True "freedom" is not the absence of structure… but rather a clear structure which enables people to work within established boundaries in an autonomous and creative way.

—Rosabeth Moss Kanter
The Change Masters

Method Matters:
The Technology of Participation's™
Participatory Strategic Planning Process

By Marilyn Oyler and John Burbidge

Historical Account

The goal of the Metro Atlanta Literacy Network (MLN) was clear. The strength of their original vision had carried them through numerous successes and at least one major setback. But now they found themselves at an impasse. Uncertainty, apathy, and misunderstanding among member organizations had risen to such an extent that something different had to happen. Their immediate solution was to find a planning expert who would develop an action plan to hire a new executive director

When the MLN called Atlanta's Nonprofit Resource Center for help, they encountered a different response. Said consultant Aileen Wieland, "When the Network's future existence was in question, the key issue was probably not finding an executive director. Nor in good conscience could we recommend a plan prepared for them by an expert. We could, however, offer them the Technology of Participation (ToP)."[i] Specifically, Wieland suggested they do the ToP Participatory Strategic Planning process (PSP).

Rather than trying to sell them a concept, Wieland offered a taste of ToP methods. She led the board members through a "Wall of Wonder" timeline in which they identified major events and turning points in the Network's history. She then introduced them to the ToP

Discussion Method to reflect on the significance of the timeline and to create a story of their journey to date. After this tantalizing appetizer, they were ready for the main course.

One more thing remained to be done. A critical first step in the PSP process is developing the focus question. After brainstorming and discussion, they arrived at, "How can MLN grow and fulfill its vision of a literate Metro Atlanta for the 21st century?"

Twelve Network members—a mixture of current and former board members—embarked on their two-day strategic planning meeting. After reiterating the focus question, the facilitator began with: "Imagine yourself five years from now reading a newspaper headline, 'Metro Atlanta Literacy Network Reaches Goal of a Totally Literate Atlanta'. What do you see happening? What new structures or 'best practices' are in place? What are people saying about the Network's achievements?"[ii]

At the end of the session, people were surprised at how much they agreed about the future of the Network. Differences of opinion that some feared would divide the group didn't materialize. All the participants felt they'd had their say and contributed to building a common vision.

Visioning is one thing. Naming those things preventing you from attaining your vision is quite another. This was the challenge of the second session on Underlying Contradictions. Using the analogy of a logjam on a river, Wieland asked the group to name the logs in the way of their vision for a literate Metro Atlanta. Among those named, one stood out. It was "Negative perceptions about the Network." She asked for more data on this but little was forthcoming. Next morning, after further probing, an open discussion proved to be the breakthrough the group needed. Said Wieland, "I could feel a new energy in the group. People remarked how divisive and draining these negative perceptions had become. They expressed relief over finally facing and naming them together."[iii]

From here on, this new energy was apparent as the group decided on bold and innovative actions. Two major directions emerged, each with specific initiatives. Wieland asked the participants to choose one initiative to which they brought expertise or for which they had

passion, and to work as teams to map out key actions for the year and for the next three months in detail.

Reflecting on the experience a few days later, the Network president said, "A new executive director is now a down-the-road idea. This process made us work toward a shared vision of what we wanted and where we wanted to go, and to take ownership of that."[iv]

The impact of the planning was felt far beyond the event itself. A year later, participants reported that 50 percent more board members were involved in the work of the organization; six new organizations had joined; and the Network had increased its visibility by staffing exhibits at two conferences, conducting workshops with four other organizations, becoming involved in a national reading campaign, and creating a promotional video. Perhaps most telling, three years earlier, nobody had wanted the job of board president, so one person reluctantly stepped into the breach. This time, there were two nominees.

The Basics

The Participatory Strategic Planning process is a key part of the Technology of Participation, but it is not the whole package. Among many tools in the ToP kit, the most frequently used are the Discussion method, the Workshop method, and the Action Planning method, all of which are incorporated into PSP. Most people use several methods, often in combination with one another or with other types of participatory processes.

ToP Method	Purpose
Discussion Method	A simple, four-step process that moves from objective data to decisions by soliciting everyone's input on an issue. Can be used to reflect on an experience, analyze data, talk through problems, and accomplish a variety of other purposes.
Workshop Method	A five-step process that weaves everyone's wisdom into a common standing point or sense of shared reality. It generates creative ideas, and uses both rational and intuitive approaches to build group consensus. It is the core tool used in the first three steps of PSP.
Action Planning Method	A three-hour planning process that begins with a group's anticipating its "victory" and ends with a comprehensive plan and assignments for the task at hand. It is excellent for designing short-term projects or completing projects that have stalled.

