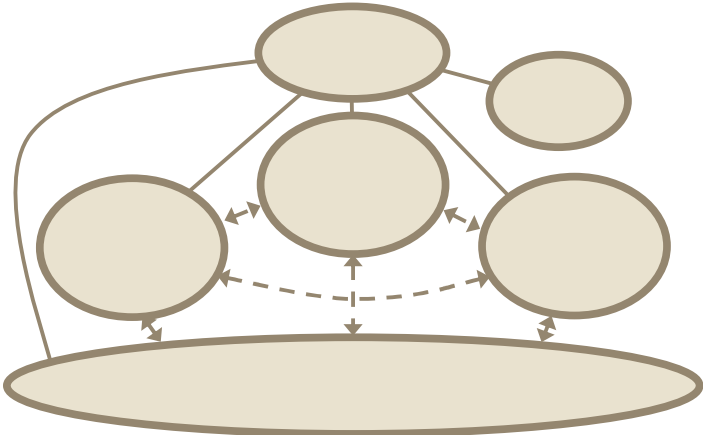




Kick-Starting Systems Change: The Best-Worst Exercise

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Introduction

This article introduces a powerful tool for kick-starting systems change in a way that helps groups address positive and negative aspects of both the current and the proposed systems. The *Best-Worst exercise* helps leaders and staff take a systems thinking approach to organizational change and create a positive environment in which all voices are heard.

Kick-Starting Systems Change: An Example

Several years ago, I was asked to work with representatives from law enforcement and justice agencies, including the sheriff's department, courts, prosecutor's office, and police. The team had been meeting for one year to plan the integration of disparate data systems so information could be shared seamlessly, yet were not satisfied with their progress. Because they lacked a methodology to tackle the very early steps of the system change, team members were trapped in minute details, such as converting paper forms to electronic documents.

By using the Best-Worst Exercise described below, I helped the team in just one meeting to move to a systems-level dialogue, draft a mission and vision for the integrated data management system, and outline an initial strategic plan. Several team members commented that this was the most productive meeting they had all year, and soon the team began to make substantial progress.

The Best-Worst Exercise

I learned about the Best-Worst exercise from Dale Brethower in a systems class at Western Michigan University (Brethower, 1998). Since then, I used this tool with great success in public and private sector organizations. Unlike the typical problem-solving approach to change management (focus on the negative aspects of the current system) or appreciative inquiry (focus on the positive aspects of the new system; Martinetz, 2002), the Best-Worst exercise addresses positive and negative views of organizational systems change (Figure 1).

	Best	Worst
No Change	Things we want to keep	Things we want to discard
Change	Things we want to create	Things we want to avoid

Figure 1. The Best-Worst Matrix.

The exercise is deceptively simple. It elegantly and powerfully breaks down the complexity of systems change into small behavioral steps. Experiencing this tool allows many groups to overcome their initial struggle as they try to get their hands around organizational systems change. The secret: It helps them ask the right, that is, system level questions.

Facilitating and Debriefing the Best-Worst Exercise

The tool works best for groups of up to ten participants. This number allows a productive dialogue among participants as they work through the four stages of the Best-Worst exercise. Plan about 30 to 40 minutes for facilitating the exercise.

After the brainstorming part of a Best-Worst planning session, I draw a simple matrix on a flipchart or marker board. In the left column I write the names of the current and new systems, in the top row I write the words "Best" and "Worst" (Figure 2). I debrief one cell at a time and label it with the key word for each scenario: Keep, Discard, Create, and Avoid.

	Best	Worst
Current system	Keep	Discard
New system	Create	Avoid

Figure 2. The Best-Worst Debriefing Diagram.

During the debriefing, participants review their ideas captured on several flipcharts and begin asking systems-level questions. These questions transcend what typically was a fixation on lower-level concerns. The integration team described above, for example, was so overwhelmed by the multi-agency change project that they had a hard time moving from tactical to system-level considerations.

Table 1 describes in detail the process of facilitating and debriefing the Best-Worst exercise.

Kick-Starting Systems Change: The Best-Worst Exercise

Facilitation		Debriefing	
Best of the Current System	<p>I begin with best-of-the-current-system to allow participants to warm up to the brainstorming exercise. This creates a non-threatening icebreaker, and in most cases, participants have something positive to say about the current system.</p> <p>It is a good opportunity for creating a safe environment for sharing ideas and concerns by reinforcing thoughtful and creative responses early in the exercise.</p>	<i>Keep</i>	<p>I explain that identifying the best of the current organizational structure or process is important because designing the new system does not necessarily mean that everything will be thrown overboard.</p> <p>Keeping things that work will contribute to getting management and staff buy-in during the design and implementation phases.</p>
Worst of the Current System	<p>Next, I ask participants to identify what is not working in the current system or process. This is an important step of grappling with system change because it allows participants to vent negative emotions in a structured manner without digressing into a complaint session.</p>	<i>Discard</i>	<p>I tell participants that this is the most powerful cell in matrix because if these items persist after the change, the new system will be perceived as “more of the old,” and the change effort may not sustain.</p> <p>It might not be possible to eliminate all current worst items, due to legal requirements, for example. In these cases, it will be important to communicate that every effort will be or was made to minimize their impact to the most practical extent possible.</p>
Best of the New System	<p>At this point, I briefly review the proposed change to make sure all participants are on the same page. When specifics of the change are not clear or not yet agreed upon, the Best-Worst exercise becomes the vehicle for clarifying what the new system should accomplish and what information is missing.</p> <p>Case in point: The integration task force described earlier was stuck because members had no common framework for describing the new system.</p>	<i>Create</i>	<p>I encourage clients to consider in their design of the new system all best-of-the-new ideas. These ideas are opportunities that prompt everyone to articulate the possibilities of tomorrow rather than complaining about the constraints of today.</p> <p>During later stages of the system design, clients might find that not all ideas are practical or affordable. When this occurs, it is again important that they communicate the reasons why some ideas are not included in the new system.</p>
Worst of the New System	<p>During the fourth and final part of the Best-Worst exercise, I explain that in designing new systems or processes, elements or steps could inadvertently be included that could sub-optimize the new system or process. Identifying the worst of the new system gives the group a sense of which potential pitfalls to look for.</p>	<i>Avoid</i>	<p>When planning a new system or process, many ideas abound. Everyone focuses on what they would like to have in the future. At the same time, it is important to pay close attention to the worst-of-the-new so that these items don’t sneak in and keep the system from reaching its potential.</p>

