

Developing a Community Vision: The Case of a regional United Way*

Professor Bradd C. Hayes
United States Naval War College
hayesb@nwc.navy.mil

Abstract

This paper provides descriptive research about a successful collaborative vision development process undertaken for a regional United Way. The entire process from learning about the client to achieving a new strategic vision is reviewed. Among the techniques used were basic research, interviews, and focus groups. The process ended with a decision event involving the United Way board of directors. The process centers around the creation of a "shared space" — a model — and a unique lexicon that together focus participants on the same goal and keep them talking the same language. The importance of understanding the challenges prompting a change in vision is stressed as well as uncovering the concerns of all stakeholders. The paper describes how "games" can be used to solicit data and prioritize goals. The role and value of facilitators is discussed. It concludes with lessons learned that confirm many of the functional theories of group collaboration.

1. Introduction

This paper walks step-by-step through a collaborative process that permitted a regional United Way to adopt a new strategic vision. "Big deal," you say, "companies adopt new strategic visions all the time. Why should I care about this one?" You might, if you knew that it had tried a few months earlier to adopt a new vision and had been so soundly defeated by its board of directors that we were told it was a mission impossible.

The United Way is confederation of non-governmental organizations that raise and distribute funds to local charitable agencies. The United Way with which we worked consists of a core group of about 60 member agencies. Each United Way is independent, even though United Way America provides some oversight and training. Because they are independent, each United Way is free to operate in accordance with local needs and desires. In order to achieve whatever vision it operates under, each United Way must satisfy three different constituencies: donors, agencies and the organization itself (meaning the staff and board of directors). Numerous indicators showed that the United Way we are discussing

would satisfy none of these constituencies if it didn't change.

2. The pressure to change

The "harsh truths," as we called them, that the United Way needed to change were not hard to find. Donors were down, funds going to their charitable agencies had been level for nearly 40 years (drastically reduced when adjusted for inflation), agencies outside of their circle of partners saw no way in, and non-performers in the circle felt secure and had little reason to improve. The United Way saw before it a slow death. Additional pressure came from United Way America, which itself was undergoing a major mission shift. Hence, the regional United Way felt the squeeze externally from three sides. The staff had done a lot of very good thinking about the problem and had presented their findings and recommendations for a new vision to their board of directors. The board, to the staff's surprise, roundly voted their recommendations down.

Our job was to get donors, agencies, and the United Way moving together in the same direction so that the downward spiral evident to all could be reversed. Michael Schrage asserts that the best way to get people talking is to create a "shared space" that can be examined, discussed, and altered.[1] Part of creating this space is offering a new lexicon that provides participants a common language in which to discuss the challenge and the vision. Organizations whose primary mission is getting ideas rapidly from concept to product know that having a prototype (or model) is critical to the creative process.[2]

We selected a simple 4-quadrant framework for our model. It was formed by asking two sets of paired questions about the United Way (see figure 1). On the vertical axis, we asked: Is the organization primarily "Community Impact" oriented (top) or primarily "Customer Service" driven (bottom)? That is, is the organization more a sum of its relationships or a sum of its impacts? On the horizontal axis, we asked: Does the organization focus primarily on "Agencies" (left) or on "Donors" (right). In other words, does the organization primarily work for agencies to tap donors, or for donors to target agencies? The four resulting quadrants each had

unique features, but describing them was not enough. They needed names so that each quadrant invoked a picture in people's minds as to what each represented.

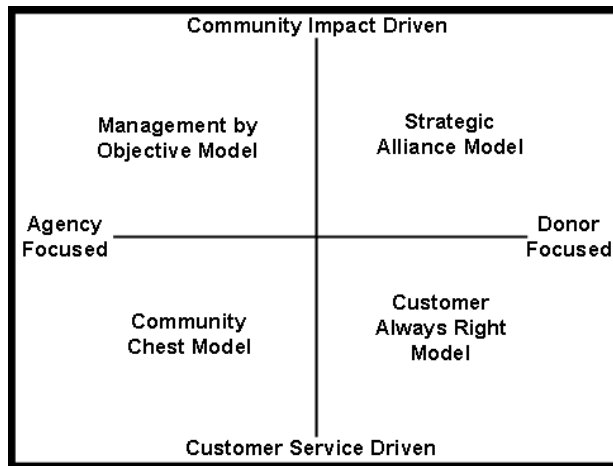


Figure 1. Scenario Model

Three of the four names represented management styles used over the history of the United Way. The organization started in the lower left quadrant, which we dubbed the "Community Chest" model. In the beginning, the United Way was strictly a fundraiser for agencies. That model lasted for nearly 45 years. In the 1960s, they started asking agencies to justify programs that were getting United Way money. They wanted results. This was the "Management by Objectives" era in business and it represented the upper left quadrant. This model lasted for 17 years.