Table 1. Related Methods in the Technology of Participation Tool Kit.

The ToP Participatory Strategic Planning method is a four-step process, usually done over two days, although you can modify the time according to circumstances. The steps are:

- mapping out the group's Practical Vision of its future;

- analyzing the Underlying Contradictions preventing that vision from being realized;

- proposing bold, innovative actions to deal with these contradictions and aligning these into focused Strategic Directions;

- spelling out the milestones on a one-year Implementation timeline to accomplish these directions, along with a detailed 90-day launch plan — the who-what-when-where-how.
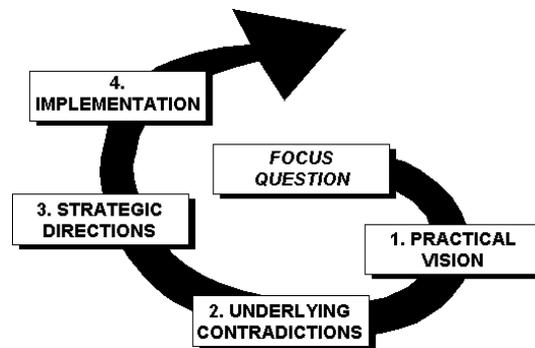
Figure 1. The Participatory Strategic Planning Process

PSP is most appropriate when a group or organization is seeking to change direction, launch a new venture, or work through a particular issue preventing it from moving ahead. It assumes a basic consensus on the mission and core values of the organization, and a willingness on the part of all present to contribute to the process and to trust the method.

The outcomes of PSP are clear—a set of charts, a strong sense of ownership and commitment to carry out the plan, clearly defined roles and responsibilities for action, and an enhanced sense of community among the plan builders. The latter is the result of many factors, but as Wieland noted, it has a lot to do with the focus that PSP puts on exploring the contradictions in depth and the way the process causes people to listen deeply to one another.[v]

Commitment to implement a plan is one of the hallmarks of PSP. In the case of the MLN, commitment became visible as participants were asked at the end of the two days to finish the statement, "As a result of this time together, I will. …" For Wieland, this was a pivotal moment.

"I was deeply moved as I heard each member commit to the work ahead. The real surprise came when three former board members dedicated themselves to active involvement again."[vi]

When an organization undertakes a two-day PSP, it is doing a lot more than just coming up with an implementation plan. It is replacing the need to hire a planning consultant or a conflict mediation specialist with trusting its own people to devise the solutions to move the organization forward. Whereas outsiders walk away after an intervention, PSP participants reaffirm their decision to stay and build the organization. In light of this, the cost of hiring two or three ToP trained facilitators for two days to guide this process is a small investment with multiple and lasting returns.

Getting Started

Several basic principles guide the PSP process. First, it is important to spend time — usually with a small representative group before the planning proper — to decide on the focus question for the strategic planning. This involves identifying the area of concern, naming the objectives you wish to achieve with the process, clarifying the participants and stakeholders, and delineating the time frame involved. The result is an open-ended question that captures the group's concerns and catalyzes its creativity.

Second, it is often useful to precede strategic planning with other methods that lay the groundwork for planning, such as an environmental scan. In the case of MLN, the facilitator led the group in a "Wall of Wonder" timeline. This exercise restored the group's sense of purpose and was key to the Network's deciding to do the strategic planning.

Third, PSP, like all ToP methods, rests on certain assumptions that derive from its origins with the Institute for Cultural Affairs (ICA). Some of these are deeply embedded in the ICA's commitment to participation per se. Author and ToP facilitator Laura Spencer spells out four basic tenets of the ICA's understanding of participation:
* It is an ongoing, integrated, whole-systems approach;
* It is an evolving, organic, and dynamic process;

- It is a structured process involving learnable skills;

- It requires a commitment to openness from everyone involved.[vii]

These tenets are the bedrock upon which ToP methods have been built. They are shared by fellow ICA author, editor, teacher, and facilitator Brian Stanfield, who names four assumptions of PSP:

- Everyone knows something the group needs;

- PSP builds on commonly understood mission, objectives, and values;

- Those who implement the plan participate in the planning;

- Senior management will be involved in, or at least aware of, the planning.[viii]

Finally, PSP is a consensual methodology. It is an iterative process that creates and strengthens the consensus of the group from start to finish. Consensus is not unanimity or majority rule but finding a way that allows everyone to say "yes" and the group to move forward. The process flow is carefully crafted to engender consensus—set the context, do a brainstorm, organize the data, name the categories, and reflect on the outcome and its implications.

