

12 Tools to Foster Alignment & Collaboration

This is a collection of simple tools that we often use to help minimize resistance and polarization in groups so they can get and stay aligned in the work and collaborate effectively.

1. Put How before If

Sometimes, making a commitment to solving a complex problem is intimidating or even threatening to members of a group. Often, however, what really scares people is the unknown (after all, most of us prefer the devil we know to the devil we don't).

To overcome these fears of commitment, we invite groups into thought experiments through which we explore possible solutions without asking for any commitments at all. Rather than first dealing with the question of IF we should try to achieve a goal, we first thoroughly explore—through storyboarding, roadmaps, backcasting and other techniques—HOW we might do it. Often, by the time we've completed our thought experiment about how we might do something, many people in the group are ready to move forward on it.

See also tool 10, "How Might Questions"

2. Hypotheses

Groups can get stuck trying to get things "just right," like agreeing on very specific goals and initiatives. That can make each decision feel like an all-or-nothing fight to participants ("If I don't get my way now, it's all over!").

While it's important to have a clear and shared direction and agenda over time, it's not helpful to get stuck up front in analysis paralysis where each decision feels like a high-stakes event.

That's why we encourage everyone to treat our shared analysis, solution ideas, and even our primary goal itself as hypothesis. That keeps us all open to continuous learning even as we progress the work together.

3. Sketching

Consider an artist starting a landscape painting. Does she begin the painting by filling out some detailed part of a scene? Unlikely. Instead, she'll likely use a light color to lay out the overall scene in broad strokes. Once that looks satisfactory, she'll then start to add layers with finer and finer detail.

When working with others, we sometimes get bogged down in the details of an analysis or possible solution before everyone is even on board with the basic concept or plan.

To avoid getting into the weeds, we talk about "sketching" the idea, "not filling in the details yet," but "getting the general concept down." We'll have a participant create a diagram of the idea on a flipchart or sometimes have a team present the general concept in a 2-minute pitch to the rest of the network. Once we have agreement that an idea or plan is even worth taking forward, we'll then start to fill in more details.

4. Critical Shifts

A critical shift is simple to define and very powerful as a strategy tool, but takes discipline to do well. A good shift is a statement of two things: (1) Some part of that current strategic picture that isn't working right now, and (2) how that part of the picture should look in the future. By defining the critical shifts that need to happen in order to achieve our goal, we create mini "problem-solving spaces" for people to work on.

One of the big challenges in working with stakeholders is that people want to rush straight from problem to solution. Sticking with the discipline of defining clear critical shifts helps us be clear about what we're really trying to solve for, identify those shifts that are the most powerful and strategic, and then come up with many ideas for how we might make each shift happen before we settle on the one solution that we'll pursue together.

An effective network will be working to make multiple shifts happen simultaneously, which together represent our solution set. When those shifts are added together, they represent the whole picture of our system change strategy.

5. Yes, And

People often assume that the best way to handle a new idea is to critique it and point out its problems ("Yeah, that's a good idea BUT..." or "No, we can't do that because..."). The theory seems to be that if we can fix the problems with the idea, then it might work, or that any idea with problems isn't worth developing anyway.

Unfortunately, even good ideas are fragile things and can die easily. The surest way to get to better ideas is through improv—by taking an interesting concept and building on it by having people add to it and continue to evolve it until they're excited by it. Even if the initial idea wasn't terrific, the idea that results is often quite different than the initial concept that we started with and is often a terrific idea (as is often the case in improv!).

6. "Good Enough"

In collaborative innovation, as in other parts of life, the perfect is the enemy of the good. Groups have an interesting tendency at times to working an idea, plan, or analysis to death by trying to make it "complete."

In our facilitation of groups, you'll often hear us ask, "Okay, good enough?" Try it sometime; better yet, first ask whether the work that the group has just done (like drafting a goal) is "good," then try asking whether it's "good enough." Whereas the first question often results in silence, the second question (which is only subtly different) will often get strong consent.

While it's important for a group to do a good piece of work on whatever it is they're trying to design together, once they've done that good piece of work, the group's energy around that specific task actually decreases rather than increases.

Find the point where a satisfying piece of work has been completed by the group and bring that part of the process to a conclusion by acknowledging the good work that's been done and identifying next steps (like having a small team take the general idea, plan, or analysis, refine it some more, and bring the next iteration back to the larger group). Concluding (and celebrating) that piece of work and

moving on will make the group's energy available for whatever's piece of work is next on the agenda.

