# Challenges in Facilitation

strategic situations, difficult people and conflict resolution
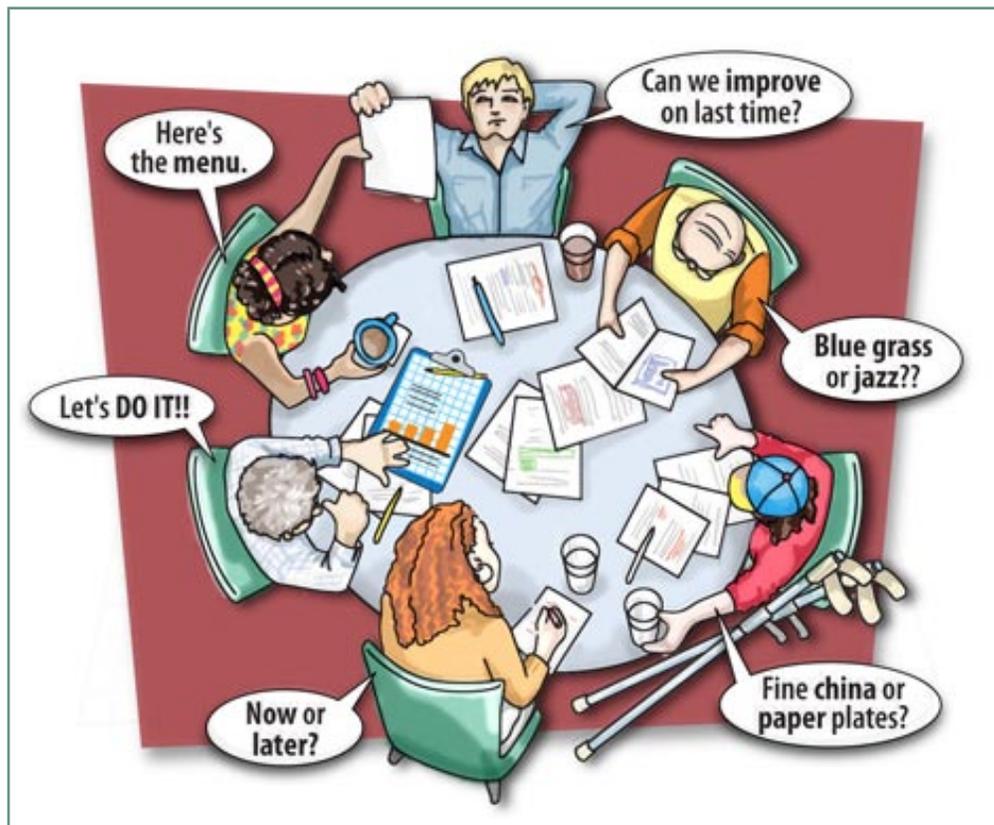
Meetings That Work
How-To Guide Supplement

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Challenges in Facilitation
a Healthy Systems How To Guide Supplement

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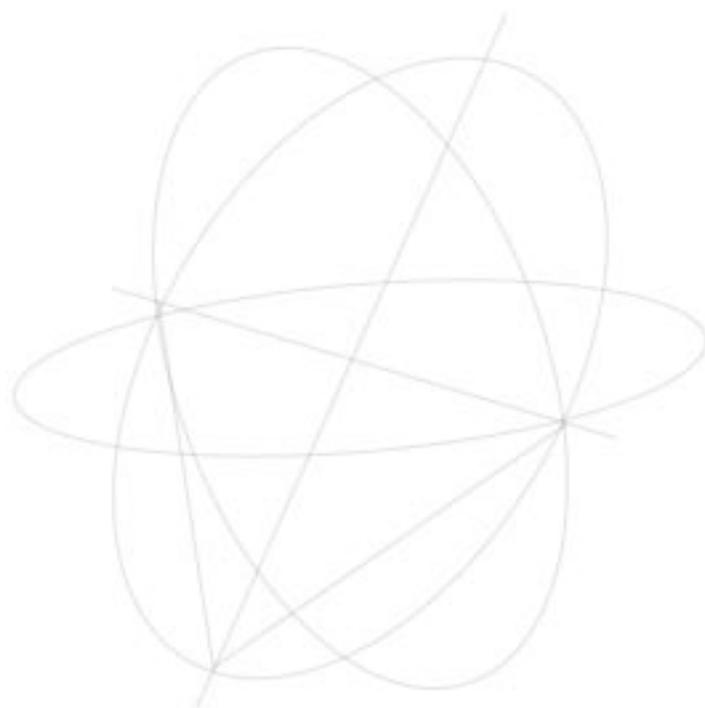
Challenges in Facilitation

