

A Guide to Action Learning along with Tools and Techniques

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Background to Action Learning

This action learning resource contains two sections: this section, which is a background to action learning, and the next section which contains a set of tools and techniques to support you in your action learning set.

Imagine, if you will, that you are a research physicist. Just when years of painstaking effort seem about to bear fruit, you come up against an intractable problem. Fortunately you are surrounded by other research physicists - past and future Nobel prize-winners. Unfortunately none of them works in your field. Does this stop you seeking their help? If you are sensible, and want to win a Nobel Prize yourself, it does not. You put your problem to them. But what can they possibly do to help you out of your impasse?

Back in the 1930s, Reg Revans found himself working with just such a high-powered group at the University of Cambridge. When they were faced with difficult research problems, he found that they would sit down together and ask one another lots of questions. No one person was considered more important than any other and they all had contributions to make, even when they were not experts in a particular field. In this way they teased out workable solutions to their own and one another's problems. Revans was so taken by this technique that, when he went to work at the coal board, he introduced it there. When pit managers had problems, he encouraged them to meet together in small groups, on site, and ask one another questions about what they saw in order to find their own solutions, rather than bring in 'experts' to solve their problems for them. The technique proved so successful that the managers wrote their own handbook on how to run a coal mine. In this way, action learning was born; but it was some years before Revans presented the cogent and tested theory which is now recognized as Action Learning.

As illustrated above, one of the keys of effective Action Learning is asking the right questions. But what exactly are the 'right questions' in an action learning context? The 'right questions' are simply those which, when asked of the right people at the right time, give you the sort of information which you need. These include questions like...

- What are we trying to do?
- What is stopping us from doing it?
- What might we be able to do about it?
- Who knows about the problem?
- Who cares about it?
- Who can do anything about it?
- Where can we find out about it?

There are many similar questions which you might choose to ask, and it is vital for anyone involved in action learning to spend adequate time working out what the right questions are for the particular problem that s/he is trying to solve. However, most managers are profound believers that Hamlet could have done what was necessary much more quickly, had he not spent so much time talking about it! And research in the field shows that most managers spend more time doing than thinking. Conversely, many management training courses spend more time on thinking than doing. Action learning, by focusing on doing and thinking, suits most managers very well and, by providing them with opportunities to solve real problems in their own workplace and learn from that experience, helps them to improve their managerial performance generally.

Action learning is a sociable activity, not something which you do on your own. It needs a group of people - whether they be physicists, pit managers, bank managers or a mixture of all three. A 'set' is the name given to the group of real managers working on real problems in a real time-frame, looking for real solutions using action learning techniques. They are, to use Revans' phrase, 'comrades in adversity'.

Each member of the set is as important as every other member of the set and each has a contribution to make. They need to be able to support, advise and freely challenge one another. The set also needs to be able to call on external experts and specialists when required, but not to have them thrust upon them. Each member of the set takes on a firm commitment to get a useful piece of work done and to understand what is being learned in the process.

The set members with whom you will be working are likely to be encountering a number of different learning situations during the period you agree to work together and even more in the course of their work as managers. It is obviously in their interest to learn as much as they possibly can from experience, if they want to improve their managerial effectiveness. But not all managers will get the same benefit out of the same learning situation. You have almost certainly, at some time during your career, been on a management training course with a group of fellow managers, all with similar amounts of experience and a desire to learn as much as they could from it. At the end of the course, some of them probably thought that it was enjoyable and useful, while others thought it a waste of time. How could this possibly be, since they all went through exactly the same course?

A large part of the answer lies in the fact that different people have different ways of learning, ways which seem more natural to them, ways which they prefer. This means that some types of learning experience suit them better than others. If a course offers them plenty of their preferred type of experience, then they are likely to enjoy it and to learn a lot from it. If not, then it may well turn out to be, for them, a waste of time.

Set members benefit greatly from understanding that different people have different ways of learning, not least because it will explain some of their previous failures. By understanding that you have a preferred learning style, and finding out what it is, you will be in a better position to understand the strengths and weaknesses of other set members with different styles from your own. You will also understand why they respond to you as they do. The person who never looks enthusiastic and never seems to want to speak may be learning just as much as his or her neighbour, but may simply be a 'reflector' who does not wish to commit him or herself too hurriedly. Here is a brief overview of different learning styles.

Activists

Activists involve themselves fully and without bias in new experiences. They enjoy the here and now and are happy to be dominated by immediate experiences. They are open-minded not sceptical and this tends to make them enthusiastic about anything new. Their philosophy is 'I will try anything once'. Their days are filled with activity. They tackle problems by brainstorming. As soon as the excitement from one activity has died down, they are busy looking for the next. They tend to thrive on the challenge of new experiences but are bored with implementation and longer-term consolidation. They are gregarious people, constantly involving themselves with others but, in doing so, they seek to make themselves the centre of all activities.

Activists learn best from novel experiences, from being encouraged to 'have a go' and from being thrown into things. They enjoy relatively short 'here and now' learning activities like business games and competitive team exercises. Activists learn least well from passive situations like

reading, watching or listening to lectures, particularly those on concept or theory. They do not enjoy solitary work, repetitive tasks, situations which require detailed preparation, or being asked to review their learning opportunities and achievements.

Reflectors

Reflectors like to stand back to ponder experiences and observe them from many different perspectives. They collect data, both first-hand and from others, and prefer to analyze them thoroughly and think about them from every possible angle before coming to any definite conclusions. These they postpone as long as possible. Their philosophy is to be cautious. They enjoy watching other people in action and prefer to take a back seat in meetings and discussions. They think before they speak. They tend to adopt a low profile and have a slightly distant, tolerant, unruffled air about them. When they act, it is part of a wider picture, which includes the past as well as the present and others' observations as well as their own.

Reflectors learn best from activities where they are able to stand back, listen and observe. They like to have a chance to collect information and be given time to think about it before commenting or acting. They like to review what has happened. Reflectors learn least well when they are rushed into things with insufficient data or without time to plan, when they are forced into the limelight by being required to role-play or chair a meeting, or when asked to take short cuts or do a superficial job.

Theorists

Theorists like to analyze and synthesize. They assimilate and convert disparate facts and observations into coherent, logical theories. Their philosophy prizes rationality and logic above all. They think problems through in a vertical, step-by-step, logical way. They tend to be perfectionists who will not rest easy until things are tidy and fit into a rational scheme. They are keen on basic assumptions, principles, theories, models and systems thinking. They tend to be detached, analytical and dedicated to rational objectivity. They feel uncomfortable with subjective judgements, ambiguity, lateral thinking and anything flippant.

Theorists learn best when they are offered a system, model, concept or theory, even when the application is not clear and the ideas may be distant from current reality. They like to work in structured situations with a clear purpose, and be allowed to explore associations and interrelationships, to question assumptions and logic and to analyze reasons and generalize. They like to be intellectually stretched. Theorists learn least well when asked to do something without apparent purpose, when activities are unstructured and ambiguous and when emotion is emphasized. They do not learn well when faced with activities lacking depth, when data to support the subject are unavailable, and when they feel 'out of tune' with the rest of the group.

Pragmatists

Pragmatists are keen on trying out ideas, theories and techniques to see if they work in practice. They positively search out new ideas and take the first opportunity to experiment with applications. They are the sort of people who return from management courses bursting with new ideas which they want to try out in practice. They like to get on with things, and act quickly and confidently on ideas which attract them. They tend to be impatient with ruminating and open-ended discussions. They are essentially practical, down-to-earth people, who like making practical decisions and solving problems. They respond to problems and opportunities "as a challenge" Their philosophy is 'There is always a better way' and 'If it works, it is good.'

