HANDOUT: TIPS FOR FACILITATING GROUPS

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This handout is a supplement to **_Practical Mapping for Applied Research and Program Evaluation—Chapter 2._** Here, you will find additional insights, ideas, and techniques to help you more successfully facilitate groups to make collaborative knowledge maps.

Collaborative knowledge mapping is about surfacing, clarifying, reaching agreement on, and integrating perspectives. This process builds trust between participants and improves their understanding of their situation.

Presenting the Basics

Start by introducing yourself and providing a very brief overview of the process. If the participants don't know each other already, it would be a good idea to have them introduce themselves as well.

If some (or all) of the participants have never engaged in this kind of collaborative causal knowledge mapping process, you can help them prepare by explaining the mapping process and by demonstrating it with a few concepts and arrows (see Chapter 2). We often do this with very large pieces placed up on the wall so everyone in the room can see (Figure 1).

Start the demonstration by writing two concepts (that everyone will be familiar with) on large pieces. Be sure to show how each is measured. Then add an arrow between them. Be sure to show how the arrow represents one concept causing the other. Next, encourage the participants to join the thinking by asking them to suggest two or three concepts to add the sample map on the wall (with measurements). Then, ask them to suggest one or two arrows to connect any of the concepts on the wall. It is also helpful to provide a "counter example" by placing an arrow between two concepts that is clearly in the wrong direction (heck, we don't know, something like "more flowers growing causes more rain"). Ask them if it makes sense. Then, use the experience to explain the voting process and how an arrow is removed from the table if there is not a majority agreement that it should stay.

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FIGURE 1 ⬟ Large Pieces on the Wall to Serve as Examples

Starting the Mapping Process

Here are some options for different ways to start the mapping process. Choose the option that will work best for your situation.

Blank Slate Start

One way to start mapping is by providing the participants with blank cards on a blank table. Then, as in Chapter 2, players take turns identifying concepts, writing each concept on a card, and placing the concept cards on the table. While this opens the door for maximum creativity, some participants find it difficult to start with a "blank slate." It seems we humans often find it easier to begin with some point of reference. Here are a few alternatives.

Goal-Based Start

Begin by asking the participants a leading question such as "What goals are important for you, your department, your organization?" Their answers may be used as concepts. However, it is important to note that the concepts should be phrased as things that can be measured. For example, "income" is a good concept because it may be represented by a range of numbers of dollars (zero to very large). In contrast, "two million dollars" is not a good concept because it represents only a single number. If participants provide non-measurable concepts, ask that they rephrase their suggestions into concepts that are measurable.

Leader Initiated

While the mapping process is collaborative and democratic, it is sometimes initiated by a leader, manager, or director. In such cases, the leader may have two or three key concerns or concepts. Those can serve as starting concepts that are placed on the table at the start.

Interview Based

The facilitator starts days in advance of the actual mapping by conducting one-on-one interviews with leadership and/or key people to identify top concerns or themes (more on interviewing in Chapter 4). Those concerns or themes may be used as one or more topics for mapping activities or as concepts to help start a map.

Last Year's Plan

Begin by creating a map of the previous year's strategic plan. This may be done with the whole group, a small team, or the facilitator, depending on the needs of the client/participants. Starting with the text, identify the concepts and causal connections. Then, use those to create a map from the text (for more details on how to create a map from program materials such as a strategic plan, see Chapter 3).

Participants start by reflecting on the map that they or you have created from the text. If last year's plan provided a practical guide and is still relevant (which may be determined by the client in conversation with the facilitator), participants may add more concepts to the map, focusing on areas that seem to need more concepts and connections according to the client and/ or the facilitator. If last year's plan was of questionable use or needs significant updating, participants may start by suggesting things that might be removed, then go on to making additions. If there is a benefit to distancing themselves from the map (e.g., the map was created in a noncollaborative way by a now-departed leader who is held responsible for a disastrous year), participants may evaluate each concept and causal arrow and vote on its validity (and thus whether or not to keep it on the map), before moving forward to improve the map.

Existing Maps

Other community and organization development methods may also be used to provide maps. For example, "Future Search" (https://futuresearch.net/) involves the collaborative creation of a "mind map." If you are coming in as a facilitator to help a group that has used one of those other methods to create a map, you can use those maps as starting points for your activity in creating a causal knowledge map (so you don't have to start from scratch). Those kinds of maps may be "translated" into a knowledge map by copying the concepts onto cards and identifying causal connections with arrows. You should be careful, however, because those maps may not indicate causal relationships. So if you translate a map (either by yourself as an expert or by facilitating a group of participants), proceed one step at a time. Identify concepts and ask if they are measurable. Identify connections and ask if they are causal. If everything translates well, you (and the group) will have succeeded in creating a knowledge map. Next, you can facilitate a mapping session where the participants improve the map by adding concepts and causal connections to that starting map to create a better map.

