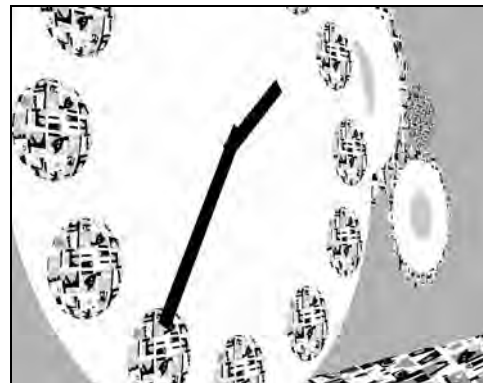


Future Workshops - The Unthinkable and How to Make It Happen

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Keywords:
Action Planning, Participation, Social Inclusion, Disruptive,
Empowerment

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Snapshot (Quick Learning)



Future Workshops are a method to develop a vision of the future shared by the participants. These workshops primarily aim to encourage socially or otherwise excluded people to take an interest in their future and to pursue their dreams. The method is fundamentally driven by their creative energy, and it emphasizes the equal status of participants regardless their social, political, etc. background and role.

Future Workshops are best used in a context where there is scope for action and where collective efforts are required to change a restrictive environment to better suit the needs of its users. Ideally the participants of a Future Workshop are supposed to take responsibility for the expected changes and also given the respective authority and resources to initiate this change.

Future Workshops combine analytical (rational) and creative (intuitive) phases to

1. Analyse a given, current situation,
2. Develop visions of the future and
3. Agree on an action plan how to reach these desired results.

Participants of a Future Workshop thus embark on a cathartic journey, starting by naming the curse of today and the fears of the future, continuing by being allowed to dream and so to overcome the constraints of everyday life and the normative power of the factual, eventually ending up developing and initiating concrete actions towards a desirable and better future.

While carried out under a strict time management regime, Future Workshops are extremely open to any content addressed by participants. ‘Everything said is important’, ‘everyone gets the opportunity to speak’ and ‘everything is recorded’ are the underlying principles for true and equal participation. This is supported by a variety of facilitation techniques.

Future Workshops are instruments of fundamental empowerment. If conducted properly they result in powerful action plans and a high commitment of participants to carry actions through.

Future Workshops also might result in cohesive and effective action against established powerful institutions.

Future Workshops have been employed initially in community settings, in the peace movement, the green movement, etc. Even though the method may have been deployed successfully in business, we hesitate to recommend it for use in a context where ‘disruption’, ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ are believed to best not interfere with shareholders’ interests.

Keywords: action planning, participation, social inclusion, disruptive, empowerment

Context (Where & What)



Future Workshops are best suited for solving problems in organisations such as factories, co-ops and unions, schools and youth centres, pressure groups and voluntary organisations, neighbourhoods and communities.

Future Workshops are a method to develop a vision of the future shared by the participants. These workshops primarily aim to encourage socially or otherwise excluded people to take an interest in their future, to develop a belief in being powerful by themselves, and to give them the prospect to achieve their dreams. The Future Workshop is fundamentally fuelled by the creative energy and equal status of participants regardless their social, political, hierarchical etc. background and role. It is a collective method that stresses the equal status of individual participants and the collective ownership of results. Future Workshops are instruments of real empowerment and can result in cohesive and effective action units against established powerful institutions.

Future workshops combine analytical (rational) and creative (intuitive) elements into three phases, i.e.

- (1) To analyse a given, current situation,
- (2) To develop visions of the future and
- (3) To agree on an action plan how to reach these desired results.

(1) The analysis of a given situation is the **critical appraisal** phase (or simply critique phase as it has been named in the original translation of the method (Jungk & Müllert, 1987)). Its aim is not to produce a rational, well-balanced, consensus view of the current situation. Quite the opposite should happen in this phase. Participants are asked to name all the negative aspects of the current situation, and all the fears of the future they have. The critical appraisal will inevitably draw a dark picture of the present and a bleak outlook into the future. This is essential for the whole Future Workshop since it is believed that only if participants can express their negative feelings they are able, in the next phase of the process, to leave them behind and invent a new, positive future.