INTRODUCTION

When a meeting is running smoothly, the process you are using works, the tool you are using is effective, and generally, team members are working together productively to reach one of the desired outcomes. What if this isn't the case?

Challenges happen despite our best planning and training. In this section, we will discuss ways to think and things to do when things just don't seem to be going well. For example, what if the process or tool you had planned to use is not working? Or what if group members are behaving in such a way that it feels difficult or impossible to make any progress?

This Supplement is divided into two parts. In the first part, Strategic Situations, we will be talking about what to do when the dynamics of the meeting shift, in moments of uncertainty or when something unexpected happens. In the second part, Difficult People and Conflict Resolution, we'll focus on a particular type of strategic situation that pertains to people and the difficult ways they sometimes behave both individually and interpersonally. We will explore appropriate attitudes and possible responses to conflict.

Strategic Situations

What is a Strategic Situation?

Strategic Situations are points during a meeting when change, insight or emphasis is needed. They can be planned, or come as a surprise. When they occur, some action is required, either by the team, the facilitator or both.

While planning the meeting and preparing the agenda, the facilitator is mapping out the territory that will be covered, including the different topics and processes, and the shifts that occur throughout the meeting as the group moves through the agenda. The facilitator tries to anticipate times in the meeting when a particular emphasis will be needed, e.g. dealing with a potentially contentious issue. Each of these points of change and emphasis are strategic situations, and it is helpful if the facilitator - to the extent possible - thinks strategically about how best to move through them.

This being said, no matter how well planned a meeting is, there are inevitably many unforeseen strategic situations - ones that even the most experienced facilitator would not be able to anticipate or plan for. In fact, one defining quality of many strategic situations is that the facilitator will not know what to do when they arrive. What if the process is no longer working? What if it appears that someone is blocking the group from making any progress? When these situations occur, it is the facilitator's role and responsibility to step in on behalf of people, process and/ or results, facilitate appropriately, and at times, provide choices and options to redirect the group.

Ways to recognize a Strategic Situation.

· Energy in the room gets compressed, anxious, angry.

· Energy in the room gets diffuse, scattered, distracted.

· New information is introduced that strongly captures the attention of the group or the facilitator.

· Team has completed one step in the agenda process.

· Members are getting off track.

· Ill-defined or random pieces of data coalesce -- Ah Ha!

What to do in Strategic Situations

There is no one right way to intervene and no perfect process or sequencing of steps for intervention. Trial and error, and learning to recognize prototypical situations with practice over time are often the best teachers. However, there are also several principles, which can help you in strategic situations - in particular "Intervene Judiciously and Strategically" and "Circle-Spiral-Circle."

Here, we will use Circle-Spiral-Circle (One of the Principles described in Part Two) as a framework for working through Strategic Situations. As a review, this principle provides a framework for orientation and action. The first circle describes current reality or where you are now; the second circle describes where you want to be; and the spiral depicts how to get there. The following is an outline of questions you can use to apply this principle in strategic situations.

Where we are... 1
Where we want to be. 2
3 How to get there...

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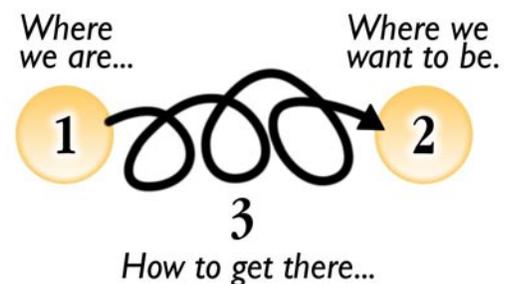
1. What's going on?