Pragmatists learn best when there is an obvious link between the subject matter and their current job. They like being exposed to techniques or processes which are clearly practical, have immediate relevance and which they are likely to have the opportunity to implement. Pragmatists learn least well where there are no immediate benefits or rewards from the activity and the learning events or their organizers seem distant from reality.

Finally, as this guide moves into its second section, which contains a wide range of tools and techniques to be utilized by your action learning set, you might find it useful to occasionally review how the set is working with reference to its overall processes, and its use of tools and techniques - within the light of the set members' individual learning styles.

The Tools and Techniques

Each of the tools and techniques that follow has its own relative advantages and disadvantages. Each will, therefore, be suited to some situations rather than others. Furthermore, it is important to remember when using any of the tools or techniques that you should always stand back and ask yourself – ‘Do the outputs we’re getting here make sense?’ Much as, in the early days of hand-held calculators, people made mistakes regarding the position of the decimal point (i.e. right individual numbers but wrong magnitude!), so it is important not to ‘miss the point’ through an over-enthusiastic use of the following tools and techniques that does not allow time to stand back and reflect on the bigger picture. As with all tools, they will only ever be as good as the people that are using them.

Having begun with that note of caution, these tools and techniques are about ‘thinking’, and maintaining an appropriate balance between thought with action, as discussed in the first section, ultimately leads to greatest effectiveness. And whilst reflecting again on the first section, just as tools work more or less effectively in different circumstances, so they will work more or less effectively with different individuals. Remember the discussion around individual learning styles? The key here is, if something is making the job less effective or progress isn’t being made, try something else!

Finally, it is intended that this resource not be limited to use within the context of your Action Learning Set, but also as a general resource for your day-to-day management practice. Much of what follows will have direct relevance when analysing, problem-solving and decision-making at any time, be this on your own, in one-to-one situations, or in meetings. My wish is that you become familiar enough with the resource to establish your own analytical habits.

1. Brainstorming

This technique generates a wide variety of ideas in a short space of time. It is often used to explore an issue that would benefit from a creative input, whether the issue be to identify the possible causes of a situation or generate options for a solution. There are three ways to run a brainstorming session.

Method 1

1. State clearly the issue in hand. Ensure everyone involved in the exercise understands the issue.
2. Ask each person to call out his/her ideas in turn. Participants can pass if an idea doesn't come to them but they should still be included on successive rounds. Doing this allows quieter group members to contribute fully. Stop when all participants have dried up.
3. A facilitator records all the ideas, exactly as they are given, i.e. no interpretation or judgement to be used.
4. After all the ideas have been noted, anyone in the group can ask for clarification of any of the points that have been noted.
5. The group then explores each of the ideas in turn, expanding on them, using them as a source for further ideas, combining them and – if appropriate – eliminating them. It may be necessary to manage this part of the process assertively if the group becomes unproductive in its discussions.
6. If possible, list the ideas under headings, which may then suggest a range of ways forward.
7. Based on the actions identified, draw-up a SMART Action Plan.

Method 2

1. State clearly the issue in hand. Ensure everyone involved in the exercise understands the issue.
2. Each person writes as many ideas as they can think of on Post-it™ notes.
3. When people have finished, each participant sticks their Post-it notes to the wall for the rest of the group to see.
4. When all have made their contribution and scanned the collective output, the Post-it notes can be arranged in groups.
5. Based on the actions identified, draw-up a SMART Action Plan.

Method 3

1. Prior to the group meeting, circulate the issue in hand. Ensure, by the most appropriate means, that everyone involved in the exercise understands the issue.
2. Thereafter, go to Step 2 of Method 1 or 2 above, as required or desired.

2. The Change Cycle

This framework provides a means of exploring, and obtaining buy-in to, the process of change.

Method

1. Set the context for the exercise, i.e. discuss the change initiative that is currently in-hand and explain that the Change Cycle is being used to help work through emerging issues.
2. Describe the Change Cycle (see Figure 1 below).
3. Use an example of a change initiative that the group can readily relate to. Ask them to brainstorm⁽¹⁾ the behaviours they might see at each of the four stages of the cycle.
4. Move on to the actual change at hand. Again, ask the group to brainstorm the behaviours they might see at each of the four stages of the cycle.
5. Use a template similar to that illustrated in Figure 2 below to record the behaviours suggested.
6. Continuing with the template illustrated in Figure 2, get the group to brainstorm actions to address the behaviours that might be seen.
7. Based on the actions identified, draw-up a SMART Action Plan. Actions should aim to move people forward towards the next stage of the cycle, and not aim to cut out or avoid a stage of the cycle.

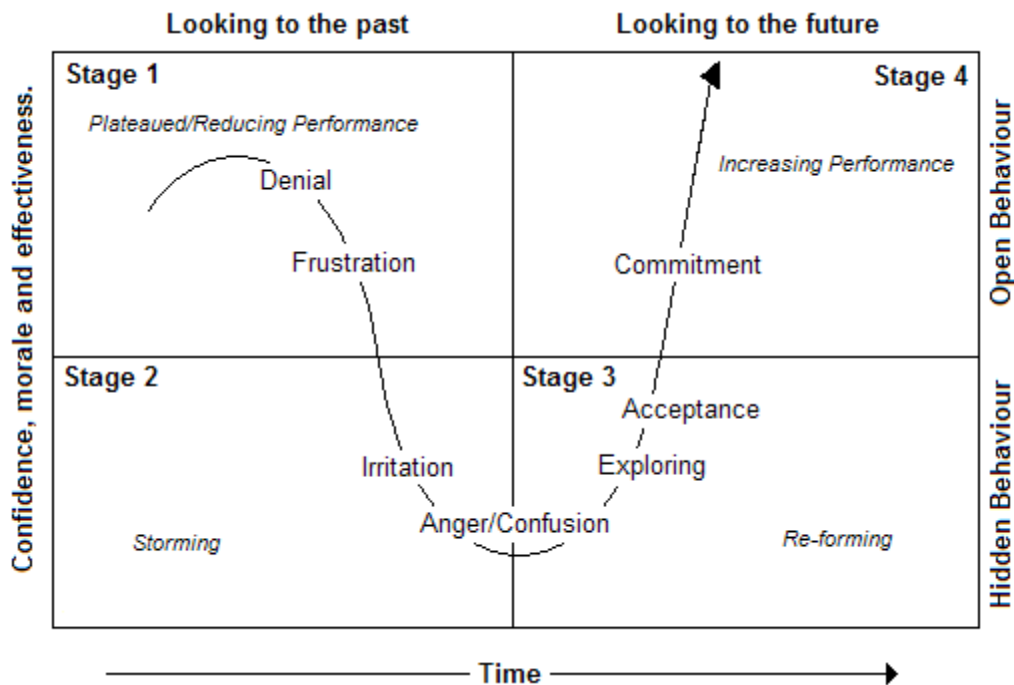


Figure 1: The Change Cycle



Stage 1 Behaviours and indicators Actions/solutions	Stage 2 Behaviours and indicators Actions/solutions
Stage 3 Behaviours and indicators Actions/solutions	Stage 4 Behaviours and indicators Actions/solutions

Figure 2: A template for structuring issues from The Change Cycle exercise

3. The Concept Fan

This tool generates logically a range of creative solutions. Used in a brainstorming⁽¹⁾ style, the tool adds structure and clarifies the bigger picture associated with the issue in hand.