Starting in the mid-1980s, the United Way realized that money wasn't coming in like it used to. As a result, they turned their focus to the donor. Hence, we called the lower right quadrant, the "Customer is Always Right" model. During this period, the United Way adopted "donor choice," where donors could use the United Way as a venue for contributing to any charitable organization in or out of the United Way's circle of agencies. The agencies thought it was a deal with the devil, but it made the annual thermometer grow taller each year.

As the United Way became increasingly a "pass through" organization, it felt it lost its identity. That is why it wanted to move into the upper right hand quadrant, which we dubbed the "Strategic Alliance" model. The trick for us was to try and get donors (who loved the customer is always right quadrant), and agencies (who loved the community chest quadrant) and the staff (who *thought* they were in the management by objectives quadrant) to move willingly into the strategic alliance quadrant. We were told it couldn't be done.

3. Getting to know the players

We knew nothing about the United Way when we began the process and we suspected that many of the donors we would be interviewing didn't either. What really surprised us, was that many United Way staff members didn't really understand the issues either. But we didn't learn this until after we had interviewed them. This presented a challenge. Randy Hirokawa insists that high-quality decisions can't be reached if the problem isn't accurately and thoroughly understood. In fact he offers four critical functions that groups must perform to reach good decisions: "(1) the group needs to understand thoroughly and accurately the problem presented to it; (2) the group must marshal a range of realistic and acceptable alternatives; (3) the group must assess thoroughly and accurately the positive consequences associated with each alternative choice; (4) the group must assess thoroughly and accurately the negative consequences associated with each alternative choice." [3]

After spending two months getting to know the United Way and its challenges, we formally interviewed the staff. One of the ways that we solicited information during this process was having them play a version of the television reality game "Survivor." As contestants, we gave them five of their "products: the United Way Fund, Critical Issues Fund, Special Initiatives, donor choice, and Philanthropy Accounts. The United Way Fund raises undesignated money (money that can be allocated to any United Way agency), the Critical Issues Fund raises money designated for special areas, donor choice permits contributors to designate their gift to any agency (in or out of the United Way system), Special Initiatives are unique R&D programs, and Philanthropy Accounts provide designation services (a charitable banking account) for top level donors.

These "products" were voted off one at a time following a directed discussion around issues like the impact of 11 September on local fund raising and the donor "death spiral" the United Way was experiencing. We discovered the bulk of the staff didn't operate in the "Management by Objective" model; they were firmly rooted in the "Customer is Always Right" model. Donors were their focus and all other considerations, including community impact and the agencies who achieved it, were secondary. This surprised the staff, but it meant we only had to move groups out of two quadrants (the community chest and customer is always right quadrants).

Next we had to get to know partner agencies, associated agencies, and United Way donors. We did this through a series of group interviews over the course of two months. The interviews had three objectives. First, we needed to get familiar with those whom we were interviewing. Second, we needed to expose them to the possibilities for

change. Finally, we wanted to pre-test ideas as they were raised.

One of the early obstacles we had to overcome was strongly held perceptions of the past history between the United Way and its agencies. We were intrigued by the stories they told. They both sounded like jilted lovers who longed to reconcile but didn't know how. When we briefed what we had heard, we used "Dear Abby" letters (figure 2). Both the agencies and the United Way agreed there was some truth in what the other said, which helped persuade them that change was necessary by both sides. We also found that the humorous tone of the letters helped bridge the gap between them and advance the conversation. The new strategic vision suddenly became the tool to make the change and close the gap.

