Think and Listen ▲ Go Round ▲ Vision Support Group ▲ Open Agenda

Designing Productive Meetings & Events

How to increase participation and enjoyment

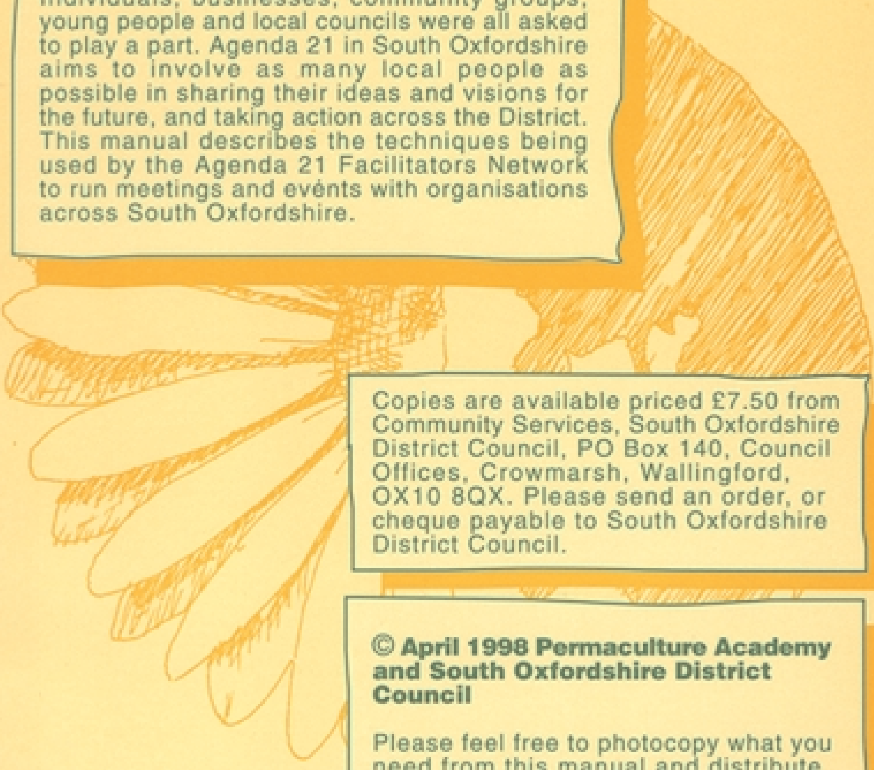
Local Agenda 21 in South Oxfordshire

Think and Listen ▲ Go Round ▲ Vision Support Group ▲ Open Agenda

AGENDA 21

Agenda 21 arose from the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the largest ever meeting of world leaders. Governments recognised that on their own they could not do enough to solve some of the world's biggest problems - like poverty, unemployment and environmental damage.

Individuals, businesses, community groups, young people and local councils were all asked to play a part. Agenda 21 in South Oxfordshire aims to involve as many local people as possible in sharing their ideas and visions for the future, and taking action across the District. This manual describes the techniques being used by the Agenda 21 Facilitators Network to run meetings and events with organisations across South Oxfordshire.



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foreword

Ever come out of a meeting feeling inspired? excited? with a sense of achievement? Maybe yes, but no doubt there have been more that were frustrating, tedious or unproductive.

Ever pondered how you could get more people to join your community group, when at each meeting it is the same old faces?

We often put effort into organising special events, but what about a routine meeting? This manual describes a set of simple, easy to use methods that can be used to increase productivity, participation and enjoyment in many different everyday situations. They need very little preparation and they work!

This manual is the result of the work of the South Oxfordshire Agenda 21 Facilitators Network. The Network was formed in July 1997, to train local residents to run whole day visioning workshops for local communities. It quickly became apparent that we did not have to wait until the end of the course to put our new skills into practice. We began to use the techniques we were learning for groupwork and meetings within our own lives. From youth events and environment groups to scientific research meetings, we found we had a portfolio of methods at our finger tips that people enjoyed using and that got results.

After just three and a half days of training, in March '98, five of the facilitators ran a full day 'Action Search' event with representatives from eleven churches in the Wallingford area, as described at the end of this manual.

These methods work because they are designed for inclusion - so that everyone at a meeting has a real chance to participate.

So whether you belong to a community group, work for a business, represent constituents on a Council, or co-ordinate a Local Agenda 21 programme, if you dip into this manual I am sure you will come across something that tempts you to read on. But don't stop there. Try out some of the suggestions and find out for yourself how rewarding they can be.

Heather Saunders

Heather Saunders
Local Agenda 21 Co-ordinator
and trainee facilitator.

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1. introduction

What this manual is for and how it is arranged

Meetings and events make up a significant part of the activities of any organisation or group. And yet such meetings and events are often unsatisfactory, absorbing large amounts of time and resource with little positive output. By carefully planning the structure in advance, it is possible to achieve more at even the most routine meeting.

The central proposal in this manual is that meetings and events can be greatly improved in terms of productivity and enjoyment by the use of simple methods. These can be used on their own or assembled into meeting and event designs. The manual presents a collection of such methods, known as 'inclusive meeting methods'. These methods have been chosen because they are easy to learn, easy to use and applicable in many circumstances.

The manual is prepared with the expectation that users will try out the methods presented here, familiarise themselves with their strengths and weaknesses, and go on to use them regularly at work and in voluntary and community settings. A person using the methods described to run a meeting or event is termed a facilitator.

The manual is arranged as follows:

Chapter 1. Introduction

Chapter 2. Inclusion: Describes the idea of inclusion that underpins the methods presented here.

Chapter 3. Principles: The problems associated with conventional meetings and proposed remedies. This section is included so that you can be sure that the methods proposed here are consistent with the way you want your organisation or group to develop.

Chapter 4. Methods: Describes in detail methods for use when constructing meetings. Each method is presented in the format, Description, Why It Works, Challenges and Applications. For some methods there are additional sections describing answers to frequently asked questions (FAQ's), how to brief participants and facilitator's notes.

Chapter 5. Agenda 21 Networks: relates the methods to the specific requirements of Agenda 21

Chapter 6. Two More Principles: Working with Visions and Finding Common Ground.

Chapter 7. Action Search: Describes in brief a one day event using a range of inclusive meeting methods.

Chapter 8. Origins of Inclusive Meeting Methods

There is a considerable amount of cross referencing in the manual. This means that you will find strange words (usually section headings) popping up before they have been explained. A solution to this is to refer to the contents list and dip into the manual in any order to find an explanation of the term, if you need it to be able to continue reading.

A progressive system of methods

The meeting and event methods described in this manual can be connected to make a wide range of meetings of all sizes and shapes. The simplest methods, ***Think and Listen*** and ***Go-Rounds***, are core components of the next highest level of methods such as ***Vision Support Group*** and ***Constructing Open Agendas.*** In turn each of these second order methods can be used to generate third order methods like the ***Action Search*** described in outline in the final chapter.

The methods chosen for a meeting will depend on the intended function of the meeting, the number of people attending and the range of abilities likely to be present.

Inclusive meeting methods can be small or large scale. Two people together can use a ***Think and Listen*** to great advantage for a meeting that may take 15 minutes or less. Or the methods can make up designs for events suited to 50 or more people coming together for a whole day.

Liberating structures

There is a common belief that structured meetings lead to constraint and possible reduction of spontaneity and creativity. If the structure is rigid and inappropriate then this may be true. The methods proposed here are intended to be used with flexibility and a certain amount of improvisation. Meetings are kept relevant through modification to suit the conditions on the day. This means that whilst facilitators may work from a prepared plan they remain open to making changes.

Design practice

It is proposed that each time people come together for a meeting someone, an individual or better, a small group of people, have prepared a design for the event. This preparation will involve thinking well about the meeting to ensure that people will have a positive experience and that the event is productive.

Finding safe opportunities to practice these skills is crucial. For some people, in some organisations, this will be no problem and you can start with colleagues at work. For others, more informal groups such as those which form around clubs and societies may be safer or more open to experimentation. Family and friends often gather together for some common purpose and these get togethers provide relaxed opportunities to try out your developing skills.

The safest situations to practice in are:

- training events specifically set up to provide practice opportunities
- with a group of people who agree to experiment with the methods

In circumstances where there is no agreement to experiment, an appropriate strategy is to use the methods in an informal or naturalised way (without naming the methods for example).

Introducing the new approaches

Introducing new approaches to any organisational context can be difficult, some contexts significantly more so than others. New organisations or networks are generally more promising than those with established patterns of practice.

For all sorts of reasons established organisations are often resistant to change preferring instead to stay with familiar methods however poor and ineffective these might be. Even though people may experience great gains in productivity, enjoyment and reduced stress at meetings through using inclusive methods they are still likely to fall back to old ways unless consistent efforts are made to reinforce the benefits.

Facilitators need to develop ways of introducing the methods unobtrusively and will need to be persistent.

Particularly good opportunities for introducing inclusive meeting methods exist whenever there is some novelty in the circumstances of a meeting or event. That is, for example, whenever the composition of a meeting group changes, when a new venue is used or when the focus of attention moves onto unfamiliar topics.

It is especially useful if an existing group hears of the great meetings that your group is having these days and asks for some facilitation assistance to sparkle up their own discussions. Facilitators from outside are often a novelty in themselves and can introduce new ideas in circumstances that would defeat an insider.