Method

1. Write down the issue, or the desired outcome, in a short sentence.
2. Ask the question 'why?', and write down the responses on the right hand side of the original issue/outcome statement.
3. Ask the question 'how?', and write the responses on the left hand side of the original issue/outcome statement.
4. For each response to 'how?', again ask 'how?', and write the responses to the left hand side of the target response (see Figure 3 below).
5. Repeat Step 4 until the group runs out of ideas.
6. Based on the responses elicited, draw up a SMART Action Plan.

Note: This tool is reciprocated by The Five Whys

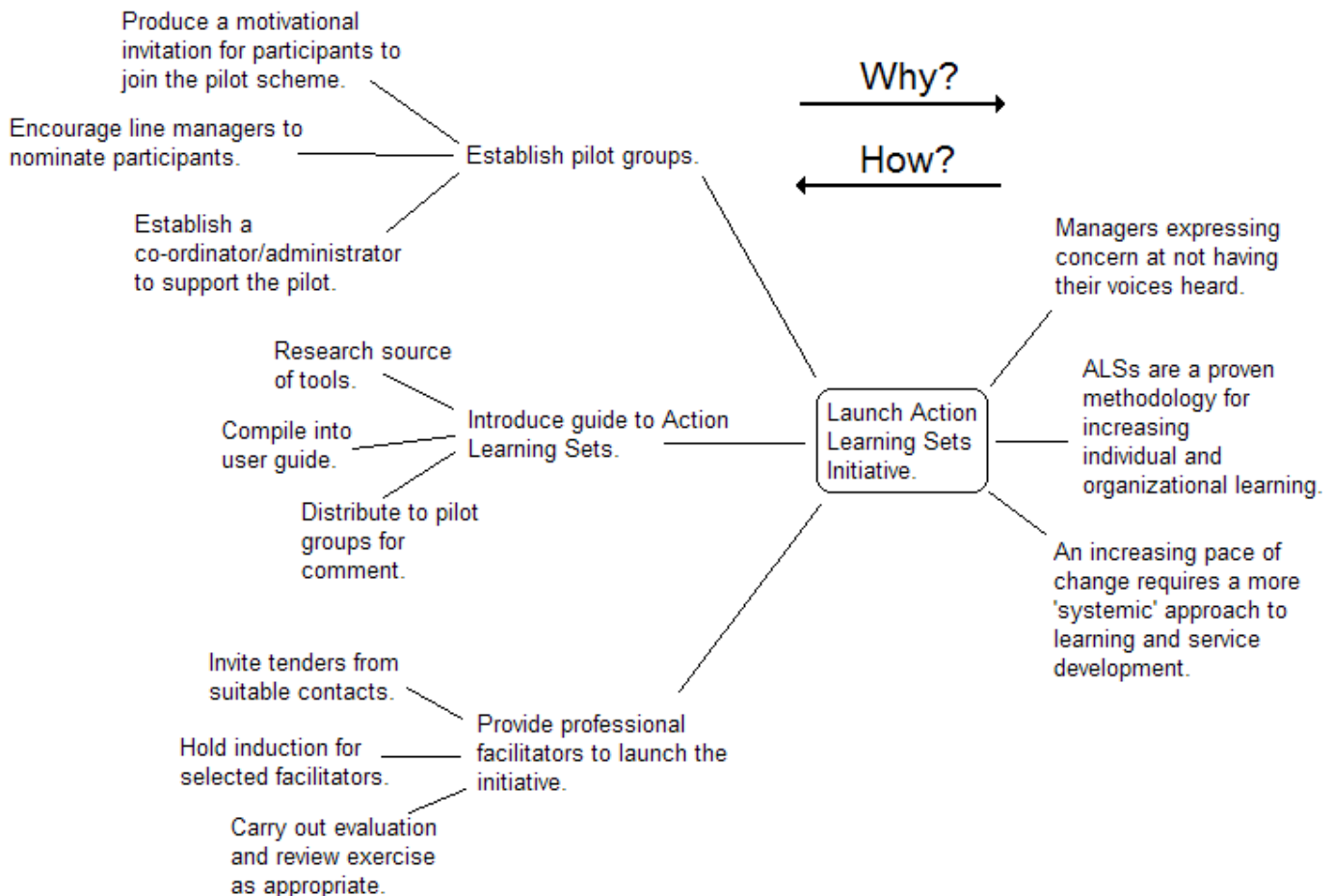


Figure 3: Example of a Concept Fan

4. Effort Impact Graph

This technique provides a means of prioritizing a list of options. As such, it may be useful when prioritizing the outputs from any of the option generation techniques (e.g. Brainstorming, The Change Cycle, The Concept Fan, etc.).

Method

1. List the options being considered.
2. Classify the options by:
 - (a) The impact or benefit they provide;
 - (b) The effort or cost they will take to execute.
3. Work through each option in turn, asking the group to rate them as high, medium or low against impact and effort. When the first few options have been placed on the graph (see Figure 4 below), they may act as a benchmark or reference point to rate further options, e.g. option x is more or less effort than option y (note: this is similar to the Forced Pair Comparison⁷⁾ Technique).
4. When all options have been positioned on the graph, allow the group time to reflect on the outcome, to ensure they are happy with the result.
5. Use the final graph to prioritise the options. Those that offer the greatest impact for the least effort will most likely be chosen as highest priority, i.e. those in the top left hand corner of the graph.
6. As an alternative, the group might rank the options in terms of cost or effort, and then rank them again in terms of benefit or impact. The two ranking values can then be used to plot the options (again, see the Forced Pair Comparison Technique).
7. Based on the options identified, and their associated priority, draw-up a SMART Action Plan.

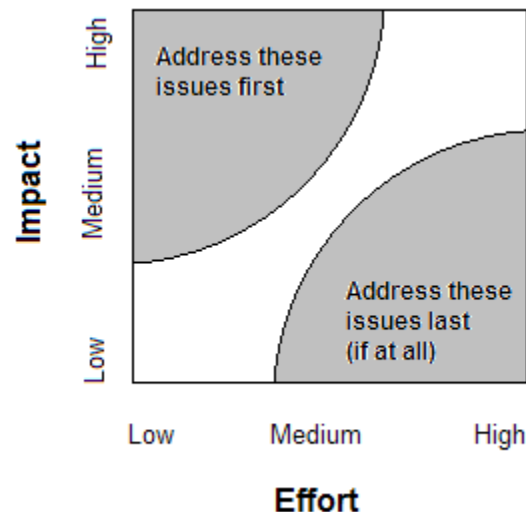


Figure 4: Making a Graphic Representation of Priorities

6. Flowcharting

This tool provides a picture of how a process is working, and may be used when you wish to clarify a flow or sequence of events in a process. If completed conscientiously, it often draws out startling revelations!

Method

1. Clearly state the start point and end point of the process in which you are interested.
2. Brainstorm all the steps in the process.
3. Put the steps in sequence.
4. Draw the flowchart using the symbols suggested below (Figure 6 and 7).
5. If possible, test the flowchart (track the real process) to establish if this is what really happens. Make modifications as appropriate.
6. Discuss and agree actions to improve the process. These may include:
 - Combining certain steps;
 - Cutting some steps;
 - Replacing some steps with different actions;
 - Adding some steps;
 - Allocating steps to different people;
 - Making use of technology;
 - Etc.
7. Based on the actions identified, draw-up a SMART Action Plan.

