How to Tackle Big Challenges in A Networked World

TACKLING THE BIG CHALLENGES when there is no single, simple, rational answer can rarely be done by a single individual or company working alone. Certainly, this is true when facing global, national, or community issues, but it is increasingly true within organizations and small groups.

When faced with complex problems, we tend to find a rational answer by analyzing increasing amounts of data and polling for opinions and then announcing the answer to those who must follow. It's a rigid approach to strategic planning. We need an agile approach that leverages all of the cognitive diversity available to us.
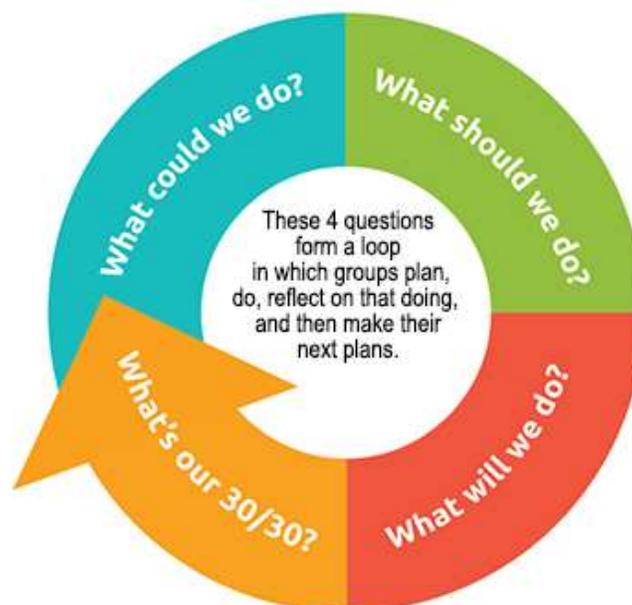
In a networked world, the question becomes. "How do you design and guide complex collaborations in open, loosely connected networks when no one can tell anyone else what to do?" Without going into a critique of society, this has become a major concern across a wide range of organizations and institutions.

To answer this question, Ed Morrison and his *Strategic Doing team** have designed an agile approach to strategic planning that they present in their book, *Strategic Doing: Ten Skills for Agile Leadership.*

Good strategy answers two questions: *Where are we going?* and *How will we get there?* The answers to these questions will provide you with an effective strategy, but by themselves, they don't inspire the engagement that is sorely needed in our time.

Strategic Doing divides these two questions into four questions: *What Could We Do?* and *What Should We Do?* to provide destination. Then to answer the how we have *What Will We Do?* and finally, *What's Our 30/30?*

The 4 Questions of Strategic Doing™

What could we do?

What should we do?

These 4 questions form a loop in which groups plan, do, reflect on that doing, and then make their next plans.

What's our 30/30?

What will we do?

These questions encourage networking and real collaboration—"linking, leveraging, and aligning resources in ways that enhance one another's capacity to create a shared outcome, a mutual benefit." In telling example, a civic group came together and implemented Strategic Doing concluding, "**Strategic Doing broke our grant addiction.**" They were able to come together and identify and unlock assets so that the sum was greater than the parts.

In a hierarchy, the challenge is to communicate information about what to do *down*, and to get information about the results *up*.

In a network, on the other hand, the challenge is to get the members' resources and efforts *aligned* toward a chosen objective.

The Strategic Doing method contains a set of ten skills that work within the framework of the four strategic questions. "Complex collaborations emerge when we follow a small set of simple rules. These rules—really, just the implementation of each of the skills—embed a lot of practices that academics have found valuable in a wide range of academic fields." The ten skills themselves encourage collaboration as no one person is good at all ten. Transformative results can happen when you enlist a diverse team to bring each of these skills to the network.

The Four Questions of Strategic Doing

Skills 1 and 2 begin the process by setting the stage for productive, collaborative conversations.

> **Skill 1: Build a safe place for deep and focused conversations.** An agile leader will communicate and reinforce equity of voice and the commitment to behave in ways that build trust and mutual respect. Keeping the group size small—5 to 7 people—can also increase our chances of success.

> **Skill 2: Use an appreciative question to frame your conversation.** "We live in the world our questions create. We spend time developing framing questions to assure we are all in the same world, as it were—looking a closely as can at the same conversation." So, we need to define the issue with an asset-based, personally meaningful question that has many answers to encourage people to reflect and think.

Question 1: What Could We Do?

> **Skill 3: Identify the assets at your disposal, including the hidden ones.** There are assets that team members have control or influence over, but there are also assets that people don't even know they have. Often these must be coaxed out by others in the group as we all too often, undervalue what we bring to the table. These can include hobbies, skills, and interests that someone has pursued independently over the years.

> **Skill 4: Link and leverage your assets to create new opportunities.** Connecting assets allows us to think horizontally. That is, to combine assets from different discipline, fields, or bodies of knowledge. It's thinking together and extending our minds.

Question 2: What Should We Do?

Skill 5: Identify a big opportunity where you can generate momentum. Deciding which option has the greatest chance of success is not easy. The authors suggest a 2x2 matrix that considers two criteria to draw out better thinking from the group.

Skill 6: Rewrite your opportunity as a strategic outcome with measurable characteristics. At this stage, you are trying to define a shared outcome that everyone can agree on and see in their mind's eye. It must be emotional, or people will not move on it. It's not a vague vision statement. The authors suggest asking three qualitative questions to draft an agile strategy: If we are successful, what will we see? What will we feel? and Whose lives will be different and how? Then name ways you might measure the outcome so that you can be sure that everyone understands the outcome in the same way.

Question 3: What Will We Do?

Skill 7: Define a small starting project to start moving you toward your outcome. You're not looking for the perfect plan here; you're looking for action. A small step towards your outcome keeps you from becoming overwhelmed. You don't need the whole path laid out before you do anything. You just need to begin—and learn as you go. "We really can't learn how to make progress toward that outcome until we start *doing* something."

Four qualities of a good start are first, short enough. They engage everyone on the team. The create buzz, garnering attention for the work. They test some key assumptions. And finally, they don't require permission.

Skill 8: Create a short-term action plan in which everyone takes a small step. No spectators. Make sure everyone on the team shares the responsibility for implementation.

Question 4: What's Our 30/30?

Skill 9: Meet every 30 days to review progress, adjust, and plan for the next 30 days. Without feedback, we easily get off-track. "Agile leaders need a specific kind of feedback loop: *a learning loop*." Change is inevitable, so we need to make adjustments along the way. What are we learning? Does everyone still agree with the outcome we are after? Do we need to make changes? The 30/30 is a guideline 30 days look back and a look forward to the next 30 days. You may need to shorten the timeline to 7/7 or perhaps longer.

Skill 10: Nudge, connect, and promote to reinforce your new habits of collaboration. Establishing new habits and making changes are not easy. Agile leaders provide guidance. "If it is vaguely assumed that the network will thrive on its own, it won't." Agile leaders nudge everyone to move ideas into action and complete their tasks. They strengthen their network by connecting new people and other networks to it. And they promote it by publishing the successes.

These ten skills implemented within the framework of the four questions will create conversations that can lead to transformative change. The four questions are a cycle that you return to again and again to build on what you're learning by doing and to refine your strategy.