(2) To develop visions of the future is the aim of the **utopian fantasy** phase (or simply fantasy phase). As radical as the critique had to be in during critical appraisal, as radical the utopias should become in this phase. Particularly the constraints of money, power and politics can safely be ignored. Participants are allowed and actively encouraged to dream. The normative forces of the factual no longer should dominate the discourse. Yet participants will not just generate endless wish lists. They will have to develop coherent descriptions of Utopias, defined as 'place[s] of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions' (Merriam-Webster Online, 2006).

(3) Realisation—i.e. to transform Utopia into a picture of a desirable future, and to initiate first steps towards that future—is the aim of the **implementation** phase. This is difficult to achieve; and it is best done in several iterations, approaching the desirable from the far end, e.g. by identifying those characteristics of the Utopias that relate most closely to existing realities. Finding analogies and examples of 'what is possible there could also be possible here' is essential to avoid getting trapped by accepting constraints as given instead of challenging them. Once a description of a desirable future has been found, the last stage in the process is to start to make it happen. A Future Workshop ends with an action plan that brings a first step towards a better future within reach of the participants.

The length of a workshop varies from less than one day to one week. Ideally, one should allocate one day per phase. The workshop would need to be led by at least 2 facilitators. The number of participants ranges typically from 25 to 50 people. However, Future Workshops with over 100 participants have successfully been held, requiring up to six facilitators. Variations with even bigger audiences could probably be realised by integrating Open Space approaches.

A team of facilitators ensures that the three phases and the basic principles are respected, i.e.: ‘everyone is important’, ‘everything said is important’, ‘everyone gets the opportunity to speak’, ‘everything is written down or visualized’. The facilitation techniques should be varied in order to generate a diversity of opinions, ideas and proposals. Techniques typically employed include: brainstorming, ranking, mind-mapping, fantasy travels, role-play, reportage, collage and painting. Further, the facilitators are responsible for the preparation and the documentation of the Future Workshop.

It is important to keep in mind the context Future Workshops were developed in. Their invention goes back to the 1960s when Robert Jungk, then journalist, later professor of future research at TU Berlin, experienced the long-term impacts of the nuclear bombings on civilians in Hiroshima. He decided to establish future research in Germany as a discipline that studies the long-term impacts of decisions driven by a predominantly techno-scientific society. However, he found, particularly during the first international conference of future scientists, held in Oslo in 1967, that ‘experts, politicians and managers started to colonise the future. In the past only countries were colonised, now they started to subdue time by determining the future. From this insight the question arose how we could let as many people as possible participate at formulating and designing the future. (...) In the early sixties I thus started the first Future Workshops giving the people concerned the possibility to meet, to unleash their hidden potentials and to mentally prepare for social change.’ (Weirauch, 2002).

Preparation (The Checklist)



The main preparation goes into establishing the aims of the Future Workshop. From these aims the initial question has to be developed which is required for starting the critical appraisal phase. It is important that this initial question actually opens up the analysis of the issue to be worked on. So questions should start with ‘What are your concerns ...?’ or ‘Which are your fears ...?’ (but obviously not with ‘how’ or ‘why’).

The second main effort goes into the meticulous planning of the Future Workshop. It is absolutely essential to allocate enough time for the last phase, the implementation. A good rule of thumb is that the implementation phase could take almost 50 % of the actual working time of a workshop (i.e. excluding breaks and housekeeping announcements). Utopian fantasies equally require some time, maybe 1/3 of the working time. The remaining time is then allocated to the critical appraisal. It is important to be aware that participants tend to stick with moaning, so the transition from the critical appraisal to the utopian fantasies has to be designed with special attention. Similarly, the transition from utopian fantasies to implementation requires participants to change perspective, which needs support from the facilitators.