Many people first experience the use of the methods in this manual as artificial and forced and, in the extreme, as embarrassing. These feelings fade very quickly as people become familiar with using the methods and respond to the considerable benefits that they bring. Trainers and facilitators need to maintain an air of quiet, encouraging confidence in the methods during implementation. Giving people plenty of opportunity to speak out their concerns about using the methods is useful.

Why "meetings and events"?

Organisations and groups have a variety of ways of bringing people together for work purposes. Many of these gatherings are commonly called meetings and this is, indeed, an accurate description. However the description "meeting" is too small to describe half or whole day workshops and other events. The term "event" is used here to expand the range of possibilities, and to invoke the sense of creativity that "event" allows and which is less easy to find in "meeting".

2. inclusion

What is an inclusive meeting or event?

An inclusive meeting is one that is designed to encourage participation and is open and accessible. The desire to be inclusive and work with a wide diversity of participants has led to the development of the methods described in this manual.

Inclusion has two aspects:

i) Bringing together diverse groups of people ready to work together. That is, getting people to come in the first place.

ii) Using methods of work that ensure that when people do come they have a productive and enjoyable time and feel valued through being heard.

These two aspects affect one another. Good, inclusive meetings yield very high work rates and people appreciate the sense of ownership they get from participating in such positive events. Thus these people become great ambassadors for the group or organisation and feel genuinely able to recommend participation to their colleagues and friends. The network grows by word of mouth.

The meeting methods proposed here are primarily about the second aspect of inclusion - of making meetings productive and enjoyable through paying attention to inclusion. Experience shows that if this second aspect of inclusion is a priority then the first aspect, drawing increasing numbers of people together, takes care of itself.

How inclusive is inclusive?

Inclusion is relative. All meetings, because of their content, venue or timing are relatively open or closed. Towards the closed end are gatherings of single race, single sex professionals taking decisions that affect the lives of people without a voice in the meeting. At the other end there are open assemblies with many different special needs gathered together to discover how they can cooperate to bring about mutually advantageous change. The methods described in the manual are intended to serve the more open end of the continuum in two distinct ways:

Firstly the methods lead to meetings which are comparatively relaxed and unpressured. These have more capacity to pay attention to the special needs of the participants. Openings are likely to include a ***Go-Round*** in which participants can describe their special needs. For example more supportive chairs can be found for those with bad backs, a seeing person can act as an ally for a sight impaired person, presenters can take trouble to speak clearly for people for whom English is not their first language, someone who needs to leave early can have their exit facilitated and so on.

Secondly the methods lead to structures for meetings that can make the most of having a diverse mix of participants. The meetings can benefit from new perspectives, a broader ownership, access into otherwise excluded communities, cross cultural synergies and more.

Limits to inclusion

Whilst the methods proposed in this manual have been adapted to accommodate a wide range of special needs there are many challenges in this field that are yet to be addressed.

Many of the limits to inclusion come from physical conditions and timing factors. Holding meetings in places inaccessible to wheelchairs will exclude wheelchair users for example. Meetings that happen only in the evenings may exclude parents and carers, whilst Saturdays are always difficult for retailers.

Inclusive meeting designers will want to develop their awareness of these limits to inclusion and find creative ways to work around them

A meeting which works well for the widest range of people is the intention. The better such a meeting caters for special needs the better it is for everyone.

Inclusion now!

There is a tendency to think of inclusion as a big issue requiring considerable preparations and resources. It certainly is a big issue overall but the smallest inclusive meeting methods can be applied instantly to everyday organisational life. This way people can radically improve dozens of small meetings and encounters now whilst planning for big events sometime in the future.

They can set in motion a gentle transformation of an organisational culture towards improved inclusion to ensure that the greatest number of people are exposed to the benefits at the earliest opportunity.

3. principles

The guidelines and principles presented here expand on the problems often associated with meetings and point towards the solutions described in the following chapter.

Putting aside Time to Think

In conventional meetings and events people are frequently expected to “think on their feet” They are expected to make comments or take decisions before they have had a chance to think a matter through for themselves.

Several effects flow from this:

One is that the person in the spotlight has to do their thinking out loud in public and might take a considerable chunk of air time wandering around the matter in hand searching for something useful to say. Other participants may grow impatient with the wanderer and interrupt them on the grounds that they are wasting time. Or others may divert the speaker by putting forward their views, interrupting the speaker's train of thought. The speaker may never draw a conclusion to their own satisfaction before the proceedings move on.

Another effect is to cause delivery of hurried decisions or poorly considered opinions as speakers avoid exposing any preliminary thinking to the crowd and plump hastily for the first plausible view they can find.

Further, some people may not be able to cope with the spotlight of attention at all and may pass up the opportunity to participate merely to avoid exposure.

All of these effects diminish the quality of a group's work and work against participation and diversity.

Therefore: Precede all decision making or opinion gathering with private thinking time in which each participant has the opportunity to explore their own thoughts in safety. The ***Think and Listen*** method is a flexible method which is useful for this purpose.

Equal Opportunities

In meetings a common pattern is for some people to fill the air time whilst others sit on the sidelines. It is often difficult to diagnose the problem. Is it domination by the overconfident or are others unwilling to take the risks of participation? When unequal participation occurs people can feel shut out and frustrated and may withdraw from productive involvement. This effectively reduces the diversity of the group.

Therefore: Establish an Equal Opportunities culture from the outset in order to create balanced participation. ***Think and Listens*** followed with ***Go-Rounds*** work well for equal opportunities or use ***Go-Rounds*** on their own for simple matters such as introductions.

Interruption Free Proceedings

When one person is speaking and is interrupted by another they can be diverted from the point that they were seeking to make.

Interruptions often arise from competition or from the interrupters fears that they will not be heard themselves. Once the participants understand that the meeting follows the ***Equal Opportunities*** principle both competition and the fear of not being heard diminish significantly.

Therefore: Remind people that Interruption Free Proceedings within the context of ***Equal Opportunities*** are core principles for the meeting. Use ***Think and Listens***, ***Go-Rounds*** and ***No-one Speaks Twice...*** as methods for ensuring the balance. This way competition is largely eliminated from meetings as everyone can see that they will get a go. However interrupting is something of a habit for some people and the facilitator may need to remind them of the new guidelines several times. Asking people to make a note of what they would say if they could interrupt is a useful strategy as the note can be used for reference at an appropriate time.

Owning Statements

It is common for many people in meetings to speak about themselves without using "I statements". That is, they may say something like, " People won't make changes like that" when they really mean " I would find it difficult to make changes like that myself". The first statement is probably contentious and may cause one of those unproductive and air-filling exchanges of opinion that continue “Oh yes they will” and so on.

Saying "I would find it difficult...." is much more useful. The facilitator could go on to ask the speaker to say more about their reasons for finding the changes difficult to contemplate or act on. Valuable information is likely to emerge just so long as the speaker stays with speaking for themselves.

Watch out for participants talking generally about “other people” or “someone” or, very commonly, saying "you" or "one" instead of "I" .

Therefore: Have people rephrase their contributions to always start with an “I statement”. So instead of “Some people would cheat the system” it becomes “I would cheat the system”. (This is, of course, a much more unlikely thing for anyone to say about themselves.)

As soon as this condition for speaking with “I statements” is working consistently, the meeting will be dealing with reliable information, coming directly from participants' own experience.

Self-contained Meetings and Events

For the most part people are fully occupied with daily working and living. Finding time for extras such as meetings can be a challenge. Certain groups may find it impossible, e.g. dairy farmers and parents of young children. And many working people are already clocking up 50+ hour working weeks. Therefore expecting people to read meeting minutes, make preparations for presentations, phone round to convene a meeting or in any other way be active outside of the group’s meeting times is unrealistic.

Therefore: Make every effort to ensure that meetings and events are self-contained. If they are part of an ongoing series, include reviews of the last meeting (what went well, what could have been different - see ***Giving Feedback***), setting of agendas for the current one (see ***Working with Open Agendas***), setting of dates and venue for next meeting and identification of the facilitator, timekeeper and recorder for the next meeting (see ***Multiple Meeting Managers*** and ***Rotating Roles***).

Minutes and All that Stuff

Producing conventional minutes for meetings is an onerous task which almost no-one wants to do.

If anyone needs to know what actions they have agreed to undertake as a result of the meeting they can make notes to this effect themselves.

Only the most formal of meetings needs to be recorded using minutes.

Minutes and the associated procedures such as cut off dates for agendas, matters arising from the minutes of the last meeting, agreements to sign the minutes as a true and faithful record, and linear preset agendas all conspire to rob any meeting of flexibility and enjoyment.

Therefore: Avoid a meeting culture which expects or insists on minutes. If a meeting or event must be recorded then either choose a least- effort method such as having the meeting issue a list of ***Next Achievable Steps*** or use a ***Mind Map***. Rotate the recorder's role to avoid this task settling on the most compliant members of the group. Almost always avoid traditional minutes both because of their cost, limited uses and interference with the freedom of meetings.

Next Achievable Steps

There is a tendency for people to propose resolutions to problems that require action by people other than themselves. Or that require the application of resources that they do not control. This is a consequence of our culture in which significant decisions are the province of professionals and experts.