Roles, Responsibilities, Relationships

Who participates in a PSP depends on the nature of the group involved and the task at hand. It has been done with all levels in an organization, from senior management to departmental teams, as well as with a cross-section of participants in an organization. Typically, it involves all those who have a strong investment in the outcome of the planning and includes people from different levels in the organization. However, even in the most lateral of organizations, without the support and involvement of the major decision-makers, plans produced by participants may end up being just that—plans.

A fundamental of the PSP process is having a ToP-trained facilitator lead the process. Like many methods, ToP demands more than simply following steps in an instructor's manual. Inherent in these techniques are presuppositions, values, and assumptions about individuals, groups, and life itself that have given birth to these methods over more than a quarter century. To

honor these roots and the nuances of style that make a skilled facilitator, a person needs to have been exposed to PSP and worked with a seasoned trainer over a period of time.

This is what the ToP training system is designed to address. It includes a curriculum of facilitator training courses, a fast-track program, a global trainers' network, a mentoring program, and an international training-of-trainers program. ToP trainees interested in deepening their skills and sharing their experiences using the methods have created Facilitator Guilds across the United States and in several other countries. In addition, a number of ToP trained facilitators have been instrumental in forming the International Association of Facilitators (IAF), an organization devoted to professionalizing the art and science of facilitation.[ix]

The role of the facilitator is to help the group discover common ground and move beyond conflict to a situation in which everyone wins. According to Mirja Hanson, former IAF president, the quest for common ground involves three main activities: building shared awareness, creating consensus agreements, and mobilizing productive action. This is no small feat. Facilitating a yearlong timber-harvesting mediation between 26 interest groups in Minnesota underscored this for Hanson. "When the challenge is to manage hundreds or thousands of pieces of data, with 25 perspectives on each piece, changing space conditions, shifting moods, interaction effects, and finite time frames—facilitation skill, method, and experience can make or break the effectiveness of public discourse."[x]

This statement suggests a high degree of dependence on the facilitator in the PSP process. At first glance this would appear to be true, given the fact that the process is tightly structured, accomplishes a lot in a limited time, and is geared toward producing a particular product. However, the role of the facilitator in all ToP methods is restricted to *process*. The *content* of a strategic plan is what the participants bring.

	Before	During	After
Sponsor	Works with facilitators to decide focus question and participants; collects background data	May participate in the planning process; protects participants from encroaching responsibilities	Assists participants in implementing plan; holds participants accountable for accomplishments; helps deal with problems that arise

Designer/ Facilitator	Works with sponsor to decide focus question and participants; clarifies who will be responsible for ensuring follow-up	Leads the PSP process; keeps time; invites reflection on each step of the process	Conducts evaluations with participants and sponsors and a 90-day celebration of accomplishments and plan rollover
Participants	Commit to making time available; agree to work with the facilitator	Bring content to the process; trust the methods; honor input of other participants	Support implementation teams or task forces in follow-up actions agreed upon in plan

Table 2. Roles and responsibilities in the Participatory Strategic Planning Process

Participants are called upon to trust the process and the facilitator guiding it. In a county health department, people initially resisted the process because of varying levels of trust in the facilitator, the purpose for using the methods, and how the process was implemented. Many people had never been asked to participate in the department's planning before and distrusted the invitation to take part. Few had ever participated in any kind of structured method and grew impatient with the length of the process, while others were skeptical that it would result in any change. After ToP methods were used in a variety of settings for many purposes, this mistrust began to evaporate. People grew to expect and even delight in using the methods. In the words of one staff member, "In three years, trust has been built, responses have become more agency-specific and show greater nuance, and there is a deeper level of understanding."[xi]

Another expectation of participants is that they create a plan for themselves, not others. People are seldom short of great ideas, but too often these are great ideas someone else should do. Some elements in a plan may require permission or funding from external sources to realize. However, the key is selecting those options that participants can and will do.

Impact on Power and Authority

Like all ToP methods, PSP is designed as an empowerment tool, i.e., it enlarges the decision-making capacity of organizations and extends the implementation of those decisions to a wider range of people. While many people today in private-, public-, or nonprofit sector organizations value this more lateral, inclusive approach, some do not. Denver-based consultant

David Dunn discovered this while introducing ToP methods to government employees and citizen activists in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and Herzegovina.