Data: What do you observe? What is the raw data?

Context: What might that imply? What broader issues might be relevant?

Questions: What more do you need to know?

2. Where do we want to be?

Goal: What do you need to accomplish in this situation/overall?

3. How can we get there?

Principles: What strategic principles might apply?

Choices and Options: what are some options for facilitation?

- verbal options - what do I say?

- nonverbal options - what do I communicate with body language?

- timing - when is the best time to do so?

Difficult People and Conflict Resolution

What causes conflict and what is its significance for the facilitator ?

The role of the facilitator is to focus on people, process and results. One of the biggest challenges in helping a group to follow a process to reach a goal, can be working with people. Sometimes - for any number of reasons – as facilitator, it will seem that one, several or even most of the people in the group are being "difficult" or in conflict with each other or you. And as a result, it may be seem impossible to keep the meeting on track. "Difficult" people may also make you feel uncomfortable, frustrated or fearful. How can we respond to these situations effectively? Is there a way we can behave that will minimize the chances of them arising in the first place?

In this section, we will provide a framework for dealing with "difficult" people. It is based on the reality that often we help to create our own difficult people because of basic misunderstanding. While it is true that everyone has the potential to behave in ways which may be challenging for others to deal with, it is also true that often we mis-perceive what is happening, and respond inappropriately. This then creates an escalating cycle of tension which increases our perception that there is a problem with the other person or people. In meetings, this dynamic can occur between any combination of people: group members and facilitator alike.

The primary strategy for managing difficult people and conflict is to try to reframe our understanding of what is going on. When we observe what is happening with care and from a detached viewpoint, we are able to identify underlying causes, as well as appropriate response. With practice, we can develop our observational skills to the point where we can sense potential difficulties arising before they are apparent to the group, and resolve them before they become issues.

This section has two parts. First, we will discuss ways to reframe our view of difficult people and conflict. This will include a look at common causes and possible responses. We will then discuss issues of self-awareness, and the role of the facilitator in any difficult situation: you may be part of the problem and can always be part of the solution.

Part One: Reframing Our View

Tensions and conflicts can arise in meetings due to personal issues, as well as process or content related issues, or some combination of these. Often our own misunderstanding of the causes can intensify the problem. Therefore, one of the most important things we can do when these situations occur is simply be aware and observe. By observing carefully, we gain insight into what is happening, and an understanding of possible responses. Learning to do this takes practice. However, there are some basic ways that misunderstanding and conflict can arise in groups, as well as methods of responding. We present these below.

We speak in terms of a "difficult person" and the group. This presumes that one person is pitted against the entire group and vice versa. While this can happen, of course it may be that several people are in conflict with each other, or with the entire group and so on.

Why a "Difficult" Person or Conflict Arises

· Someone may be raising a difficult issue which others don't want to face. When this happens, the group can turn on the person who is raising the issue - labeling them as difficult or a problem. The facilitator needs to help people be aware of what is happening, protect the individual who is being tar-

geted, and redirect the group's focus to the issue level. A helpful principle to follow is Accept, Legitimize, Deal, Defer, which is addressed fully in the Principles section of this manual.

· Someone may not be aware of how they are behaving. We all do things we don't intend to sometimes, simply because we are unaware. Gentle and low-keyed feedback from the facilitator can easily bring people back on course. This will protect the individual and, if done soon enough, will keep the group from going off track.

· Someone may be feeling tense, uncomfortable or otherwise out of sorts. All of us have "dark" sides - things, people and issues that cause us to feel tension and act it out. Usually, when people behave this way within groups, it's hard for others to not react or take it personally. The facilitator's role is to protect the person and the group. Be patient and non-reactionary with the individual, and do or say what is necessary to alleviate his or her struggle. At the same time, be sure the other members of the group feel protected and safe.