When designing the schedule for the workshop, facilitators have to create a good balance of plenary and small-group activity, schedule enough breaks and allocate time for ‘off-duty’ activities such as relaxing, chatting, etc.

Also, the material needed and appropriate facilities have to be ready for the workshop. Suggested material (for a workshop with about 25 participants) is 30 flip-chart sheets or a paper roll (1,5 meters wide, 20 meters long), 50 pastel crayons in various colours, scissors, 5 rolls of masking tape, glue, 300 sheets A4, 300 sheets A3. The facilities should be flexible, allowing for plenary

session and breakout groups. Furniture will have to be moved, and it is necessary that sheet with workshop results can be stuck to the walls.

Toolkit (The Essentials)



The essential ingredients of a Future Workshop are on the one hand facilitation principles and techniques, on the other hand an adequate set of tools and materials. In strong contrast to many more recent facilitation techniques, a Future Workshop requires no sophisticated toolkit, available only through specialist retailers – no fancy magnetic shapes, dedicated computer programs or specialist pens. Scrap paper, pastel crayons and masking tape are the main ingredients – the less gadgetry the more the Future Workshop can focus on the content.

Facilitation principles, techniques and skills, however, are the essentials for conducting a Future Workshop. Many of these principles are general facilitation principles, such as being sensitive to the groups needs, listening to constructive criticism and responding appropriately, confronting problems and difficulties, being supportive, encouraging all group members, using questions instead of statements, etc.

Also, common facilitation techniques are used quite extensively in Future Workshops: clarification of statements, clustering of items, combination of similar ideas, prioritizing techniques, negative poll (elimination of low priority items), setting un-related items aside for later use, question techniques such as the nominal group technique, force field analysis, storyboarding, etc.

Additionally, Future Workshops employ a specific facilitation pattern. It is sometimes referred to as the 'funnel pattern'. It gets used at least once per phase, in longer workshops also twice or more often. The funnel pattern of a Future Workshops consists of six steps:

- a. *Prepare* the participants by stating the question or topic and creating an atmosphere that supports the current phase (i.e. critique, fantasy, or implementation). This is typically a plenary session, however sometimes appropriate small group activity can serve the same purpose (cf. below the introduction to the implementation phase in table 3).
- b. *Collect* items related to the question or topic by using some facilitation technique such as brainstorming, brain writing, etc. This could equally be a plenary session or some small group activity.
- c. *Structure* the items collected above to review the items collected, to get an overview of the material and to reduce the number of items the workshop has to deal with to a more manageable size. Typically one would use some clustering technique.
- d. *Expand* the clusters to create a richer picture of the issues that are often summarised in a few words and quite abstractly in the titles of the clusters. This step is extremely useful to create a common understanding of the issues at stake.
- e. *Select* the most important, most relevant, most interesting or most innovative etc. issue for future consideration in the next funnel or phase. Quite often this is done by voting on individual clusters or items and then counting the votes. However, a good solution might also be to give participants the opportunity to choose issues they want to carry on with, maybe even despite of high vote counts.
- f. *Close* the funnel by reviewing the process, acknowledging the contribution of everybody, pinpointing the results of the funnel and stressing the collective ownership of these results.

The facilitation of a Future Workshop also needs to take extra care for the transitions between the phases. So the transition from the critical appraisal phase to the utopian fantasy phase has to change the mindset of the participants from a more negative, backwards oriented attitude to a positive, creative and future-oriented attitude. A good break and some icebreaker techniques can very well be employed to achieve this transition.

Similarly, the transition from the freely floating utopian fantasy phase to the very much action-oriented implementation phase requires participants to change their mindset again. The facilitators have to support the participants in their work moving from utopian ideas to concrete implementation steps. Useful techniques can be trying to find examples where similar utopias have been realised, trying to identify potential obstacles to implementation, or trying to name possible sponsors, promoters and opponents of the utopian ideas.