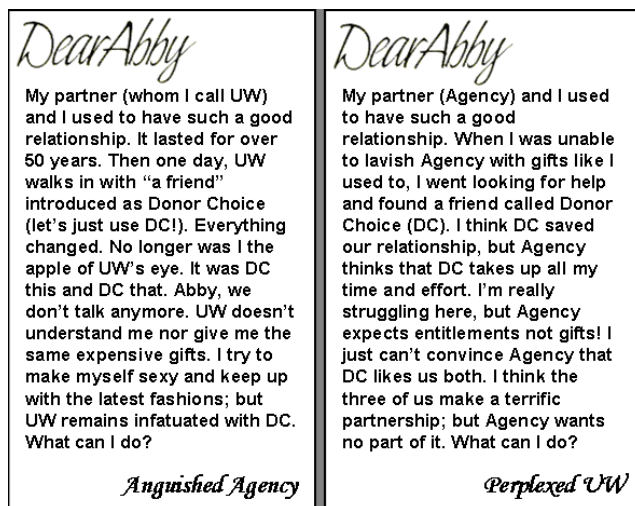


Figure 2. Relationship letters

Throughout the process, we kept board members and agency directors advised of exactly what we had learned and where we were headed. One of the reasons they rejected the first staff-proposed vision was because it was presented as a fait accompli without their input. To avoid this, our updates were frequent and disclosures full. The 4-quadrant model was instrumental in keeping everyone speaking the same language and focusing on common ideas. Personalities and personal feelings were minimized, because people could praise or criticize the model without making personal attacks on either proponents or opponents.

Facilitators proved important for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that participants could direct their praise or anger at them while preserving relationships that would remain crucial regardless of the outcome of the vision process. Although the value of facilitators is well known,[4] this aspect of facilitation was new to us. More on the role of facilitators is found at the end of this paper.

4. Gathering data

As noted above, interviews were conducted in groups, and we used a number of non-traditional techniques to solicit information from participants. When we proposed playing games, like Jeopardy, with participants, staff members blanched, even though they had enjoyed the Survivor game during their interviews. "How can you expect our best donors," they asked, "many of whom are CEOs of major corporations, to come and play games?" The fact is, with rare exceptions, participants loved it. We have this true in dozens of events we have conducted. Even people who are "all business" appreciate an innovative approach and are not averse to having a little fun.

The Jeopardy game was different than the television version. During the real game, contestants select a category, are given answers, and they provide the question. The game board is already weighted, with the hardest questions being priced the highest. Our version provided a single question (or category) and five answers (or courses of action). Participants were asked to price the board.

Each participant was given a notional \$1000 per category to spread across the five answers. If they felt all answers had equal merit, they could spread the money evenly (\$200 per answer). On the other extreme, if they felt there was only one right answer, they could place the entire amount (\$1000) on it. The object of the game was for participants to provide a ranked and weighted ordering of the answers (courses of action) in each category.

The 4-quadrant model, for all the reasons previously mentioned, remained the centerpiece of the interviews. We followed Hirokawa's functional approach by exposing participants to the harsh truths driving the United Way to change then asking them to suggest solutions for the challenges presented by the harsh truths. Because we had researched how other United Way's how faced similar challenges, we had a good idea of what courses of action were available and how they fit in our model. We were able to use the model to explain how participant recommendations fit into it. The aim was to get participants to convince themselves why moving to the strategic alliance quadrant of the model was a good idea, even if they personally didn't believe it when they began. As a result, the interviews became a journey of discovery for both us and the participants.

5. Testing ideas

Once interviews were completed and we had gathered ideas about how the United Way could move forward with its vision, we conducted four focus groups to test them. The focus group process involved many more formal votes than we used during the interviews. Each subsequent

group built on those that preceded it and each group tested something new. The final focus group was used as the dress rehearsal for the decision event held several weeks later with the board of directors.

We started out testing changes to donor strategies as well as changes to the organization's vision. Over the course of the first two groups, we realized it would be a mistake for the United Way to fight a "two-front war" when the most important battle was getting the new vision accepted. Organizational concepts we tested included:

- *Simplifying United Way products.* When we started the process, the United Way was raising money for their general fund, critical issues funds, and special initiatives. We tested the idea of merging them into a single fund we dubbed the "X Fund," because we wanted participants to help us name it. By asking them to name the fund, we accomplished two things. First, we got buy in. This would be their fund because they helped us design it. Second, the fund names would reveal what they thought the money should be used for.

- *Focusing United Way efforts.* Over the years, the United Way had supported good causes in areas as diverse as child care, housing, hunger, and education. All of the programs were important, but the United Way's lack of focus contributed to its loss of identity and perceived relevance. It had started out with a human services focus and felt it needed to return to its roots. We asked participants how many areas the United Way should focus on and what they should be.

- *Reorganizing United Way staff.* As noted earlier, the staff was organized to support the "Customer is Always Right" model — the customer being the donor. That meant that most of the staff's time was spent handling donors and their money. We asked, under the new vision, how much time the staff should spend in various activities. Participants indicated, with remarkable consistency, that the staff needed to shift about 20% of their activity out of donor money management and into public outreach.