Key Concepts

Ask participants to identify a few key concepts relating to their topic from their knowledge and experience and write them on cards. Alternatively, you as the facilitator may provide some concepts. Then, facilitate a process of adding causal connections between those concepts and adding additional concepts.

Brainstorming Start

You, the facilitator, may conduct a "brainstorming" process. As participants come up with a large number of concepts (related to the topic), *you* write them on cards. After the participants run out of ideas, place the cards on the table. The mapping process then becomes more about connecting the concepts—so have lots of arrows handy!

Accelerated Play

Participants are allowed to place two pieces per turn. They might place two concepts, two arrows (connecting two concepts that are already on the map), or a concept and an arrow. This should only be done with more experienced participants for two reasons: first, because more experienced participants will be able to think up concepts and connections more quickly, and second, because the participants will need to evaluate two pieces quickly instead of one.

Clarifying Concepts and/or Causal Connections

Here are some tips for you, as the facilitator, to guide the group to clarify concepts and causal connections.

Make Concepts Things That Are Amenable to Change

As a facilitator, it is important for you to remember (and remind participants as necessary) that concepts should be presented as something that is amenable to change. For example, "money in the bank" can be measured as dollars on a scale of zero to billions. Efficiency might be measured from zero to one hundred percent. So these kinds of things work well as measurable concepts. In contrast, concepts such as "the world" or "the ecosystem" are not easily quantifiable.

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Make Concepts Measurable

It is important that most of the concepts on the map be measurable, although it is possible to have some concepts that the group does not have a way to measure at this time. In these situations, we don't know what is going on inside these concepts. However, if we can measure the inputs and outputs of those concepts (as other concepts on the map), we can understand how to make that "black box" (unmeasured concept) a useful part of the map.

For example, if someone places "team spirit" on the table but does not have a way to measure it, you can encourage participants to add measurable concepts that *cause* team spirit and identify what measurable concepts *result* from team spirit.

Clarifying Causality

It is critical that participants understand the importance of **causality**. If we cannot identify how one thing causes change in another thing, then we don't deeply and usefully understand the relationship between those things. Here are some tips for helping the group to clarify causality.

Ask for Clarification of Causal Relationships

A participant might say something like, "Reaching our clients is key to our success." In response, you, the facilitator, might ask, "Can you rephrase that as a causal relationship?" Or possibly, you may rephrase the statement and reflect it back to the participant. For example, "Do you mean, the more we reach our customers, the more we will reach our goals?" (Please note here, you might also ask the group to decide how to measure "reaching our clients;" you might also ask them to specify what the "goals" are and how to measure each of those goals.)

Avoid Non-Causal Arrows

It is not useful to place an arrow stating something like, "A is related to B" or "A is more important than B" because those are not causal relationships. Those non-causal relationships are full of assumptions that may lead to confusion! It might be reasonable to say that some things cause more change than others. For example, "Small changes in A cause large changes in C" along with "Large changes in B cause small changes in C." Ideally, the participants will be able to identify specific relationships between those changes.

Distinguish Between Arrows and Concepts

Sometimes, participants confuse the causal relationships with concepts in boxes. This may be seen, for example, in Figure 2:

FIGURE 2 ⬡ Actions (Such as Using) Should Be in Boxes, Not Arrows

Training → Using Learning → Productivity
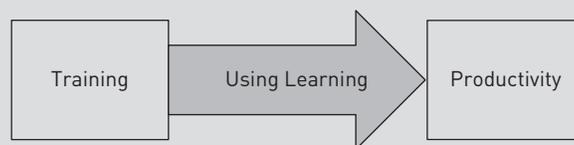
There are a few ways to "fix" this, depending on the needs and interests of the participants.

People might map this in different ways. The simplest approach might result in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3 ⬡ Simple (and Useful) Causality

Training → Causes More → Productivity
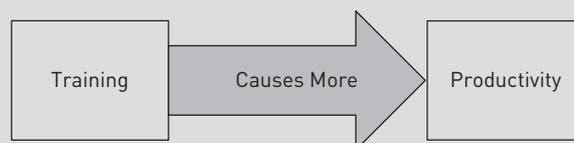
A more interesting, more complex, and more useful possible version might be seen in Figure 4.

As facilitator, you can ask the person who placed the concepts on the map if "that is what they mean" to ensure that the map represents what they meant.

