

## Basic Tools for Building Strategic Thinking Into Your Meetings

Strategic thinking is an approach to discussion and decision-making that is grounded in systems thinking. It invites us to look at issues in the context of the larger picture, and brings the goal of creating a sustainable future into all discussions about the present. This handout lists some basic approaches to building strategic thinking into meetings.

1. **Create/review the agenda ahead of time and write down strategic questions** (as agenda developer, or as participant receiving the agenda).

Strategic questions are questions that help us: learn from the past, consider both short and long-term consequences (intended and unintended), look at multiple perspectives, question our assumptions, look for patterns in the data/trends over time, look for interconnections between issues, see our decisions/problems in the context of the big picture, look for ways to determine/measure success, or look for small actions that can make a big difference.

2. **Gather diverse points of view**, from within the board and from the outside. (The *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* has many excellent exercises you can use.)
3. **Do a go-round**, asking each person to speak from their own perspective and experience about the question or subject at hand. It works best if you pose an open-ended, curiosity-based “What” or “How” question like
  - What is your initial thinking about this?
  - What impact would this decision have on you (or your team)?
  - What, in your opinion, is creating this situation?

Keep the go-round clean – let everyone speak without any cross talk. You might then ask:

- Does anyone have questions for any of us? (Make sure everyone is clear that the goal is NOT to challenge, but to clarify/gain understanding.)
  - Is there anyone absent today who might have a significantly different perspective? What might that person tell us?
4. **Ask “Who will be affected by this decision, and what insights could they offer us?”** Look widely – Suppliers? Neighbors? Families of volunteers? People who might want to become involved? Other chapters?
  5. **Bring in outsiders** to ask “dumb” questions, or present different points of view or experiences.

6. **Ask: “What don’t we understand?”** Make a list of issues you need to understand better and questions you still need to answer.
7. **Ask: “What are we assuming?”** Make a list of assumptions being made by all or some of the people in the room. Get actively and collectively curious about what data is underneath those assumptions and what else might be true.
8. **Use structured brainstorming processes** to generate lots of ideas. (Again, the *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* offers many such structures.)
9. **When it feels like you might be moving toward a decision** – or when some folks in the group are pushing in that direction – ask “What questions do we still need to answer?” (*not*: “Does anyone have any questions or concerns?”)
10. **When things get difficult, tension is high, people are frustrated or polarized:**
  - Slow down and get curious about what is happening for each person in the room (maybe do another go-round asking “How do you feel about this situation?” or “How has this affected you so far?”)
  - Do the Three Complaints exercise (see separate handout).
  - Using wall sheets, explore with the group: What are our areas of agreement? What do we disagree about? What are we still confused or uncertain about?
  - Ask people what would need to be different for them to be able to support a given decision.
  - Check in about the timeline for the decision. Can all or part of it wait until you have more time to work it through? If so, get curious about what steps would be helpful to creating a resolution everyone would be happy with.
11. **Add reflection time to meetings. Questions for Reflection:**
  - What have we accomplished in this [meeting, discussion, project, retreat, etc.]?
  - What did we learn about [topic, decision, process, proposal, idea, practice, action, interaction, etc.] in this [meeting, discussion, project, retreat, etc.]?
  - What do we still need to do to deepen our understanding of the strategic significance of this [topic, decision, process, proposal, idea, practice, action, interaction, etc.]?
  - What did we do well?
  - What could we have done differently if we wanted a different outcome? OR What do we want to do differently next time?
  - **Remember to dig deep – keep asking “What else?”** until you have moved through the easy answers to the less obvious ones.