An early step in a transition to self reliance and self help is for people to frequently observe their own tendencies for resolving problems. Do people say "This problem would be solved if the government, the local Council, the boss, you .... did this", an example of someone handing responsibility for dealing with the problem to others, or do they say "This is what I can do to help resolve the problem", an example of someone taking responsibility themselves, with the consequence that they can act to make changes.

Therefore: Give people many opportunities to work at generating Next Achievable Steps to make changes within their primary spheres of influence (self, family and friends, colleagues, community, networks). The ***Vision Support Group*** method works effectively for this purpose. Train people to spot the dependency tendency in each other and to act as each others allies in fostering a can-do mind set.

This is closely linked to making "I" statements.

Multiple Meeting Managers

Conventionally meetings have a chairperson. This is a most important role and has many functions. Time keeping is one, summarising discussions to highlight options before decision making is another. Others are encouraging and managing participation and choosing methods to enhance proceedings. This work is often called process management or facilitation.

There may be a requirement for the meeting to report to others about the outcomes and decisions taken at the meeting.

The chairperson may also wish to contribute to the business of the meeting, commonly called the content.

Working to balance attention to facilitation, time keeping and keeping records of progress whilst taking an active part in the content of the meeting places considerable demands on the chairperson.

There may also be a conflict of interest in that the chair can choose to manage the processes of the meeting in such a way as to influence the outcome of proceedings in a way that suits their own agenda. The potential conflict of interests can lead to tensions in the group.

The overload of attention can also lead to rigid, formula based proceedings as any deviation from the usual way of doing things is just too much for the chair.

Therefore: Ensure each meeting is serviced by two to three people. One person facilitates and manages the processes of the meeting. Another takes responsibility for timekeeping and the third undertakes to take notes and keep records adequate for any reporting requirements.

Rotating Roles

At conventional meetings there is additional power available to participants if they hold a management role such as the chair. Consequently allocation of such roles is a matter of great importance and may be bound up in detailed formal procedures. In hierarchical corporate structures these roles often go to the most senior people in the organisation and the roles may be effectively permanent.

There are advantages to stable occupation of these management roles. A competent chair (or management team) can provide inspiring leadership to participants and cause groups to advance their work with courage and power.

However, poor meeting management, driven by self-interest or an overbearing attitude, or by passive reasons such as not challenging the status quo, can ruin the potential for effective activity.

Where new groups of people unknown to each other are forming, a more open approach to meeting management is appropriate.

An open approach allows for groups to experience each others capabilities as meeting managers and also allows people to practice new skills or adapt existing ones. Openness also allows the group to develop a style and direction relevant to the participants.

Therefore: In the formative period of a group's activities encourage Rotating Roles for the management of meetings. Use the three identified management roles: facilitator, time keeper and recorder. Take this as an opportunity to train the largest possible number of people in the use of inclusive meeting methods.

Terms of Office

Sometimes a meeting group becomes stuck with an inappropriate management team or chair. This is much more likely if ***Rotating Roles*** are not observed. Inappropriate management can lead to fall off of attendance as participants respond to their frustrations by voting with their feet. Both productivity and goodwill are damaged in these circumstances.

Therefore: In all cases plan a programme of meetings and events with a limited life span, after which the productivity and enjoyment of the meetings can be evaluated by the group. Use the last meeting of a series to draw out this feedback from the participants. Use the method outlined in ***Giving Feedback*** and extend the questions to include: How productive have the meetings been, is another series relevant and likely to be useful and what changes shall we make before deciding to invest our time in future meetings? Using a facilitator from outside the group to assist this last meeting is often an effective strategy.

Supported Preparation and Debriefing

Normally participants taking management roles in meetings such as facilitating, reporting and timekeeping are expected to get on with the job without any access to support. This often has the effect of isolating people in these roles and causing them to feel personally responsible if things go wrong.

Therefore: Use the three role team to provide support for each other. For example the recorder might call the facilitator a few days before the meeting and ask if the facilitator needs a ***Think and Listen*** to help them develop a plan for the meeting. And after the meeting the same pair, with the time keeper, may debrief. For debriefing use the ***Giving Feedback*** questions. Both the preparation and the debriefing are good learning opportunities for the participants.

Flexible Meetings

During the course of a meeting it may become apparent that the design is inappropriate in places. Conventionally the chair would insist that the prepared agenda is followed, in the prescribed way, at all costs. This may require the use of considerable authority and energy.

Whilst strong leadership is of great use in avoiding unnecessary deviation from the agenda, there are times when insistent continuation with an inappropriate agenda is a mistake.

Therefore: Have the meeting managers and the participants be alert to situations that call for an on-the-spot redesign. This is much more feasible if the agenda and means of achieving it have been built up using ***Constructing Open Agendas***.

It is entirely legitimate for the following strategies to be used in these circumstances:

The facilitator, alerted by one of the team or by a participant says " I can see that we may need to change the agenda for this next stage of the meeting".

Then, if the group is well versed with inclusive meeting methods, the facilitator can ask participants to offer suggestions for the next steps based on the methods in this manual. In situations where feelings are running high the facilitator can usefully ask the participants to take a short ***Think and Listen*** before offering their suggestions in a ***Go-Round.***

If participants are not familiar with inclusive meeting methods then the facilitator may call a break and during this time meet with the other two members of the management team. This meeting could consist of short ***Think and Listens*** to come up with ideas on how to proceed. The facilitator needs the bulk of the thinking time as they will be the person who will need to convert the ideas into action.

Working with Open Agendas

In conventional meetings access to building the agenda is often restricted to the privileged few.

Agendas for meetings can be set either by someone external to a group or built by the group themselves.

Externally set agendas are always prone to problems. If a management group in an organisation, for example, sets the agenda for meetings of subordinates, the agenda may miss the opportunity to stimulate the creative thinking of the subordinate group. Thus the subordinates, who may well be in closer touch with conditions on the ground, have to struggle past a possibly irrelevant agenda before they can use their own experiences to identify what it is that the meeting needs to attend to.

Even when the agenda is preset by the ***Multiple Meeting Managers*** for an inclusive meeting the danger of irrelevance or misjudging of priorities remains present. Participants will find it difficult to own an agenda that they have not had a part in creating.

An Open Agenda always has space in it for minor or substantial redesign of the meeting according to the current needs of the participants.

Therefore: Encourage meetings which search out and work on participants' own agendas. A ***Think and Listen*** followed by a ***Go-Round*** is a possible structure to use or a ***Go-Round*** on its own may suffice. Use the ***Constructing Open Agendas*** method at the start of every meeting to ensure agendas accommodate the real interests of the participants. Do this even if the agenda items seem "obvious". Working with open agendas is an important commitment to inclusion and should never be missed out.

If externally set agendas are unavoidable they should be general, and leaving the detail up to the meeting participants. The ***Constructing Open Agendas*** method can still be used early in each meeting in order to assist the meeting to prioritise its activities and manage its time. Following this method ensures active participation in agenda construction and thus commitment to working the agenda through to conclusion.

Giving Feedback

It is not customary for participants in conventional meetings to give direct feedback to people who have managed the meeting. If feedback is forthcoming it may be critical and thus difficult to hear. Or it may be indirect, showing up as disruptive behaviour, which is difficult for the managers to interpret.

However feedback is an important source of information for meeting managers. It enables them to learn about the quality and effectiveness of their designs, as perceived by the participants. Making space for feedback and planning a way to gather it helps enormously.

Therefore: Set aside time for feedback concerning management of the meeting at the end of each meeting. Use the form "What have I enjoyed or liked about this meeting" and "What would I have done differently". This form gives managers useful positive and negative feedback whilst encouraging participants to take ownership of their own contributions to the success or otherwise of proceedings.

4. methods

The methods described here are a series of tools which can be used to make meetings more productive and increase ***Inclusion***. One or two can be used in isolation or the whole set can be adopted at once. The methods can be used in dozens of different combinations.

These methods have proved to be sufficient for the design of many types of meeting and event. However there are many more meeting methods which will work with the ones described below. Please feel free to add to and adapt the methods as required using the ***Principles*** in the previous chapter as guidelines.

Think and Listen

This is a fundamental method which, with ***Go-Rounds***, provides the basis for an inclusive and productive meeting. If no other methods are learnt and applied besides these two, significant advances will still have been made.

— Description

Work in pairs for a Think and Listen. For half the time one person is the thinker and the other the listener. At half time the roles reverse. The facilitator manages the timing.

During their thinking turn each person is encouraged to think out loud without necessarily making any sense to the listener. The thinking turn is for the thinkers benefit. It is a time for the thinker to collect and develop their thoughts at their own pace and in their own way.

The listener makes no comments and asks no questions but does make encouraging sounds and movements to indicate that their attention to the listener is active.

During the Think and Listen time meeting members address a topic proposed by the facilitator.

Common time periods for a Think and Listen are two to five minutes each (known as 2 by 2 or 5 by 5). Skilled groups can work outside these boundaries using one minute by one minute Think & Listens to good effect or, for complex matters, ten minutes each way. It is almost always better to pop in a short Think and Listen, however brief, than to do without.

