

Focussing small groups

The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook was written to help readers of the Fifth Discipline put the theory into practice. It is 600 pages of ideas, stories, examples and essays. This paper summarizes a few of the group exercises, which might be useful for Church of Scotland groups, whether in congregations or in the central offices, to focus their thinking for the future.

1. Breaking through organisational gridlock

An exercise for group discussion to show how short-term solutions to problems have led to a situation of stuckness. It might help to have someone who's read about systems thinking to draw the connections and feedback loops as they are identified.

1. What are the recurring problem symptoms?
2. What 'quick fixes' have been applied?
3. What are the undesirable impacts of the quick fixes?
4. What would the fundamental solutions to the problem symptoms be?
5. How are the quick fixes causing addictive side-effects?
6. How do the different problems and fixes link together?
7. What would be high-leverage actions to get out of gridlock be?

2. Drawing forth personal vision

The discipline of personal mastery offers an option for people who feel they want to change their organisation, but can't accomplish much from their position. I tried it and the result was I realised how much I disliked the physical environment of an 'office' but also that I could change it if I chose to – so I did.

1. Ask people to write down their vision for the central administration, using the following questions:

What would you like to see your organisation become?

What reputation would it have?

What contribution would it make?

What sorts of products or services would it provide?

What values would it embody?

What mission would it have?

Who would be its clients and customers?

What would its physical environment look like?

How would people work together?

How would people handle good and bad times?

What would your role in it be?

2. Ask people to share what they've written (if they want to) and consider how it might contribute to proposals for change.

3. Perspectives

This exercise aims to help people get beyond their own 'mental models' and see questions from different perspectives.

1. Identify a question eg 'what should be the shape of the central church?'
2. Put up pieces of flip-chart paper for different 'stakeholders' eg church member, General Treasurer, World Church, 121 staff, member of the cww commission, board convener, session clerk, Sunday School member. For each, head the paper 'From my perspective as [stakeholder] the problems and possibilities in considering the future shape of the central church are...'
3. Invite group members to go round the different charts writing down words to complete the sentence – green for possibilities, black for problems.
4. As a group, consider what impact these perspectives have on our proposals.

4. Scenario planning

This is another exercise to help people get beyond their often unconscious but strongly held 'mental model' or assumptions about what the future will hold, to open up different possibilities. Someone should man the flip chart to help with 2-5.

1. Beforehand, identify the focal issue or decision to be made, eg 'What should be the shape of the central church?'
2. In the small group, identify key factors in the environment that would inform such a decision, eg what will be seen as success or failure?
3. Identify driving forces of change which will affect the decision, eg demographic
4. Rank driving forces: some are certain and will feature in all scenarios, eg that the baby-boom generation will age. Others are uncertain.
5. Select the scenario logics: axes between the potential extremes of uncertain driving forces: for example, what sort of worship future generations will be attracted to might have one axis ranging from privatistic to corporate, and another ranging from entertainment worship to liturgical/contemplative: when these are put at right angles, the quadrants form four possible scenarios.
6. Divide into four groups of one or two people to flesh out the scenarios: people will dismiss general predictions, but will attend to vivid, detailed stories.
7. Present the four scenarios to the full co-ordinating forum, and examine the implications of possible decisions: testing the original question against the scenarios.
8. Identify leading indicators and signposts: what will be the clues which will show you which direction things are actually taking? This will help with further strategic thinking in the future.

5. What do we want to create? (developing shared vision)

This is similar to the personal vision exercise above.

1. Ask the group to imagine it's five years from now and miraculously you have created the church you most want to create. Use the following questions to help describe it – rather than a debate, each person should have the chance to speak on each one:

Who are the stakeholders?

How do we work with them?

What are the trends that influence us most?

What is our image in society?

How do we relate to other churches and religious groups?

What is our unique contribution to the world around us?

What is the impact of our work?

How are we financed?
What is the shape of the organisation?
How do we handle good and hard times?
In what ways is the church a great place to work?
What are our values?
How do people treat each other?

2. Now answer the same questions about the organisation now.
3. What insights come out of the comparison?

6. Undiscussables (developing team learning)

Why is it that when people with an average IQ of 120 get into a meeting, the collective IQ drops to 80? A significant barrier to team learning is the existence of topics that team members feel might offend someone or violate a taboo. These often turn out to be critical factors in forming the strategic plan or solving the problem.

1. State the ground rules:

- Respect the fear that accompanies this exercise
- Reflect and take note of your initial response to each undiscussable as it is read aloud
- Listen for what is said and not said
- Challenge ideas and assumptions, not people
- Beware of untested attributions, especially of people's motives.

2. Give each person two cards. Each person writes one 'undiscussable' on a card. If someone's behaviour is part of the undiscussable, refer to them by their job title and not their name: it is the statement of a problem, not an attack on a person.

3. Shuffle and deal the cards.

4. Each person reads their card aloud and places it face up on the table. When all the cards have been read the team groups them into common themes and decides which order to tackle them in (ones which are not addressed at the present meeting should be discussed soon, before they go back underground). Starting with an 'easy' one builds confidence. Build in time checks to keep the discussion on track.

Questions to help discussion:

1. What is the threat behind the undiscussable?
2. What mental model has allowed the hidden structure to persist?
3. What has kept the issue from being discussed seriously?
4. What are the unintended consequences of the undiscussable, in the past, present or future?
5. How does this undiscussable support or block our ability to learn as a team?
6. How does this undiscussable fit with our espoused vision and values?
7. What do we want to do about this undiscussable?