

## **"Contradictions Workshop"**

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## **Contradictions Workshop**

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### **Developmental Intentions**

- II. Toward a dialogical relationship to oneself.
  - 1. Addressing fears of losing what is familiar and safe.
- 3. Exploring life's experiences through some framework(s) of analysis.
- V. Toward connection with others.
  - 2. Experiencing oneself as part of something larger.
  - 4. Contributing one's voice to a collective endeavor.
  - 5. Recognizing that collective awareness and thinking transform the sum of their parts.

### **Context**

This activity helps a workgroup discern and name present impediments to its future vision. It is a brainstorming and analyzing process.

## Description of Activity

*Purpose.* To discern and name the underlying patterns, structures or limiting beliefs in the present circumstances—that is, the *contradictions*, that block a group's vision—so that strategic, corrective action might be taken.

*Format-steps-process.*

1. After a group has delineated its vision, I ask each person individually to brainstorm his or her blocks, issues, irritants, or other impediments to that vision. From this brainstorm, each person selects his or her top ideas and writes them on cards with felt-tip markers. The "cards" are often half-sheets of standard paper, and people are asked to write so the words can be read by everyone in the room.
2. I collect one card from each person. (At each successive round I may suggest a new criterion—for example, *most important*, *most insightful*, *most contributive to the problem*, *clearest*—whatever selection criteria make sense to the outcome that the group and I have negotiated.) I randomly post these on the wall; for example, onto a large piece of butcher paper or a sticky surface. (This process can be simplified by using a commercially available spray-on product that allows material to be repositioned as often as necessary.)
3. The group begins the organizing process when I ask them to identify pairs of cards that stem from the same underlying cause or *root cause*. I reposition the cards according to their responses. On successive rounds, each person provides another card for posting. The group continues to advise me in forming new pairs and, as needed, larger clusters, until thirty to forty cards (see Processing Tips) have been posted and positioned.
4. I direct the group's attention to the largest cluster first, asking them to look for one or more of three factors, that is, *patterns*, *structures*, or *limiting beliefs* that

inadvertently block movement toward their vision. I ask them to focus on patterns, not problems; on factors that actually exist (not factors they "lack"); on factors in which they participate (there is no one to blame); and on factors that, once identified, may suggest effective, corrective action. I illustrate these four points with an example or story from my consulting practice.

5. I help the group watch or listen for the "aha"—the flash of insight when a new perspective breaks through from the discussion of the items in that particular cluster. The group then crafts a name for this underlying obstacle or *contradiction*.

*Closure.* After all the clusters are named through a similar process, I ask the group to reflect on their discoveries, including asking how they might address the contradictions they identified.

## Processing Tips

The first key to this activity is that a contradiction workshop is used only within a larger strategic context; that is, it presumes that a group has a vision—an aspiration they hope to achieve—and intends some form of response to remove obstacles to that vision. In other words, it depends on the group's commitment to a larger process in which the contradictions workshop plays a pivotal role.

The second key is that the group works with its own experience in a way that creates safety for discussion and analysis. The data for the contradictions workshop come from the life experience of the group's members and must be honored. After people contribute their input (brief phrases on cards or half sheets of paper), questions of clarity are allowed but not criticisms of content. A person with a different perception is invited to contribute a different card.

A handy rule of thumb is that the total number of cards posted to the group brainstorm should be between thirty and forty. With fewer than thirty, some insights may be omitted. With more than forty, duplication begins to occur. However, once that number are up on the wall, I always ask the group to check that all their pertinent insights have been covered by at least one of the cards on display, and to add any ideas that might have fallen between the cracks.

When all the data have been displayed, the question shifts to, "What is beneath these data?" The search for contradictions—that is, *underlying causes, root causes*—is driven by two questions: (1) "Why do these obstacles, blocks, or irritants that emerged during the brainstorm remain?" and (2) "What is the dysfunctional underlying pattern, structure, or limiting belief?" Continually asking, "Why?" and continually asking people to look through their experience to what underlies it takes them out of the anxiety of the present and below the surface

to a deeper level. When that happens, anxieties about personal problems, interpersonal conflicts, or the limitations of life (not enough time, money, or personnel) suddenly become quite beside the point in light of the group's collective search for the patterns, structures, or limiting beliefs that block them.

Given a vision and an intent to act, and with a rich data set based on personal experience, a contradictions workshop can lead to insights about the present that are startlingly fresh and that genuinely illuminate future actions.



## Contributor's Commentary

The trick is to wean people from the old image that issues, obstacles, and blocks are negatives and problematic. The concept of *contradiction* is a positive, system-oriented approach that invites people to find in their present situation factors that are inadvertently dysfunctional with respect to their aspirations. The discussion that takes place when a group names the underlying patterns, structures, or limiting beliefs blocking their vision can become an exciting quest for what amounts to a secret doorway to the future, currently hidden within the baggage and idiosyncrasies of the present arrangements of a group's worklife. This is described further in Spencer's (1989) *Winning Through Participation*.

When a group joins this quest and discovers how they inadvertently thwart their hopes, a huge weight is removed. Their situation is no longer their problem. The problem, which is their challenge, becomes instead how they relate to their situation. They had supposed that personal problems or lack of resources or too little time were the real problems they faced. Instead they find that beneath these limiting givens are other, more fundamental factors with which they've unwittingly been complicit that are the real obstacles to be overcome, but these factors are ones they can control or transform. There is no one to blame and there is no reason to be a victim of circumstances. By naming these knotty and previously invisible complexities, the group gets handles on the tasks to which they must address themselves. The potential for concrete action is released as people take a proactive, constructive relationship to their situation.

People are helped to look beneath the surface, adopt a larger perspective, trust their experience, and use their intuitive insights to analyze what they discover. Einstein said something to the effect that no problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it; we must learn to see the world anew. The contradictions workshop helps people create an enlarged and deepened context that permits them to see factors that had previously been hidden. The contradictions workshop helps people overcome the distraction caused by the superficial artifacts of what are in fact deeper, systemic variables. When they look through the surface data of issues, obstacles and blocks to the underlying patterns, structures and

limiting beliefs, they gain control over these deeper factors by seeing, naming, and then systematically acting on them.

A footnote about patterns, structures, and limiting beliefs: We all have mental images of how work should be conducted, how life should be lived, what organizations should look like, and so forth. We call them *mindsets*, *mental sets*, *images*. *Limiting beliefs* is another name for limiting, dysfunctional mental images. *Pattern* is a name for the institutionalized residue of old images in interpersonal relationships. *Structure* is the name for the institutionalized residue of old images in organizational systems. In any case, the contradictions workshop deals in the realm of images or the institutionalized residue of images. And since images can be evaluated, adjusted, discarded, or transformed, so can the institutional arrangements that flow from them. Organizations and workgroups become expressions of our minds, and like our minds, they can be enlarged, illuminated, and recreated continually.

## Reference

- Spencer, L. J. (1989). *Winning through participation: Meeting the challenge of corporate change with the Technology of Participation*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall-Hunt. (Also available from the Institute of Cultural Affairs at [www.ica-use.org](http://www.ica-use.org))