"The people who love ToP methods are those in their 20s and 30s who are working their way into positions of influence," said Dunn. "These bright, young leaders are creating all kinds of nongovernmental organizations. Those with vested interests in making decisions for others—from international development agency executives to local leaders who stand to lose authority—are not flocking to courses."[xii]

Conditions for Success

One of the main reasons for PSP's success is that it includes everyone's input. Because individuals do their own thinking and writing before sharing with the larger group, everyone has a chance to participate. The loudest, the most articulate, or the most flamboyant don't dominate the group. The final charts take into account all inputs and reflect a synthesis that is greater than the sum of the individual parts.

Another reason for PSP's success is its emphasis on discerning underlying contradictions. This crucial step acts as a reality check, demanding that the group deal with any sober considerations in its path. Frequently, contradictions are like cataracts. You do not see them directly, yet they cloud your vision and blind you to what is there. Once they are detected and dealt with, whole new vistas of possibility can open up.

PSP will not be successful if those who create a plan have little or no way to implement it. If a senior manager or department head pretends to invite participation from his or her colleagues but insists on retaining the power to veto any decision that comes out of the planning, it defeats the purpose of the exercise. Also, if people are not willing to trust the method to incorporate diverse perspectives and handle knotty issues, it will not succeed.

When using PSP, watch out for certain pitfalls. First, don't shortcut the method. An important part of PSP is when the facilitator asks participants to step back and reflect on what is happening, especially at the end of the entire process. When everyone is tired after two days of

intense planning and itching to get home, it is sometimes tempting to forgo this final step. However, this is often a critical moment in the whole process, as people have the chance to ask that gnawing question they've been holding back, share an insight they've gained, or make connections between this and other methods they've encountered.

Second, facilitators need to spend time on the underlying contradictions. This vital step often requires in-depth drilling to get to the heart of the matter, or even for participants to understand what is meant by a "contradiction." Stanfield describes it as "the unmentioned item in every conversation."[xiii] Helping people grasp that contradictions are not surface problems, a lack of something, abstractions, or the personal fault of individuals can take time and effort.

Theoretical Basis

PSP and the other ToP tools come out of the 35-year history of the Institute of Cultural Affairs' (ICA's) work with thousands of communities and organizations worldwide. Its roots are in the Institute's early work in neighborhood planning in the low-income community known as Fifth City on the West Side of Chicago; its summer Research Assemblies, which involved thousands of people from all over the world from the mid-1960s through the mid-1980s; and a long list of social programs and training courses ranging from town meetings and human development projects to the Social Methods School and the LENS (Leadership Effectiveness and New Strategies) seminar.

From its earliest days, the ICA has been an action-research organization, alternating between team-based model building and practical implementation of those models in everyday situations. It has used the writings of a wide array of scholars and popular writers to discern trends and to spark its creativity — everything from Lao-tzu's classic treatise on strategy in *The Art of War* to Kenneth Boulding's insights into the relationship between images and behavior in *The Image*—but essentially, it has evolved methods like PSP from its own corporate think tanks, repeated use of them in a diversity of situations, and ongoing refinement. It has placed a high value on tapping the wisdom and experience of local people and group-generated solutions, rather than the work of individual experts and academic-based research.

As the ICA made increasing use of PSP and other ToP methods in its work with communities and organizations, it began to offer training in these methods to a vast and growing audience of trainers, facilitators, and consultants in business, industry, governments, and nonprofit organizations around the world. At the time of writing, ToP methods were being taught in many languages in 21 countries. Participant workbooks have been translated into Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, English, French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish.

Sustaining the Results

The benefits of PSP include a strong sense of ownership of the product, a commitment to carrying out the plan, increased communication within the organization, and a detailed timeline with built-in accountability. Retaining these benefits requires that they blend into an organization's culture—"the way we do things around here." When this happens, the capacity of PSP to affect that culture can be quite profound.

Julia Leon, a coordinator with the Information Technology Department (ITD) at Emory University, was part of such a process. Having experienced staff morale problems and low approval ratings from their customers, Leon and some of her colleagues who were trained in ToP methods used them to help achieve a greater sense of buy-in and cooperation among those with whom they worked.

