

Building up Availability of SME Internationalisation Services (BASIS)

Practical guide for facilitating futures workshops

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Introduction

This booklet contains a concise practical guide on how to facilitate a futures workshop. After a short introduction of the method, things to consider before, during and after a futures workshop are presented.

The structure of a futures workshop introduced here is the same as in the BASIS futures workshop training in Riga on April 12th 2012. It should be noted that the way of facilitating workshops presented here is just one of many possible ways. The format presented here is based on the way a typical workshop is facilitated by the Finland Futures Research Centre. The presented views concerning workshop facilitation are founded on author's experience on facilitating tens of dozens of workshops for various groups in Finland.

Background of the method

The original idea of a futures workshop is to bring together people from various backgrounds who all share an interest in a common issue or problem. The aim of the first futures workshops was to increase people's participation in solving collective problems by giving them an opportunity to influence the future decisions concerning an issue whose development might otherwise be defined solely by traditional decision makers such as politicians, civil servants or experts.

Origin of futures workshops is often attached to the work of an Austrian futurist Robert Jungk, who developed the basic form of the workshops for the purpose of enhancing municipal decision making in Austrian towns. The idea was to give residents of different districts of a town, to whom the decisions made by the political command have the most profound effect on, an opportunity to influence and, to some extent, make the future of their neighbourhood.

Futures workshops are originally an instrument for collaborative problem solving but in social sciences, especially futures studies, workshops are also used for collecting information. Futures workshops are a good tool for tackling complex problems where many, often seemingly contradicting views, have to be fitted together. In addition to collecting and producing information futures workshops act as an instrument of social learning which is especially beneficial if the people taking part in the workshop are also responsible in bringing about the desired change.

Before the workshop

Goals

Futures workshops can be held in order to fulfil one or several goals. Workshops can be used for finding alternatives for current activities, a new direction (strategic scenarios) or for collecting futures information without an immediate use for this information in mind (food for thought).

Notice that a workshop can be a “one-off” event or a series of interconnecting workshops that can be stretched over a long period of time. Determining the goals of a workshop and the level of precision of the information that the day is expected to yield often vary depending if the workshop is a “one-off” event or one in a line of several events. In a “one-off” workshop the goals should be quite clearly determined and workshop planned so that this result is achieved, whereas in a series of workshops there is much more flexibility regarding required results of a one single event.

Participants

It is essential to define what purpose the workshop serves, since this reflects on what kind of people should be invited. To a workshop whose goals are very practise orientated (for instance improving existing or designing new services and initiating the desired change) most of the participants should be stakeholders regarding the theme of the workshop, whereas in and information collecting exercise it is advised to try to collect a group of experts who have wide knowledge on various issues relating to the subject at hand.

The importance of successful selection the relevant stakeholders (or experts if the goal is to produce new information) cannot be overstated; the results of the workshop are only just as good as the participants are. Ways to ensure that the people wanted to attend the workshop, accept the invitation are to motivate them in the invitation (what purpose the workshop serves, what is the benefit of attending for the participant?) and to send the invitations well in advance so the people have spare days in their calendars.

Duration

It is advised to reserve one full working day for the workshop. Half a day (roughly three hours) should be seen as the absolute minimum duration for the kind of futures workshop described in this text. During the workshop day one can always shorten the duration if it so happens that the intended results are achieved in advance. Lengthening the duration at the end of the day is not advised. If the workshop failed to produce what it was supposed to, one can always fill the gaps by drafting a questionnaire and sending it to the participants later.

When planning what time to start the workshop day, keep in mind that some participants might have to travel to the workshop venue, so it is a good idea not to start too early in the morning.

Facilities

The venue where the workshop is being held has some significance. The nicer (peaceful, undisturbed place) the place, the better chances there are to get a good result. Budget permitting, it is also a good idea to serve lunch or refreshments during the workshop. Lunch or coffee breaks serve several purposes; they give the participants a chance to discuss the topic in a relaxed manner, give the

participants a chance to refresh and it also serves as a token of appreciation of the time people are willing to give for the common cause.

Background information

In some cases, especially if there are reasons to suspect that all participants don't share the same knowledge base needed to discuss the issue of the workshop, it is a good idea to compile a background report containing data that collects key issues regarding the subject, thus supporting the discussions of the workshop.