What the thinker speaks about and how their thinking develops is confidential, known only to themselves and the listener. The listener makes no reference to what has been said by their thinker, either to the thinker or to anyone else, unless the thinker clearly gives their permission for this to happen.

Think & Listen

THINKING		LISTENING	
DO:	remember the time is for you	DO:	look at your partner be active in your listening
DONT:	need to appear bright or knowledgeable	DONT:	ask questions interrupt try to clarify

— Why it works

A Think and Listen is a method for ***Putting Aside Time to Think***. Time to think allows participants to um and err, try out ideas, abandon those with little promise and settle on those with real potential, safe in the knowledge that their wanderings are private and confidential.

Subsequently, when the facilitator requests peoples views on the topic in hand, they can expect the feedback to be more thorough and useful than it would have been without a Think and Listen.

A Think and Listen also gives people an opportunity to speak. They may have been listening carefully to a presentation, taking in what is said. Now they can reverse the flow by speaking out their thoughts. This greatly improves their grasp of the material and alleviates the fatigue that comes from continual inputs.

Once people relax they find having an attentive, approving and patient listener alongside helps the quality of their thinking. With good attention they often discover some new thoughts and surprise themselves. This effect is summed up by the phrase, "I often don't know what I am thinking until I have said it".

Because the listener knows that their turn for uninterrupted thinking time is coming shortly they are able to suspend any urges to involve themselves with their thinker's thinking by interrupting, asking for explanations or otherwise "joining in". Some people do find the listening role very difficult and have to sit on their hands to prevent themselves from interrupting. These people (and their colleagues) will benefit most from the method in the long run but may need some unobtrusive supervision early on.

— Challenges

The method is simplicity itself. But it does present people with significant challenges.

This is often the first new method introduced to a group. It is so different from normal conversations and discussions with their interruptions and digressions that people can feel awkward with it. Keep the time fairly short for the first few goes to avoid those difficult empty spaces.

The awkwardness soon tails off as a group becomes more practised. However the facilitator needs to be ready to reassure people that any discomfort is temporary and that empty spaces are valuable as opportunities to gather thoughts (or rest). Once a group is skilled at Think and Listens the reverse effect appears. That is, if there isn't a Think and Listen scheduled when it is needed the group may protest at its absence.

Thinkers may need to be reminded that the time is for their benefit. They are not expected to make a coherent speech to their listener, nor convince their listener of their point of view. There is no need to prepare in advance. Only they will report on their thinking to the larger group.

Very occasionally a member of the group will find the space provided by a Think and Listen just too much and will continually ask their listener for feedback. This may be because this person has not had anyone listen to them before, or has been told that they are stupid and therefore does not value their own thinking. Pair this person with someone who has obviously good attention and not with people who need to sit on their hands. Someone with good attention enjoys listening to other people and encourages others by their presence.

For the listener, besides avoiding the pull to join in with the thinker, the biggest challenge is to avoid any attempt to compose their own speeches ready for their turn whilst listening.

It will take several goes (perhaps three or four) for a group to feel at home with Think and Listen. After each go ask for feedback - "what was it like to have interruption free thinking time?", "what was it like to be the listener?. This feedback will provide opportunities to repeat the instructions and to answer any queries.

— Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

Q. What happens if the thinker speaks about something the listener wants to respond to?

A. The listener definitely does not make a response during the thinkers time. They may do so during their own thinking time but only if they ask permission to do this.

Q. Help, I won't be able to fill the time when it's my turn to think out loud?

A. Rarely a problem. Although people might be hesitant at the start they usually respond well to good listening and find they have plenty to say. However it is quite acceptable for a thinker to think quietly to themselves for all or part of their turn. The listener still gives good attention even when the thinker is silent.

— Applications

Think and Listen is a versatile method due to its simplicity, the small amount of time it takes and the universal benefits arising from ***Putting Aside Time to Think***.

Applications include (and this list is by no means exhaustive):

- To allow people to explore what they already know about a situation or a subject.
- After a presentation in which case people may use a

Think and Listen to generate comments or questions. This works even in very large groups.

- To generate options for decision making.
- For choosing between options.
- For making commitments to action.
- During preparations for presentations, when writing reports or planning meetings and in any other circumstance where a person may get 'stuck' and feel unable to proceed.
- Prior to the start of business to off-load any matters that are pulling people's attention away from being present.
- On arrival home after work or at any other transition point when often there is competition for attention.

— Facilitator's notes:

Allow time at the beginning for people to find partners (“work with someone you don’t know” is a useful suggestion) and to work out who is Thinking first.

At half time call out your own version of "OK folks that’s the first three minutes over, time to finish what you are saying and then to change roles, one to think and the other to listen" (low, slow, deep voice carries best). And at the end, "OK folks, that's it, lets gather round for the next stage in proceedings".

A timer that bleeps so everyone can hear is a great aid. Some timers come with a memory and reset to show the same time, each time, and are excellent.

Allow turn round time in the swap over and allow finishing time at the end. A 3 by 3 might take 10 minutes , a 5 by 5 might take 15 minutes.

Go-Round

— Description

In a Go-Round everyone gets to speak for a short, equal time, taking turns. The facilitator briefs the group and offers topics or headings to guide contributions.

— Why it works

At most meetings and events some people never get heard. At big events (20 plus people) this may be a significant minority/majority of people. A Go-Round goes some way to fixing this by giving everyone a space to speak to the whole group. It is an ***Equal Opportunities*** method and can be used more than once in a meeting.

People really appreciate the ***Inclusion*** generated by using a Go-Round and respond well to the early use of one as an invitation to participate.

A Go-Round provides people with a safe opportunity to speak to the whole group and the bits of information that are shared help to build up a picture of the diversity available to the meeting.

Giving a set of headings for a Go-Round allows people to relax as they know what they should talk about. Timing the contributions avoids garrulous people taking more than their fair share of group time.

— Challenges

In small meetings the method is an easy way to start and finish and is useful as the basis for ***Check-Ins*** during proceedings. Working with large numbers of people calls for special considerations.

The dilemma is that the bigger the group the longer a Go-Round takes. One view is that the gains from having everybody speaking to the whole group at least once are so valuable that every effort should be made to include at least one even if a very short time is allowed for contributions. (Try "your name and one word about yourself", or "your name and give a sign to show your energy level" using thumbs up for good, thumbs down if you need a rest and anywhere in between).

Even in groups of up to 40 people a Go-Round of half a minute each works well. A minute each allows quite substantial issues to be addressed.

In still bigger groups everyone speaking to the whole group is impractical unless this is a main purpose of the meeting or event. In these situations give everyone a ***Think and Listen*** opportunity and then take a small number of feedbacks.

— FAQ's

Q. Do I have to speak? A. Not if you don't want to (in large groups passing may well be helpful).

— Applications

Use as the backbone of any ***Beginnings and Endings*** for people to introduce themselves and to feedback how the event has been for them.

Use a Go-Round after any ***Think and Listens*** to gather the ideas.

— Facilitator's notes

Only a minimal briefing for participants is required. It is worth giving it its name, Go-Round. This is especially useful in helping people to see that inclusive meeting and event design is simply consciously adopting obviously useful methods. Naming also serves to make this productive and convivial method visible and memorable. A remembered method is a used method.

The facilitator goes first in order to model the brevity required to make the Go-Round work. Then she Goes around the group in either direction (try alternate directions each time to avoid developing bias) and listens well to each person as they speak. She acknowledges their offering positively (try "Thanks", "Good", "Great").

People will need to know their turn has come, especially in large meetings when there may not be sufficient physical space for the assembly to sit/stand in a clear order. The facilitator cues people in and out by obviously breaking and making eye contact. A timer is a useful aid here.

Times of 30 seconds to two minutes are common depending on the content proposed for a Go-Round and the number of people participating. Longer times of up to five or ten minutes work well when small, skilled groups ponder large topics or take careful decisions. It is a surprise to everyone just how much can be said in a short time especially if people have prepared with a ***Think and Listen.***

A guideline for large meetings is that 30 minutes total time is easily within most people's attention span. Go-Rounds taking more than this could be broken up with a stretch or break halfway through.

Small groups can complete a Go-Round in much less time, say five to ten minutes depending on subject matter.

Check-Ins

— Description

From time to time the facilitator will need to know how the participants at a meeting or event are doing. Is their energy level OK? Do people need a break? How are people after lunch? Can people keep going for another ten minutes so that we can finish this item before lunch? Are we warm enough, too hot and is there enough air?

The thumbs up, down or somewhere in between method is very useful here (see Challenges in ***Go-Rounds*** above) and is an improvement over just asking the question and responding to the answers from one or two participants.

— Why it works

Frequent Check-Ins provide facilitators with essential feedback to use in judging how to proceed. Check-Ins also work in the other direction by giving the participants the information that the facilitators care about their state of energy and comfort.

Bringing attention to peoples own energy and comfort will often stimulate them to do something about it like opening a window or leaving the room for a short break. And acknowledging the situation often means that people are more willing to find extra energy for a short time even when they are tired.

— Challenges

People are generally not used to describing how they feel or how they are getting on. This is cultural conditioning which soon breaks down as people notice how refreshing it is when they don’t have to pretend that everything is always fine for them.

Beginnings and Endings

— Description

Begin and end meetings with simple ***Go-Rounds***.

