

What Are the Most Important Planning Questions for My Team — Chaordic Stepping Stones

Tenneson Woolf and Kathleen Masters
January 2015

(Excerpted from United Methodist Church Participative Leadership Journal, and Adapted from Chris Corrigan)

When we understand the need to work with chaos and order, we need a tool to plan the work together. Even methods that deliberately invite chaos have shape to them. These strategies are called Chaordic Stepping Stones. These steps help us find our way to the sweet spot between chaos and order, a chaordic place that has enough order to feel coherence, and yet enough chaos to deserve the name of life.



These steps help to create conversations that are rooted in real need and sustainability for the community. Though the steps are interdependent, as a planning tool, begin with your need. Each of the stepping stones is activated by asking key questions, a few of which are named below (and each of which has an example or two of the kinds

of answers and reflection that might result). When working with a team, select from these questions (or create others) to help explore each stone as you lay it in place.

Need

The need is the compelling reason. Sensing the need is the first step to designing a meeting, organizational structure, or relevant change initiative.

- What is going on in the world now that influences what we are doing here? (poverty, war, health epidemic crisis of faith)
- What touches the nerve that we know we must touch? (It is not acceptable to have neglected, underfed children.)
- What is the example (or person) that represents why this matters? (Angela is a homeless mom with two children; she is doing all she can, but is trapped by the system.)
- What are the challenges and opportunities we are facing? (Seventy percent of the teen population is obese. We could change the direction of some of this generation with education on better nutrition.)
- What is the need that this project can uniquely meet? (Increase the number of teens with healthy nutrition habits.)
- What does the world need this conference to be? (A robust and generous dialogue about the real issues that will shape the next steps in the future.)

Purpose

From the need flows the purpose. Purpose statements are clear and compelling and guide us in doing our best possible work. Though there are often many layers of purpose, it is good to recognize together a very succinct version of our purpose, which becomes an overarching story to share.

- If this work should live up to its fullest potential, what do you dream (or vision) is possible? (All children will have one healthy meal per day.)
- What is the purpose we can adopt that will best meet the need? (Create a lunch offering for teens.)
- What could this work do / create / inspire? (Healthy living, healthy community.)
- What is the next level for our work? Where should we be heading? (Teens growing vegetables that are used in one healthy meal per day.)
- What is the simplest and most powerful question we could keep at the core of our work? (What keeps kids healthy?)

Principles

Principle of cooperation guide how we will work together. It is very important that these principles be simple, co-owned, and well understood. These are not principles that are platitudes or smart regurgitations from books that are disconnected from our specific work. Principles are crisp statements of how we agree to operate together so that over the long-term we can sustain the relationships (even when we get grumpy or lose touch with what we are doing) that make this work possible.

- What are the principles we want to enact for our learning networks? (Curiosity, patience, experimenting.)
- What is important to remember about how we want to work with the participants of our initiative? (No blame, no shame.)
- What do we think is most important to remember as we design to meet the need and purpose? (Follow the natural energy that arises in the group.)
- What unique ways of doing work and being together can we bring to this work? (Playfully serious, seriously playful.)
- What are the most essential values that will hold us together? (Faith in a living God and universe, patience with each other.)
- What agreements will remind us of what really matters here? (What does it do for kids?)

People

Once the need and the purpose are in place and we have agreed on our principles of cooperation, we can begin to identify the people that are involved in our work. Mapping the network helps us to see who will have an interest in what we are doing. Mapping reminds us to find the natural resources, abilities, and thinkers that will improve an initiative.

- Who needs to be in the room? (Church leaders, policy makers, community organizers, school leaders, etc.)
- Who is not in the room and how do we bring them in? (Those that have a stake, but do not show up.)
- How do we leverage relationships to propagate the ideas generated by our work together? (People to carry the story and the next level of invitation to support this work.)

- Who will be interested in the results of our work? (Media, community organizers, philanthropists, other faith community leaders, etc.)
- Have we included the people that will be most impacted by this work? (People whom we can do with, rather than do for / to.)

Concept

As we move to a more concrete idea of what our structures are, we begin to explore the most useful concepts. This is a high level look at the shape of our endeavor. For example, if our need was to design a way to cross a body of water, we could choose a bridge, a causeway, or a ferry. The concept is important because it gives form to very different structures for doing our work. In our work together we might explore here the different kinds of structures including circles and networks and really understand them; how they operate, how there are embedded with various contexts and cultures, and what implication each has for our work.

- What are examples that we might choose for our work? (A series of evening World Cafes, a monthly teleconference call.)
- What is the clear pattern of our work and what organizational forms are in alignment with that? (A monthly Open Space may help us sustain our curiosity and our accountability with one another.)
- How might we activate our principles to best do our work? (A regular update on a Facebook page.)

