

The Bottle Top Protocol

'Our choice of bathroom product was no longer based on the quality of the product but on the desirability of the bottle top.' (name withheld)

Here are some suggestions:

- Your job as chief bottle topper is to help others create a picture of their system.
- As much as possible ask people to become protagonists, by choosing a top and placing it in position. Be a guardian of a protagonist's piece.
- Be careful if you move a piece. Please check with them to see if the new configuration is helpful. The same applies if people move around pieces that were not their own. Always check with the original protagonist to see if it fits with their perception.
- If people chose one piece initially but then choose another, ask them about their first choice and the reason for the change. (Often their answers are gold)
- By all means ask, if the question occurs to you, 'Could you help me understand a little about how you made the choice to put the piece "there".'
- After a number of tops have been placed on the table it's a good idea to ask people,
- 'Is there clarity within the system about the purpose? Or do different people within the system have a different idea of the purpose'
- Choose some tops to represent the purpose(s); add other tops to draw out some distinctions, if appropriate.
- Ask 'What are these differences? And what impact does this have for people in different parts of the system?'
- Keep asking what else is part of the system? Is there anything that is missing?
- At some stage it's a good idea to call for a five minute period of reflection. It is very useful to stand up and then move around the table. Try and stand in the shoes of different stakeholders to get a sense of what it is like for them. Try to avoid making suggestions about what people could do. OK to do this at the end with care.
- Be prepared to abandon the exercise if it drags on for too long. It may not be the best tool at that time.
- Take a photo at the end.

If you are thinking about making an intervention it could be useful to apply a framework suggested by Bob Dick:

- Does this intervention need the involvement of God.
- Does this intervention need the involvement of some of the lesser gods?
- Does this intervention need the involvement of your group?
- Can you implement this intervention yourself?

The bottle top exercise can be a bit like finger painting – as one participant observed: 'Bottle tops, can be boring to watch, but brilliant to do.'

This idea was suggested to me by Rosemary Marshall, from RMIT. Rosemary became quite a fan of the process and put a sign up in the work place kitchen requesting her colleagues to collect some fancy bottle tops. Over a two-week period she not only accumulated a diverse collection but generated interest as well. This worked in her favor when she introduced the process to her work group. People enjoyed seeing their bottle tops being used and this helped to reduce her "performance anxiety" which commonly occurs when trying out a new tool.

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