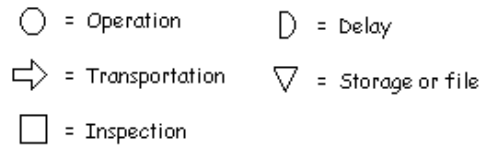
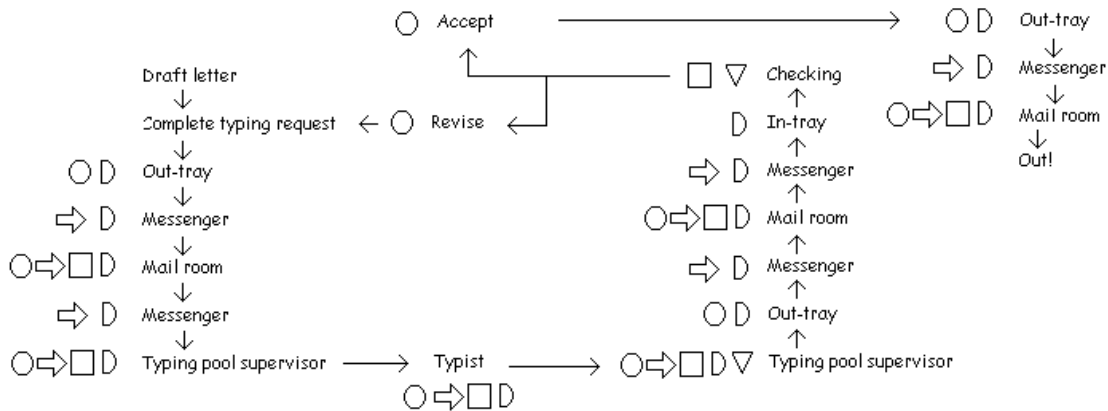


Figure 6: An Example of Flowcharting Symbols



Broad Analysis

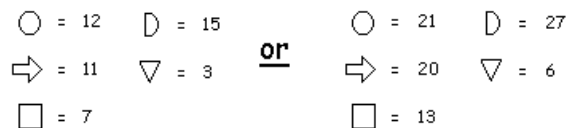


Figure 7: An Example of Flowcharting – Getting a Letter Typed through a Typing Pool!

7. Forced Pair Comparison

This technique provides a simple priority score as to the importance of issues relative to each other. It is particularly useful when a group of people need to reach a consensus. However, it does not take any other issues into account other than people's preferences. Issues that may, therefore, be missed include costs and benefits. If such is required, the Effort Impact Graph may be more appropriate.

Method

1. Create a comprehensive list of options. Techniques or tools that may assist in this step include Brainstorming and the Five Whys.
2. From the, as yet, un-prioritized list, select the top issue and ask the question "Is option 1 better than option 2?" Whichever is the better option, place a tick in the column next to it.
3. Then ask "Is option 1 better than option 3?" Again, whichever is the better option, place a tick in the column next to it.
4. Continue until you reach the end of the list, then take option 2 and repeat the process.
5. Then take option 3, etc.
6. Add up the sum of ticks for each option. The one with the most ticks is the perceived best option and, likewise, all other options can be ranked (see illustration below).
7. Based on the priorities identified, draw-up a SMART Action Plan.

Options	Tally	Priority/Position
1. Organised team events.	////	2
2. Understanding more about team members.	/////	1
3. Evenings social events.	///	3
4. Joint coffee/tea breaks.	//	4
5. More team meetings.	/	5

Figure 8: Example of a Forced Pair Comparison relating to Effective Team Building Options

8. Force Field Analysis

This framework provides a visual representation of the factors that aid, and the factors that hinder, a targeted change. The process can be a significant contributor to action planning for change, as the act of asking people about their concerns and resistances is a key part of involvement and consultation. As such, it can be a powerful tool in developing commitment. In simple terms, if 'Resistors' are stronger than 'Drivers', then the change will not happen. Estimating the relative strengths of each driver and resistor is not an exact science, but can assist in gaining a realistic view when contemplating change.

Method

1. Having stated clearly the current situation, the desired situation, the solutions that have been considered to close the gap, and the rationale for the preferred solution, draw up a force field template (see Figure 9).
2. BrainstormTM the Drivers and Resistors to the preferred solution, and put the driving forces on the left and the resisting forces on the right.
3. Develop an understanding of the presented issues through discussion.
4. If it seems appropriate, estimate the relative strengths of the drivers and resistors. Forced Pair Comparison may assist in this task – within each category (drivers or resistors). This might then be combined with an agreed numerical 'strength-score'.
5. Use the findings to develop a SMART Action Plan, possibly using the Effort Impact Graph to establish a priority for actions. The aim is to reduce resistors and strengthen drivers.
6. It is important to note that reducing resistors usually brings greater gains than strengthening drivers!

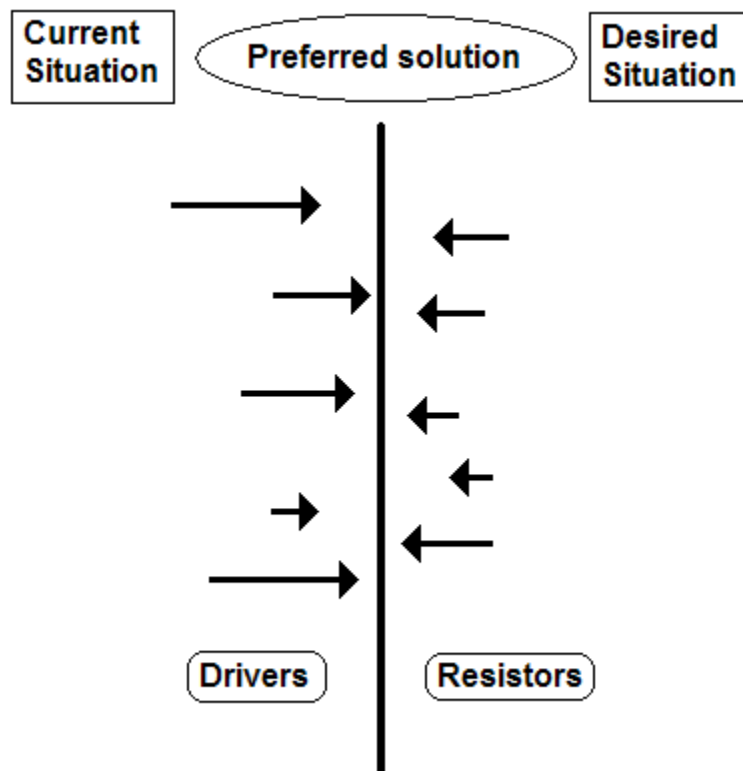


Figure 9: Template for a Force Field Analysis

9. Forward Measurement

This technique provides a context for developing a measurement system that is based on financial and non-financial measures in relation to a desired outcome or future. The whole area of 'measurement' is one that, traditionally, is presented and thought-through poorly. Either scant regard is given to true measurement - by managers who act on instinct/experience - or measures are developed that do not represent a meaningful picture to any but a few stakeholders. Once the process has been completed for the first time in relation to a specific issue, it is amenable to change and modification as the project or initiative unfolds and more data becomes available. And a key benefit is that the technique focuses action on the ideal outcome. It is worth noting that many people find it difficult to accept the sometimes less tangible, accurate, yet fundamentally important, non-financial measures. It may take some time for the team or organization to build confidence in the use of these measures.

Method

1. Create a clear picture of the ideal outcome from a situation or project. Consider how you would be able to tell if you had reached this outcome. Consider all the elements – financial and non-financial. Ask yourself, “How would things look, appear and feel?”
2. Understand clearly why you want to measure, e.g. for learning, contribution, value creation or reward. Brainstorming might be useful here, as might The Five Whys. Keep the output from this stage on show, as it will be a reference point for the measures that are developed later.
3. Identify which of the items highlighted in Step 1 are the most important (possibly using Forced Pair Comparison). Which are the ones that, if you couldn't identify them, would compromise commitment or belief in the project or initiative?
4. The elements identified in Step 3 now form the basis of the measures. For each, check that if you measured them you would achieve the aim of the measurement identified in Step 2 above.
5. For those that are suitable, put a timeframe on the measures.
6. Determine the actions that are necessary to achieve the outcomes, and draw-up a SMART Action Plan. Continually reassess if the ideal is still appropriate and where you are in relation to that ideal.

