

TALKING ABOUT EVOLUTIONS

From what, to what?

Everything is in process. But our ways of thinking about organizational development often don't account for that.

Our tools can be static, designed to look at single slices of time, where things are right now rather than where they've been or where they're headed. To help our clients think in terms of ongoing change, we created this exercise. How is your organization, team, project, strategy, or field evolving right now?

We call it the "from what, to what?" exercise. Our clients have used it as a warm-up at meetings, a prompt for long-term strategy conversations, a retreat opener to see if people are on the same page. It can reveal changes that can be otherwise hard to see. It can detect signs of gradual progress where before things seemed stagnant. It can identify roadblocks that require course corrections. And it can help people be more open to change by showing how they already are changing.

Prediction: the process of thinking about evolutions will galvanize your group! We have seen it happen again and again. Our clients have found it fun and fruitful: "This exercise was incredibly helpful to our board of directors and staff as we moved through the process of designing our strategic framework for the next three years." "It allowed us to embrace the change we are living into and honor the past. And I enjoyed how versatile this exercise could be." "For our board, this exercise helped to crack open their big-picture thinking as well as illuminate the history, characteristics, and capacities of our organization."

Check out the exercise on the next pages. Read the annotations that follow for ideas on how you might use it. Adapt it to fit your needs. Give it a try. And let us know what you think and how we could improve it.

I. Identifying Your Evolutions

First, what is the thing evolving?

It could be an organization, team, project, strategy or field. (Or, if you're doing the exercise on your own, it could even be yourself.)

Second, what timespan do you want to use for your evolutions?

The inquiry can be most fruitful if you look at ongoing evolutions—from some time in the past to some time in the future. For example, if you're planning to use this exercise as part of a strategic planning for the next three years, your timespan might be from "three years ago" to "three years from now."

| | | |
|-------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| From when, in the past | → | To when, in the future |
| | → | |

Now, what evolutions are you seeing?

Ask members of your group to brainstorm different evolutions, on their own or in pairs. Write down all the evolutions that come to mind. They can be positive or negative, general or specific, straightforward or subtle.

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| | → | |
| | → | |
| | → | |
| | → | |

2. Analyze Your Evolutions

After members of your group have brainstormed evolutions individually or in pairs, ask them to pick the 2-3 evolutions they think are most significant, write them down (legibly!) on sticky notes, and post them on a flip chart or wall. Then, as a group, review and discuss the evolutions.

Sort your evolutions into categories.

What themes strike you? Any important commonalities or differences? Any surprises?

Pick the evolutions that have the most energy for your group.

They can be positive evolutions you want to pursue or negative ones you want to counter.

Analyze those priority evolutions.

How can you support or accelerate the positive evolutions? How can you redirect the negative ones? What key factors influencing the evolutions is your analysis surfacing?

I. Identifying Your Evolutions

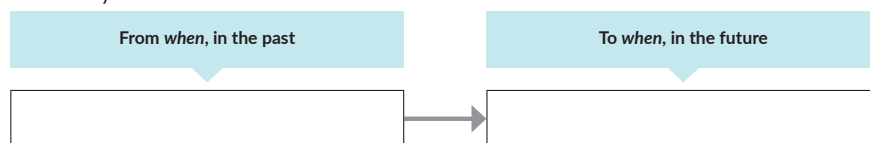
First, what is the thing evolving?

It could be an organization, team, project, strategy or field. (Or, if you're doing the exercise on your own, it could even be yourself.)

Or you might choose more than one thing. For example, one client identified evolutions in four areas: program strategy, culture, operations, and learning approach.

Second, what timespan do you want to use for your evolutions?

The inquiry can be most fruitful if you look at ongoing evolutions—from some time in the past to some time in the future. For example, if you're planning to use this exercise as part of a strategic planning for the next three years, your timespan might be from "three years ago" to "three years from now."



Your first instinct might be to think about your evolution from the present to the future. We encourage you to make it from the past to the future and think about evolutions that you're in the midst of right now.

Now, what evolutions are you seeing?

Ask members of your group to brainstorm different evolutions, on their own or in pairs. Write down all the evolutions that come to mind. They can be positive or negative, general or specific, straightforward or subtle.

Most people who do this exercise focus on positive evolutions, but sometimes surfacing how things might be evolving in the opposite direction can be constructive. We've also seen how it can be provocative when people identify areas where nothing is changing and put the same thing in the "from" and "to" boxes.

Encourage your group to be flexible and creative in generating evolutions. Some evolutions we've seen identified during this exercise are literal: "5 staff" → "10 staff." Some are metaphoric: "Loose-knit" → "Tapestry." Some are cosmic: "Planet (exclusive)" → "Constellation (inclusive)." The more variety, the better.

2. Analyze Your Evolutions

After members of your group have brainstormed evolutions individually or in pairs, ask them to pick the 2-3 evolutions they think are most significant, write them down (legibly!) on sticky notes, and post them on a flip chart or wall. Then, as a group, review and discuss the evolutions.

If possible, we encourage you to do this part of the exercise with everyone in the group gathered around the evolutions posted on a wall or flip chart.

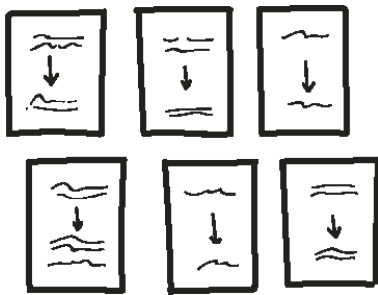
Sort your evolutions into categories.

What themes strike you? Any important commonalities or differences? Any surprises?

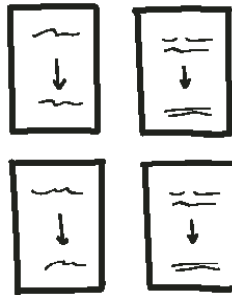
A good way to do this is to have members of the group do a “gallery walk,” individually reviewing, sorting and posting notes on the evolutions before you discuss as a group.

Some clients have stopped here, using the exercise to give people a big-picture perspective and identify critical questions, then spending the rest of their time exploring how they will address those questions.

Category1



Category2



Pick the evolutions that have the most energy for your group.

They can be positive evolutions you want to pursue or negative ones you want to counter.

We’d encourage you to think in terms of “energy,” which can be emotional as well as intellectual. We’ve seen clients get a lot out of prioritizing in this way and probing why certain evolutions resonate.

Analyze those priority evolutions.

How can you support or accelerate the positive evolutions? How can you redirect the negative ones? What key factors influencing the evolutions is your analysis surfacing?

Tension can be your friend during this review. Use the evolutions to tease out different perceptions in the group. Look for where the gaps between current reality and aspirational evolution are widest and ask why.