- *Restructuring United Way committees.* The United Way maintained a number of boards and committees, but members of these groups felt impotent (believing the only real power rested with the board of directors). Members of the agency accreditation committee, for example, recommended that certain agencies be dropped only to find the board overturning their recommendations. In order to overcome this challenge, we tested the idea of forming Impact Councils that corresponded with the focus areas tested earlier, with members of the board chairing each group. By focusing the groups and involving the board in them, participants believed that it would be more difficult for entire board to overturn their decisions. Participants changed the name of these groups from Impact Councils to Task Forces, because they felt that "Councils" generated images of fat

cats sitting in a room making decisions rather than action oriented individuals who were involved in the community. These Task Forces would have real power and would be the heart of the new vision.

- *Community outreach.* During the third focus group, we tested a "summit series" concept that added an extra layer of formal community meetings on top of the United Way structure. It went over like a lead balloon and was dropped after that one event. Since this was the brainchild of the president of the United Way, the focus groups played an important role in convincing him that it should be dropped. His staff had been unable to do so.

Participants enjoyed the voting process (we handed out separate ballots for each vote). As often as possible, we fed back the results of their votes during the event and used them as the basis for further discussion. We have found, over the course of dozens of events, that participants love to see results as much as they enjoy providing input. Whenever possible we include voting in our events and instant feedback.

When we use computer groupware, this process is much easier; but it can be done using paper ballots and PowerPoint slides (or butcher paper). One of the most interesting votes taken occurred at the end of the events. Having laid out the vision, we asked participants to state their belief or disbelief in the vision and whether the United Way could pull it off (see figure 3).

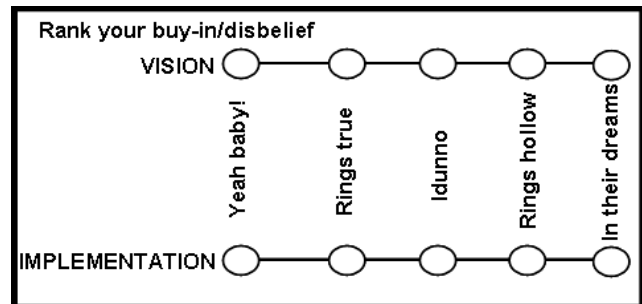


Figure 3. Buy-in ballot

The more the vision was refined, the higher the belief in the vision (100% buy in by the final focus group). Implementation was another matter. Since we had spent all the time describing the vision and virtually none on how it would be implemented, votes expressing skepticism were natural and expected. The point is that if you want to get buy in for both a group's vision and its implementation plan, you better have implementation plans worked out in some detail. We felt the skepticism in this case was not only deserved but healthy and a sign that participants were fully engaged in the process.

6. The importance of examples

I've already noted how important our 4-quadrant model was in getting people engaged in a conversation about the direction the United Way wanted to go. As an extension of this concept, we felt it was important to show concrete examples of how the vision had been successful. We selected two.

The first example came from within the regional United Way itself and was called "Making it Work." It was a job training and education program that partnered the United Way, the state government, and provider agencies, with most of the money coming from the state. By all accounts it was a huge success.

The second example was from the Baltimore, Maryland, area and dealt with problems faced by homeless people. The homeless face a complex array of challenges including joblessness, malnutrition, illness, crime, loss of self-confidence, and too often, early and/or untimely, death. No single agency was prepared to handle the resulting broad list of needs.

Three agencies joined forces to establish The Center at 111 Park Avenue, which offers many services, including medical care and testing, mental health counseling and treatment, emergency assistance, housing assistance, job readiness workshops, job placement help, and legal support. Bringing all these services together under one roof resulted in a 51 percent single year increase in clientele, while operating costs increased only 18 percent over that same period.

These two examples provided participants with both the vision and the possibilities. If the United Way was going to become a leader in the community, it had to forge relationships beyond those created by the money flows it generated.

7. Getting affirmation

The process ended with a decision event with the board of directors. As noted several times in this paper, we included board members in each phase of the process and regularly update the full board. Recall that our philosophy was getting them engaged and obtaining vision buy-in along the way. We wanted to avoid springing anything new on them at the decision event itself. By the time the decision event was scheduled, we felt the battle had been won. The staff wasn't so sure.

The days preceding the decision event were filled with angst for the United Way staff. One staff member, who had demonstrated open hostility to the desired change, was suddenly fired. The number of staff with whom we worked was trimmed dramatically, and the president of the United Way considered cutting back on the number of decisions he wanted the board to address. A final planning session

with him and his reduced team two days before the event did much to calm their fears.

Since the decision event was also a formal board meeting, we realized that the votes participants would make would be binding on the organization, meaning they would be formally moved, seconded, and voted on. We saw this an opportunity for wiggle room and, as we explained our plan to the staff, they agreed.