Making it Happen (The Approach & the Action)



A Future Workshop consists of three strictly distinct phases:

- (1) Critical appraisal: To analyse a current situation
- (2) Utopian fantasy: To develop visions of the future
- (3) Implementation: To agree on an action plan how to reach these desired results

As with any facilitation method, a Future Workshop starts with an introductory phase that gives an overview over the method, the particular techniques used, the dos and don'ts for the workshop and an introduction into the topic.

(1) Critical appraisal provides an opportunity for the analysis of current structural problems and deficits. This phase could include: collecting critique, complaints, problems and fears related to the topic, establishing the main points of critique, illustrating these points with examples, selecting the most important points for further consideration in the workshop.

The aim of the critical appraisal phase is twofold: Firstly, it helps participants to vent frustration with the topic to be worked on. But, more important, secondly, this frustration and critique is taken seriously and will be fed into a process to actually change circumstances. The critical appraisal phase, therefore, is more than a token wailing wall; it is the first step of a self-directed change process.

Table 1: Example of a Critical Appraisal Phase

Step	Duration	Activity
Introduction	10 min	Facilitators explain the aims of the critical appraisal phase
Critique	20 min	Small group activity: Participants formulate their frustration and critique and jot down keywords on A3 oder A4 sheets of paper
Cluster	30 min	Plenary: critiques are clustered into groups according to similarity
Select	15 min	Plenary: Participants select those critiques groups they deem most important (e.g. by marking them with their initials)
Expand	45 min	Plenary: Participants are asked to tell their own stories relating to those critiques that have been selected; facilitators take notes on a flipchart so they are visible (and legible) for everybody.

(2) In the **utopian fantasy** phase daily problems are left behind and fantasies and visions – here for once not in the sense of 1990s MBA-lingo – are developed. This phase could make use of various creativity techniques, eliciting wishes, ideas, fantasies, or utopias. The phase also aims to identify what is the essentially new, fascinating or innovative content of these fantasies.

The aim of the utopian fantasy phase is to leapfrog common constraints, to overcome self-censoring, to make use of possibilities, to open up imagination in order to create space for thoughts that never have been thought before; imagination is king and all wishes are granted. That implies, that there is no place for critique of ideas, but a lot of scope for picking-up ideas and developing them further.

Table 2: Example of a Utopian Fantasy Phase

Step	Duration	Activity
Get positive	15 min	Work in pairs: For each critique participants describe in one sentence a positive situation where the particular critique would be absent or invalidated.
Introduction	10 min	Facilitators explain the aims of the utopian fantasy phase
Visualize	20 min	Small group activity, according to interest in single aspects of the positive sentences: Participants create a visual representation of their wishes by painting a picture.
Associate	20 min	Plenary / individual work: Participants freely associate ideas, stories, etc. that relate to the imagery created in the step above.
Develop utopias	50 min	Small group activity: Every participant selects one idea from the visualisation and related associations (ideas, stories). The group assembles these into a fairy tale, a play or similar to describe an utopian society or setting.
Evaluate	60 min	Plenary: Small groups present their utopias. The other participants try to identify what novelties and inventions these utopias contain.

(3) During the **implementation** phase, these fantasies are reviewed: How could they be rephrased as demands or requests? How could they be captured as goals or requirements? How could they be formulated as projects and put into action? Who would take responsibility to carry them out? The implementation phase is all about translating fantasies into actual and enacted innovation.

The aim of the implementation phase is to select ideas and develop them further into projects and actionable items that participants can walk away with and start implementing right after the workshop. This is notoriously the hardest phase and often requires quite some orienting intervention by the facilitators. However, it works well if the topic has been chosen carefully—i.e. the topic is relevant and addressable. It is essential that the context of the Future Workshop allows for participants actually to take action.

