



Map of Reality

PURPOSE The Map of Reality is a collaborative reflection process that allows groups to generate a collective view of a series of activities and behaviors around a specific body of work in a given timeframe. This collective view supports group learning, decision-making, and collaborative action.

DESCRIPTION The Map of Reality allows a group of people to understand the complexity and interdependencies in their shared work. Participants are able to reflect on a body of work in which they have been engaged and understand it as more than a series of unrelated events; they begin to see the underlying patterns that connect them. Individuals' perceptions are revealed and aggregated in order to give the group a more accurate picture of the whole. The process produces qualitative data, insights, and understandings of a current reality that facilitate group learning toward achieving shared goals. The Map of Reality is a practice in the discipline of systems thinking that "provides a different way of looking at problems and goals—not as isolated events but as components of larger structures." (P. Senge, et. al. *Schools That Learn*, p. 78)

PREPARATION Before facilitating a map of reality reflection, make sure you have carefully considered the following questions:

- What is the purpose for engaging in this reflection?
- Have we chosen a specific body of work on which to reflect that is meaningful to all participants?
- Will the body of work be sufficiently complex so that no one participant has a complete picture?
- Should we use a *brainstormed* (generative, open-ended) or *bounded* (with a predetermined set of events and outcomes) map of reality process?
- How do we intend to use the data and insights generated by the map of reality process?

INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1: Determine the focus of the map of reality

Decide what timeframe (start and end times) and scope of work will be covered by the map of reality process.

Step 2. Decide whether to use a brainstormed or bounded map of reality

A *brainstormed* map of reality relies on the group of participants to fill in key events and outcomes that fall within the timeframe. Thus, it is a generative, open-ended process that allows everyone to describe the work as they saw it. A *bounded* map of reality, however, is based on a predetermined set of events and

outcomes. Participants in a bounded map of reality are not asked to come up with events and outcomes. Rather, they are asked to reflect on their experience and participation in a specific scope of work that is outlined to them.

Step 3. Set up the timeline

Using large chart paper (or whiteboards), create a timeline of the desired time period at the top. If this is to be a *brainstormed* map of reality, choose a set of categories (usually no more than six) to organize participants' responses. There is a great deal of flexibility in the categories that can be used, depending

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INSTRUCTIONS *continued*

on the purpose of the process; categories can be descriptive or interpretive.

Here are some suggested categories: **key decisions, critical events, memorable moments, key relationships, learning activities, purpose (content or focus) of meeting, critical decisions, important information, what's changed, and what's stayed the same.** Divide the timeline chart into rows, one for each of the categories you have chosen.

If this is to be a *bounded* map of reality, then add all the key events and outcomes to the timeline chart before beginning. Choose a few reflection questions for participants to answer and create a row on the timeline chart for each question. Here are some suggested questions: **"How did you participate?" "What showed up for you?" and "What did you learn?"**

Step 4. Invite participants to fill in the chart
Allocate at least 20 minutes for participants to write their responses on post-it notes and place them on the chart. In the brainstormed map of reality, they will be generating responses based on the categories selected. In the bounded map of

reality, they will be responding to the set of events and outcomes by answering the reflection questions. In the bounded map of reality, facilitators should tell the story of the events and outcomes on the timeline chart before participants start answering the questions.

Step 5. Do a gallery walk

After the responses have been placed on the timeline charts, ask participants to take at least ten minutes to walk around and silently read what was added.

Step 6. Reflect on the newly created map

In small groups, spend at least 20 minutes discussing the following questions: What patterns or trends did you see? What might be contributing to these patterns? What did you learn from this process? What implications does this map have for our future work? After the small-group discussion, gather as a whole group to hear responses from each small group.

Step 7. Bring closure to the process

Discuss what will be done with the data and insights generated. Create an ad-hoc group to plan for how the map will inform future work.

APPLICATIONS

We have used the map of reality process in different stages of a group's development. For instance, a map of reality can be helpful when a group is newly formed. Looking at past events from each individual's perspective can create a shared story that the group's future work can build on. We have also used it to reflect on a year's worth of work in school district partnerships, to look back and learn from long-term processes such as a baseline assessment of district literacy assets or the development of communities of practice in literacy instruction across schools.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The map of reality process is a practice in systems thinking, one of Peter Senge's five disciplines of learning organizations. The authors of *Schools that Learn* use a metaphor of an iceberg (p. 80) to explain ways of looking at reality. Above the surface are the events, but much more is beneath the surface: patterns and trends and the forces that contribute to them.

Senge, P. *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990

Senge, P., et al. *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education*. New York: Currency Doubleday, 2000