· Someone may be intentionally creating conflict within the group. In this case, the most important thing the facilitator can do is stay firm and manage the tension - which means not let the person's behavior throw you off. If you can do this, it will help everyone in the group better withstand the difficult person's behavior.

· People may be in conflict at a "position" level (see Meetings That Work Part Two: Principles) - unaware that they have underlying common interests. Principled Negotiation may be useful to bring people below the position level to the interest level, where they may find common ground. This is discussed in more detail in the Principles section.

· People may be in genuine disagreement. Of course there is nothing wrong with honest, straightforward difference of opinion. It's actually healthy. However, if all the tools for building agreements and all of the principles seem to be failing to bring people together, it may be necessary to accept the disagreement and, if using consensus, switch to the fallback option such as voting.

· One or several group members may be in an escalating cycle of misunderstanding and tension which has little to do with anything. People can often end up in conflict for very small, insignificant reasons. When the facilitator stays centered, remains non-defensive, and aware of the group dynamics, it's easier to see these struggles when they arise and help to alleviate them before they get out of hand.

As the above examples illustrate, when a person is labeled by a group as "difficult" it is usually not as simple as that. Conflict can arise in a group for many reasons. Causes can be multiple and hard to unravel. In addition, when a person behaves - for whatever reason - in ways that are perceived as difficult, a cycle sets in which tends to build on itself, making that person seem even more difficult and increasing tension in the group.

For example, if Person A wants to bring up an issue which people have been avoiding, Person A might feel frustrated, nervous or anxious while mentioning it. Others might mis-perceive Person A's discomfort as aloofness or arrogance, state that Person A is being difficult and the issue is not important. Person A, in turn, will no doubt feel these different reactions from the group, and become more uncomfortable, which increases the group's reactions, and so forth.

The most important thing a facilitator can do in a challenging situation is to anticipate and recognize these patterns and then head them off (deflect, dissolve, resolve) before the cycles described above get started. The needed facilitative behavior will depend entirely on the situation. For example, if someone shows signs of discomfort and hesita-

tion, the facilitator can ask them how they're doing and encourage them to speak up. On the other hand, if someone is beginning to talk beyond the appropriate time, the facilitator can do what is appropriate to let him or her know. In both cases, the facilitator is giving the individual a way out before any conflict spreads to the entire group. In either example, the facilitator intervenes so that the group doesn't need to be involved.

If conflict has already escalated, the facilitator's role is to help the difficult person and help the group itself - to protect everyone from the dynamic at work. The appropriate words or action will vary in every situation. Beware of falling to one of two extremes: being a overly passive doormat that does too little, or an overly intervening control freak that dominates. Both approaches arise from fear and insecurity, and both can and will backfire. If, as facilitator, you have as your highest priority staying centered and aware yourself, it will be easier to find the appropriate response.

The situations we have been discussing - involving "difficult" people and conflict resolution, are all types of strategic situations, which are discussed more generally in the previous section of this manual, entitled "Strategic Situations."

2. The Role of the Facilitator: Be Part of the Solution

Your Presence Matters

It is important, as a facilitator, to be aware of what role we play in any situation that arises in the team. Essentially, whatever is going on in the team - whatever - by our presence, we have some influence. How we use this influence is up to us. If things get difficult, it's very easy to see the challenge as "out there" - in another person or people. While this may well be the case, it's also true that, as facilitator, we are always, to at least some degree, part of what is going on. We cannot completely separate ourselves from the rest of the "system." Therefore, we are never completely isolated from the problem. This means we may be part of the problem and it certainly means we have leverage or influence in resolving the problem. In fact, the group looks to us to avoid and resolve problems.

Be Part of the Solution

The entire time you are facilitating, you are striving to select the appropriate group process to help the group get to its desired outcomes, and to take care of people. If members are being difficult or members are in conflict for whatever reason, the first thing to do is ask "have I done anything, or am I doing anything to contribute to this situation?"