We said, for example, if informal votes indicated that the board was moving in a direction with which the staff was uncomfortable, the formal motion should be to delay the decision rather than forcing the board to approve or disapprove the matter at hand. The United Way president was particularly fond of this approach because there were several decisions he wanted to delay. The staff had different fears. They had watched the board reject change time after time and were concerned it would happen again. The night before the event, one staff member emailed us, wished us luck, and advised to "carb load" for the ordeal ahead.

The board meeting facilitation was much more straight forward than previous events — no games, just straight votes. Each vote was preceded by a briefing that explained what we had learned over the course of interviews and focus groups and the options available to the board. Some of the votes were strictly "yes" or "no" votes. Others were votes among courses of action, names, etc. When the dust settled, the board unanimously approved every decision the staff wanted and delayed the decisions the president desired. The staff couldn't believe it and variously called the outcome "miraculous" and "momentous."

Since the decision event, the United Way has hired a full time facilitator to oversee the transition to the new vision.

8. Lessons learned

There are three areas that facilitators trying to push an organization towards a new vision need to think about: the clients, the process, and the facilitation.

8.1. The clients

A facilitator needs to understand where clients *think* they want to go, what they *think* the challenges are that confront them, what they *believe* the consequences of changing (or not changing) will be, and who the important players are in the process. They may be wrong. That is why Peter Schwartz recommends asking the following questions. "What are the driving forces? What do you feel is uncertain? What is inevitable? How about this or that scenario?"[5] Robert Knowling, Jr., notes that any change process "must start with clarity around vision and strategy." [6]

A facilitator needs to have broad (horizontal) knowledge, not deep (vertical) knowledge. He or she needs to know enough to offer some helpful explanatory analogies about the situation. Time and again we were able to move beyond a barrier because we demonstrated, through analogies, how others had dealt with similar dilemmas. You have to do more than parrot what you have heard.

In our case, the United Way staff had a good idea where they wanted to go, they just didn't know how best to explain it to other stakeholders — the board of directors and member agencies — and get them willingly to go along. The staff knew that agencies would resist the change because they risked losing some or all of their funding. Resistance from the board was expected because they were either heads of agencies or sat on agency boards as well as the United Way board. What they did not expect was resistance from within the staff. Some of the staff, however, focused on agencies while other staffers focused on donors. They realized a change in vision would require a realignment of staff positions and could cost some of them their jobs. The resistance to change should have been anticipated.

Assuming that donors, agencies, staffers, and board members were all clients, helped the United Way craft a vision that appealed to most of them. Here are our suggestions for getting to know your clients. Understand:

1. the vision (and make sure it is the real vision they seek)
2. why they think it is necessary to change
3. the business (ask a lot of questions, do some research). Tom Kelley recommends “starting every project humbly — and a little dumb.”[7]
4. who must embrace the vision and what they want (they are also clients)
5. who could undermine the implementation and why (consider them clients as well)
6. other challenges (make sure the vision answers the mail)

Convince clients that you are listening to and addressing their concerns. Every interim report we provided included changes that reflected “client” inputs.

8.2. The process

Everyone has a favorite process. Kelley, for example, recommends a 5-step process: (1) understand, (2) observe, (3) visualize, (4) evaluate and refine, and (5) implement.[8] This paralleled our process fairly well. We wanted to learn all we could, tell people what we learned (both to reassure the United Way and educate donors), and explain what we were thinking as the process moved forward. We wanted no surprises when it came to the final decision event because we felt involving board members along the way would help ensure success.

The process described in this paper allows you to get to know your clients, their environment, and their challenges. It permits you to explore all pertinent issues during the interviews and then test and refine ideas during the focus groups. It also provides consistency and keeps everyone on track. Just as importantly, it lets everyone know what products they should expect and when to expect them. Here are our suggestions for process:

1. *Start with a model and create a lexicon for it.* Our 4-quadrant, scenario-based model permitted clients to see different destinations that could result from their decisions as well as potential benefits and challenges associated with each of those outcomes. A scenario, as defined by Schwartz, is “a tool for ordering one's perceptions about alternative future environments in which one's decisions might be played out.”[9]

2. *Make the process sequential.* Don't try tackling too much all at once. One reason you want to move sequentially through the process, according to Kelley, is that you don't want to “peek at the answers before [you] know the questions.”[10]

3. *Make sure everyone involved is briefed frequently about the state of the process.* Kees van der Heijden points out, “Often much more important [than the formal process] is the informal ‘learning’ activity, consisting of unscheduled discussions, debate and conversation about strategic questions that goes on continuously at all levels in the organization.”[11] We met weekly with the United Way staff to hold informal brainstorming sessions and argue different courses of action. Occasionally, board members would sit in on these sessions. Not only did these meetings help sharpen the final vision, they created an excitement within the staff that might not otherwise have been generated.

