

Worksheet



Working backwards to a solution

Material provided to the Mental Health Foundation by organisational psychologist Ross Gilmour (Gilmour McGregor & Associates).

This worksheet will support you to resolve issues by focusing on solutions and working backwards from there. If your teams have identified a common cause of stress, this activity could provide a good way to work on a solution together.

Too often, we try to avoid dealing with issues that might cause conflict or, alternatively, deal with them head-on in an attacking or confrontational way which rarely leads to a resolution.

A more constructive way to tackle challenges is the 'working backwards' technique.^{1,2,3}

The 'working backwards' technique starts with you imagining that it's now a specific date in the future, e.g. six months from now. You then talk about the issue you're facing as though it has been resolved. Talk about the steps you imagine you and others took to resolve the issue and reflect on what worked well.

The date that you choose in the future is determined by how complex the issue(s) are – it needs to be realistic and achievable. The examples below show how different timeframes can be applied to suit different situations.

Applying the 'working backwards' technique

Step One: Choose a realistic time in the future – a time by when you could reasonably expect the issue would be resolved and imagine that that's where you are now. Describe the issue in the past tense – as though it's already resolved.

Step Two: Invite the other person, or group, to add their input into the description of the issue now that it has been resolved.

Step Three: Look back from the point that the issue has been resolved and, together, describe the steps, actions, etc, that were put in place that resulted in the resolution (i.e. the solutions).

In this phase it is possible to develop agreed plans, deadlines, etc, and to assign responsibilities to people for implementing the actions. Note: it is important to make sure that the actions or solutions are realistic.

Step Four: Develop and agree on how and by who action points were followed up. This can be achieved by asking, "What steps did we put in place to monitor progress and make sure that it did all happen?"

One of the biggest advantages of using the working backwards approach is that it moves the focus away from the problems and on to solutions. It is much easier for people to listen to comments and conversations that focus on solutions rather than problems, as problems often come across as criticisms.

Examples:

1. Issue:

Poor relationships between the technical staff and the admin team.

Timeframe:

Six months

Purpose:

This meeting is to find ways to resolve some of the issues that I am aware have been arising between the technical and administration teams.

Description (what it would look like at the end of the time frame):

Imagine this meeting is happening in six months' time and we're looking back and reflecting on how well the two teams are currently working together.

There's a level of mutual understanding and support between the teams. For months I've been hearing how much the administration people appreciate our technical team, and vice versa.

Conversation starter:

"What makes the working relationship such a good one?"

2. Issue:

Increase in targets combined with a reduction in budgets.

Timeframe:

Twelve months

Purpose:

This meeting is to find ways to meet our new challenging targets. How can we achieve this?

Description (what it would look like at the end of the time frame):

We've met the targets and stayed on budget.

Conversation starter:

"We've achieved all our goals for the year. What was the first thing we did to do this? What is working well?"

Group description of the steps, actions, etc, that were put in place that resulted in the resolution (i.e. the solutions).

What we did	Realistic?	Agreed?

Don't forget to identify the steps put in place to monitor progress and make sure that it did all happen.

You now have a plan you can all agree to that will help resolve the issue. The action points, dates and goals can be worked toward, and, if when your future date comes around, you can have the conversation again to see if the issue is resolved.