The background report should be purely informative, i.e. consist of issues that are not to be contested in the workshop. In workshops where participants come from various backgrounds sending this kind of preliminary material for the participant beforehand is very much recommended.

During workshop

Phases

According to Jungk and Müllert (1987)¹ a "classic" futures workshop consists of four phases. This division is very applicable and slightly modified version of it is followed also in this example. Idea is that each phase is, at least to some extent, relying on work done in previous stages so that knowledge is cumulating throughout the workshop. The textbook example of the phases of a futures workshop are:

- 1) The preparation phase – the conference room (or rooms) is prepared (papers, pens, post-it notes etc. should be available). The workshop method, its rules and the scheduled course of the workshop are introduced.
- 2) Critique phase – actual start of the workshop. Here, the problem is investigated critically and thoroughly.
- 3) Fantasy phase – creative phase where it is allowed to vision different possible futures, even goofy ones.
- 4) Implementation phase – the ideas found are checked and evaluated in regard to their practicability. If a solution has been found, an action plan is written down.

Preparation phase

Before the start of the workshop all material needed to go through the day is collected. Futures workshops don't really require anything special, large sheets of paper and pens (in various colours) will do. One can also use post-it notes instead of writing all the ideas directly at the paper. If this is

¹ see also Apel (2004)

the case, one should reserve plenty of post-it notes. There are possibilities to use modern ICT, especially in the final exercise where stories describing various possible future paths are written on a laptop connected to a data projector. This helps everyone to get involved in editing the text is useful, but if data projectors for each group are not available, traditional methods will do just fine.

After participants have arrived the day should start by the facilitator giving a brief overview on the subject and goals of the day and the employed method. If the participants have received background material in advance, there is no need to give an overview on the subject. The duration of this facilitators open speech shouldn't be too long, 15-30 minutes should do.

Groups

After the facilitators opening speech is finished the participants should be divided in groups. Size for one group should not exceed seven or eight people. If the group is larger than this, the risk of someone being left out of the conversation or the risk having several parallel discussions going on in the group, grows. These small groups should be seated in an open circle to be able to interact and write to the paper in the middle of the group.

There should be no hierarchies in groups' discussion even though in some cases, where for instance some people in the group have a high position in the society, this might be somewhat difficult to achieve. The facilitator should keep an eye on groups and monitor that groups are functioning properly. This means, no domination of one or few members, just one discussion going on in the group at a time (instead of many separate discussions at other ends of the table) and that group is recording their discussion on paper. Groups can assign a clerk who does the writing on the group's behalf, but the preferred way is that everyone in the group contributes to writing.