FIGURE 4 ● It Is Better to Have More Complexity and More Causality
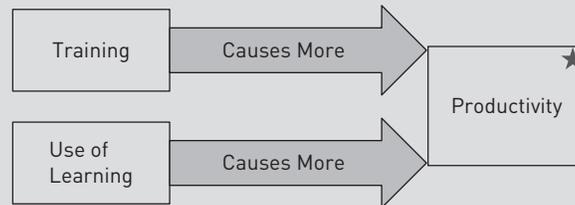
Recall that this version is a transformative structure, reflecting a deeper understanding of the situation. Additionally, it raises interesting questions in the "white space" to the left of the boxes, asking, for example, what causes more "use of learning!"

Stretching Thinking by Asking Guiding Questions

We can evaluate statements as valid if they can be phrased as clear causal relationships. We cannot use statements that are fuzzy or unclear. Nor can we use statements that are not causal. For example, "I like to have fun" does not express a causal relationship. However, it does provide an opening to explore where causal relationships might exist. For example, you, the facilitator, might ask, "What causes you to have fun?" or "What are some of the things that result from you having fun?"

Sometimes, participants might say something like, "I don't know what it is, but I know it when I see it." Or "I don't know how to describe it." Or their comments might relate to causal relationships—for example, "I don't know what is going on, but we seem to have problems on Tuesdays." The fact that they said they don't know how to describe it or that they don't know what's going on tells us that the situation is not well understood. It is difficult to express "Tuesday" as a causal relationship. To say, "more Tuesdays cause more problems" doesn't sound quite right. After all, we can't reduce the number of Tuesdays experienced each month, and we would have difficulty explaining something fuzzy as a "problem."

Those kinds of statements provide the opportunity for facilitated conversation to explore what is going on. You can ask the participants to talk about the situation and wait to hear what concepts and causal relationships emerge as they make their explanations. After participants have identified a few concepts, reflect those concepts and causal relationships between them back to the participants—for example, "Do you mean that X causes Y?"

The conversation should continue until the underlying causes and results can be mapped (and, hopefully, measured). If the participants remain stuck, it may be necessary to take a break to stimulate new thinking or bring in some expert knowledge.

Action Planning, Tracking, and Accountability

Action planning is when the participants stop *making* the map and start *using* the map.

Remember to look for actionable concepts, transformative structure, loops, and leverage points (Chapters 2 and 5) and help others to see them as well.

Goal setting is a critical conversation at this stage. Participants should look at the concepts, identify current levels (for example, the number of clients served each month), and make some predictions as to what might be reasonably achievable. For example, a 10% increase (within a specific time period). You may want to place a sticky note on each of those concepts indicating present and desired levels.

Note here that each participant may be focused on different goals. This is perfectly natural, as each person will have different interests.

This is a rich area for conversation. You can encourage each person to explain their assumptions and reasons for how they expect to reach their goals. Are those goals too ambitious? Not ambitious enough? As you listen to those conversations, is there something critical that needs to be added to the map? If so, ask the group to identify what that critical thing is, then add it to the map.

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Next, ask participants to "backtrack" along the map from their goal concepts (against the direction or flow of the arrows) to identify those concepts that they will put into action. Then, ask each person to explain (briefly) the actions they will be taking and how those actions will be a change from "business as usual." If they are not able to identify new actions, they may need to continue mapping instead of taking action.

As each person explains their "path" of action, ask the other participants to look at the map and identify where that path intersects with or influences the action paths of others. Encourage participants to talk about those intersections and new ways they might work together to support mutual goals.

You may also want to ask participants to develop "what if" scenarios. Ask participants to start at one concept on the map and suggest how changes in that concept (following arrows on the map) will lead to changes in some other concepts. Participants should take note of alternative options as well as what concepts they control and concepts they don't control. This may be remade into a kind of decision tree.

It is very important to track progress over time. However, although each concept should be measurable, it is usually not practical to keep track of all of them. Certainly, leverage points should be tracked on a regular basis. Monthly is good.

Ask participants to identify their specific reporting responsibilities (generally, each person will keep track of key performance indicators (KPI) data for their area—see Chapter 7). This is *very* important because concepts that are "outputs" (concepts with arrows pointing to them) for one department or work team are often the "inputs" (concepts with arrows pointing away from them) for another.

Tracked data should be recorded and shared on a regular basis to all who may be interested (participants in the mapping session and stakeholders who may not have participated in the mapping session—see Chapter 2). That measurement process supports collaboration as well as accountability.