If the answer to this is "yes" then the first step is to acknowledge that to yourself, clarify your perception with the group and, if appropriate, apologize and make any necessary changes. There is no reason to be defensive. If we are defensive, we will misread what's going on and then everything we do will either not help or make things worse. If we can avoid becoming defensive, we have far better chances of helping. As soon as we adjust our own behaviors, attitudes or strategy, we are able to begin helping others and to become part of the solution.

Part Three: The Facilitator (the Person section of this guide) provides additional information on the personal state of the facilitator and the skills needed to stay balanced when dealing with conflict and interpersonal difficulties.

EXERCISES: Practice in Strategic Situations

An Explanation of the Framework for What-If Scenarios

There are many strategic situations that arise in meetings -- points when the facilitator may need to intervene on behalf of the PEOPLE, PROCESS or DESIRED OUTCOMES. In general, we can say that you facilitate only when needed - no more and no less. but, how do you decide what is needed, how much is needed and when it might be appropriate?

There is no absolutely right way to facilitate. However, a great way to begin building your skills and your confidence is to consider your options for facilitating. And a great place to start is to build on your own experience in meetings, looking at situations where you have felt unsure, nervous, frustrated or lost. We will call these "What Ifs" scenarios.

For each of the What Ifs that we consider in this exercise, we will apply a framework to follow in analyzing strategic situations.

The framework asks four questions:

1. What is the situation - what is the raw data? (Analyze What)

Data: What do you observe?

Context: What might that imply? What broader issues might be relevant?

Questions: What more do you need to know?

2. When might I intervene? (Evaluate When)

Process, Tools, Principle: When in the process shall I intervene? What strategic principles might apply?

3. How and why would I intervene? (Evaluate How and Why)

4. What are some options for what to say or do? (Consider Options)

Options: What are some options for facilitation?

Verbal: What do you say?

Non Verbal: What do you communicate or indicate with body language?

Exercise #1: How Do Your Deal with Conflict?

PART A

1-An argument with a family member

2-A disagreement with a colleague (peer) at work

3-A disagreement with a boss

PART B

Brainstorm and discuss your own responses to conflict. Make a list.

PART C

Analyze which responses to conflict are effective and why.

#2 What If Scenarios for the Facilitator

If you have a group of in-house facilitators or facilitators-in-training, work through this list over time to explore options for facilitation in various Strategic Situations. Brainstorm your own list as well.

1. What to Do if Conflict?

2. What to Do if two people with opposing views start to argue

3. What to Do if No Agenda?

4. What to Do if I have agreed to facilitate a meeting and when we get to the room, I discover that the group does not have an agenda?

5. What to Do if Leader Takes Over?

6. What to Do if the leader who asked me to facilitate is trying to control outcomes, do I call time on process?

7. What to Do if Confusion Over Issue?

8. What to Do if the members of the group keep broadening the conversation and changing the process, instead to coming up with solutions to the stated problem?

9. What if Members Abandon the Agenda?

10. What to Do if the members of the group start saying things like "should we try..?" or "why can't we talk about...?", or "this isn't getting us anywhere!"?

11. What to Do if There Are Non Participants?

12. What to Do if two members of five member team who were participating are now not participating, leaning back in their chairs?

13. What to Do if Eyes Roll?

14. What to Do if members of the team roll their eyes and glance at one another every time a certain person speaks?

15. What if the Scribe Edits

16. What to Do if the scribe repeatedly chooses not to write down all of a members comments, picks different words, and ignores the keys words and phrases that you repeat back to them?

17. What if Time is Up?

18. What to Do if whether it be a section of the Agenda, or the end of the meeting, if the time is up?

19. What if Action Items Are Not Completed?

20. What to Do if certain people in the team either do not complete their Action Items, or completed them late?

21. There are several leaders/decisions makers, all of whom have authority over you as facilitator.

22. Someone announces that she/he is going to disrupt the process

23. You are facilitating a bunch of facilitators

24. You have strong process people and strong solution/action people in the same room

25. There are no volunteers for the Action Items again and again

26. The audience is partially hostile

27. The leader of the group steps in and gives "wrong" information about the process/project and they have clout and an ego. The team goes off track as a result.