Beginnings for meetings coming together for the first time need to be simple - "say your name and one thing about yourself" or "say your name and where you live now" are examples. Include a question about why people have come if you are unsure what participants expect from the meeting.

Endings are useful places to get feedback about how the meeting has gone for participants - "say your name, something you have enjoyed about the meeting and anything you would have done differently" works well.

— Why it works

Clear Beginnings and Endings make it obvious when proceedings have started and finished.

A clear Ending signals to people that they can go. It is a good policy to run an Ending to finish at the time stated on the invitation to the meeting. If there is outstanding business for some people or people want to hang on for social reasons then things can carry on after the Ending without entrapping those who must go. Meetings with unclear endings are common and problematic.

For facilitators, Beginnings can provide the information that is required to improvise fine tuning to the meeting design. Sometimes these improvisations may be extensive, especially when you have been hired in by a third party who has given you only an outline briefing. Better a slightly chaotic meeting than an irrelevant one.

Feedback at Endings is both the facilitator's reward and principal place of learning. You need to know that people have enjoyed the meeting for your own sake and "what I might have done differently" often gives good clues for changes to future meeting designs.

No One Speaks Twice...

— Description

From time to time people will express the need for discussion. A discussion is often taken to mean something of a free for all, anybody saying what they like, for as long as they like. They are, generally, much less useful than people think but there is strong cultural conditioning at work that insists that free discussion is equivalent to the freedom to think. Without structures, open discussions commonly throw up problems such as arguments and exclusion, domination patterns, polarisation and politics. In these conditions of competition good thinking goes out of the window and little gets done.

Open discussions can be made more useful by applying ***Equal Opportunities*** methods. The facilitator declares the discussion open and proposes the guideline, "No-one to speak twice until everyone has had the opportunity to speak once". The facilitator asks her recorder (see ***Multiple Meeting Managers***) to take charge of monitoring who speaks, leaving the facilitator free to watch the group for signs of under engagement by participants and find small ways of encouraging the reticent.

This structural method can advance and adapt after a while - "Now I'll take no-one to speak three times until everyone has had a chance to speak twice" to "Anymore for anymore?" if proceeding are clearly calm and towards completion.

— Why it works

This method works by eliminating the possibility that anyone can commandeer the air time by speaking several times in quick succession. It is not possible to create an argument, for example, if there is no space for a ding-dong type of transaction to develop. Nothing is quite so likely to turn people off from enjoying a meeting than the development of a two person, points scoring conflict.

Managing contributions to discussion using this method also ensures that there is sufficient space in the discussion to encourage quieter people to contribute, or, if there is not much for people to add, the discussions are refreshingly short and to the point.

No one speaks twice ... works to eliminate the unnecessary bulky trivia and irrelevancies that fill up air time.

— Challenges

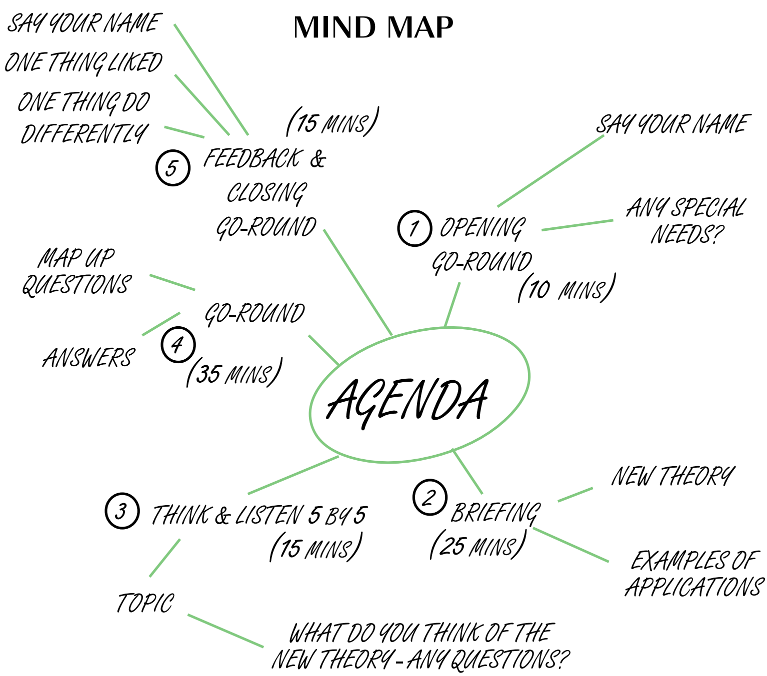
No one speaks twice... can upset people who cherish battles of wits or who feel the need to let off steam. Some people believe that conflict sharpens thinking and that a good argument precedes a good decision.

If there is resistance to using this method or it doesn't seem possible to introduce it (this method is especially difficult for existing groups or groups with lots of professional and academic members) then seek to use it without being explicit. For example when a participant is about to speak for the second or third time, and is shutting out others by doing this, say "before we hear from you again lets see if anyone else who has not yet spoken would like to say something". In this naturalised form it is a skill much used by chairpeople in conventional meetings. However not being able to name the method does mean that it remains relatively obscure.

Mind Maps

— Description

Mind maps are freehand diagrams that start from a circle in the middle and have arms radiating out at all sort of angles.



— Why it works

A Mind Map gives a visual representation of the whole of a subject and allows the main points to be easily identified. It is a flexible way of presenting information that allows for alteration much more easily than linear text.

— Challenges

Mind mapping is a skill that requires some practice as the mapper has to translate sentences into key words. Agendas are easiest; it is much more difficult to map the proceedings of a presentation and a following question and answer session. Make sure people get to practice at an easy task whilst they build up their skills.

— Applications

Many and varied. Skilled mind mappers use them in all places where notes are required - in preparation for presentations, in response to presentations, when constructing and displaying agendas, mapping that ideal weekend, when reviewing their own thinking, when preparing to write a report and many more.

Mind maps permit participants to brainstorm items for agendas without any constraints, in the first place, to do with order or timing or priorities. Nor does the position of an item on a mind map indicate its importance. Using mind maps allows for much reworking of an agenda when using the ***Constructing Open Agendas*** method. Reworking may include clustering items together, showing links between items, adding numbers to indicate order, time allocation and striking out items as they are completed.

Constructing Open Agendas

— Description

First stage: At the beginning of the meeting the facilitator or recorder draws up a ***Mind Map*** showing the items the participants want on the agenda. Some or most of these may have been obvious beforehand but the principle of having the meeting generate them on the spot is important and should be adhered to. If a pre-prepared agenda was issued before the meeting it should be clearly marked as a draft to show that the real agenda will be generated on the day.

In most meetings there are likely to be items generated that could not have been predicted. A ***Think and Listen*** can be used to generate items for the agenda.

Second stage: The facilitator guides the meeting to categorise each item as requiring short, medium or long amounts of attention.

Third stage: Given the time available for the meeting a rough calculation can be made that deduces that short means five minutes say, medium means ten minutes and long means twenty.

Very brief or very long items show up at this stage and can be accommodated. Note that often items that are flagged up as "this only needs a minute" turn out to take much longer than predicted.

Fourth stage: The group is now ready to decide a running order. Generally short items go first.

Fifth stage: During the meeting the facilitator, recorder and timekeeper will draw participants' attention to progress against the plan. The whole meeting proposes adjustments in order to make the meeting a success. Adjustments may take the form of spot use of a ***Go-Round*** or ***Think and Listen***.

— Why it works

Working on constructing the agenda allows all participants to own the content, order and general management of the meeting. The method allows essential negotiations for time and space to be conducted in the open.

Such an agenda is always relevant to participants needs and is strong evidence of the desire to devolve power and control.

Working the agenda construction through in the stages proposed above makes light of this potentially complex task.

Understanding that the agenda timings and order can be reworked as necessary gives participants the security and confidence arising from a robust but flexible structure.

— Challenges

Some participants get stuck when trying to categorise an item as requiring short, medium or long amounts of attention. These may be people who find working with the rough and ready style required by the method rather difficult. They will need reassuring that the programme can be adjusted to accommodate for any estimating mistakes.

Participants may generate a wildly optimistic number of items for the agenda in the first place. However as the stages of constructing the agenda unfold this will become obvious. Negotiations to pare the number of items down or do more of them as half-minute instants are useful. Note that items can be described briefly by their proponents in order to assist participants in deciding whether they should be included or not, although watch out for people 'doing' the agenda item in this phase of a meeting. Alternatively suggestions can be limited to one agenda item per person.

Items requiring preparations of material for pre meeting deliberations will have been flagged up for inclusion in a previous meeting.

— FAQ's

Q. Isn't working through Constructing Open Agendas a waste of time. After all, the ten/twenty minutes it takes could have been used to process one or two items.

A. The benefits of mutual ownership of the agenda and meeting process gained through Constructing Open Agendas and ***Visible Agendas*** include increased commitment to progressing the agenda to completion. Closed and hidden agendas are much more likely to derail a meeting and to cause it to overrun.

— Applications

Use in conjunction with ***Visible Agendas*** for all meeting and events. This is a powerful method which allows constructive and collective design of meetings.

Use the principles of flexibility and openness even in the most tightly structured events. Doing so, even in very small doses, will change the character of an event from passive to active for participants.