7. Propositions

Leaders and facilitators of multistakeholder work often hesitate to make proposals to the network—after all, shouldn't the participants come up with their own analysis and ideas through their work together?

Unfortunately, bridging from data to analysis to shifts to ideas can be tough for groups, especially if the participants aren't used to working together.

Here's one way to grease the skids of innovation: Rather than waiting for the group to come up with an analysis or create a great strategy, try testing out a possibility by making a "proposition" to the group. For example, if the group has several ideas and is having a hard time choosing one, just propose working on one to start. That proposal creates a "point of reference" for the group. They may decide to reject your idea but at least they've advanced their thinking together, and the reasons they didn't like that proposal can further clarify their thinking about what they DO want to work on.

8. Questions Over Answers

Developed by our friend Patricia DiVecchio, the *Asking the Next Right Question* technique keeps groups moving fast by focusing on finding the right questions before we struggle with finding answers. When a small team presents a possible solution to a large group, we ask the larger group to ask questions but the presenting team is only allowed to capture the questions, not answer them (clarifying questions excepted). Invariably, the team finds that 2-3 of the questions provide fresh insight that helps them refine their solution on their own, which builds ownership and a sense of accomplishment.

This technique avoids a host of problems with the conventional Q&A approach:

- the desire of the presenting team members to look smart and competent causing them to make up their answers to important questions on the spot,
- the sense of having answered and resolved a question so the presenting team doesn't consider it further, and
- the larger group taking away "responsibility" from the presenting team for struggling with the hard questions themselves.

9. Versioning

As we noted above, decisions can seem like all-or-nothing propositions, which increases participants' sense of risk. Putting versions on documents (like plans, analyses, hypotheses, etc.) and even the goal of the network can remind people that everything is subject to change by the group, which keeps everyone open to learning and adapting the work as they move forward. In other words, it makes each version less "precious" to participants and keeps them in learning mode where they are attached to finding the right solution rather than being attached to the solution before them. This in turn lowers the stakes, since everyone knows that they can change the work at some point in the future if the current assumptions and approach don't prove out.

10. How might we questions

A common question in design thinking is “How might we...” and the question is particularly useful at moving people from critical analysis mode into creative action mode. For example, when someone points out that we can’t get a technical solution through customs in a given country because of corruption, we can turn that barrier into a problem-solving exercise by asking “How might we get this solution into the country reliably?” This opens doors and puts people into a creative mode rather than simple hitting a dead end in their thinking.

11. Focus & Frame

Defining the focus and frame for a group’s work together is really helpful in negotiating the many interests and concerns that people bring to any initiative. Even after you’ve worked hard to ensure that everyone is in the room to work on the same objective, you’ll inevitably have parts of the work where people disagree on the scope of their work together. By explicitly setting elements into either the “focus” of the group or the “frame” of the group, you can turn down the heat and avoid polarizing conflict.

The focus is anything that the group agrees is clearly within scope for their work together. The frame contains other things that people care about that we’re going to pay attention to (that is, not ignore or put completely off the table), but normally not work on together as we pursue our focus.

Sounds simple, but it’s an incredibly powerful way to keep people aligned around what they are doing. That’s because groups can’t do everything they want and they need a manageable scope of work, but by explicitly naming what’s in frame for the group, those people who really care about those related challenges at least know that they aren’t being ignored entirely.

Plus, paying attention to what’s in frame helps groups avoid unintended consequences in their work and find opportunities for wins on related challenges. For example, even as we focus on reducing worker exposures to hazardous chemicals, we can also pay attention to potential impacts of our work on environmental discharges. The two interests are not mutually-exclusive, but making this distinction allows the group to focus on reducing exposures while continuing to pay attention to the impacts of their work on discharges.

12. Design Principles (and Prototyping)

When people start listing the reasons an idea won’t work, consider it a gift and actively turn those critiques (and the reasons people like the idea) into a working set of design principles that can inform the design of even better solutions. Then once the group has an idea that meets the shared principles that we’ve developed together, they’ll be that much more aligned behind the idea.

That’s also why we prototype early and often in Collaborative Innovation. The purpose of early prototyping isn’t to create the actual solution (which could happen in the first round but rarely does). Instead, it’s to learn from these prototypes what will work, what we like, what we don’t like, and why—so that the next idea we prototype is that much closer to hitting the mark.