28. Every time a person makes a suggestions, the rest of the team expects that this person will carry it out (not picking up responsibility).

29. The sponsor of the team is not organized and has no real vision for the team

30. I am asked to facilitate a meeting and find that there is no agenda when I get to the room

31. What if I am asked to facilitate an on going group and they do not have ground rules but it is apparent that they need them.

32. There are several leaders/decisions makers, all of whom have authority over you as facilitator.

33. Your boss called the meeting and although he says it will be a group decision, it's clear he has a plan already in mind.

34. A member announces that she/he hates the process

35. You are facilitating a bunch of facilitators

36. You have strong process people and strong solution/action people in the same room

37. There are no volunteers for the Action Items again and again

38. The audience is partially hostile, and two people start to argue.

39. It's time for the meeting to start and half the people aren't there.

40. The leader of the group steps in and gives "wrong" information about the process/project and they have clout and an ego. The team goes off track as a result.

41. Every time a person makes a suggestions, the rest of the team expects that this person will carry it out (not picking up responsibility).

42. The sponsor of the team is not organized and has no real vision for the team

43. I am asked to facilitate a meeting and find that there is no agenda when I get to the room

44. What if I am asked to facilitate an on going group and they do not have ground rules but it is apparent that they need them.

#3 What-if Scenarios for Non-Facilitators

If you have a group of in-house facilitators or team members who are familiar with facilitation and its power to support good decisions, use the list below as a starting point for a discussion of how to handle difficult "What-If" strategic situations if you are NOT the facilitator

1. The facilitator can't facilitate

2. The facilitator does not have an agenda

3. I have an idea for a tool that I think can help

4. The team is in two different processes at the same time and the facilitator doesn't pick up on it.

5. What if at the meeting, we realize that the regular facilitator will not be there and the team wants to meet without a facilitator.

6. The team members are sick of structure and meeting standards and want to forego the Agenda for awhile. The facilitator has no authority to demand that there be an agenda.

7. The recorder wrote down something that I didn't say...wrote down something that someone else did not say. (mis-interpreted) and the facilitator did not catch it.

#4 Gator Gallery Role Play

PURPOSES:

1) To understand that there are many kinds of "gators," (or difficult people) to explore what they look like, and to understand that difficult behavior has a legitimate reason underlying it.

2) To gain practice in dealing with difficult people, and in recognizing that there is more than one option for dealing with difficult people, and a framework for deciding.

Steps:

A) Create your own gallery of Gators. Thinking of all the various people who have caused "problems" in your meetings, characterize them by giving them a name such as "Difficult Dan" or "Silly Sally" or Talkative Tommy".

B) Post your list of Gators.

C) Explain to your group of practicing facilitators that you will now role play each Gator profile. Your will send one person at a time out of the training room. The remaining group will select one Gator to portray.

D) Call the person that is IT back into the training room and have them begin a meeting (provide a pre-designed agenda and use it throughout this game/exercise).

E) Portray the "gator" as the facilitator tries to move the meeting forward.

F) the Round of play os over when the Facilitator identifies the Gator and the Gator's "difficulty".

SERIES DESCRIPTION
Meetings That Work How-To Guides

This Series of Healthy Systems How-To Guides focuses on managing and facilitating effective, efficient and collaborative meetings. The Guides in this series consist of 1) The Process and Tools for running a meeting, 2) The Principles and Mental Models that underlie and support the Agenda, 3) The Personal Skills and Practices that help all members of the team artfully navigate unique and challenging situations and 4) Special Topics including Strategic Situations and informal or Unconventional Meeting formats.

Process: Before, Start, During, End and After

The first section of this manual lays out a step by step PROCESS for running an efficient and effective meeting. This section comprises the obvious things we do to plan and run a meeting. It begins with what needs to be done Before the meeting, then discusses what happens at the Start, During and End of a meeting, and finally, what needs to be done After a meeting. In addition, the basic tools needed to successfully complete each phase of the meeting process are presented and explained.