Table 1: Facilitating and Debriefing the Best-Worst Exercise.

Tangible Product: System Change Checklist

The completed Best-Worst matrix results in an elementary checklist for designing and implementing the new system. While it does not cover all aspects of the necessary design, it reflects a consensus as to what during the first round are considered important potential benefits and pitfalls of the organizational change. This checklist may also be used for developing strategic goals, but it cannot take the place of thorough strategic planning.

The organizational change team should review this checklist at regular intervals against the current state of the design and during implementation to ensure that the best items have been incorporated, or at least addressed, and that the worst items have not become part of the new system.

As is true for many organizational change management projects, the process is just as important as the product. It is important to debrief results of the exercise as soon as possible. Debriefings may occur immediately during facilitated sessions or, in the case of questionnaires, during follow-up meetings.

Option 1: Focus Groups

Several years ago, I designed and facilitated a community-wide visioning process for a mid-sized city in southwest Michigan. Focus group members included over one hundred city residents, staff, commissioners, and the mayor. Using an extensive planning toolkit as their job aid, participants convened simultaneously in seven self-facilitated groups.

During the first two sessions, community members used the Best-Worst framework to identify the best and worst of the city today and in 2025. During the two final sessions, they created citywide visions and fine-tuned goals developed during the Best-Worst sessions.

This project was successful because the Best-Worst exercise allowed participants to quickly understand what was expected from each focus group without spending time on figuring out a complicated planning process. In addition, city commissioners publically adopted the visions and goals and included them in their annual planning retreats. Twelve month later, we reconvened the groups to review progress and conduct additional planning, again using the Best-Worst exercise.

Option 2: Questionnaires

It is not always convenient or expedient to use the Best-Worst exercise with a live audience. For example, the number of participants may be very large and would require too many sessions, or planning meetings do not allow time for facilitating the exercise. In these cases, administering a questionnaire will yield highly useful results that can be readily collated, analyzed, and synthesized.

Anonymous Surveys

I recently worked with a large Midwestern university on the merger of two departments. My role was to create an environment where staff viewed this integration as a forward-looking opportunity despite the fact that some of their colleagues lost their jobs.

We administered the Best-Worst exercise in the form of an electronic questionnaire to over forty managers and supervisors immediately following the merger's announcement (Figure 3).

Please list your thoughts and ideas for each of the following questions.

- 1. What were the best three things about the previous organizational structure?**
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- 2. What were the worst three things about the previous organizational structure?**
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- 3. What could be some of the best three things about the new organizational structure?**
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- 4. What could be some of the worst three things about the new organizational structure?**
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- 5. Please list one overriding concern you might have regarding the implementation of the integration project.**

Thank you!

Figure 3. The Best-Worst Questionnaire.

Because of the sensitivity of this project, we ensured anonymity by having participants email their completed questionnaires directly to me. After pasting only their responses into a working document, I deleted all emails. Only three days later, we reconvened all managers in a visioning workshop and presented the aggregate Best-Worst results as a springboard for developing team visions and strategies.

The Best-Worst questionnaire was successful in two areas. First, we achieved a response rate of 95%. Second, during the visioning workshop, participants enthusiastically focused on the future instead of rehashing negative aspects of the merger. An informal follow-up six months later revealed that management continues to track progress on the implementation of these initial strategies.

Non-Anonymous Surveys

The Best-Worst questionnaires also works well as a non-anonymous survey. I used this approach in a research company undergoing a complicated reorganization. The initial planning phase involved a number of fact-finding sessions that included different multi-disciplinary teams of managers and scientists. Because this restructuring required a cultural change, the session had the potential to turn antagonistic - an idea ideal setting for the Best-Worst exercise.

Participants submitted their completed questionnaires. We distributed their comments at the meeting and asked participants to identify their top worst items. In many cases, the project team was able to address these concerns on the spot; we recorded other concerns for later follow-up.

Using the Best-Worst exercise non-anonymously successfully created a cooperative rather than an adversarial environment and enabled productive dialogues about the new organization.

Option 3: Breakout Sessions

A final variation of the Best-Worst exercise is the breakout format. When groups are large and questionnaires are not feasible, breakout sessions are ideal for meetings that address multi-agency changes in a forum of participants who typically do not work together or do not know each other very well.

I facilitate breakout sessions by dividing the group into four small teams and ask them to explore one element of the Best-Worst exercise. Breakout teams may work in the large meeting room or in smaller rooms. At the end of the session, each group reports its findings to the other participants, with me facilitating the overall conversation. The advantage of this self-facilitated method over the facilitator-led approach is that more participants can join the dialogue about organizational change at the same time.

Summary

The Best-Worst exercise is a powerful tool in the OBM toolbox. It helps kick-start complex organizational change and works well with facilitated groups, surveys, and breakout groups. The ideas created by the exercise become a checklist that informs the design and implementation of systems change.

References

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Author Notes

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