Table 3: Example of an Implementation Phase

Step	Duration	Activity
Review ideas	20 min	Participants form pairs and review all the ideas generated in the utopian fantasy phase and have to agree on one single idea they like most.
Introduction	10 min	Facilitators explain the aims of the implementation phase
Cluster	10 min	Plenary: Every pair reports the idea they have selected, the plenary attempts to cluster the ideas.
Examples	30 min	Plenary: Participants try to think of examples and analogies where an idea has already been realised in a different context.
Demands	20 min	Small group activity: Small groups form according to interest in ideas. Their task is to formulate what is required for the idea to become reality as concrete demands. Ideally, these demands cover short-, medium- and long-term aspects of the idea.
Vote	30 min	Small group activity: The groups rotate and vote on the demands established by the other groups. At the end, each group selects one of their demands to develop into a project in the following steps.
Develop projects	30 min	Small group activity: Participants formulate a project by answering the questions: What do we want to do? Why do we want to do it? How are we going to do it? Who is going to do it? Who do we need to inform, to consult, to get support from? When and where do we start?
Present and commit	45 min	Plenary: Each group presents their project; the other groups critically assess the proposal, ask questions and critically evaluate the commitment of the group's members to actually take action.

Optionally the implementation phase can be extended by activities such as interpreting the ideas from the utopian fantasy phase, i.e. to guess the 'hidden meaning' behind wild ideas, or collecting ideas, tips and lessons learnt from past experiences of implementing demands or starting a project.

The Future Workshop is then concluded by a focussed evaluation phase, reflecting on positive and negative experiences during the workshop itself.

Results & Next Steps (The Follow-Up)



The Future Workshop ends with one or several concrete projects and action plans. Participants have committed themselves to take action. A better future now seems realisable.

However, it is important to be aware that sometimes 'reality kicks in', that everyday routine quickly can consume the enthusiasm and energy that was set free in the Future Workshop. Commitment to take action is not enough to realise plans. If change is to happen an environment has to be created that supports the drivers of change in achieving results and dealing with resistance. Essentially, this means that the process of change that has been initialised in a Future Workshop has to be managed properly. Thus it is of great value to document extensively the

results of the Future Workshop so the participants can refer to the intermediary and the final results of their work. This is of course only the bare minimum the facilitators of a Future Workshop can offer the participants in terms of support.

It is generally a good idea to schedule a follow-up event with at least those participants who actively want to promote change. Additionally other supporters could be invited to that meeting as well.

Such a follow-up meeting would create an environment that supports change by:

- Creating elements that support change—e.g. by setting up pressure groups, securing specialist support from experts, etc.
- Establishing ways for other people to join the projects or the support groups and to stay on top of what actions are taking place etc.
- Planning for quick wins in the change process.

Real Cases (As it has Happened)



Below we present three real cases where Future Workshops were used to feed into change or development processes. The first case, Youth Strategy, is the most typical application of the method, while the other two cases, Future Town and Oil and the City, illustrate variations of the method.

Youth Strategy

For the development of a joint youth strategy for a rural canton of Switzerland, local teenagers themselves were invited to develop their own vision of what services should be available to them. A one-and-a-half-day future workshop was held with 24 young people aged 12 to 20.

This was a typical Future Workshop in terms of audience, schedule, and expected results. On the first morning complaints about the situation for young people were collected in small groups. In a plenary the topics were clustered, and every participant could indicate their three main issues. These for example included the lack of a McDonalds restaurant, difficult access to sports facilities, or tensions between different nationalities.

The first task of the utopian fantasy phase was first to draw a picture of their ideal canton. The four pictures all showed plenty of leisure facilities and shopping opportunities. Interestingly, one of them integrated them all into a youth centre. As a second task the participants had to think of a good experience they would love to make in their Utopia and to enact it as a small play. This proved extremely popular with the teenagers, and they developed stories where they themselves were the protagonists of their Utopias. One group showed a casual encounter between an old farmer and two young guys. The two guys managed to convince the farmer to allow them to hold a beach volleyball tournament on one of his fields which he eventually enjoyed watching (see fig. 1a below).

