CS cluster and repeat the process for an IMPOSSIBLY good future (Heaven). The resulting 1-2 hexies are then to be placed in the upper right hand corner of the work area.</p>	<p>This process can be started with each group as they become free to commence it. Groups will work at different pace and it is important to keep the pace up. If necessary prepare another task for groups that finish early.</p> <p>Normally you should contrast the phrase <i>impossibly good</i> with a phrase often used in scenario planning=, namely <i>best possible</i>.</p> <p>Ritual dissent (if there are multiple groups) can be used to challenge heavens and hells, but if this is the case the historical strand should be covered so other groups do not see the material before they have finished.</p>
<p>They then repeat the process for an IMPOSSIBLY bad future state (Hell) with the results placed in the bottom right hand area of the work area.</p>	<p>Note that the phrase <i>heaven</i> and <i>hell</i> may be culturally sensitive and alternative words may be need to be used.</p>
<p>Each group is then asked to <i>make heaven happen</i>. They are told to do this the same way that they worked this history of the CS. Starting with the immediate preceding significant event to heaven and then working backwards, event by event to one of the significant events that track back from the CS.</p> <p>The group are allowed to have one accident or completely unexpected event in the backwards path.</p> <p>They must not trace it back to the current state.</p>	<p>At this point the main error is to work forwards from a turning point to heaven or hell.</p> <p>It is critical to monitor the groups at this stage.</p> <p>The temptation to suggest a type of accident here has seduced many a consultant. If you have to suggest something then create an example if a different field and ban its use.</p>
<p>The process is repeated for hell. Make it clear that the track should not necessarily link to the same point in the past as did the Heaven track.</p>	<p>this can be combined with the above if time is running short</p>
<p>Once all groups are finished then they are asked to appoint a spokesperson who stays with the work area, while the other members rotate around the other groups to see what they have done. The instructions are to note common events and surprises.</p>	<p>This may be carried out analytically after the event itself</p>

Step	Comments
<p>The results should now be recorded and ideally retained. If the events are required for another process such as the social construction of the Cynefin framework then they should be replicated. If there is no alternative to using the original material then make sure it is recorded.</p>	<p>The recorded material may also be subject to analysis after the event.</p>
<p>The commonalities and differences between the groups are ideally analysed by the groups themselves - ideally by remixing the groups to have representatives of each of the starting group.</p> <p>This can be done with three questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the commonalities and differences between your FB and those of the other teams? 2. What surprised your about the other results 3. What consequences do you see from the differences? Both for what has happened in the past and what could happen in the future. 	<p>You may want to explain the theory of the different types of pattern entrainment before this part of the exercise. Point out the following</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Things in common in the past determine the way we see the future. 2. If there are lots of CS differences the group is not aligned 3. Patterns on the pathways to heaven and hell are things that could be triggered by a proposal and would determine crisis response. 4. Heaven and hell options can reveal deep seated motivational factors.

Variation ONE

Under this variation identification of Heaven and Hell precede identification of the current state. The sequence is then:

1. Heaven
2. Hell
3. Current State
4. Path back from current state
5. Path back from Heaven
6. Path back from hell

In this variation heaven and hell are less likely to be seen as incremental variations of the current state. In the standard version above the current state is not influenced by visions of heaven and hell. You may also want these states identified by different sub groups and consolidated. There are many variations.

Variation TWO

Allow multiple bifurcations in the time lines. This can only be done if you have more than an hour. Under this variation it is important to distinguish between events and turning points. events are hexies in the chain, turning points are at bifurcation and connection points.

Good & Bad Practice

Common bad practice is to suggest examples to the group. This should be avoided.

Analysis

Each groups results should be compared with care as follows:

Common events in the past across all groups should be identified. These may not be an exact match and not all groups will have all events in common. Differences are also significant. The common past events represent the pattern entrained filters through which a group or groups filter their perception of the present.

You may find (and it is frequent) that one groups hell can be another groups heaven

The accidents can have varying degrees of significance as they represent unrealisable fears or hopes.

The heaven and hell tracks, particularly the early stages, represent events that will trigger a pattern entrained response to heaven or hell respectively.

Other Methods

Ritual dissent