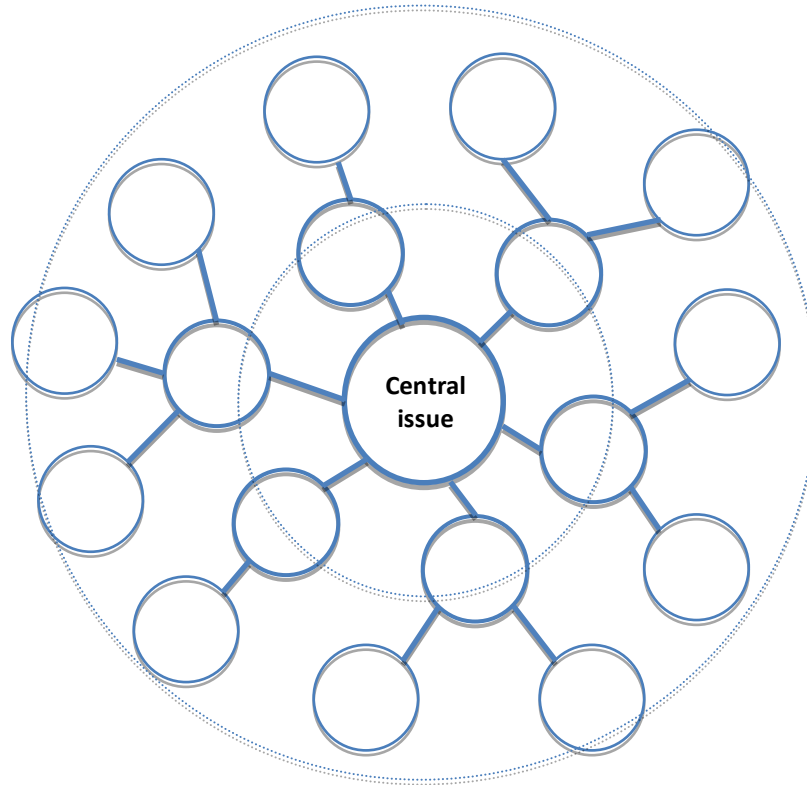
Critique phase

Futures wheel

The workshop begins by a fairly simple exercise, futures wheel. This is a form of visualised brainstorming is performed around a fairly general issue or a question concerning the issue of the day. Brainstorming can be recorded in groups with the help of via futures wheel (or a mind map). Aim of this exercise is to understand the operational environment regarding the topic of the day and to see where and what kind of indirect consequences changes in the issue of the day can have on other actors in the society. Instead of writing everything down on paper, the group can also use post-it notes to write their ideas (post-its are then placed on the paper). Benefit of using post-its is that they make clustering ideas into groups easier as the work progresses.

Picture below describes a textbook example of a futures wheel. There the lines represent links between issues and the big circles illustrate first- and second-degree effects that possible changes regarding the central issue might have on the society. Note that this level of sophistication is not

necessary or often even not attainable in a workshop setting, but in an ideal case is possible. The result of this phase is often more or less a fuzzy mind map than collection of symmetrical circles.



Picture 1. Futures wheel

Futures wheel exercise proceeds in the following way: first each participant spends five minutes thinking about the issue and making notes. When the discussion begins, the topic of the futures table is written in the middle of the paper. Then groups discuss and collect actors who are directly affected by current actions or changes in the central issue (first level). Also possible effects the actions and changes might have on them (around each actor) are discussed and written down. After that the process is repeated (2...n level) and continued as long as increasing levels seems reasonable. Connections between issues should also be written down and if one is using post-it notes in collecting the ideas, items belonging thematically together can be clustered together.

When the group feels the wheel is finished, the facilitator can order the group to vote on which of the surfaced issues the group considered to be most important of interesting. Results of the vote can be used when deciding on what topic to use in the next exercise.

As a result of this stage there should be a picture of a network (or system) regarding connections or possible effects of changes of the central issue. Another benefit of futures wheel discussion is that it offers a good change for the participants to get acquainted with the subject and with other group members. One should reserve 45 to 90 minutes of time for this exercise.

Futures table

The futures table is, compared to futures wheel, more systematic way of collecting and organising futures information. Aim of this exercise is to identify and collect all relevant issues related to the selected topic (to form a system model of a sort) and use the items in the table to derive outlines for several future paths.

The group can draw the table themselves or the facilitator can draw the blank tables beforehand. In this version of futures workshop the table is so called ACPVOD –table, where the acronym comes from first letters of the six variables in table’s left column. One can change the names of variables if some other variables seem to be better suited for the topic at hand, one can also add new variables to the table if necessary. The essential thing is to have the kind of variables that cover the system to which the topic had influence.

Below is an illustration how the blank table should look like.

	Selected topic					
Actors						
Customers						
Products						
Values						
Obstacles						
Drivers						
...						

Table 1. Blank futures table

First each group must choose a topic for the futures table. Topic can be the same as it was in the futures wheel but preferably it should be a bit more precise than that and preferably describe an action or an objective relating to the topic of the day. If the group has voted for most important or interesting issue from the futures table, it can be used as a topic for the table. Year in the future, to which the discussions in this stage are stretching, should also be noted in the title. In an ideal case various groups in the workshop each produce futures tables with slightly different topics. In choosing topics for the table facilitator can guide groups to choose different topics from group to group. Once the topic is selected, it is written down at the top of the table.

As the discussion starts the table is filled with various issues related to the topic of the table (one can start with collecting material from the futures wheel). After the group feels like it can no longer produce new input to the table the group can move to the next phase of the workshop exercise. As a result of this stage there should be a table that describes the system regarding the central issue. This is probably the most important exercise in this model of futures workshop, so one should reserve ample time for this. Usually 1,5 to 2 hours of time should suffice for this exercise.