Principles

Underlying the basic meeting process and tools is a set of PRINCIPLES upon which all successful meetings depend. These will be discussed in the second section of the manual. Principles may be thought of as invisible mind sets, mental models or truths. They are the foundation upon which the process lies, and also the conceptual ground or framework which supports meeting facilitators, leaders, or members, in their effort to help the meeting process run smoothly.

Person

The final section of the manual focuses on the PERSON who is facilitating the meeting. Successful meeting management and facilitation requires more than a knowledge of process and principles; it requires a set of personal skills -- mind and heart-sets, if you will, and a belief that who and how we are effects those around us and their capacity to work well as a group or team. The PERSON section focuses on the less tangible qualities of a successful facilitator.

The Series as a whole provides experienced facilitators, would-be-facilitators, meeting leaders and members alike a thorough framework for mastery: the process steps, the tools, the truths and models and the personal practices to run or effectively participate in meetings. This series of self-contained guides will help you become an astute diagnostician of meetings – to recognize if a meeting is going poorly or well and why. In addition, it will provide you with increased choices and options to help make your meetings more effective.

We focus on the role of the facilitator in particular but the information in this Series can be used by anyone who participates in meetings of any type and in any setting. Whatever your particular interest is, we hope you find it helpful.

Healthy Systems Product Guide

You have just completed one in a series of the How-To Guides. All of our How-To Guide are aligned with Healthy Systems' leadership and management model. The table below and the graphic to the left place this Guide into a broader context and provide a sampling of the topics covered in other **Healthy Systems products**.

Content	Process – steps	Principles – guidance	Person – Audience
Identity and Direction	Steps include Strategic purposing, planning and contextual analysis.	If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there. Identity is self-organizing.	Executive Leadership Leaders at all levels Management
Process Design	Define, Map what is, Evaluate, Redesign, Test and Standardize To	Processes are designed to serve the goals and strategies of the organization.	Operations Managers Quality Improvement Teams
Project Management	Define, Plan, Start, Execute, Close	Cross boundaries judiciously	Project Managers Teams
Meetings	Start up through Wrap up	First Understanding and then agreement	Facilitators Teams
Relationships and Teams	Establish intention, connect, communicate, collaborate and keep conflict productive.	Relationships are the most personal and meaningful way to practice integration and alignment.	All people, all positions
Culture	Design it, Align it through story telling,, surface assumptions, reinforce and celebrate	Surface assumptions Define Values Create heroes that define your ideal culture.	All people, all positions
Corporate Wellness	Steps to take to create a wellness initiatives in your company, including wellness goals and metrics in your strategic plan.	There is a reciprocal relationship between the health of the organization and the well being of the people who work there.	All people, all positions
Design and Change	A developmental model to navigate change. Involving, designing,, bridging gaps, maintaining relevance, redesigning, and diffusing	Structure dictates functioning	Organization Development Leaders at all levels Managers
Healthy Organization	Integrating all the processes above and knowing how they work together to create and sustain vitality.	Focus on flow, integration and alignment. Release tensions and bottlenecks.	Organization Development Leaders at all levels Managers

Healthy Systems
THE HEART OF BUSINESS

About Healthy Systems

Healthy Systems is a management consulting firm that aligns and integrates the people, processes and strategic directions of an organization—for the health of the organization and the well-being of its employees.

We train and coach organizations in the dynamics of complex systems and in the skills, tools and strategies for creating and sustaining a vital and balanced workplace.

Healthy Systems works in collaboration with organization development and training specialists to meet your specific and customized needs.

Healthy Systems provides consulting and customized training for organizational effectiveness, focusing on methods to create and sustain vitality and relevance in meetings, projects, processes, planning and interpersonal relationships.

About Sara Grigsby

Sara Grigsby has worked professionally as an organizational development consultant, trainer and facilitator since 1985, providing project-based management, coaching, training and event facilitation services to a variety of corporate, public agency and health care clients. Sara is the founder of Healthy Systems and its lead consultant.

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