8.3. The facilitation

Skilled facilitation is important in advancing any collaborative process. Victoria Clawson and Robert Bostrom compiled a list of 16 facilitator functions which they drew from a survey of facilitators.[12] Three of those functions apply strictly to computer-assisted facilitation. They are: (1) appropriately selecting and preparing technology; (2) creating comfort with and promoting understanding of technology and technological outputs; and, (3) understanding the technology and its capabilities. The other 13 functions are used in any facilitated environment: (1) promoting ownership and encouraging group responsibility; (2) demonstrating self-awareness and self-expression; (3) listening to, clarifying, and integrating information; (4) developing and asking the right questions; (5) keeping the group focused on outcomes; (6) creating and reinforcing an open, positive, and participative environment; (7) actively building rapport and relationships; (8) presenting information to the group; (9)

demonstrating flexibility; (10) planning and designing the meeting process; (11) managing conflict and negative emotions constructively; (12) encouraging and supporting multiple perspectives; and (13) directing and managing the meeting. Almost all of these functions were encountered during the course of our process.

We have learned from years of working with groupware that “horseshoe” arrangements, with the facilitator working the middle of the “U,” are best. We also prefer groups of 25 people or less. There are differing opinions about the role of the facilitator. Some believe his role should be minimal, stepping in only when things move off course. When developing a strategic vision, however, we believe the facilitator should be the center of attention. One reason is that if participants become the center of attention, personal animosities can develop that could corrode relations and prove unhealthy or disastrous later on.

Another reason the facilitator should become the center of attention is to try to get participants to like him/her so they strive to please him/her. This is particularly important when it comes to final agreement. If the facilitator has antagonized important players, the approval process could be undermined. On the other hand, if participants like the facilitator they are more likely to consider themselves allies in getting the vision passed.

One important tool in achieving these goals is having name tents in front of participant so that the facilitator can call them by name. This is important for two reasons: first, it makes them feel like friends; second, it levels the playing field. First name exchanges help the facilitator remain in charge. At the end of the day, the facilitator wants the vision he/she has helped the organization to craft to pass muster and get approved.

Establishing camaraderie early on is important. When I say early on, I don’t mean early in the meeting at hand, but early in the process. When we conducted the decision event for the board of directors, there was only one person in the room with whom we had not had previous interactions and established some rapport. As a result, often as not, it was board members arguing for passage of the vision — the same board members who months earlier defeated a similar vision.

Not all facilitators feel they must be liked to be effective. When we looked at the alternatives, it appeared best to us. We could have opted to remain neutral, but then we would have developed little trust and would have had a difficult time obtaining buy in from the participants. We were hired to get buy in for the vision. In our minds, vision equals trust. Who wants to move forward with a vision that is being delivered by someone you don’t trust? The other alternative was to be bossy and abrasive — deliberately unlikable — that alternative appeared counterproductive. Here are our recommendations for facilitation.

1. *Explain the vision using imagery with which the participants are familiar.* The model we used provided participants with both a shared space and a common language. The vision should tell a compelling story about why it is needed and how it will meet the challenges.

2. *Don’t promise more than you can deliver.* A number of agencies wanted reassurance that adoption of the new vision wouldn’t result in a decrease of their funding. We couldn’t make such assurances. In fact, we were quite clear that the opposite might happen. The honesty and integrity of the facilitator must be preserved if trust is to be maintained.

3. *Give everyone a chance to speak.* We generally started meetings with introductions and always ended meetings with a wrap-up exercise that provided each participant “30-seconds” to sound off. We called these “elevator exercises” because they normally involved a scenario during which participants had a chance encounter in an elevator with somebody important (like the president of United Way) and had 30 floors to convince him of their position. During the focus groups, we changed the scenario slightly and told participants they were being interviewed by a local television station and had 30 seconds to make the sale as to why the new vision was good for the community. These exercises left everyone believing they had been given an opportunity to share their views (even if they remained silent during most of the discussion). The “sales pitch” did another important thing, it forced participants to be supporters of the vision — ensuring everyone left on a positive note.

4. *Use lots of votes and provide as much immediate feedback as possible.* When we first started facilitating group data-gathering events, we collected information for later analysis. We seldom shared it immediately with participants. Time and again the participants asked to see the results and we realized that was important. Once we started sharing results, participants were unhappy if a vote was taken and no feedback was provided. Knowing they would see results made them more engaged in the process.