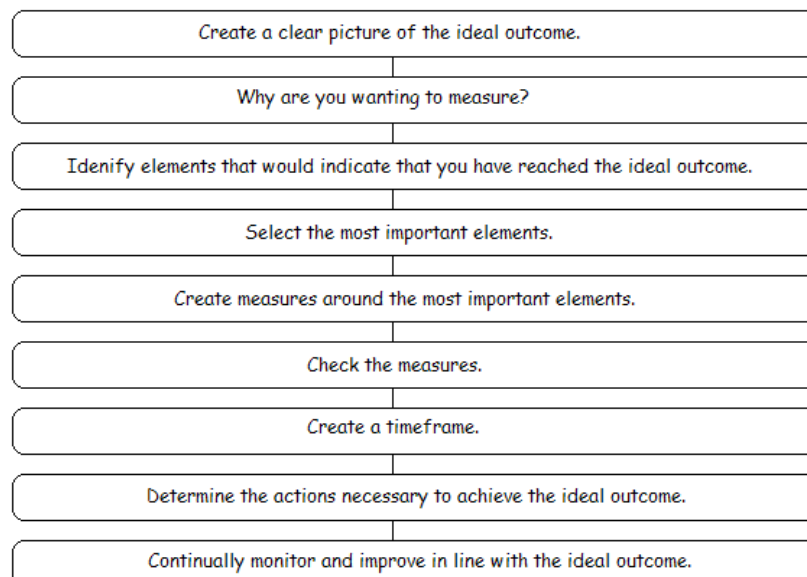


Figure 10: A Summary of the Forward Measurement Technique

10. The Improvement Cycle

This technique is readily adaptable to any service or process improvement framework that your team or organization may have adopted. The sections under 'Methodology', below, relate to Figure 11. Often, we do not spend enough time reviewing, reflecting and learning from what is going on around us. Once we have made appropriate time available for these activities, the key thing the Improvement Cycle provides is a common language for continuous improvement.

Method

Plan

- Gain a clear understanding of what you are aiming to accomplish by defining the problem or process that is under review (*Understand*).
- Define the current process relating to the issue and establish the root causes of any problems identified (*Analyse*). Brainstorming, The Five Whys, and Flowcharting may all be useful tools here.
- Develop the detail of what needs to be done (*Organize*).
- Use the information and analysis to develop a SMART Action Plan (*Prioritise*). The Effort Impact Graph and Forced Pair Comparison may assist here.

Do

- Implement the action plan, as a pilot if possible. Monitor progress and learning points.

Review

- Review and evaluate the results/outcomes of actions taken. Ask yourself the following questions: Are we getting the results we anticipated? What else is happening? What can we learn from the results? Using the SWOT Analysis framework may be beneficial during such reviews.

Act

- Reflect on learning. Understand what needs to be done differently and establish a new SMART Action Plan.

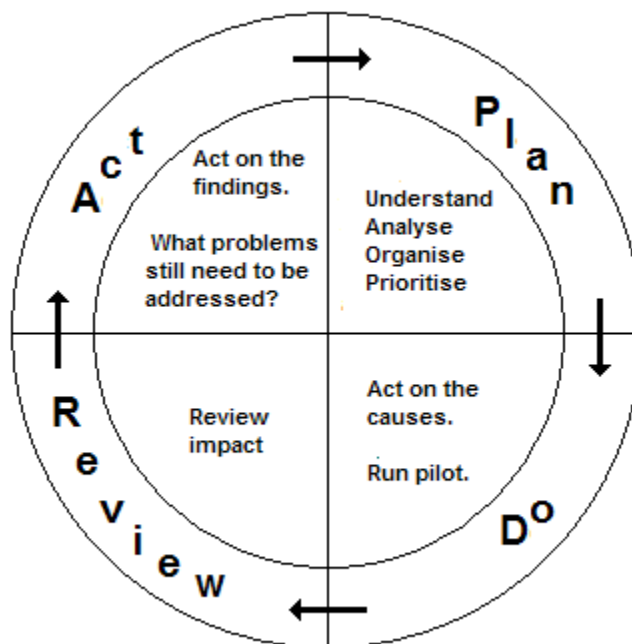


Figure 11: The Improvement Cycle

11. Influence and Control

This tool provides a visual representation of where issues or opportunities fit in terms of our ability to influence or control them. The key here is that we often have less control than we think or feel we have – particularly in an increasingly networked and ‘connected’ world where ‘control’ can only relate to our own behaviour and ‘influence’ *may* relate to the behaviour of others, i.e. we can rarely control the behaviour of agencies outside of ourselves unless draconian measures are taken. It is critical that we remain realistic over what we actually have influence and control over, particularly as the boundaries of influence and control are often in a state of dynamic flux. Furthermore, we should always fully understand the reasons behind why we seek to have influence and control. It is often on the basis of these reasons (and in making them explicit) that success depends.

Method

1. Establish the list of components that contribute to the issue you wish to control or influence. Brainstorming may be of assistance in this first step.
2. Go through the list and consider, for each component, whether you or your team/organization can:
 - Influence and control the component?
 - Influence but not control the component?
 - Neither influence nor control the component?
3. Place each component in the appropriate space in the diagram (see Figure 12 below, which illustrates the technique in relation to taking part in a yacht race!).
4. Focus on the issues that are in the centre of the Influence and Control template, i.e. those that you can both influence and control. These can be taken forward using one or more of the other tools outlined in this guide, e.g. Effort Impact Graph, Forced Pair Comparison, Force Field analysis, Systems Thinking and, of course SMART Action Planning.
5. For issues that fall into the next category, i.e. influence but no control, maybe use Influence Diagrams to increase the effectiveness of your influence.
6. For issues in the outer category, no influence and no control, be aware of the impact these may have on the issues you can influence or control, but limit the time spent discussing them. Remember, they are *outside* of your influence or control!
7. Based on the actions you identify, draw-up a SMART Action Plan.

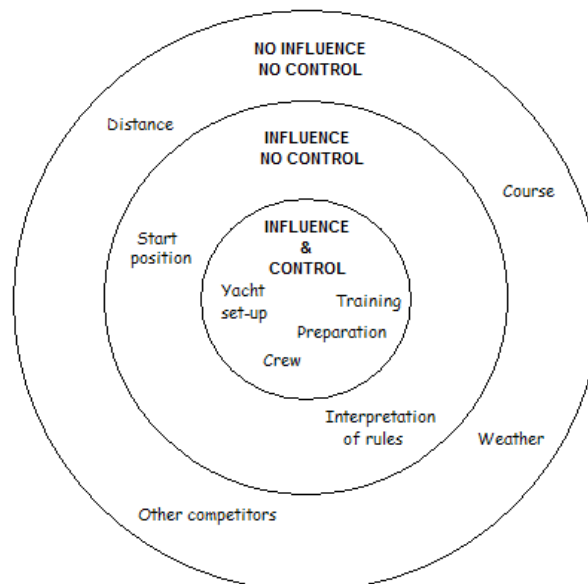


Figure 12: Influence and control in a yacht race

12. Influence Diagrams

This technique provides a picture of the multiple factors that influence an issue or problem, thus facilitating a deeper understanding of the situation prior to generating a solution. However, it is important to keep it manageable, so identify no more than ten to fifteen factors in your final analysis and, if necessary, restrict the causal/influence relationships to the most major ones.