Visible Agendas

— Description

The recorder in the meeting makes sure that the agenda for the session is visible at all times and is written up, in ***Mind Map*** form, on a flip chart sheet or similar. Sometimes a visible time table is a useful, separate addition to the agenda.

— Why it works

In the type of meetings and events proposed by this manual the group will want to actively modify the agenda as the meeting goes on (see ***Constructing Open Agendas***). This is difficult if the agenda is on A4 paper and arranged in linear fashion.

A large scale, easily drawn on display is essential (several colours of marker are required). This way the group can pay attention to reworking timings, priorities, break allocations etc. as the need arises. Thus the meeting members have both control over and responsibility for the progress of the meeting.

Groups thus empowered do much better than groups who have to stick to a linear agenda.

— Applications

Works for all meeting situations.

— Facilitator's notes

Most meeting rooms come with flip chart stands or whiteboards these days but suitable pens and wipers are often a problem. Be prepared, take your own. This also allows you to avoid using toxic varieties if you want to.

Vision Support Group

— Description

Vision Support Group makes use of the methods ***Think and Listen*** and ***Go-Round***. Each person in a small group of three to six people has the attention of the other group members (using ***Think and Listen*** no-interruption rules) whilst they take a turn to answer the following four questions or adapted versions of these questions. Each person's turn is equal in length and is timed.

Q1 What is going well for me as a ....?

Q2 What is difficult for me as a ....?

Q3 What are my long term goals and visions as a ....?

Q4 What are my next achievable steps towards these visions and goals?

The "as a ...." space provides each group with a particular focus suggested by the common characteristics of the members of the group. That is, if the group are all men, Didcot residents, and interested in their local environment, for example, then the "as a ...." could combine these characteristics to come up with, for the first question, "What is going well for me as a male resident of Didcot who is interested in my local environment?" and insert the same phrase in all the others.

Or, less complex but with a different meaning, would be the formulation "as a male resident of Didcot"

Or , alternatively, "as a man interested in my local environment"

Other variants are possible.

Each variant changes the potential outcomes of the Vision Support Group. Imagine the effect of using different variants yourself by listing three or four of your key characteristics and running through the questions, answering them from the aspect of the different combinations of characteristics. There are no limits to the variants possible.

A Vision Support Group is not generally intended to provide material for wider distribution although see Applications below. As in a ***Think and Listen*** the contents of a Vision Support Group are confidential unless the speaker chooses otherwise or the facilitator says beforehand that feedback is required.

— Why it works

Vision Support Groups give people the space to think out loud on the topic of visions and long term goals (see ***Working With Visions***). Most people have very little opportunity to think in such an expansive way in their normal lives and this method gives people practice at these strategic activities.

All the benefits of ***Putting Aside Time to Think***, ***Equal Opportunities*** and ***Interruption Free Proceedings*** also accrue when using a Vision Support Group.

The capacity to work in this strategic way increases significantly with practice. The practical benefits which appear when people act on their Next Achievable Steps are evidence that speaking intentions out loud is an effective method for turning visions into reality.

Each of the questions is included for a number of reasons:

"What is going well for me" causes the speaker to think of positive aspects of their situation and reminds them of their capacity to do well. This is a valuable first step which opens proceedings in the opposite way to the more usual form of leaping straightaway to the difficulties in life. The habit of complaining first is deeply ingrained for most people and the Vision Support Group method always seeks to stand this tendency on its head.

"What is difficult for me" now takes place in the context of the thoughts expressed in the "What's going well" question. This reduces the power of difficulties to hold a person back from realising their visions. However, having the opportunity to share difficulties, especially in a group with strong common characteristics, is always welcome and both the speaker and the listeners gain fresh perspective as a result.

Now the preparations have been made for attending to "visions and long term goals". This is a rare opportunity and experienced users of the Vision Support Group methods relish the scope afforded by the question. Speaking out a vision or working to verbalise a long term goal helps people to prepare the ground for making changes.

When the speaker works with "What are my next achievable steps" they are seeking practical steps they can take which will move them towards realising their visions and goals. If these steps are enacted real progress for change is made. Even if they are not, practice in working out achievable steps is useful for when the participant is next thinking about making changes. Note that the emphasis is on *my* next achievable steps and not on identifying steps that others need to take

— Challenges

People may have some difficulties engaging with their visions and long term goals. This is sometimes due to feelings that only special people, visionaries, are allowed to work in this way. Or earlier attempts at vision work may have been put down as idealistic and unrealistic. When people are working with the Vision Support Group they may find it useful to notice that they are reclaiming their right to imagine the world as a better place, and that their imaginings are as valid as anyones.

Allocating time for Vision Support Groups in a busy, achievement oriented culture is often a challenge. People may need some convincing that spending time on this is valuable. But they can only experience that this is so by giving the process sufficient attention to derive the considerable benefits available from this method.

Working with this method means that no-one is required to justify their visions nor are they required to know how they will bring about their vision beyond identifying the next step. People used to forward planning may find this incremental approach, in which the identity of step two emerges only after step one is complete, especially challenging.

— Applications

Use as an element within a meeting or a larger event to ensure that each person meets at least part of their individual agendas.

The Vision Support Group method can be used by participants in a meeting to generate ideas for joint work. Alternatively Vision Support Groups can enhance the potential of members of a group to act in their own right on projects of their own choosing. People agree to give each other support for working at making changes to their own home, social and working lives but do not agree to work together on a particular project.

Groups interested in outcomes can collect the next achievable steps each participant generates and archive these. Later meetings can monitor progress and report on successes as they occur. This reporting allows a wider audience to observe the action generation that flows from a Vision Support Group.

Vision Support Groups are useful when people want to be involved in a network but are already fully committed with their own initiatives. This way they don't pick up any extra work to do and come to feel valued and supported in the work they are already doing. Being part of a Vision Support Group helps rid people of the feeling that no one cares about what they are doing.

The Vision Support Group method can be used on its own to establish Support Groups which meet regularly (e.g. once a month or once a quarter for a series of five or six meetings). The last meeting is used to review the value of the Support Group and to see if there is interest in another series.

— Facilitator's notes

It is a great help if people are already familiar with the ***Think and Listen*** method, which could be introduced at an earlier meeting. This way they will know the requirements for giving good, unintrusive attention to each other. Otherwise explain these requirements and run through the four questions giving people the rationale (as noted above) for including each one. Have a copy of the four questions for each participant or write them up somewhere visible.

Set the definition for the "as a ......". In a practised group, subgroups of three to six may enjoy working up their own "as a....." definitions using a ***Co-Round***. Allow time for this.

Use the following diagram to show how each person in the subgroup takes turns to speak, question and keep time.

Vision Support Group Method

Set up

1. Work in groups of three or four
2. Take turns to speak to the four questions
3. No interruptions, no questions, no comments - just give good attention to the speaker
4. IMPORTANT! contents are confidential

Method

1. Each person says their name and then speaks to the four questions whilst the others listen giving good attention

2. Person next to the speaker on one side guides the speaker through the questions prompted by the timekeeper on other side

(example timings)

Q.1 about 1 minute

Q.2 about 1 minute

Q.3 about 2 minutes

Q.4 about 2 minutes

Time this with a watch

The four questions

What's **going well** for me as a *person interested in improving my local environment*

What's **difficult** for me as a *person interested in improving my local environment*

What are my long term **visions and goals** as a *person interested in improving my local environment*

What are **MY next achievable steps?**

next person goes through questions

5. *agenda 21 networks*

This chapter looks at how the skills of designing and running more inclusive and productive meetings can be used in the context of Agenda 21. It also outlines a step by step approach to the development of Agenda 21 networks.

Agenda 21 stands for Agenda for the 21st Century and is a major initiative towards sustainability launched at the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Since 1992 a large number of local citizens groups have assembled under the Agenda 21 banner with the express purpose of stimulating a participative and inclusive approach to sustainable development in their local areas.

The inclusive meeting methods outlined in the previous chapter have been developed in the context of Agenda 21 and sustainability networks.

Network development is an area of organisation development that is short on theory as most organisation theory has been developed in and for the corporate world.

Characteristics of Agenda 21 networks

— Voluntary and unpaid attendance

For many participants in Agenda 21 networks, attendance will be voluntary and unpaid. Whilst a sprinkling of the people present will be attending as part of their job many people will be making a personal choice to gift their time to the Agenda 21 process.

Consequently participants will come with a reasonable expectation that the meetings or events will be interesting, fun, sociable and productive for both themselves and the overall Agenda 21 process as they see it.

Should these expectations not be met then organisers of Agenda 21 programmes can expect to see attendance at meetings and events tailing off dramatically.

— Diversity

Agenda 21 networks may consist of local citizens, local government staff, people from businesses, teachers, health workers, young people, parents, farmers, the self-employed, workers in the voluntary sector and people from any other of the myriad of livelihood niches which exist in our society.

The agency (often local government) which has recruited people for the initial group may well have made special efforts to be inclusive guided by the theme of “Strengthening the role of major groups” as proposed by Agenda 21.

This diversity is unusual and can be a major strength for the Agenda 21 process or a major problem.

Diversity is a strength when meetings are planned to encourage people to display their widely different range of world views and experiences and ensure that all these views are respected.