5. *When voting on the vision, don’t vote on it all at once or make it a “yes/no” ultimatum.* Find a portion of the vision that almost everyone can agree on and have them vote on that. You are looking for a solid, early “win” that will establish the tone for the remainder of the votes. Provide an out (a face-saving measure) like further study and later consideration in case parts of the vision are questioned. No plan is perfect. The devil is always in the details and you don’t want to let the absence of a few details derail the process.

6. *Be a little bit slick.* Don’t be snake oil salesman slick, which leaves a bad impression with clients, but provide slickness with content. We like PowerPoint briefings because, when used properly, they can tell stories, expand understanding, and capture participants’ imagination. Used badly, briefings can bore the hell out of

people. PowerPoint has become anathema in the Pentagon because it has been abused and misused and probably is viewed in a similar light in most businesses. We know we have it about right when people ask us if we could teach them how to use PowerPoint to prepare briefings.

7. *Leave them laughing.* You want people to walk away feeling good about their experience. That is one reason we resort to our own versions of old television game shows to brainstorm and prioritize. We also use music, anecdotes, jokes, food, and, when necessary, little mementos to get and keep participants in a good mood. These “tricks” won’t stop heated discussion, which would be deleterious to the effort, but they will keep discussions upbeat and help prevent them from getting personal and souring further participation.

9. The importance of models

The key to successful collaborations is the creation and management of a shared space. Shared space can be created anytime one uses a straw man, a model, a prototype, a simulation, or a game. These devices move participants beyond transactional communication, where a sender and a receiver hold a conversation and exchange information, into collaborative communication, where all participants are both sender and receiver. Collaborative communication permits participants to go beyond simple exchanges of information to generate understanding, change perspectives, and manipulate the environment in the process.

Creating models (in this case scenarios) and an associated language, asserts van der Heijden, enhances “the quality of the strategic conversation” by focusing an organization, making it more perceptive of its environment and, therefore, making it more adaptive.[13] The more work we do with scenario models the more convinced we are of their benefits. The greatest challenge is capturing a representative range of scenarios within a reasonable framework. We have found the quadrant approach particularly useful. First, it forces groups to understand two, non-dependent questions (variables) that could affect their future. These questions form a spectrum of possibilities along the two axes forming the quadrants (as in figure 1). Just the exercise of identifying the questions is valuable for an organization. Second, quadrants limit the number of scenarios a group must tackle. Although there is an infinite number of futures, a group can’t tackle them all. That makes framing the questions all the more important.

Another framework that can be used to capture a variety of perspectives is the one introduced by Kenneth Waltz in his seminal work *Man, the State, and War* looked at the sources of conflict using three images: the individual image, the nation-state image, and the system image.[14] Groups can use these same images to ask questions about their future. What could happen at the individual level that

would affect our business? At the state level? At the system level?

If those questions don’t result in the kind of granularity an organization requires, then we suggest filling out a “scenario dynamics grid.” This grid starts with the Waltzian three-tiered framework and overlays six “lenses” suggested by Thomas Friedman’s “six dimensional thinking.”[15] The lenses are: economics, politics, technology, culture, environment, and security.

The group then asks, what could happen (or what trend is already occurring) that could affect our business for each resulting box (figure 4). When the eighteen boxes are filled in, an organization has a pretty good idea of what trends or concerns, at three different levels, could affect their business.

	Economics	Politics	Technology	Culture	Environment	Security
System						
State						
Individual						

Figure 4. Scenario Dynamics Grid

Whatever the model, it creates the shared space groups need to collaborate successfully.

10. Final thoughts

In a recent book, Edward Russo and Paul Schoemaker drew six lessons from their work with groups.[16] Our experience bears out what they discovered.

- (1) Teams, on average, make better decisions than individuals. But some of the absolute worst decisions are also made by teams. Our process tried to avoid the downside of team decision making by ensuring that all stakeholders were heard.
- (2) Too little conflict is as dangerous to a decision-making group as too much conflict. This wasn’t a problem for us since many participants felt their futures were on the line. They were quite vocal about anything that concerned them.

- (3) How well conflict is managed determines whether decision-making groups fail or succeed. One way we managed conflict was by providing an activity-laden agenda for our meetings. It was simple to cut-off debate by taking a vote, then moving on to the next activity.
- (4) Moderate task conflict and low relationship conflict is the decision-making ideal. Only then are groups likely to outperform individuals. Making a model the focus of discussion fosters an atmosphere in which task conflict can take place without fostering relationship conflicts.
- (5) For divergent views to emerge in a group, leaders must signal that conflict is truly welcome. This is where an outside facilitator is particularly helpful. Since he/she has no dog in the fight, participants feel free to express their concerns. Just as importantly, subsequent briefings need to reflect those concerns.
- (6) A project monitoring plan, with clear milestones and review points, is crucial. It helps ensure that measures of success or failure are available to be used to refine a decision. Every event and briefing we provided began with a timeline, milestones, and products that were expected (figure 6). This was extremely helpful for keeping the process on track.