Repeated Cycling for Continual Improvement

It is worth mentioning that no map is perfect. The usefulness of the map will be found in the combination of the map's relevance to stakeholders, its logic structure, and the data to support it (found by reporting results). Therefore, the group should track data and meet to talk about progress on a monthly basis (either on their own or with your facilitation).

Once a year, the participants should meet with the intent to evaluate the map based on the data that they have gathered over the year. Did the data match the predictions? If not, it is time to improve the map. That iterative process of continual improvement will lead to a map for success!

Potential Issues

In any mapping session, issues may arise that challenge your ability as the facilitator to move the group forward in a useful and productive way. In this section, we will present a few possible issues that you may encounter while facilitating a group and some strategies for helping the group move forward.

Conflicting Perspectives

One relationship claims that "More A causes **more** B" while another claims that "More A causes **less** B."

Response—Ask participants to add concepts and arrows to expand the map and so understand the situation on a deeper level. Chances are, each statement is valid under different circumstances.

For example, one person may say that more fundraising events will result in more funds being raised at each event, while another person states that more fundraising events will end up in fewer funds raised per event. Exploring the issue, the group may discover what causes "funder burnout" and how to avoid it.

Giant Leap

Consider a map that says something like, "School funding ➡ Quality of education for students." While that may well be true, there are also some steps missing!

Response—Encourage the group to identify missing pieces. For example, someone might want to add a piece (or more) between those two, such as "School funding ➡ Hiring teachers ➡ Smaller class size ➡ Quality of education for students."

False Clarity

Someone says, "We frequently have a special problem."

Response—Don't ask for an explanation of the special problem. This takes the participants away from the map. Instead, ask the person to place (or ask if you can place) a special problem concept. Then, focusing on that, ask the participants to identify causal and resulting concepts.

False Definitions

Someone places on the map an unusual concept that stirs up conversation and attempts at explanation.

Response—Don't ask them to explain what the concept is (this takes participants away from the map). Instead, ask participants to say how it may be measured and to identify causal and resulting concepts.

Premature Decision

Someone says, "It is clear we need to do 'X,' let's stop this planning and go do it!"

Response—If it is not there already, you may place a concept "X" on the map (or encourage the participant to do so) and ask what causes and effects may be connected with it.

Response—Ask participants to evaluate the depth and breadth of the map (and/or other analyses that may be done quickly). If the levels are low, shift the conversation to one about the quality of the map. The individual might feel confident moving forward, but without a good map, others may not.

Response—Ask participants to take a minute to consider the idea. Then, if there seems to be a sense that they are ready to move forward, ask them if they want to do some scenario planning (see Chapter 7).

Superconnectors

A participant suggests that "everything is connected to everything," so their mapping work is done.

Response—Explain that while it may be true that everything is connected, it is also true that some things are more connected than others. For example, the walls of the building are more connected to the roof than they are connected to the map. Thus, we need to identify those things that are more closely connected because they will provide more leverage for enabling change.

Response—If there is something that the group agrees is universally connected (for example, gravity affects all things equally), explain that it is ubiquitous and unchanging, therefore, it becomes background and so is not highly relevant.

Response—Take the new concept and (with the permission of the group) create a new focus for future consideration and a new mapping project.

Hitting a Wall

Participants can't come up with any new concepts or connections.

Response—Encourage the group to gain more knowledge (through research, training, mentoring, experience, or other sources). Plan a time to continue the mapping process after they have gained that additional knowledge.

Confusion

After creating a large map, participants stare at the map with a dazed look in their eyes.

Response—Remind them that while no one can understand the whole model, a large map is necessary for understanding the complexity of the situation.

Response—Encourage each person to focus on smaller "chunks" of the larger map (sometimes, participants from one department might work on their departmental map, then maps from multiple departments may be interconnected later).

Response—Take a break and relax.

Response—Shift the entire map to a higher level of abstraction. This is done by categorizing multiple pieces and combining them into one (see Nested Maps in Chapter 7). That, in turn, results in having fewer pieces on the map.

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Too Cerebral

This is similar to confusion—complaints are made about too much thinking needed.

Response—Operationalize it. Ask people to share what new insights they might identify by looking at the map. Start some preliminary scenario planning or "what if" scenarios. Then, note the limits of understanding when the scenario runs out of concepts.

Low Participation

Some participants are not interested in contributing.

Response—Describe the situation, place the mapping process on hold, and initiate a conversation about the level of participation. What are the potential benefits and costs of the map? Where do participants see their relevance in the map? If they don't, it may be that there should be some new concepts placed on the map that are more relevant to the individuals' interests.