"What happened during those six months changed forever how we worked," said Leon. "We became steeped in participatory methods, we ran workshops with our campus customers to gain their input, and we even used the principles of participation to analyze the enormous amounts of data gathered."[xiv] Since then, ToP methods have become standard operating procedure at ITD. Said one staff member, "ToP has become enough part of our culture that the difference isn't obvious until you attend an 'old style' meeting."[xv] For Leon, there was an added bonus. "The organization is a different place to work now. Things are aboveboard. Anything can be talked about; now we know how to talk."[xvi]

Some Final Comments

Invariably, when people encounter ToP methods, they are excited about them. Some of the reasons are often repeated—the methods are clear and simple; they tap the group's wisdom and experience at a profound level; they are both poetic and pragmatic; they produce tangible results in highly usable forms; they provide a conduit for broad-based input; and they are easily applicable and transferable.

According to Nancy Tam Davis, a facilitator with Pierce County, Washington, "I've been using brainstorming and related techniques for years, but I see a difference in the quality of individual responses and group dialogue with ToP methods."[xvii] Their humble birth in grassroots neighborhood planning and their long use in a wide range of situations worldwide may account for this quality difference.

PSP stands out from similar methods in other, more tangible ways. First, it places a lot of weight on discerning the underlying contradictions. Although this step can be painful and sometimes tedious, it is crucial to creating a viable plan grounded in the real situation. In the words of management guru Peter Block, "The first act of courage is simply to see things as they are. No excuses, no explanations, no illusions of wishful progress…"[xviii] Moreover, the very naming of the contradictions often opens a doorway to the future. It's as though the solution already lies hidden within them, waiting to be released.

Second, the ICA has found it beneficial to produce a planning document that honors the input of the participants and reproduces it in a clear, accessible way. The work of each PSP step is given to participants in charts containing the entire data from the session, expressed in their own words. When people see the fruits of their labors, it is both an indication that their contributions are being taken seriously and an incentive to take the next step in the process.

Third, all ToP methods rely heavily on reflective techniques that allow people to "experience their experience." A colleague of mine once said that no experience is complete until it has been reflected upon. Using the Discussion Method, facilitators guide participants in reflecting on the process. This gives people a second chance to take note of what they have been through, evaluate it, and think of ways they might apply it in other situations.

Finally, one caveat. PSP is not a panacea for all of an organization's ills. An organization may need to think through its mission all over again, rearticulate its core values, or seek conflict resolution. Strategic planning does not address these concerns. However, as Stanfield points out, "Strategic planning, at its most transparent, can release people from stories of 'it can't be done,' free up people from blame games, and catalyze them into taking responsibility for the future."[xix] In this sense, it is both an art and a science that requires the skill of a "methods" surgeon to exercise. As Mirja Hanson reminds us, "collective genius doesn't just happen. Method matters."[xx]

About the Authors

Marilyn Oyler, director of the ICA's ToP Institute, has guided the development of the Technology of Participation Series into a state-of-the-art training system across the United States and its adaptation in 13 other countries. To this task she brings more than 20 years of experience

facilitating strategic planning and other organizational-change efforts in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the United States.

As well as delivering ongoing training and facilitation, Marilyn coordinates the national ToP faculty of more than 150 trainers and is dean of the ToP Fast-Track Training Program and of the mentoring program Mastering the Technology of Participation (MToP). She has been involved in several partnerships with universities and other organizations seeking to develop their own "cultures of participation."

In addition, Marilyn has held key leadership and management positions in the ICA for more than two decades that include three organization-wide change efforts and one major reinvention. She is a founding member of the International Association of Facilitators and of the Phoenix Chapter of the Organizational Development Network.

John Burbidge is communications director for ICA in the United States. Australian born, he has lived and worked in Belgium, Canada, India, and the United States. He is the editor of *Approaches That Work in Rural Development* and *Beyond Prince and Merchant: Citizen Participation and the Rise of Civil Society*, as well as the ICA USA newsletter, *Initiatives*. His writings have appeared in books, journals, magazines and newspapers in Australia, Europe, and North America.

In his 27 years with the ICA, John has used ToP strategic planning methods with clients as varied as an aboriginal community in Australia, an international bank in India, and the staff association of a pharmaceutical company in Switzerland. As a writer, editor, and facilitator, he seeks to find ways to release people's creativity and enhance their contributions to society.

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ENDNOTES

[i] Wieland, A. (1998) Strategic Planning: A Transformative Process. The *ToP* Methods Exchange, 3/4, 1.
[ii] Wieland, 3.
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