Method

1. Agree a common understanding of the issue in hand and summarise this in a short sentence.
2. Determine all of the factors that influence the issue or problem, possibly using Brainstorming, The Five Whys, Flowcharting, Force Field Analysis, Influence Diagrams and/or Systems Thinking.
3. Arrange the factors in a circle, leaving plenty of space for adding arrows at the next stage.
4. Explore the causal/influence relationships between each factor and connect them with arrows. Use the arrow heads to denote the direction of causation/influence.
5. Total the number of in-going and out-going arrows for each factor and then redraw the diagram to include these numbers.
6. Highlight the factor that has the most out-goings as the likely driver of the issue.
7. Highlight the factor that has the most in-goings as a likely key outcome.
8. Initially focus your further attention on the driver as this is likely to be your point of greatest leverage.
9. Based on your analysis, draw-up a SMART Action Plan.

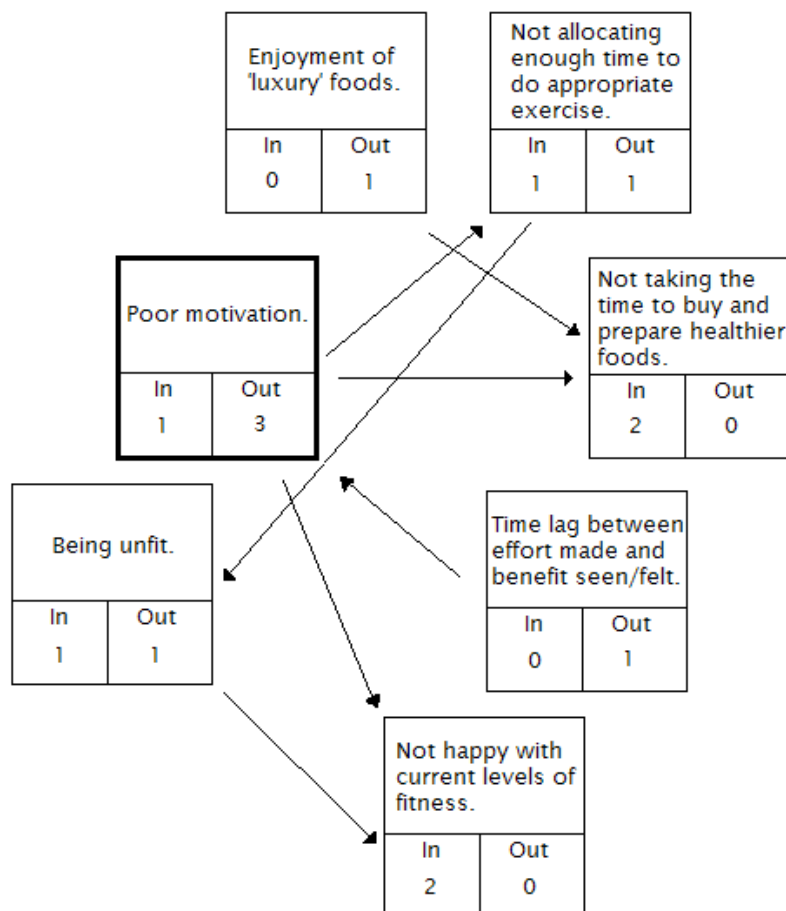


Figure 13: An influence diagram for 'getting fitter'

13. SWOT Analysis

This tool provides a snapshot of a situation, highlighting areas of strength, weakness, opportunity and threat. It can be used in any review situation and, when discussing the issues raised, it is not important as to whether or not they are in the “right” box!

Method

1. Draw-up a grid as shown in Figure 14 below.
2. Brainstorm the content for each box, for as long as ideas keep being generated.
3. Discuss the outputs and consider actions to:
 - Maximise strengths;
 - Compensate for weaknesses;
 - Exploit the opportunities;
 - Reduce the threats.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

Figure 14: Template for a SWOT Analysis

14. Option Generation (TOWS)

This framework provides a list of potential actions based on the team's or organization's perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This is an important technique because it can be highly unproductive to make decisions based on biased and unrealistic information about potential. A feature of this approach is that it is logical and creates a large amount of data.

Method

1. Complete a SWOT analysis for the issue in hand.
2. Summarise the main outputs on a chart as suggested in Figure 15 below.
3. Work through the chart by comparing pairs of statements. For example, take the first strength and compare it to the first opportunity.
4. Generate ideas to address or exploit the combination.
5. Repeat the process for all combinations.
6. On the basis of your analysis, develop a SMART Action Plan.

	Strengths	Weaknesses
	<p>I know, and have used, many tools and techniques.</p> <p>I am enthusiastic about the benefits I have experienced by using the techniques to be included in this guide.</p>	<p>I'm not a 'completer/finisher' (in the Belbin sense).</p>
<p>Opportunities</p> <p>A management techniques and tools guide is applicable to every manager, at every level within an organization.</p> <p>Most current guides are not user-friendly and contain much jargon.</p> <p>I have many contexts in which to trial this 'project'.</p>	<p>Use my experience of what I hear others say they find unappealing in management texts.</p> <p>Trial successive drafts with interested potential end-users (e.g. Action Learning sets, Management Diploma candidates, executive coaches).</p>	<p>Set this piece of work as a 'school holidays project', i.e. only work on successive drafts when I'm not in the main flow of my other work.</p> <p>Do 'little and often' without too much concern with the amount of task remaining.</p>
<p>Threats</p> <p>A lot of my effort may be expended for little tangible return.</p> <p>Given my work and family commitments, I may not complete the work.</p>	<p>Attempt to find a 'market' for the final product that is outside of my traditional consultancy and development work.</p> <p>Design a course to fit with the final product.</p>	<p>Accept that this is, for me, CPD and don't have strong expectations regarding the potential of my efforts to be tangibly rewarded.</p>

Figure 15: Option generation exercise related to the writing of this guide

15. Radar Charts

This framework provides a graphical representation of actual performance in relation to targeted performance. It is, essentially, an analysis of how we are doing in comparison to how we want to be doing (reality vs. goal).

Method

1. Identify the area for analysis.
2. Select and define the rating categories (see example in Figure 16 below). It is important to be clear on how performance is being measured (i.e. against SMART objectives are the ideal). Brainstorming can be useful here.
3. Agree a scale for each of the categories.
4. Draw an appropriate wheel with a spoke for each category (see illustration in Figure 16). Label each spoke and add the scale.
5. Establish the target and current levels of performance against these scales and plot these on the chart.
6. Interpret and use the results, being clear that 'size of gap' and 'importance of category' are two separate variables, and these need to be considered in conjunction when establishing priorities.
7. Develop the appropriate SMART Action Plan.
8. Maybe, place the chart in a prominent place and use to plot progress.

