



Addressing Barriers
(From Experienced AI Practitioners)
Collected from Ai Listserv

In my environment I regular meet organizations in struggle or crisis. People are afraid, uncertain and looking for stability and answers. When I try to focus on positive questions, I have the same experience as Lynn describes: they want to go back to the issue of barriers, problems, frustrations etc.

What I have discovered is that it is better to accept that situation and start with the type of questions Rob describes in his reaction:

Tell me about a situation when you had great problems and you have overcome them.

What can we learn from that experience for the present situation and how can we use our experiences again?

You start at the point where they are, but you take them with you to a new place with new possibilities

Is the issue the language of barriers or the barrier of endless analyzing barriers that doesn't lead to productive outcomes.

Potential barriers to goals do exist, the group narrative about barriers may be helpful or unhelpful. Transforming that narrative may be a helpful step:

If they want to talk about barriers get them to talk about how they have overcome barriers in the past:

Tell me a story about your most creative response to overcoming a barrier? What did people do, what made it creative, what gave you the freedom to think creatively like that?

What would happen if we used that creativity with this new barrier?

Two approaches that I've found useful in addressing "barriers" in strategic planning are:

- 1) reframing topics/questions; and
- 2) in the design phase/prototyping initiatives.

1) Reframing:

I think reframing is probably the most useful skill we can develop ourselves and help our clients, colleagues, friends develop. So when a barrier (or a perceived problem) is raised - let's say it is called "bad communication", you could help them reframe the topic to what is desired. Sometimes people go to the positive opposite - like "good communication". I think this topic is helpful, but typically only gets you to status quo - i.e., the absence of the perceived problem. However, if you keep working with the individual/group you can help them unearth what is really desired - maybe it is "open and transparent communication" or "engaged decision making" or whatever describes the ideal functioning with relation to the topic. The British Airways example is a good one – moving from "baggage loss" to "exceptional arrival experience".

I really like Mac O'Dell's Problem to Opportunity tree as a tool to help a group work through a real example. The trunk of the problem tree is the stated problem/barrier (bad communication), they then map the causes of the problem (roots of the tree), and the outcomes/results of the problem (the leaves/fruit on the tree). I then work with the group to reframe the topic and put the opportunity (reframed topic) in the trunk of the tree, then they identify the root causes of success (roots of the tree), and the positive outcomes/results of the opportunity. The group is quick to point out the difference in energy between working on the problem and working on the opportunity. They also come to realization themselves that they can "fix problems" by focusing on the opportunity or what is desired. In fact, they usually say that the root causes of success (in the opportunity tree) give them ideas/solutions to not only overcome current challenges/barriers, but eclipse the problem - moving to higher level functioning - which is supported by the idea of positive image/positive action.

Also, I think it is really helpful to develop topics/questions that include paradoxical challenges, like "Exceptional customer service through cost containment" and "Mission accomplishment through fiscal responsibility" and improbably pairings like "Lightning fast consensus". These types of questions open up the both/and thinking needed to really move beyond the current challenges and barriers.

2) Design/Prototyping:

Another helpful way to address barriers in strategic planning is during the design phase - where the group is typically focused on gaining consensus on goals/priorities and identifying key initiatives that would support moving the goals forward. Assuming this is being done in a summit, and you have the "system" in the room - when you have the group prototype or model an initiative, they usually take organizational and environmental constraints/barriers into consideration. It is the choice of the group in how they decide to address the constraints/barriers - i.e., work within the current constraints/barriers, develop solutions that address any potential barriers, and/or develop prototypes that make the barriers irrelevant.