Response—Take a break.

Response—Start with smaller groups, each addressing smaller, more focused maps. Then, integrate those smaller maps.

No More Progress Seems Possible

Despite the best efforts of the facilitator and participants, participants can't make the map any better.

Response—Move forward with analysis (Chapter 5) and action planning (Chapter 7). Even though the map may have low scores, it is still a start.

Trust

If two groups are very different, those differences may lead to confusion, misunderstanding, and problems. However, we can often improve collaboration by building trust.

Response—Focus on seeking agreement on each small piece of the map. Trust is built by many small agreements—an approach that fits very nicely with the process of building a knowledge map within a collaborative workshop because each person is involved with identifying, evaluating, and voting on each of the many small pieces that make up the map.

Generally, as people build maps, we find that most groups agree on most things. By identifying those concepts and causal connections that are relevant to the situation and, importantly, by gaining agreement from other persons at the table that they have identified a relevant piece, the group builds a map that everyone can trust.

The process of gaining agreement on one small piece of the puzzle is different than trying to gain agreement on the complete bigger picture. This is important because our human minds are not capable of grasping the big picture. When we try to grasp the big picture, we end up with many partial perspectives, each of them different. When we try to grasp the smaller picture, we are looking at something small enough that each mind can comprehend it. So the views are more likely to be similar for a small piece than they are for the big picture.

Considering Conflicting Agendas

Occasionally, stakeholder groups might be approaching a situation with deeply entrenched goals.

Response—In these kinds of situations, it might be better to have each group create their own map. Then, the facilitator can integrate the maps and bring the integrated map back to the separate groups for dialog and decision-making. This way, each group can build on the insights of the others and (we hope) develop new insights for working together.

Hidden Agendas

By their very nature, hidden agendas are difficult to deal with because we don't know what they are. Since the mapping process is about surfacing insights, it also helps to surface hidden agendas, and if properly facilitated, these agendas can be more helpful than harmful.

For example, consider an emerging community coalition where one participant is mainly interested in selling software to the other participants. The seller might surface his agenda by adding a concept and arrow to the map saying something like, "Buying my software will make you successful."

The first "line of defense" is the other participants recognizing that there is something not quite right about that claim. First, software, by itself, does not lead directly to success. Second, there are other sources of software that might be as good (or better) than the one being "pushed."

Response—As facilitator, you can help deal with these potentially troublesome situations by asking the person to rephrase their proposition in a more general way—for example, "Quality of software ➜ Success." And encourage the person to identify a few more steps in the process—for example, "Quality of software ➜ Inventory control ➜ Efficiency of operations ➜ Success." Then, when it comes time to use the map for action planning, participants can decide for themselves whether or not they need better inventory control.

Making Decisions That Are "Off the Map"

When it comes time for decision-making, it is important for maintaining trust and transparency that actions are "*on* the map." For example, if a coalition of community members creates a map suggesting the need for more sustainable and responsible energy policies and one of their group proposes legislation to provide funding for oyster farms (not on the map), there may be a loss of trust!

Response—Remind participants to stay on the map. Perhaps there is a need to revisit the map?

Boundaries

Some people who have a deep background in systems thinking techniques may ask, "What are the boundaries of our maps?" For maps of the physical world, that is an important question. If we are driving across the country, we need a map of the whole country—no more and no less. With a knowledge map, it's a little different. The map goes as far as it needs to—no more and no less.

Response—We can say that the map creates its own boundaries. It is self-bounding. When creating a map, we want to keep adding concepts that are meaningful to the stakeholders. Then, we want to connect those concepts with causal arrows. When all those concepts are transformative (having more than one arrow pointing at them), the map *might* have reached its own boundary.

Post-Mapping Reflection

After mapping and planning, ask the participants to reflect on the mapping process. This builds their trust in you, the facilitator, and confidence in themselves and the process. You might ask general questions, such as "How was your mapping experience?" Or more specifically, what was the most interesting or useful thing you learned in this mapping process?" and "What might we do next time to improve the process?" Go around the table and give each person a chance to share their perspective.

On another level, it is worthwhile to meet with the "contracting" client (who may be a manager, director, or CEO). In this meeting, ask how the process went and how the map is perceived by the participants.

This meeting is also an opportunity to discuss more traditional opportunities for organizational development. Insights gained during the mapping and planning processes may suggest the need for additional work in other areas including the following:

- Revising job descriptions (because of changed responsibilities)
- Training
- Facilitating change management
- Team building
- Quality control
- Changes in management responsibilities
- Communication
- Performance evaluation
- Conflict management