

Learning on the Run 5: Synetics

How to enhance a team's creative thinking to move beyond the natural resistance to change?

The Request. The Director of Forest Management for a state Department of Forestry wanted to introduce uneven-age stands as an adopted forestry management practice within the state. Many state foresters were familiar with the concept, but had not put anything like it into practice. The Director wanted a "training" that would help foresters consider the practical application of "uneven aged stands" and present any forthcoming recommendations to the department leadership.

Larger Context. The state agency was responsible for managing the cutting, growing and use of the state's forest. Up to this point, the state managed it's land to maximize profit by allowing private companies to bid on "getting the cut out", yielding as much timber as possible from any one sale. State foresters would typically put out bids to clear cut parcels of land designated for timber sale. Cutting all the trees down would yield another generation of trees that would be roughly the same age for that parcel. "Uneven-Age Stands" was a new forestry concept that allowed for cutting timber in such a way that left many different trees of different ages. The idea was to maximize the diversity of niches available to wildlife and create more stable forests. This new forest management concept had not been demonstrated and was foreign to many timber companies. It would certainly impact the foresters in determining how the timber was placed for sale and the timber companies in how the cut was actually carried out. Many of the foresters understood clear cutting and would be adverse to seeing their job change. Also, they worried about the probable resistance among timber companies to change their practices.

Consulting Intervention. A 1.5-day workshop was developed and conducted for all the state foresters. The foresters were randomly assigned to three working teams. Each team was expected to develop workable plans for how the state might implement uneven-age stands as a forest management tool. The training consisted of three parts: 1. The value of being open, avoiding the jump to easy answers 2. Understanding the issue and generating strategies and 3. Deciding on a strategy and action plan.

After doing some fun individual and team work that allowed the whole group to look at their experience with remaining open to change, we decided to use a series of techniques to unleash each team's imagination. We wanted to help them generate interesting and novel ways of implementing "Uneven Age Stands".

One of the main techniques we used was a Synetics Approach.¹

1. The team listed each team member's own understanding of the issue. Clarifying questions were used to see differences and similarities. Based on the team's discussion, a statement of the issue as understood by the team was posted.
2. Brainstorming was used to discover any immediate solutions by team members.
3. The team was then asked to "take a vacation" from the problem and have some fun. They were to select a new setting or world X to explore as an analogy to the issue. The worlds might be machines, metals, etc. They were to pick the strangest and most different setting that was most intriguing to the whole team. They were to respond to the following questions:
 - Describe x.
 - How does x work?
 - What do we know about x?
 - What does it feel like to be an x?
 - What is your experience as an x?
 - What pictures can you draw about x?

The points from the “vacation” discussion were “forced fit” to the issue at hand. The team responded to:

- What relationships do you see between the analogy and the problem?
- How can we use x to describe our problem?
- How can we use this information about x to tell us something about the problem?
- What immediate solutions are suggested?
- What solution(s) can you imagine that is so way out that you'd immediately get fired for suggesting it?

Each team was to pay attention to these potential traps:

- Not being able to leave the reality of the issue
- Changing the words of the author vs. using the exact words
- Discounting unique understandings or censoring ideas
- Judging ideas that “can’t work” vs. asking how might we make that work
- Teams having so much fun, they are less willing to return to the problem
- Skipping over possible solutions that come from the earlier brainstorming

4. Finally, the team was asked to review all the material recorded and list all the possible options.

Last Line. Using a team’s imagination to implement changes to traditional practice helps to surface and work with the natural resistance to change.

¹ Gordon, w. (1961) *Synetics*. NY: Harper and Row. Prince, G.M. (1970) *The Practice of Creativity*. Evanston, IL: Harper & Row. Ulschak, f. Finishing unfinished business: Creative problem solving. (1979) In: *University Associates Handbook*. San Diego: University Associates.