Diversity is a problem when the process has no strategies for accommodating significant differences and seeks to obtain commitment to a “consensus for action” that is skewed to satisfy the agendas of an articulate lobby.

Diversity also means that the participants are likely to have widely different capacities for working cooperatively in groups.

For some people, attending meetings and events may be quite novel. They may feel quite anxious about participating until they feel safe and valued.

Other people may have considerable experience of meetings and events and may feel confident at the outset to take charge of proceedings and impatient with “inefficiency”.

Mixing these two groups of people together, the diffident and the confident, can commonly give rise to problems. “Experts” may come to dominate proceedings and the balance of involvement may mirror the dynamics found in wider society in which, for example, men may speak more forcefully and frequently than women, professionals more so than working people and white people may dominate in groups of mixed races.

Large losses of voluntary participation are a common problem across many Agenda 21 programmes. Dominated meetings and turgid events figure prominently as causes of this loss of potential.

Use of inclusive meeting methods allows all parties to benefit from the diversity available through designing all meetings and events for ***Inclusion***.

— The access to resources and scale of task ratio

A further, significant characteristic of Agenda 21 networks is the access to resources to scale of task ratio. That is, these networks generally have very small material resources (cash budgets, paid staff, IT equipment and so on) and yet have arguably the world's most adventurous, urgent and demanding task to hand (bringing about significant sustainable development at the local level using an inclusive process). No other organisations, world wide, have such a large task set against such a small budget.

Agenda 21 networks need to adopt approaches that are low cost and widely effective to be successful.

Agenda 21 networks & local government

Agenda 21 is usually initiated by local government, as prescribed by the United Nations. This is appropriate but not straightforward. Local government is predominantly corporate in character. Initiating Agenda 21 requires network support, design and development skills not generally held within local government. And Agenda 21 networks require local government to have a different quality of accessibility than is normal.

— Network skills for local government

Working on the principle that the organisations with more resources are those which need to adapt to accommodate those with less, then local government needs to adapt to and become transparent to Agenda 21 networks.

This means that programmes of training in network skills for all local government staff are required starting with those who are most likely to come in contact with Agenda 21 networks. A common language that bridges the corporate/network divide would be a most useful place to start. This manual proposes inclusive meeting methods as one component of such a language.

Using this approach the Agenda 21 network and local government each use the methods for their own purposes. That is, meetings and events internal to both organisations are based on the methods. Thus when the two organisations come together for partnership activities they share knowledge and experience of a common approach to designing inclusive meetings and events.

This common approach allows people to move with confidence into either organisational culture and feel at home. This is very different from the current situation in which members of the public experience local government as a bewildering and mysterious world of complicated and inaccessible goings on.

— Realistic expectations

A common feature of existing Agenda 21 programmes is a set of expectations, held by local government staff, that newly formed groups of diverse citizens have astonishing capacities for:

- holding effective and conflict free meetings
- finding common ground within their diversity
- endless patience and goodwill towards each other and their local government
- spare time to produce written contributions towards State of the Environment reports and other major Agenda 21 documentation
- cutting through the organisational inertia that bedevils local government
- technical judgement around complex issues of sustainable development
- and more

The list shows that these are unrealistic expectations. Where they operate they dramatically increase:

i) the potential for alienation of the public from local government Agenda 21 programmes

ii) the disappointment of local government officers close to the public, with the public

iii) the tension between over-enthusiastic-for-action Chief Officers and their staff dealing the with the realities on the ground.

These expectations are often invisible to those who hold them.

Local government staff with responsibility for co-ordinating the Agenda 21 network need to be aware that they may be, on behalf of their employer, setting up conditions that may well lead network groups towards disappointment and failure.

Summary of the Approach

In order to address the problems set out above, the following approach for developing an Agenda 21 programme is suggested:

- Local government enables the Agenda 21 network to come into being and flourish by providing training for a core group in inclusive meeting methods
- This group, along with local government, identifies local organisations (businesses, voluntary groups, church groups, clubs and societies, schools, community colleges, for example) that show some interest in engaging with sustainability.
- With support from local government (convening effort, publicity, meeting rooms, some office facilities) The Agenda 21 network designs and facilitates meetings and events such as the ***Action Search*** described in the manual with the purpose of enabling the "client" organisation to seek out common ground visions and goals towards sustainability.
- As the Agenda 21 facilitators group gains in confidence and skill it teaches others how to use inclusive meeting methods thereby increasing the capacity of the network to work with other organisations interested in actions towards sustainability.
- At some point the Agenda 21 network could offer facilitation and teaching services on a sliding scale (free to voluntary groups, at a fee to commercial organisations) in order to generate revenue for network activities.

— Benefits of using the approach

The benefits to all parties are likely to be significant. The Agenda 21 network, being embedded in the local community, can now access in a creative way large numbers of community organisations otherwise not normally available to local government. Thus local government makes significant progress towards the otherwise intractable goal of wide ***Inclusion*** and participation not by direct contact but through the Local Agenda 21 network.

Note that this approach does not exclude direct contact between local government and community based organisations. Much contact of this type is of great value. Rather the approach is proposing that a wider range of community organisations (especially the smallest ones) can be engaged in a more creative way if the Agenda 21 network acts as an interface between government and community.

Group leadership is an important skill to foster in networks. Designing and running inclusive meetings and events is excellent practice ground. A network using these methods will have plenty of people practised at and willing to take leadership.

Local government also experiences internal benefits from changing the culture around its own meetings and events. Improvements to productivity, inclusion and enjoyability of meetings and events through using inclusive meeting methods could transform morale and effectiveness for many people in local government. This internal functional improvement through better meetings and events is available to any organisations who adopt the methods set out in this manual.

6. two more principles

Working with Visions and Finding Common Ground are two additional principles, made explicit here ready for the brief description of the ***Action Search*** method which follows.

Working with Visions

The problems of today are a product of the beliefs contained in yesterday's thinking. Applying more of this thinking rarely results in solutions to the problems, as no shift of the underlying beliefs has taken place. What is really required is an approach which allows us to challenge our beliefs and avoids getting bogged down in current problems.

A practical starting point for this thinking transformation is through working with visions. Working with visions gives people the opportunity and space to say how they would like things to be in the future, without being bothered by the need to sort out todays messes. Having a well developed sense of how things could be in the future is visionary.

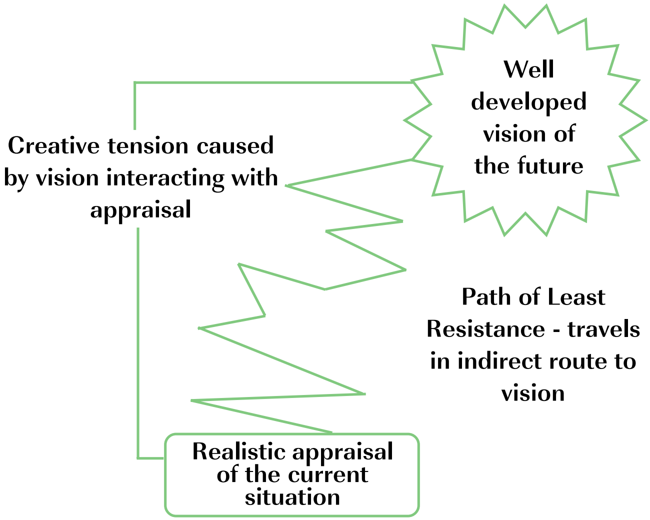
Many people will have been discouraged from holding visions. They may have been told that only elite and super intelligent people can be visionaries. Or they may have been ridiculed in the past for their optimism and hope.

Goals are strategic components of visions. For example a car free society may be a vision, eliminating 50% of my car use by the year 2000 is a component goal of such a vision. People are generally not used to setting strategic goals in their lives.

Working with visions makes it more possible to cope with a realistic appraisal of the current situation. People are better able to approach the reality of what is happening now when they are supported by a sense that things need not be like this at all.

Hearing other people work in this way is always enlightening. That is, other people give us access to a broader range of vision than we can perhaps manage on our own and can show us that there are many, valid ways of viewing the current situation.

Robert Fritz's model overleaf shows that holding a vision of the future at the same time as holding a realistic appraisal of today sets up a creative tension for the holder. This tension causes the holder to notice and create pathways towards their visionary future by an inevitable and almost effortless process of resolution. These pathways are termed "the paths of least resistance" in recognition of the understanding that significant progress towards a vision can be made through light and incremental steps. Any struggling towards visions should serve as a clue that we have slipped off a path of least resistance and that remedial action is appropriate.



From: The Path of Least Resistance, Robert Fritz, 1994
Butterworth Heinman, London

Remedial action consists of revisiting either or both of the "ends' of the model, visions of the future or realistic appraisal of the current situation, in order to reset the creative tension which shows up the paths of least resistance.

Therefore: Take every opportunity to create encouraging and uncritical spaces for people to practice their capacities as visionaries. Repeatedly affirm to people that they have the right to dream their ideal world into being. Encourage people to convert their most inspiring visions into strategic goals which are concise and specific.

The ***Vision Support Group*** method is effective for these purposes and is suited to small groups meeting for evenings, half days or longer. The ***Action Search*** method (which includes a ***Vision Support Group***) works for large groups of up to 64 people meeting over a whole day and has additional benefits.