The implementation phase already started at the end of the first day, recollecting the issues and ideas the teenagers had generated during the day and opening up a public list of other ideas that had not been discussed in detail. Thus the participants were motivated to think about their projects over night.

The next day saw the development of project ideas. The aim was to be able to present these ideas at the end of the workshop to local and cantonal politicians, teachers, headmasters, youth workers and the general public. The participants worked in small groups on the projects they felt most attached to. Halfway through the morning, they had to present their work to their peers who tried to put themselves in the shoes of the politicians. After lunch, the public was presented with

some of the small plays from the first day and the projects developed so far. Sure they were surprised by the content of the proposals, and the presentation that was much more lively than the usual ‘death by PowerPoint’. The principal demand was easier access to sports facilities. But also smaller projects like a notice board for youth events were suggested. Politicians were asked to give their feedback on the projects, and the teenagers could then directly react to it. They engaged the politicians in a quite lively discussion, and the pressure mounted when one politician announced that one of the public sports halls was to be demolished. Faced with the—still very polite—anger of the teenagers, the politicians, headmasters, and youth workers promised to look into the possibility of opening a school's sports facility to youth groups. The reception afterwards offered ample opportunity to continue that discussion.



Figure 1a; 1b: Youth Strategy: participants enacting their Utopia; public presentation (Photos by Peter Troxler).

The consultants who lead the development of the youth strategy, of which the Future Workshop was part, made sure that the teenagers' demands were taken seriously in the later phases of the strategy development project. The representatives of the various government and NGO bodies eventually agreed, that only by joining up their individually limited resources they could live up to the expectations of the youth of this rural canton. Smaller projects such as the notice board were realised quickly. The issue of access to sports facilities, however, proved more difficult to solve; and only recently it was explicitly included as a requirement when the canton started the planning of a new sports centre.

Future Town

The project ‘Future Town’ was situated in a small suburban town in Switzerland, aimed at helping the city council to establish a development strategy for their town. The workshop formed part of an extended organisational development process that involved the whole city council.

This workshop was not typical of the empowerment intention of the method, since only the 15 elected councillors could participate. The workshop had the standard three phases, phase one and two on the first day, 2.5 hours in the morning and 3 hours in the afternoon, phase three on the second day (3 hours). Participants were invited to prepare issues for the critical appraisal, mainly due to time restrictions. At the start of the utopian fantasy phase, one facilitator-consultant told his story of a possible future of that suburban town. The story was carefully crafted and sometimes offered two or three versions in order not to overly influence the participants. The participants were asked to express their visions graphically (fig. 2a).

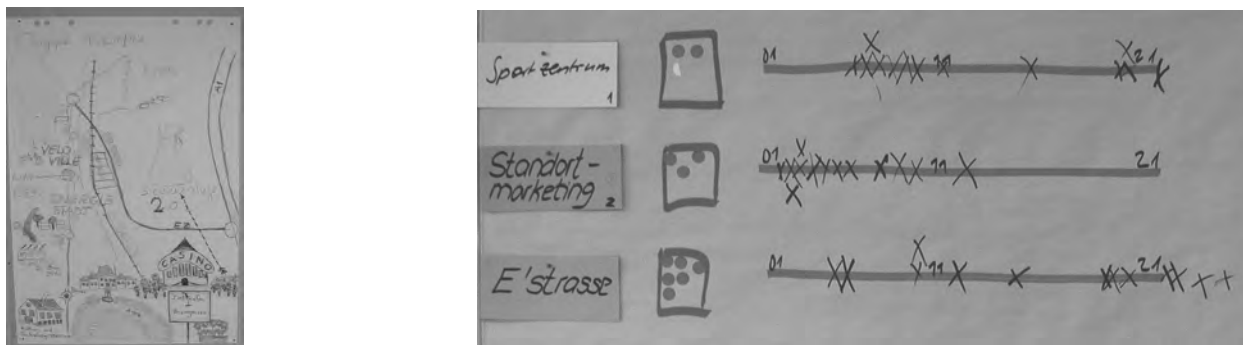


Figure 2a; 2b: Future Town: Graphical vision; potential developments with weighting and projection when they will happen.