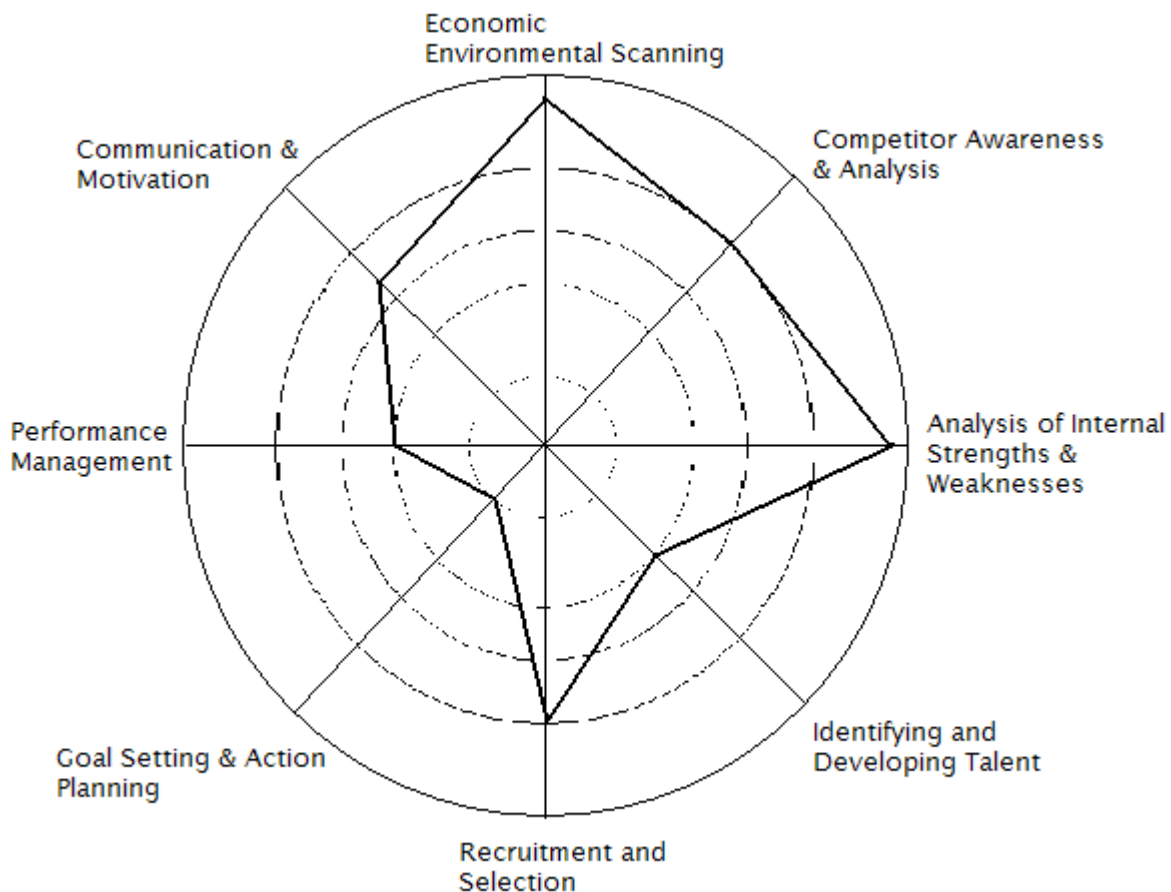


Figure 16: Radar charting 'Organizational Performance'

16. Risk Management

This tool facilitates an assessment of the risks to an organization or individual project in order that appropriate actions can be taken to minimise negative or undesirable outcomes. It is rarely possible to eliminate risk entirely, so it is important to make an informed assessment of acceptable risk, particularly as organizations (and individuals) thrive by taking appropriately managed risks.

Method

1. Brainstorm the risks associated with the issue in hand.
2. Position the risks within a template similar to that indicated in Figure 17 below. The horizontal axis relates to probability of the risk occurring whilst the vertical axis relates to the impact on the organization or project under consideration.
3. Determine the scale of the risk by multiplying the probability score with the impact score. The highest numbers represent the highest risks, and the full range of risks might then be listed in order of priority.
4. Establish appropriate SMART Action Plans to address the identified risks.

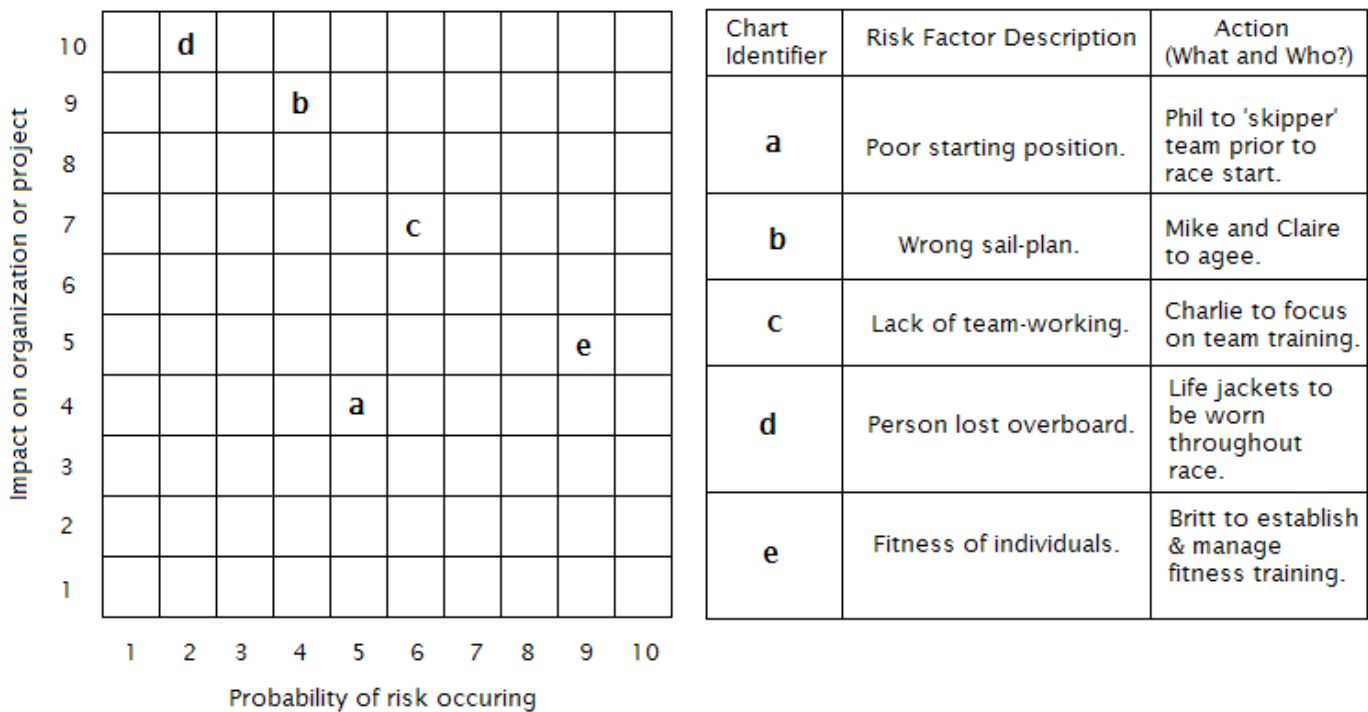


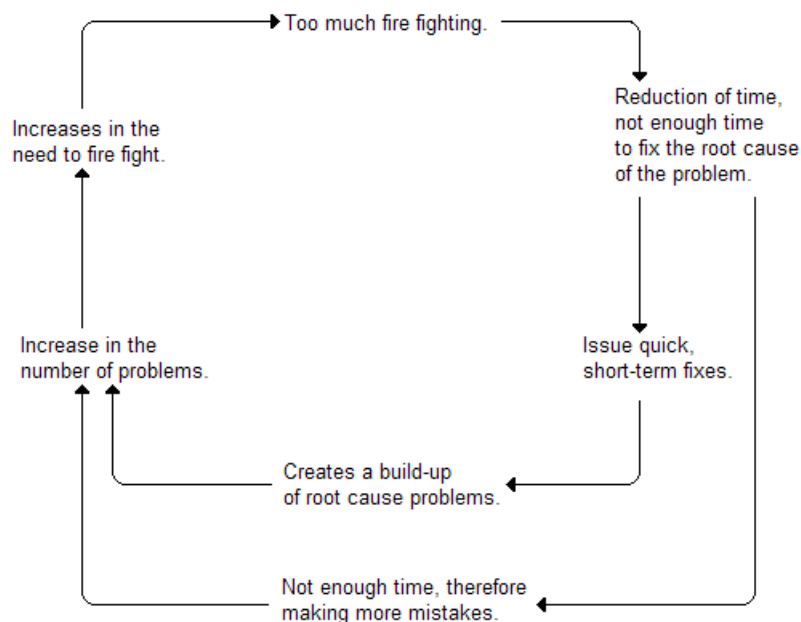
Figure 17: Risk Management in a yacht race

