

Avoiding the groan fest

Penny Walker gives some advice on turning around negative meetings

It was a heartfelt plea which struck a chord with us all: “The eco-team champions meeting is a ‘groan fest’. The people who come along moan and groan about how bad things are, and we never move forward.”

All of us knew what she meant.
So how do you avoid the groan fest?

Naming the elephant

It can really help to ‘name the elephant in the room’ by explicitly drawing attention to your perception that the group has got stuck in a pattern of negative thinking, and that you’d like to shift this to something more productive. If people are willing to experiment with a new way of looking at things, then try this short exercise¹.

On a whiteboard or flip chart paper, draw a two-by-two grid. Put a ‘plus’ sign at the top, and a ‘minus’ sign at the bottom. Write ‘past’ on the left, and ‘future’ on the right.

Ask the group for words or phrases which fit in each of the four quadrants. Some examples are given in Figure 1.

Remind the group how powerful words and feelings are, and how they frame our expectations and can skew our analysis of what’s possible. Ask where on the map people would mostly like the conversation to be, to be as productive and effective as possible. They will probably indicate somewhere in the area shown by the dashed line in this figure.

Invite the group to notice when they seem to be spending too much time in some other part of the map and ask people to help direct the discussion back into the area they want to be in.

Once the group has agreed to shift to more positive, future-orientated conversation, then you can choose from two basic approaches:

	Solving problems	Inspiring solutions
What is within my control and what can I influence, to help...	...solve this problem?	...move us towards this vision of success?

Solving problems

The first approach is to take the complaints at face value, and examine them. By understanding them in greater detail and systematically developing ways to resolve each one, the group can use the meeting to agree an action plan – albeit incremental – which dismantles the barriers which are stopping it achieving its goals.

Inspiring solutions

The alternative is to focus on what the group wants to achieve: instead of letting the negative aspects of present circumstances dominate, ask people to conjure up an image of the positive opposite which they’d like to create. This approach can lead to more creative, transformational thinking, but you may have to allow people to purge themselves of groans before they’ll be willing to look to the future.

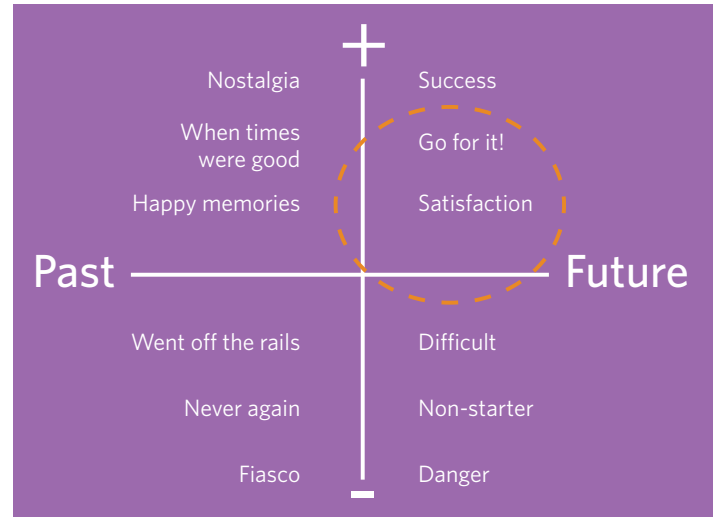


Figure 1: Naming the elephant – past, future, good, bad exercise

Let’s look at both approaches in more detail.

Problem solving

Sometimes the first step in moving beyond the groans is to acknowledge them: don’t avoid the groan fest, encourage it!²

Listen carefully to all the complaints, writing them up on a flip chart so everyone can see that they’ve been heard and recorded.

When people have run out of moans, and using a different sheet of paper, invite people to work on the solutions to the issues. Begin with asking people what they do want (not just the absence of the things they don’t want, but a positive alternative).

Encourage the ‘ideal world’ solutions to come out, not just the grudging and compromise solutions.

Following on from the identification of solutions, ask people to begin to focus on what they can control and what they can influence to help bring those solutions about. If people seem to be talking about action in ‘the greater cosmos’ rather than in their own spheres of control and influence, bring them back to what they can do – not what they wish others would do.

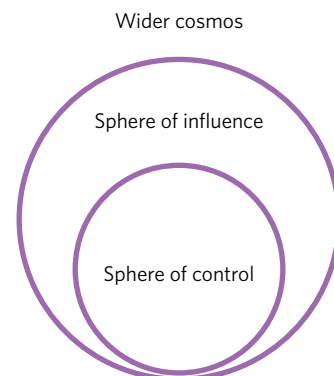


Figure 2: Sphere of control, sphere of influence

Sometimes the problem is big and complex, and people may need to work on it between meetings, bringing in other people to be part of the conversation.

Sometimes the barriers seem so intractable, that they prevent people from being able to see things in a positive light. In that case, you could try focusing on the ideal future instead.

Solutions focus

There are some rather magical questions which can help free people up to imagine in detail the positive future they want to see .

Q: “Imagine you fell asleep tonight and all of the challenges disappeared by magic, what would be the first tiny signs that the miracle had happened?”

Q: “If you had a magic wand, how would you want it to be? When/ where does this happen already ... even just a little bit?”

Q: “On a scale of 1 - 10, where do you stand right now with 10 being the perfect situation?” And when the group respond ‘3’ because they are feeling so low, follow up with “What gets you that high already? What would get you one point higher?”

Appreciative inquiry

This is another approach which is based on noticing existing strengths and success (the top left quadrant).

Break the group into pairs. Ask them to reflect on a time when they did bring about a great change, despite the odds. It could be in their professional life, but it doesn't have to be.

Thinking about that time: What was going on? What did it take, to bring the change about?

Ask them to see what themes emerge from their conversation.

The pairs then get together into fours, which exchange stories and themes.

And finally the key insights from their conversations are shared with the whole group. These insights can inform discussion about how best to move forward.

No pain, no gain

Above all, use the dissatisfaction which people are expressing as a springboard to changing things: if what we are doing now isn't having the results we want, it makes sense to try something different.

So the next time you find yourself in a ‘groan fest’ meeting, try something new. ■

Penny was helped out by generous professionals who are members of the Association of Management Education and Development (www.amed.org.uk) and the International Association of Facilitators (www.iaf-world.org). Solutions Focus www.thesolutionsfocus.com

Read more at Penny's blog: <http://penny-walker.co.uk/blog>

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