

Learning activity

The Critical Pathway Framework

TIME: 90-180 mins

LEARNING AIMS:

- Develop a strategic pathway towards specific goals
- Inspire longer term thinking
- Encourage strategic thinking
- Provide experience and skill in defining clear objectives
- Support exploration of how change happens.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS: Unspecified

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS: Critical Pathway Instructions flipchart / SMART flipchart / lots of A4 paper / pens / large room

FRAMING:

This tool is used here to help participants think strategically about supporting any type of change they want to achieve, based on learning and insights gained in the context of a training. It is a demanding and thorough process.

The process will help participants to devise a 'critical pathway' that can enable them to move towards their goals. The exploration will help them to think more strategically about how to achieve the changes they seek.

Being able to break down the steps towards achieving our goals is a key skill for successful strategising. This tool gives participants practice in setting stepping stones of achievements and sequencing those towards successful transformation.

The basic concept is to have each person write down the outcomes they think need to happen, in order to achieve the final aim they have established – not so much the steps or activities they need to do, but the changes that need to happen for their hoped for outcomes to be made real.

The activity should be preceded by some kind of reflection or visioning on the 'goals' towards which they want to move. These can be specific socio-political goals or (as is the case in a psychosocial resilience training) broader goals relating to culture and ways of operating for themselves and their groups. Naming some of the qualities of this 'future' is important. In some situations the goal will be very clear and specific. In others it might just

serve to provide a sense of direction. The Walking into the Future activity is a good way to set this up.

Some participants will take to the task more easily than others. As the facilitator, you need to support and engage with people, as they work individually, to enable them to get the most out of it.

FACILITATION:

Step 1. Setting up the activity (10 - 15 mins)

(This timing does not include having established the future aim or goal - see Other Considerations above).

- Introduce the activity in the context of whatever session/theme you are using it and according to the kind of goals you will be working towards.

- Give the instructions:

- Place an object or sheet of paper in the centre of the room that represents your overall aim/goal
- The objects in the centre of the room represent a point in the future. The edges of the room represent today. Each person (or small group) will create a path of stepping stones, using sheets of A4 paper, from today to the future point
- On each of the paper stepping stones, you will write down specific outcomes that are important and necessary to achieving your goal, starting from where you are now and taking you towards the goal (or working backwards from the goal to now)
- Each paper stepping stone is one outcome or change that needs to happen for the ultimate goal to be realised
- The pathway does not have to be uni-linear - there may be various strands happening simultaneously and intersecting with one another
- You may want to think about different dimensions of where outcomes need to happen, eg. inner/personal qualities/skills, relational requirements, group capacities, practical/material outcomes etc.

- It is important to stress that each stepping stone represents an OUTCOME, not an action or something to do. This shift of emphasis is an essential part of the process and helps people to think strategically. For example, an outcome would be 'I have increased competence to facilitate inclusive decision making processes for my group', but habitually people will write something like 'Learn how to facilitate inclusive decision making processes'. When people realise they have made this mistake, they should turn the piece of paper over and reformulate the action as an outcome (it is a usually just a case of changing the wording).

- Use a flipchart to capture the instructions clearly, leaving this visible for people as they work.

Step 2. Work on OUTCOMES (30+)

Let people get on with the activity. Remain available to answer questions and proactively offer support, asking people how the process is going and offering pointers. The exercise can be very challenging for people and requires a lot of focus and engagement. Be patient. It can take people time to get into the process, but eventually they will produce some impressive material.

- Encourage them to:

- Start with a few main stepping stones and then add intermediaries
- Consider personal and collective changes involved
- Consider material, psychological and relational changes.

Step 3. Change OUTCOMES into OBJECTIVES (20+)

Once a critical mass of people seem to have generated a viable pathway of stepping stones, introduce the idea of OBJECTIVES. All OUTCOMES should now be changed into OBJECTIVES, using the SMART Objectives guidelines.

An objective should be:

- Specific (fill in the details!)
- Measurable (not always quantifiable, but names indicators that enable us to know when something has been achieved)
- Achievable (this simply means that the objectives seem realistic, even if they might be ambitious)
- Relevant (if the initial critical pathway has been well conceived, the objectives will almost inevitably be relevant to the pathway)
- Time-specific (the closer to today the objective the more time specific it is likely to be)

Introduce SMART, writing it up on a flipchart for the group and giving examples of how this might look

- Continue to support them, individually with the task.

Step 4. Goals and Resources or Next Steps (20+)

An additional step for deepening thinking about the pathway is to apply Goals and Resources. Thinking about each objective, ask the questions: 1. What resources do we already have that can support us to achieve this? And 2. What additional resources do we need to find to enable us to achieve this? The answers to these questions will often generate additional steps on the pathway.

Step 5. Action Learning and Responsive Planning (20+)

One further step involves asking what methods and processes will be included to enable ongoing learning, reflection, and adaptation of the plan.

Step 6. Sharing work in small groups (45 - 60)

Participants form small groups (of 3-4) and take turns to share their pathways. The small group help each other to refine and further develop the pathway through helpful questioning and reflection.

Conclusion and take aways

The small group work serves as the debrief. However do find a moment to mention that:

- This work need not be adopted as a plan without further reflection
- All such plans require regular reviewing and adaptation
- Where these strategic ideas will involve other close collaborators, it is useful to take this tool back and rework the ideas together, to ensure everyone can bring their own experience and creativity to developing the pathway and more easily get behind the ideas.

SOURCE: Ulex Project adapted from The Change Agency