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Tuning Your PATH

The process of creating a PATH often generates excitement and commitment. What sort of change results from the process depends on how PATHfinder's follow-up and build on the work done in the creation. Three kinds of follow-up matter:

- Actually taking the first steps PATHfinders commit to making during the process
- Checking how things have changed and what has been learned and making action plan revisions after each month or two's work.
- Taking time to study and tune the PATH soon after completing it.

This guide outlines questions useful in tuning a PATH so that it will make the greatest possible contribution to achieving positive and possible change. It is based on experience that teaches the power to generate and sustain creative action that comes when people hold the tension between an important, vividly expressed goal and an honest account of current reality.*

Think of the process outlined here as like tuning an instrument to assure a true sound or like tuning an engine to assure maximum sustainable power and efficiency. It's important, but not nearly as exciting as the process of creating the PATH itself. It's a sort of tinkering: testing in different ways and trying adjustments to see if they lead to improvements. Tuning can sometimes reveal more serious problems like a conflict of purpose or commitment swept away in the excitement and positive feeling of a PATH meeting that reemerges when the emotional temperature cools. Not everyone will find tuning fun to do and sometimes people might want to avoid it for fear of exposing conflicts or disrupting a positive mood.

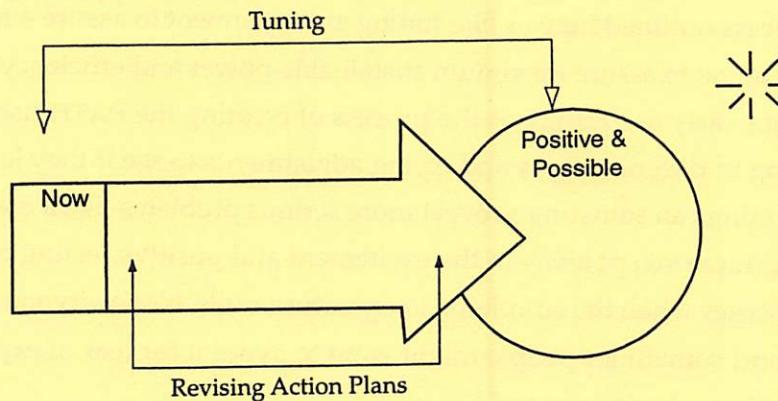
When to tune a PATH? First, while the results on the display are still vivid, but after the satisfaction of working hard and well on creating the PATH has passed into memory, maybe the day after the meeting maybe after a few days. Then after some time as

* PATH adopted this insight from the work of Robert Fritz, a composer and student and teacher of creating, who calls this phenomenon "structural tension". This tuning guide modified to suit PATH from a checklist in Robert Fritz (1999). *The path of least resistance for managers: Designing organizations to succeed*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers (www.bkpub.com). Any PATH facilitator will find this book well worth studying.

passed in order to clarify and deepen expression of the goal and current reality in light of experience.

Who does the tuning? The person or team committed to create the changes the PATH points toward. If a whole team can't gather, one or a few members can take responsibility for answering the tuning questions and bringing their answers to the next team meeting for discussion.

What's the **focus**? Tuning is different from revising action plans in the light of experience. Revising action plans adjusts how pathfinders move from the current reality to the goal defined by the PATH. Tuning focuses on the opposite ends of the PATH arrow to check that both the goal and current reality are expressed as powerfully as they can be. It is worth keeping these two important processes separated because people and teams are easily tempted to commit the fatal error of noticing that action plans haven't worked well and then shifting their goal downward to match the results, which relaxes the tension necessary to creation. The focus of revising action plans is to correct the PATH finder's steps toward the goal. The focus of tuning is to make the tension between the goal and current reality clearer and stronger for the PATH finder.



What about **timing**? PATH will lead nowhere unless we move into action. Tuning could become a way to avoid action if we use it compulsively. Spending an hour or so talking through these questions –a few minutes each– will pay dividends.

Tuning the goal expression

Look thoughtfully at your expression of a positive and possible goal.

1. Is this the result we really want to create?

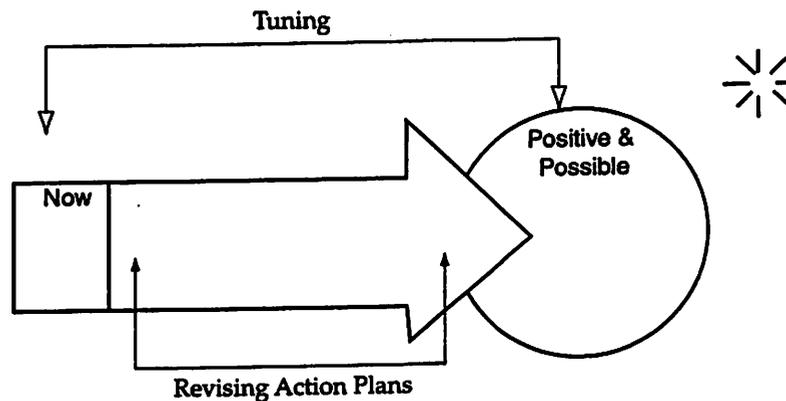
Put the goal into words by describing what things will look and sound and feel and smell and taste like when you have created what you want.

- Notice any places where it is hard to describe the goal.

