

## Additional Empowerment Tools and Techniques

Leaders and facilitators can use various collaborative tools and techniques to empower their teams and even their organization as a whole. Here are some ideas and recommendations, with links or references for further exploration:

### 1. Systematic Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Grids

It is one thing for leaders to empower employees to offer ideas and solutions; it is another to organize their inputs and facilitate discussion in an organized process that ends with clear decisions and action plans. Without a systematic procedure, leaders may end up not maximizing employee contributions and disengaging them instead.

Bens (2018) offers several tools for managers and facilitators. She outlines a step-by-step process for analyzing an issue that needs to be solved. Within this process are decision-making tools that can be used to ensure that the best solutions are identified.

Working with your group:

- a) Identify the specific problem. Summarize in 1 or 2 sentences.
- b) Clarify the goal of the problem-solving exercise. (e.g., *What is the desired outcome? What would things look like if the issue were resolved?*)
- c) Conduct a detailed analysis of the problem. Use probing questions to try and get to the root causes of the issue. Differentiate between symptoms and underlying causes.
- d) Brainstorm potential solutions. (*Encourage out-of-the box thinking. Ask each other questions like: What would customers suggest? What if cost were not an issue? What's the most creative way of approaching this problem?*)
- e) Evaluate the solutions in a systematic manner. Some ways to handle these are:
  - *Multi-voting*: Team members review the list of items that they are voting on (e.g., the list of potential solutions to be considered). Then they discuss and come to agreement on the criteria that will be used for voting on potential solutions. Criteria could include: most important to our customers; most significant given our strategic objectives; most feasible to implement, etc. Once the criteria are clear, they are given a set of sticker dots to indicate their overall preferences for solutions. For example, they may be given 10 sticker dots to distribute among their top four choices. Once everyone has "voted," then the dots per solution are tallied.

- *Effort/Impact grids:* On a flip chart or board, create a 2x2 chart, with Effort on the X-axis and Impact on the Y-axis. Effort refers to the level of effort to implement the solution (Easy to Do or Difficult to Do) while Impact refers to the level of improvement expected from the solution (Major Improvement or Minor Improvement). You will end up with 4 boxes (see below): 1. Easy to do/Major Improvement; 2. Easy to do/Minor Improvement; 3) Difficult to do/Major Improvement; 4) Difficult to do/Minor Improvement.

1. Easy to Do / Major Improvement	3. Difficult to Do / Major Improvement
2. Easy to Do / Minor Improvement	4. Difficult to Do / Minor Improvement

Have your employees review the potential solutions, and together, sort the solutions into these 4 categories. Create action plans, particularly for #1, #2 and #3.

- *Criteria-based grids:* Work with your team to identify the relevant standards against which to judge potential solutions. Using a grid, list the potential solutions down the first column, and the criteria on the following columns.

	Criterion 1	Criterion 2	Criterion 3	Total per Solution
Possible Solutions				
1.				
2.				
3.				

Have each person rate each solution against each criterion, using a scale of 1-3 (1=does not meet the criteria, 2=somewhat meets the criteria; 3=fully meets the criteria). Tally the scores to determine the best-identified solution.

- f) Create detailed action plans using a RASCI worksheet. This is a responsibility assignment worksheet that outlines the key activities and tasks to be done, and the names or initials of the team members who are either R (Responsible for the task); A (Gives approval); S (Provides support); C (Needs to be consulted); and I (Needs to be informed).

The chart below provides a simple example. More sophisticated responsibility charting templates can be found online. There are also several online project management tools available such as Smartsheet, Trello and Microsoft Project.

	Person 1	Person 2	Person 3	Person 4	Person 5
Activity 1					
Task 1.	R	I	A	C	S
Task 2.					
Task 3.					
Activity 1					
Task 1.					
Task 2.					
Task 3.					

- g) Identify the biggest potential obstacles to your solution and action plan, and discuss ways to overcome these.
- h) Include a plan to monitor, evaluate and report progress.

## 2. Workout

General Electric (GE) originated the use of an empowered problem-solving methodology called Workout, which has since been adapted by teams from other organizations including General Motors and Unilever. This type of intervention can be utilized by a single team, multiple, cross-functional teams, or even entire departments or divisions in a company. The basic objective of the Workout is to engage employees in “working out” a business problem. Their participation is critical because they are closest to the issue at hand. The Workout process has been used to improve processes and procedures, reduce errors, and eliminate unnecessary, low-value activities (Anderson, 2017).

A Workout session could take between one to three days, depending on the nature of the business problem(s) and the number of employees and teams involved. Generally it has five phases: a) orienting participants to the objectives and structure of the session; b) brainstorming ideas about what the specific Workout session will tackle; c) presenting and voting on the top ideas to work on; d) small group action planning, wherein groups work on specific proposals including project implementation plans, often with the support of an identified project sponsor and team leader; and e) town hall presentations

to senior executives. What is unique about the Workout is that senior leaders are expected to make “yes” or “no” decisions at the end of each presentation, so that proposals that are approved can be sponsored and initiated immediately. Progress on these initiatives is monitored regularly to ensure that objectives are met (Ulrich, Kerr & Ashkenas, 2002)

While trained consultants typically lead large Workout processes, managers can implement a simple version of this within their own departments or teams. A critical point is their willingness to listen and make swift decisions on their employees’ proposals for change. More information about the Workout process can be gleaned from the Ulrich et al., 2002 book. There is also a very good summary of this process that can be downloaded online from:

[https://www.academia.edu/8042920/The\\_GE\\_Work-Out\\_How\\_to\\_Implement\\_GEs\\_Revolutionary\\_Method\\_for\\_Busting\\_Bureaucracy\\_and\\_Attacking\\_Organizational\\_Problems\\_Fast](https://www.academia.edu/8042920/The_GE_Work-Out_How_to_Implement_GEs_Revolutionary_Method_for_Busting_Bureaucracy_and_Attacking_Organizational_Problems_Fast)

### 3. Design Thinking

Many organizations and managers today are interested in the concept of design thinking. Generally, design thinking follows many similar steps to systematic problem solving, such as defining the problem and coming up with solutions. However there are a number of unique steps, such as starting with empathizing with the user or customer (really observing and understanding the experience of the people for which we are designing or redesigning a product, service or process); ideating (coming up with ideas but really challenging assumptions and looking at issues from multiple perspectives); and rapid prototyping (working hands-on to design, build and test models in a repeated cycle until the best results are obtained). It is a systematic way of problem-solving that uses both logic and imagination, and recognizes the value of incubating ideas and co-creating ideas with diverse teams, acting swiftly, testing small, failing fast, and refining before building the products to a larger scale.

Managers can use design thinking to empower their teams, not just to come up with ideas but to try implementing creative potential solutions in a small way without fear of retribution. It also encourages leaders and employees to engage with their customers in a deeper way than they may have done previously.

There are many resources on design thinking (e.g., Lewrick, Link & Leifer, 2018; Lockwood & Papke, 2017). There is also a free virtual course from the Stanford University Hasso Platner Institute of Design (also referred to as the d. school). The course can be accessed at: <https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources-collections/a-virtual-crash-course-in-design-thinking>.

## References

Anderson, D. (2017). *Organization development: The process of leading organizational change*. Sage.

Lewrick, M., Link, P. & Leifer, L. (2018). *The design thinking playbook: Mindful digital transformation of teams, products, services, businesses and ecosystems*. Wiley.

Ulrich, D. Kerr, S., & Ashkenas, R. (2002). *The GE Workout: How to implement GE's revolutionary method for busting bureaucracy and attacking organizational problems*. McGraw-Hill.