Finding Common Ground

A startling feature of working with visions is the consistency with which common ground emerges between people however diverse the group or network. It seems that most people can agree that fresh air, clean water, less stress, safe food, energy efficient and affordable housing and many other conditions to do with an ecologically aware and socially just society are worth working for.

This consistency of common ground provides a significant opportunity for people to work together in a different way. People can choose to put their attention onto the areas in which they do agree, to leave on one side the areas of disagreement, and to work up joint projects that bring the common ground into being.

Working with common ground has the potential to liberate for sustainability all the energy and effort that is currently absorbed in maintaining the more normal adversarial mode of proceeding.

Working with common ground also brings people into positive relationships with one another. Through these developing relationships people can discover other overlaps of interest and can also come to respect each other as people. These adjustments reduce the potential for conflict and diminish the significance of any unresolved issues between people. This does not mean that people have to suppress their differences in order that progress can be made but rather that they choose to focus on the common issues first, build working relationships and then seek to resolve differences from within the context of the relationships.

Therefore: Give people every opportunity to work with methods that open the space for generating common ground and working up joint projects based in areas of agreement. Note that these methods appeal to the desires of people to engage in cooperation and mutual aid, although often these tendencies have been obscured by centuries of adversarial politics.

Use all the inclusive meeting methods to remind people of the benefits of reviving a culture of cooperation and mutual aid. Use the ***Action Search*** method specifically to bring together large numbers of people with the purpose of finding common ground in their visions of the future.

7. action search

An Action Search is an example of a structure that uses the meeting methods shown in this manual to design a day long event. It is included in this manual to give an idea of the scale and scope of events that are available to organisations and groups once they have mastered the fundamental skills of working with inclusive meeting methods.

Description

The steps below illustrate the basic form of an Action Search. The description here is not intended to be a full briefing of how to run such an event. Modifications to this form are common as the design can be adapted to have different functions for different groups.

An Action Search is a large group event. Up to 64 people can participate in up to eight groups of eight. The method helps such a group to search for common ground amongst its members as preparation for identifying projects based on this common ground.

Is an Action Search appropriate?

Factors in deciding whether or not an Action Search is appropriate are:

- Does the participant group have an existing organisational framework that can take the output of an Action Search and convert the discovered common ground into meaningful projects?
- Does the group have the commitment and willingness to spend a whole day working on its visions for the future?
- Is it possible to bring together a wide enough group of stakeholders in the organisation to ensure that the exercise and its outcomes will be supported by the people who control the organisation's resources and develop its policies?

An Action Search absorbs considerable planning resources. To guarantee productivity a positive answer to these questions is required. If these are not forthcoming a better strategy may be to apply inclusive meeting methods (***Go-Rounds***, ***Think and Listens***, ***Vision Support Groups*** etc.) to the organisation's usual programme of meetings. Use of these methods will help the organisation to develop the capacities and attitudes that are required to gain the benefits from an Action Search.

Otherwise an Action Search may be used in situations where no organisation exists at present. An example would be the use of an Action Search at the commencement of an Agenda 21 network.

Action Search Steps

Settle participants into home groups of 4 to 8 people depending on the numbers expected. Use coloured dots or a similar device at registration to allocate people who arrive together to different home groups then follow the flow chart:

Step 1
Divide into groups of 3 or 4 and enact a Vision Support Group

Step 2
Work on your own and draw your vision for the world in the year 2020. Imagine yourself the same age as you are now. Make this an optimistic vision - what you would like to see, not what you fear may happen - take charge and make your future world just right for yourself!

Step 3
Return to your home group and arrange the following roles:

- a timekeeper
- a recorder
- a facilitator

Now go round the group and listen to each person describing their thoughts for the future.When everybody has had a turn go round again. Have each person say a plus point, a minus point and something interesting that they noticed during the presentations.

Step 4
Now develop a composite vision for your home group that combines the common ground between you and includes any new ideas you have had as a result of hearing the thoughts of others. An element is common ground when all members of the group want it included in the composite vision. Take note of any elements that are rejected.

Create a presentation to show the whole group the essence of your common ground vision. You may do a song, a hymn or a poem, a mock radio or TV show, take people on a journey or use any mixture of creative styles in your presentation.

Step 5

Present your creation to the whole group

Step 6
Take a Think and Listen with a partner to debrief on the presentations.

Step 7
In your home group make up two sets of display strips:
- Common Ground and
- Unresolved Issues

Post these on the wall

Step 8
The whole group now meets to consider the displayed strips. Similar strips are grouped in clusters under the two headings, Common Ground and Unresolved Issues. For elements that appear in both, test to see if the contradiction can be resolved by asking the groups who posted the strips to give a brief justification for their choice. See if new agreements can be made if wording is changed a little and offer disagree-ers the sentence "Could agree if..." to complete. Work through all the clusters in this way shifting any disputed items across from Common Ground to Unresolved Issues.

Step 9
Items left in Common Ground form an action brief for the coming period. Your organisation can now see what its priorities are and knows that everyone shares in the same goals.

You are invited to sign up to be a participant in a Progress Group which will convert the Action Brief into practical projects.

Unresolved Issues can be researched by their proposers and returned to the whole group for further consideration at the next Action Search.

Step 10
Closing Go-Round "something I have enjoyed about today".

8. origins of inclusive meeting methods

There is a great deal of interest and activity in Britain today concerned with designing inclusive meetings and events to increase productivity.

For example Future Search, an innovative three day structure designed to access common ground for action across a wide diversity of people, has been used by practitioners in many organisations and networks.

This was introduced to the UK in 1996 by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (Future Search - An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organisations and Communities, 1995, San Francisco, Berret-Koehler Publishers Inc.). Future Search has spawned several, less resource demanding one day derivatives. The Action Search, described in this manual, is one of these. At least a dozen others have been developed by members of the Future Search Practitioners Network (Centre for Community Visioning, 1st Floor Vine Court, 112-116 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1JE).

Other practitioners, experimenting with Open Space methods, Planning for Real and derivatives, Village Design Statements and many more innovative approaches to participation and inclusion are at work.

Besides the inspiration provided by the Future Search method this manual is informed by the unparalleled networking capacities of the world wide Re-evaluation Counselling organisation (Rational Island Publishers Inc, 719 Second Avenue North, Seattle, Washington, 98109, USA).

This network effectively supports people in world change work across the globe with the slenderest of material resources. It relies instead on human intelligence and smart, least effort for most effect, organisational designs. The methods used for meetings and events in Re-evaluation Counselling are characterised by ease of learning and ease of use, and can be combined to create structures with many functions which excel in creating space for participation.

Most of the methods and structures in this manual are modelled directly on those existing in the fields of practice described above. Some linking methods have been added to cluster groups of methods together to increase the potential yields.

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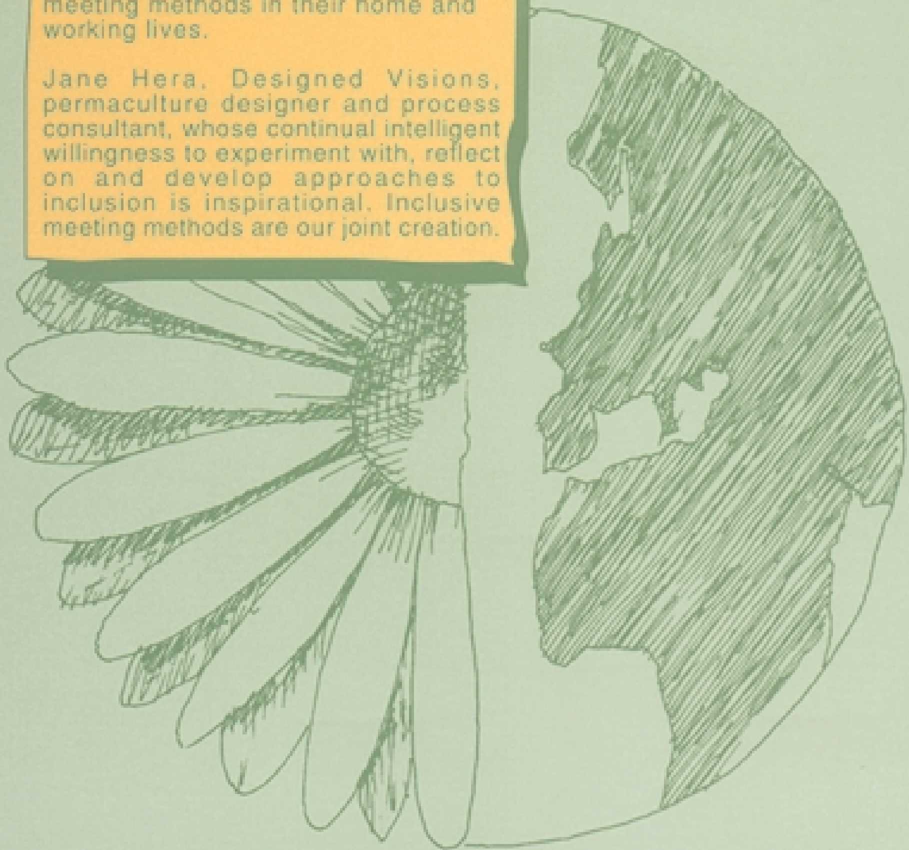

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