In the implementation phase, the participants were not developing an action plan, but they were establishing various potential developments in the town and the socio-political environment. At the end, they had to select what they felt were the most important developments and indicate when they expected these developments to happen on a scale from 'this year' to 'in 20 years' (fig. 2b). This list was then used after the workshop to draft a development strategy.

The mix of analytical and creative methods, the latter being rather alien to city councillors, helped to establish a shared view across political barriers.

Oil and the City

The project 'Oil and the City' aimed to analyse, from an artistic point of view, the impact of the Oil and Gas Industry on the City of Aberdeen in Scotland. This yearlong project kicked-off with a one-day Future Workshop to enable the artists involved to dig into the subject and to develop their artistic practice.

Participation was open to the public and the workshop attracted a range of interest from academics to consultants, from people with a work background in the oil industry to local residents. So a rich base for the artistic work could be build quickly, which provided the artists with sufficient material to develop their own work.

The three phases were entitled 'The Colour of Oil is Black', 'Dreaming of Black Gold', and 'Oil and the City'.



Figure 3a; 3b; 3c: Oil and the City: clustering complaints; collective meals; writing-up individually (Photos by Eva Merz (left) and Peter Troxler (center and right)).

The workshop intentionally had a reduced implementation phase since its aim was to generate material and ideas for the artists to work with. This was also the reason why some particular techniques were used, particularly the 'log book'. Participants were asked to write down a summary of the critique phase and, later at one point in the utopian fantasy phase (fig. 3c), a personal statement a summary of all the 'good things' about oil in Aberdeen. These were then published, along with the other results from the workshop, in a booklet.

Tips & Tricks (To-Do)



- ☑ *Visualise:* it is indispensable to visualise any content participants contribute during the workshop and make it available to everybody in the audience
- ☑ *Time management:* The most important results of a Future Workshop are generated in the last phase. Therefore time management is crucial so earlier phases don't eat into the time allocated for the third phase.
- ☑ *Project creation:* The formulation of concrete actions is a hard step in the whole process. Apart from enough time it needs also special support and an approach that softly but succinctly helps participants to make their ideas more specific and action-oriented.

Potholes (Not-to-Do)



- ☒ As a facilitator, don't interfere with the content of what is being discussed. Facilitators are to facilitate the work of the participants, as their role suggests.
- ☒ As a facilitator, never destroy, cross out or dispose of any results from the workshop, nor allow anybody else to do this, as it might hurt (other) participants' feelings.
- ☒ Never start a Future Workshop with a series of presentations, 'inputs' and the like, as this would bias the participants' opinions. A Future Workshop builds on the original thoughts, ideas and imagination of the participants.

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Author Biographies



Dr. **Peter Troxler** works as a management consultant in Europe. He supports organisations in the private and public sector building management systems for the knowledge economy. Peter has worked in academia at ETH Zurich, Switzerland and at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. His main interests are cross-disciplinary issues at the interface of psychology, IT and engineering, and management science. He is said to be a passionate facilitator, and he has a second life as an arts producer and manager.



Dr. **Beate Kuhnt** is a research fellow at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, with the Software Engineering Group. Her main research area is to develop a systemic approach for IT project management including methods and techniques for handling social aspects. She contributes to the continuing education project MIO (People, Information Technology, and Organization) as project leader and lecturer. She is a facilitator for Future Workshops since 1989.