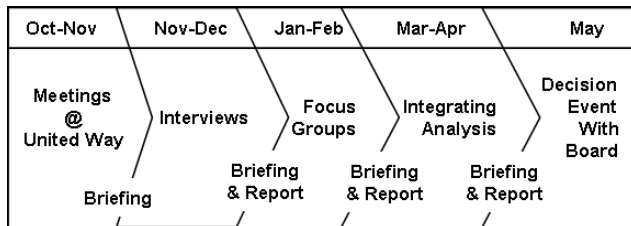


Figure 6. Process Timeline

Russo and Schoemaker also point that “jealousy, animosity, and posturing can destroy group productivity. Dominant individuals can subvert the process. Personal agendas can derail attempts to move ahead.”[17] We saw this in spades. Staff meetings, for example, were very different depending on whether the president of the United Way was present. The staff would take advantage of the president’s absence to make their case and ask us to present it to him. This provided them with an anonymity they didn’t have otherwise. One of the values of groupware is that it provides the same kind of anonymity with the boss in the room.

The president of the United Way wasn’t the only strong personality and even he recognized that the opinions of board members and high-end donors were as (or more) important than his. An outside facilitator, using a process and model similar to ours, can play these personalities

against each other and overcome these challenges — letting no single position dominate.

Because perceptions were so strongly held by participants in each United Way constituency, their views of the future could not help but be colored by them. We had to help them overcome this color blindness. “The obscure we see eventually,” noted Edward R. Murrow, “the completely apparent takes longer.” An outside facilitator, armed with a good process and an effective model can help people see the completely apparent. He/she can turn communication from a retelling of past accomplishments (what has been done) to the more important subject of future possibilities (what can be achieved).

Committees, over the years, have developed a terrible reputation. So bad, in fact, that we now call them task forces, teams, groups, etc., just to avoid the stigma. “A committee,” according to an adage, “is usually a group of the unprepared, appointed by the unwilling, to do the unnecessary.”[18] The job of a good facilitator in vision development is to foster the collaborative process by preparing the group and making it a willing participant in a worthwhile endeavor. It’s time to recapture the valuable position that collaborative efforts once enjoyed.

[1] Michael Schrage, *Serious Play*, Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 2000, p. xiv.

[2] In addition to Schrage, see Tom Kelley, *The Art of Innovation*, New York, Currency Doubleday, 2001, and Andrew Hargadon and Robert Sutton, “Building an Innovation Factory,” *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2000, pp. 157-66.

[3] Randy Y. Hirokawa, *Discussion procedures and decision-making performance: a test of a functional perspective*, Human Communication Research 12, 1985, p. 205.

[4] See, for example, R.M. Schwarz, *The Skilled Facilitator: Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups*, San Francisco, Josey-Bass, 1994.

[5] Peter Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View*, New York, Currency Doubleday, 1996, p. 136.

[6] Robert E. Knowling, Jr., “Leading with Vision, Strategy, and Values,” in Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, and Iain Somerville, *Leading for Innovation*, San Francisco, Josey-Bass, 2002), p. 178.

[7] Kelley, op. cit., p. 32.

[8] Ibid., pp. 6-7.

[9] Schwartz, op. cit., p. 4.

[10] Kelley, op. cit., p. 32.

[11] Kees van der Heijden, *Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), p. 273.

[12] Victoria K. Clawson and Robert P. Bostrom, “Research-driven facilitation training for computer-supported environments,” *Group Decisions and Negotiations* 5, 1996, pp. 7-30. Thanks to Mark Adkins, Jay Nunamaker and Michael Burgoon for providing this data.

[13] van der Heijden, op. cit., p. 131.

[14] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1959.

- [15] Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and The Olive Tree*, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999, p.15.
- [16] J. Edward Russo and Paul J.H. Schoemaker, *Winning Decisions*, New York, Currency Doubleday, 2002, pp. 159-186.
- [17] Ibid., p. 161.
- [18] Evan Esar, *20,000 Quips and Quotes*, New York, Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1995, p. 157.

* Material in this paper related to process is used with the express permission of Dr. Thomas Barnett, sole proprietor of ***Barnett Consulting***.