

LIFTING GROUPS OUT OF THE GROOVE

Sometimes groups need to break their routine in order to think "outside the box." A series of retirement home Board planning meetings, for instance, brought these outcomes:

- agreement on priorities for new and ongoing projects
- a process for managing conflict
- fresh relationships among board members.

At the first session, we concentrated on gathering ideas. Although everyone has done brainstorming, the temptation to discuss each new idea is so strong that each group needs the reminder: no nay-saying and no discussion of each idea.

Without these guidelines, groups follow the discussion script to which they are accustomed. Each person thinks she/he knows what other members stand for and may unintentionally collaborate to keep other members in that role. Brainstorming breaks the pattern: When ideas are emphasized, you are free to get "on a roll," not "in a role."

Sometimes silent brainstorming works better. Everyone writes ideas on sticky notes, one idea to a note. Next you sort your ideas into categories as you paste them on the wall. Others join you, making and finding categories that don't need naming; people will see the patterns. Anyone who thinks an idea belongs in another category can move it. People read and sort until all categories are set, usually in a few enjoyable minutes.

In the process I used with the two Boards, our categories of ideas suggested clear alternatives for the Boards' direction. We could identify two concentric circles of concern, for instance, one serving the needs of the residents, and the other addressing the needs of elderly throughout each town.

The next step is setting priorities. At this stage old conflicts may hinder the group's progress, so a way must be found to honor each member's choices while moving the group toward decisions. One of the Board Chairs suggested that we give each Board member self-stick dots with which to show their priorities. Everybody placed their dots beside the ideas, red for top priority, blue for second priority and yellow for third.

Voilà. Dots clustered on certain ideas, and a rich discussion followed. Natural dot clusters and anonymous "voting" prevented people from jumping to conclusions, both about who thinks what and about limits for projects that might be undertaken.

The next step, actually making decisions, is hardest. But everyone is so heavily invested in the success of our process that they hear each other, adjust and reach agreement. As *Getting Past No* author William Ury puts it, the group has created momentum for agreement by "accumulating yesses:" consenting to hear new ideas, agreeing on project categories and collaborating to set priorities.

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A client writes...

"For several months Merryn led successful workshops for Blue Cross Blue Shield employees ... She was adept at integrating our own business requirements and work products into the class structure. This approach greatly enhanced the outcomes for participants and the company."

Karen Saudek, HR Director,
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Vermont