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- Is the problem one of understanding or finding words? In that case, restate what you mean until it seems clear.
- Is the problem one of different team members having different understandings of the goal? In that case, negotiate until you have agreement.
- Make sure that the graphic images you choose are clear, vivid, and meaningful in expressing the goal. How well the images are drawn is secondary to your sense that an image really communicates something important about the result you want. Don't worry about translating images into words, look at the images
- Is there anything extra in the goal circle? What could you drop without losing anything important from your expression of the goal?

2. *Is this goal expressed as specifically as possible?*

Put numbers to whatever parts of the goal expression you can.

“We will welcome 50% (or all or 20) students who are now in other schools or segregated classrooms into ordinary classrooms with the accommodations and supports they need to contribute to a class of active learners” is more powerful than “We will practice inclusion throughout the school” because it is easy to judge whether the first goal has been met or exceeded.

“More than 10 groups have visited us from other communities to learn how we support families” is stronger than “We are innovators in family support.”

Translate comparative terms into actual statements of results.

“Better teamwork” is weak because it measures in terms of current reality rather than a positive and possible goal. A dysfunctional team could be doing better and still be horribly ineffective. Finding a stronger statement might take some thought. In this case it might help to talk more about exactly what people would take as a durable sign of insanely great teamwork.

If numbers aren't appropriate, be imaginative about replacing vague statements like “Sarah will be happy with her job” with stronger statements like “People who hear Sarah's story will be inspired and instructed about what mutual support in the workplace really means.”

3. *Are we creating results or solving problems?*

The purpose of problem solving is to make something go away. The purpose of PATH is to create something important. Be sure the goal expresses creation and building rather than elimination or avoidance.

“The group home will close on schedule and on budget” expresses something you want less of. “Each person living in the group home will live in a place of their own with the support, adaptations, and assistance they need to live comfortably and safely” expresses part of a result worth creating

4. *Are we describing actual results or only a process for achieving that result?*

Goals express *what* we want to create. Process tells *how* we think we will get there. The path goal circle should be about *what*, the steps of the PATH arrow about *how*. Of course, you can use PATH to plan a process. For example, the *what* could concern creating a strategic plan that mobilizes a strong constituency for change.

“Set up a task force on employment” or “Deliver a strategic plan to regenerate the neighborhood to the city council” or “Have a demonstration at the legislature” describes process. “Develop 20 new jobs in different kinds of workplaces” or “Have a thriving community garden that provides fresh vegetables for 15 households” or “Celebrate the inauguration of a government committed to moving our agenda forward” expresses results.

Tuning the description of current reality

In general, statements about current reality seem to be the weakest part of the PATHs people create. Sometimes this is because the pathfinder feels so good about describing a positive and possible goal that describing current reality feels like crashing. Sometimes this is because the agreement a team reached as they imagined positive changes feels too fragile to test against judgements about current. Sometimes PATHfinders are in an energy slump. Whatever the understandable reason, tuning the description of current reality matters to any PATHfinder who wants the power that comes with holding creative tension.

Look thoughtfully at the current reality box. Put your description of current reality into words, and then reflect on these questions and use the answers to either strengthen your description or to frame questions that you will find answers to (e.g. “We need to find out what percentage of the students excluded from school last year were Spanish speakers).

1. *Did we use the goal we expressed as the reference point for describing current reality?*

Be sure that each aspect of the goal is matched by a clear statement about current reality.

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If the goal includes “All public transportation will be fully accessible” include statements like this when you describe current reality: “None of the public busses have lifts.”

2. *Did we describe the whole picture?*

The issue is not being negative or positive, optimistic or pessimistic. The issue is being concisely, specifically, truthfully clear about where are starting from.

Our goal is develop the educational power of all classrooms through the inclusion of all students. In some situations, “Inclusion is working for some students” may be a true, but incomplete statement. A more complete statement might say, “While inclusion is working well for some students, all of those students come from upper-middle income families and many classroom teachers still refuse to consider welcoming excluded children with the support of the teacher’s union.”

3. *Have we laid out any “editorials” or assumptions or exaggerations that we can translate into factual news report?*

It’s easy to fall into the trap of letting ourselves off the hook of getting and describing the facts by using shared assumptions or even prejudices. The more straightforwardly factual our description of the behavior of the system we are now part of and want to change, the better able we will be to design and re-design effective action plans.

If our goal is to replace a sheltered workshop with employment in real jobs, describing current reality by saying “local employers are prejudiced and only interested in a dollar” might get a nod from everyone now on the inside, and it might be true but sometimes it is only an assumption. Sometimes the news report might better read, “We do not know how to approach employers and we feel fear and lack of confidence about doing so; so we haven’t tried and we really don’t know what employers would say to a specific applicant who wanted a job and had assistance available.”

4. *Have we smuggled any solutions into our statements about current reality?*

Our favorite solutions can take the place of planning creative action. If we think “better communication” makes any situation better we will be tempted to smuggle it into our description of current reality by including “poor communication” whether it belongs or not.

If our goal is “local banks will write a million dollars a year in mortgages that are sustainable for people on disability income” describing current reality as

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“lenders are prejudiced” may smuggle in a favorite solution: “public education”.

Of course, communication may be both relevant to our goal and lousy. And local bankers may be unmatched in their prejudiced rejection of disabled people’s business. This question just gives us a chance to check to assure that we are indeed describing current reality instead of listening to selections from our own top 40 solutions.