Limiting Beliefs

So much of what we do when we organize ourselves is based on unquestioned models of

behavior. It is not uncommon to have a few fears — nobody will come; nobody cares; we don't have enough money anyway, etc. These are the kinds of thoughts running unconsciously through our minds. Many will try to disregard these thoughts, hoping they will go away, or believing that if they engage them, they are sabotaging their own project. You have to be the beacon of hope, right?

The opposite is true. By being willing to engage the limiting beliefs, even just to the point of shared awareness, you are clearing the way for a more robust and supportive team.

- What makes us tremble, and what do we fear about new ways of working together? (Success, failure, lack of time, lack of resources, etc.)
- Who would we be without our stories of old ways of working? (Scared of letting go, moving into the new, not having a keynote.)
- What do you need to be at your best? (Laughter, kindness, awareness.)
- What will it take for us to fully enter into working in new and unfamiliar ways? (Time for reflection, willingness to accept failures.)
- What is our own learning edge in working together? (Not knowing all of the details yet continuing to move forward.)

Structure

Once the concept has been chosen, it is time to create the structure that will channel our resources. In these conversations, we will make decisions about the resources of the group: time, money, energy, commitment, and attention.

- Who are we becoming when we meet and work together this way? (A community that practices compassion at all levels.)

- How do we support the aspirations of the group? (Regular communications, appreciations.)
- What is the lightest structure that will serve our purpose and need? (A rhythm for a series of dialogues.)
- What role might the core team play when the project is over? (Storytellers.)
- How do we wisely combine the various organizational concepts to support our work and sustain the results? (Expanded group of skilled hosts.)

Practice

The ongoing practice within the structures we build is important. This is the world of to-do lists, conference calls, and email exchanges. The invitation here is to practice working with one another in alignment with the designs we have created.

- What do we need to do to sustain our work together? (Weekly meetings, email updates.)
- What is our own practice of working in networks? (Monthly learning calls, an agreement to ask for help.)
- How do we leverage relationships and support the work that arises from them? (Continue reaching out to others to share the story of what we are doing; invite their reflections.)
- How do we sustain and nourish our relationships and collective aspirations? (Vignettes, profiles of people involved.)
- What commitments are we willing to make to contribute to the success of our endeavor? (A year on a committee, three hours a week for the next six months.)

Harvest

There is no point in doing the work in the world unless we plan to harvest the fruits of our labors. Harvesting includes making meaning in our work, telling the story and feeding communities with the fruits of our work.

- What are the forms of harvest from our work that best serves the need? (Newsletter, report, short video, blog posts, impressions.)
- What are the artifacts that will be the most powerful representations of what we have created? (Landscape map, published article, report.)
- How will we carry the DNA of our work forward? (In people, in invitation, in questions.)
- What are the feedback loops that we need to ensure that learning and change accelerates itself? (Frequency, topic.)
- What are the questions we share as we learn through this new way of meeting? (Practice the story so that you can share what is true for you.)

A Final Reflection

There are ways that you can use this planning tool to accomplish a lot in a very short period of time. That is likely to be quite satisfying. However, we would encourage deliberate and significant attention, well beyond a first pass, to each of these stepping stones. You can learn a lot from a table of contents in a book. But the table is, or course, not the book. Planning teams, particularly in environments that need significant innovation (like churches), are not in place to merely check items off of a list. Planning teams are also about becoming a way of being together that welcomes pause as much as speed, that welcomes

discernment as much as driving accomplishments forward.

Enough order to have coherence. Enough chaos to deserve the name of life.

Tenneson Woolf (www.tennesonwoolf.com) is a facilitator, workshop leader, speaker, and writer. He posts a daily blog, *Human to Human*, in which he offers reflection on varied aspects of participative leadership practices, insights, and human to human depth. He has been a practitioner of Circle and other participative forms for 20+ years. His lineages include The Berkana Institute, *The Circle Way*, and *The Art of Hosting*.

Reverend Kathleen Masters (www.centerformissioninnovation.org) is Manager of Missionary Training & Continuing Education with the United Methodist Church. Based in Atlanta, Kathleen is working to embed more participative leadership practices with the church's learning and education programs. She and Tenneson worked extensively to create the *Participative Leadership Journal* from which this article is excerpted.

Chris Corrigan (www.chriscorrigan.com) is a noted speaker and a well known teacher and steward of the *Art of Hosting*, an approach to participatory leadership practiced worldwide. He works with organizations, communities and teams to address strategic challenges using dialogic approaches to decision making.