Fantasy phase

In the beginning of this imaginary a few, preferably 3-5 distinctive future paths, are constructed using the items in the futures table. Different kind of approaches regarding envisioned future can be probable, preferable or possible (physically, technically and socially) future. Table below shows how different stories can be picked out from the table (x's are various items that the group has written in the table, red circles and a line connecting these circles show an example of how different elements in the table form descriptions of the future). Here only one future path is created; following future end states derived from the table should be marked with different colours from the first one (next might be blue, then green and then yellow...)

	Selected topic					
Actors	x	x	x	x	x	x
Customers	x	x	x	x	x	
Products	x	x	x	x	x	x
Values	x	x				
Obstacles	x	x	x			
Drivers	x	x	x	x	x	
...						

Table 2. Future paths derived from the futures table

After the future paths are created, the paths should be written to a format of a story. The idea of this stage is to present the work of the groups in a format that is easily understandable even to anyone who wasn't present in the workshop. The idea is that the group writes the stories together, this is achieved best by using a computer (and a word processing software) that is connected to a data projector so everyone can assist the writer in forming the story. If these tools are not available, the story can also be written on paper. Here the facilitator should encourage the groups to be creative since the table can be sometimes be somewhat restricting in that people often fail to be truly creative when choosing the variables and items for the table.

The texts don't have to be true scenarios depicting events from present to the projected future, the stories are refined further in the final stage of the workshop. Time needed for writing stories depends on how many paths the groups have constructed. Roughly 20-30 minutes per story is needed.

Implementation phase

The aim of the last phase of a futures workshop is to bring the work done in groups more concrete by writing an action plan that illustrates how the desired future is achieved (who does what, when, with what resources, etc.). However, if the idea of the workshop was just to collect ideas (food for thought) this stage is not necessary. Action plan can be complemented by drawing a timeline which describes the sequence of events needed to fulfil the depicted futures. Product that follows from writing this kind of an action plan with timeline can as close to a scenario as one can achieve in a group exercise.

This exercise should be quite simple so roughly 15 to 30 minutes of time per future path should be enough.

Finally, after the last exercise, all groups briefly present their work to all the other groups. The time for each of these presentations should be no more than 10 minutes. Leave also time for comments and discussion and tape the discussion for later use if possible.

Role of the facilitator

In the best possible case the facilitator doesn't influence the groups' work in any other way but keeping the time and instructing what to do in various phases. Facilitator shouldn't sit in the same table where the group work is done or take much part in the discussion since the influence of the ideas and opinions of the facilitator on final results of the workshop should be kept to minimum. Facilitator should be available for the groups at all times so that he can help the groups in case there are some problems (e.g. with the method or regarding the goals of each phase).

The most important task of the facilitator is to get people to be present (not just physically but also mentally) and discuss the topic of the day. In some cases this might mean banning the use of own phones, laptops or tablet computers while discussions are underway.

After workshop

Questionnaire

When reporting the previous 3-part exercise it often happens that one notices that some points presented in the workshop might need clarifying. A good way to improve the quality of the information collected in the workshop is to make a short survey for the participants regarding the ambiguous points (this should be done within a week or so after the workshop). For this purpose many software are available: One fairly good one is found at www.webropol.com (requires a licence), another, which is free on charge is found at www.surveymonkey.com.

Reporting

A successful workshop might produce a whole lot of material, but presenting everything as a result is not a good idea. Report should be concise and focus on the issues that were completely new or of which the groups were clearly uniform on. One advisable way to produce a report is to present “cleaned” versions of groups’ futures wheels and tables along with stories (if they are of good quality) and action plans. Along with these the report should have some kind of analysis of the results (written by the facilitator) and possibly a list of open questions and next tasks concerning the topic of the workshop.

General notes on futures workshops

One common feature in futures workshops is that often people are talking about the present (or past) when they should be discussing future, i.e. something that does not yet exist. One of the key roles of the facilitator is to encourage participants in thinking creatively and making sure that their thinking is focused on the future rather than just concentrating on the past and present.

One should never plan the exercise too far ahead. It’s difficult to know what the groups find interesting and how well they respond to different exercises. For the success of the workshop, the precise following of the method is not that important, important is the reason, the key question, why the workshop is organised. Providing views regarding this key topic is the measure of the success of a workshop.

As stated earlier, views and hints mentioned in this short guide, apply to Finnish environment. As habits and culture vary from country to country some aspects of carrying out the workshop exercise should also need to be changes. The structure presented here should by no means seen as binding, if something doesn’t work, feel free to find a way that does!

References

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