17. Systems Thinking

This framework provides a view of a whole system and the interrelationships between elements of that system. Given the increasing complexity of our world, most situations we find ourselves in are complex. Systems thinking is based on the premise that everything is connected in some way and by exploring the connections we generate a useful way to get a holistic picture of a situation. Essentially, systems thinking helps us to see reality more realistically! In itself, systems thinking encompasses a large number of methods, tools and principles. What follows is a brief introduction to one of the basics – causal loop diagrams.

Method

1. Define the start point or problem.
2. Consider the effects that this leads to. Use sentences such as “This in turn causes ...”, or “This in turn would cause ...” Map these onto a diagram linking them with arrows and ensuring that the direction of impact is indicated.
3. Continue to ask and note the consequential issues until ideas dry up.
4. Now revisit the loops and check that they are true, sufficient and complete.
5. Select the options or actions appropriate to creating your desired outcome.
6. Develop a SMART Action Plan.



Reading this systems diagram, it is possible to see a reinforcing loop. Somehow, the cycle needs to be broken if things are going to change. One possible solution may be to create a team to address the root causes of the backlog of problems. This will then create some space so that in future there will be the time to deal with the root causes rather than issuing quick fixes aimed at the symptoms.

Figure 18: A Systems Diagram for a well-know problem!

18. Consequence Analysis

This framework provides a structured way of checking the knock-on effects that a particular solution to a problem might cause, i.e. it is a means of exploring potential undesirable consequences. It can be used after identifying a solution to check that you aren't creating more problems. In essence, this is a simple visual technique that does not guarantee the success of a solution, but it does heighten awareness as to other problems that may be generated by a particular solution. This is really a cause and effect analysis in reverse.

Method

1. State clearly the proposed solution and write it on the left-hand side of a sheet of paper or flipchart, as shown in Figure 19 below.
2. Create a 'fish-bone' diagram that caters for the major areas that will be affected by the proposed solution.
3. Then, for each of the areas identified, ask the question, "What effects could this solution cause in the area of ... ?", capturing the answers on the diagram.
4. Continue asking until the list of consequences has been exhausted.
5. Review the diagram and consider which are the undesirable consequences.
6. Develop a SMART Action Plan that addresses the identified consequences or, alternatively, review the solution if it causes more problems than it solves.

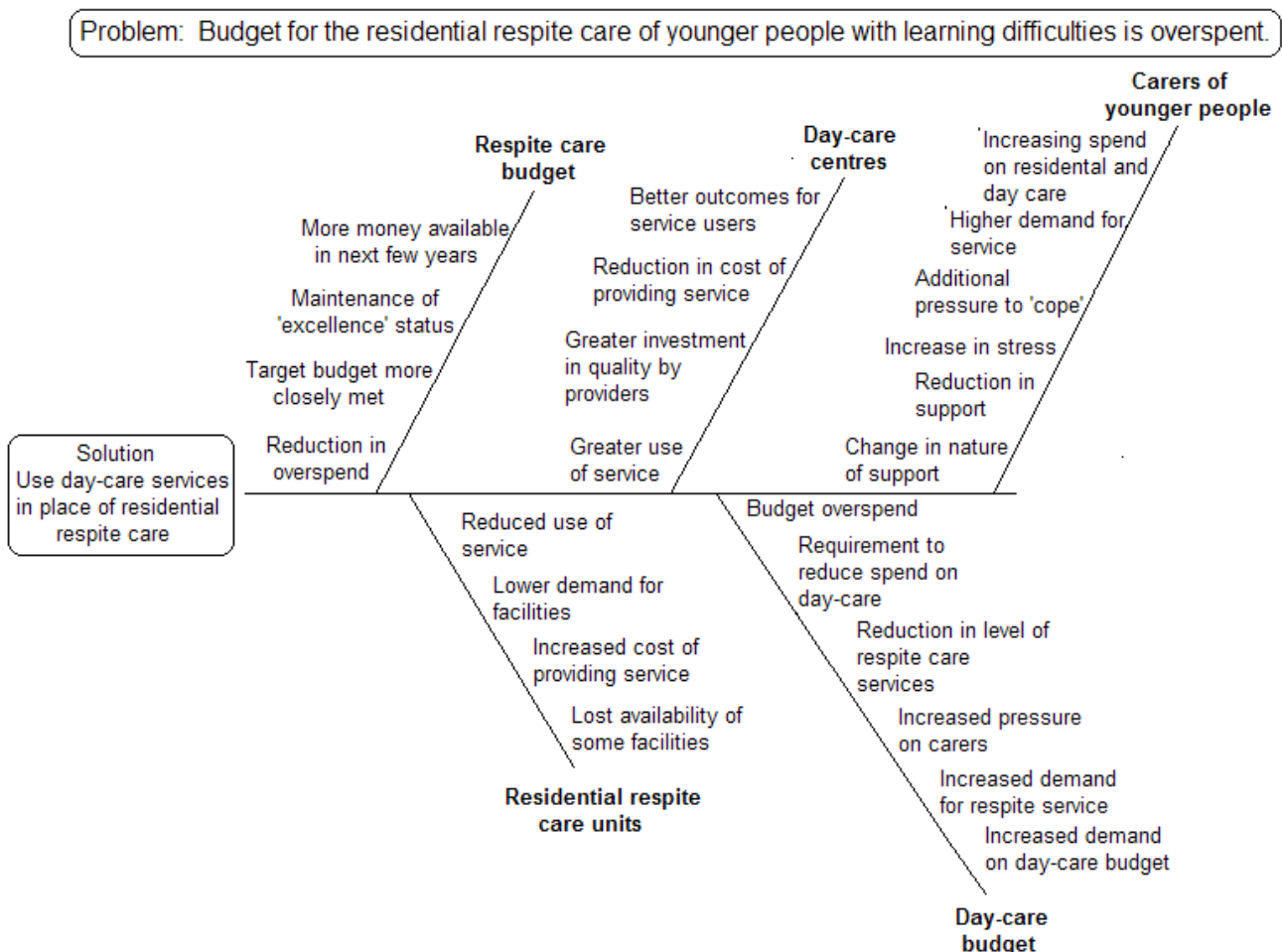


Figure 19: An illustration of a 'consequence analysis'

19. SMART Action Planning

Taking input from any of the tools or techniques provided in this guide, complete a template similar to that illustrated in the Figure below. This may seem tortuous at first, but persistence will be highly rewarded, as SMART Action Plans tend to be achieved!

Specific		Measureable	Agreed	Realistic	Timely
What, specifically, is to be achieved?	What are the specific actions that need to be taken?	What will be the key tangible measures of success?	Who needs to agree with this action to ensure its successful completion?	How realistic is it that this action can be fully achieved (given other pressures and constraints)?	What is it that makes this the right time to be pursuing this action?

Figure 20: The basis for an achievable plan