



Common Future

Duration: 2 ½ hours

Group size: small groups of 5-8 people

“Will we remain outside of the community inviting people in or will we go to our communities, seeking to be a transforming agent?” – Eric Swanson

Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to discover and confirm common ground among all participants regarding elements of an ideal future we all want. The goal is to reach agreement on those things that we are ready, able, and willing to do now without negotiation or needing approval from a higher authority.

Outputs

- A list of agreed ‘common ground’ items
- A list of potential projects
- A list of ‘not agreed’ items to be set aside for another time

Preparation

- Set up for small group interaction.
- Provide adequate wall space to display the three types of lists that are generated in this activity.
- Make sure there is room for people to move around in order to rearrange items placed on the wall.

Materials:

- √ Flip Charts for each small group
- √ Colored markers
- √ Scissors
- √ Masking tape

Guidelines

This is a three-part activity. Allow 60 minutes for Part 1, 30 minutes for Part 2, and 60 minutes for Part 3.

Part 1

- Do Part 1 of this activity in small groups of 5-8 people.
- Work from notes and/or your understanding of the Ideal Future Scenarios presentations. You are looking for common ground among all participants from which you can create a plan of action. Common ground is the things this group is ready, willing, and able to do without negotiating or needing approval from a higher authority.
- Each small group will create 3 flip chart sheets using the following titles:
 - Common Future Themes – what we all agree we want
 - Potential Projects – concrete proposals for how to get what we want
 - Not Agreed – conflicts not yet worked through
- Discuss all the ideas generated by the Ideal Future Scenario presentations that you can remember and add each to one of the three lists. Do not attempt to resolve differences – simply place them on the “not agreed” list for now. Be sure to capture all the ideas for potential projects that arise from the discussion. If the list is weak, intentionally brainstorm that area.

Part 2

- For Part 2, pair with another group and merge your lists.
- Discuss each Common Future item and once again seek explicit agreement on common ground – things that you are ready, willing, and able to do now without negotiation or approval from a higher authority.
- If you disagree on an item, move it to the “not agreed” list.
- If both groups have similar themes, combine them.
- After merging the lists, cut the Common Future list into strips (one item per strip) – so they can be rearranged later - and post them on the wall provided.
- Take an extended break, preferably overnight, so participants have time to mentally revisit their earlier concerns before making any commitments

Part 3

- When the full group is reassembled, you will complete the final step in achieving common ground to move forward. The outcome should represent the common future toward which all participants are motivated to work.
- Briefly review the Common Future themes on the wall from Part 2. Then, encourage participants to move the strips around until you are satisfied that all related themes are together.
- On a fresh flip chart sheet write Common Future and ask:
 - What do we all want? What are the shared visions and values?
 - How have we expressed similar themes in different ways?
- Once again, any unresolved differences go on the “not agreed” list.
- Display the final Common Future list in a prominent place. From this point on, all the work will focus on this list.

Adapted from Weisbord, Marvin and Janoff, Sandra (2000). *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities*, Second Edition. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Tips for facilitating group activities

- Consider changing the usual meeting environment to stimulate creative thinking.
- Keep the end goal of decisive action in mind for the duration of the activity.
- Open with a brief overview of the activity so participants know what to expect.
- Be careful and consistent to maintain pre-set boundaries of time and task.
- Encourage small group self-management; suggest that each group select a recorder, a reporter, a time keeper, and a discussion leader.
- Work with the people, ideas, and motivations you have to find enough common ground to act rather than being bogged down or sidetracked with an attempt to resolve “deeper issues”.
- Seek global perspective on issues by allowing all opinions to be expressed, validating polarities, and by agreeing to disagree on issues that cannot be resolved quickly.
- Encourage people to stay engaged in spite of differences. Resist the urge to intervene unless you observe movement toward ‘fight or flight’. Allow the group to resolve its own differences or agree to set them aside.
- Provide plenty of easily available nutritious snacks and beverages
- Consider using a Church Futures consultant to add depth and breadth of experience.

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