Developing Shared Understanding

**CONSTELLATION MAPPING METHOD**

How do you help people quickly understand a complex challenge together, generate practical pathways to action, AND build genuine commitment to working together, all at the same time?

CoCreative developed the following method for leaders at a public company who wanted to collaborate with their stakeholders on social problems in the communities in which they operate. It works well for groups of up to 30 people working on issues that are complex and not well defined.

Instructions to participants:

1. **We’re going to quickly generate as many items as we can related to this issue.** There are three types of items: **Challenges** are problems related to the issue (write these on red notes*), **Opportunities** are potentially positive outcomes of addressing the issue (write these on green), **Resources** are anything that you as a leader could leverage directly or indirectly to positively impact the issue (write these on blue).
   
   *Tip: Give examples of resources, challenges, and opportunities to help prime the pump.*

2. Write one item per note—legibly!
3. Each item must somehow relate to the focus issue.
4. Each item must be specific.
5. Each participant can create an unlimited number of items—the more, the better.

* Obviously this is somewhat arbitrary—the point is to be consistent. Use whatever colors you prefer.

After people have written lots of items, tell them to generate two more items each and then post all their items on the wall. It’s okay if they start to connect related items as they post them, but they shouldn’t get caught up in that because that’s the fun part that we’ll do later!

After the participants have posted all their last items on the wall, take a short break and then gather everyone near the wall. Make sure everyone can see the notes well and then invite everyone to start connecting elements. Read items aloud as you connect them together. (The hexagon-shaped notes fit neatly together into patterns.)

**Benefits of Constellation Mapping:**

- Each person’s distinct perspective and information becomes part of the whole picture.
- Items often come together to make interesting connections that no individual participant would have seen.
- As people connect problems with resources and opportunities, the connections point to possible “solution paths” that can address the problem multi-dimensionally.
- As people connect items, they see not only the static relationships among various factors, but also the dynamics of the problem, which are difficult to see through a two-dimensional presentation.
- The process of connecting items that everyone generated builds shared understanding and commitment.

You can use the output from a Constellation Map to feed a storyboarding process, where the group creates possible stories about what’s happening (based on the map) and then extend that story into the future by narrating how this group might impact that issue. **See our Storyboarding toolsheet for more on that process.**

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**MATERIALS**

- Hexagon-shaped notes from thinkingtools.net (red, blue, and green)
- Sharpie markers (one for each person)