

Best Year Ever! - A Guide to the Process

Introduction

Andrew Gibson provided a practical workshop on his Best Year Ever! Methodology at the Unconference.

This guide explains how to run the Best Year Ever! as a workshop-based process that helps teams and organisations co-create an action plan for the next steps. The SF tool used is Numberless Scaling – see Appendix.

Best Year Ever has been used successfully to develop business plans, income streams and memorably to help improve a team that self-described as the worst in their organisation! One client has had their 'Best Year Ever' for each of the last four years and credits this workshop as contributing to their success.

Preparing for your workshop

Your workshop groups should be 6-12 people, with delegates drawn from all stakeholder groups. Mix up teams, board members, etc., so the workshop includes many perspectives.

Run as many workshops as your client needs (and as their budget allows!) to involve all the stakeholders on their list.

All workshops follow the same format, so individuals only need to attend once.

After you have completed the workshops, meet with your client and their choice of colleagues in a small review meeting. Themes will emerge from your workshops that can be converted into a short, 2-3 page document with the following format:

- Vision
- Current Strengths
- Next Steps Action Plan

For the purposes of this demonstration workshop, we will consider us all having our 'Best Year Ever'. It is vital that everyone in the room is asked a question with which they will all agree!

Equipment

You will need flipchart paper, an easel, three pen colours, and blu-tak or similar for in-person workshops. Delegates need no preparation in advance. I ask them to sit in a circle where all can see the flipchart. No desks or tables are required, though client preference will prevail if they want them.

You can also deliver the Best Year Ever! workshop online via Zoom/Teams. I use a Blank Word document as the flipchart and create a bulleted list.

Workshop Format

You need 1.5 to 2 hours to run this in full, though the time taken may vary.

Welcome and icebreaker

Example - 'In pairs, find out your partner's name, role and one thing that pleased them in the last seven days. I will give you two minutes each and then ask you to introduce your neighbour.'

Workshop Stages

Stage 1 – The Miracle Question – [1h to 1h15m].

“Imagine we were 12 months from now. We have had our Best Year Ever! We walk into this room next year. What do you notice that tells you we have had our best year ever?”

Facilitator Notes

- Discuss the needs with the client beforehand when working with a team or an organisation. This discussion would help prepare the opening question. For a client seeking a five-year business plan, one example would be:
 - *“Imagine we were five years’ from now. We are celebrating the brilliant implementation of our brilliant five-year business plan. What do we notice that tells us we have implemented our business plan brilliantly?”*
- We flip-chart the responses.
- Start with the perspective of the people in the room;
 - If they say, “We would be doing XYZ”, or “We would have more staff”, ask them what they would notice that would tell them that more ‘doing XYZ’ or ‘having more staff’ was working well;
 - Keep asking them ‘what else’ and keep focusing on noticeable differences.
 - Try not to write ‘actions’ on the flipcharts – just noticeable difference statements;
- When the perspective of the people in the room is flagging, ask, *“Who else is involved in this, e.g. ‘Best Year Ever’? “What would they notice?”* ;
 - Repeat *“What else?”* until the group starts to struggle, then ask for another *“Who else?”*;
 - Explore what this person/these people would notice, and so on and so on;
 - Keep repeating the ‘who else’ until all perspectives have been considered.

You should have many pages of flipcharts full of noticeable differences by running and keeping this process going.

Stage 2 – Review the list of noticeable differences – usually takes around 15-20 minutes

It usually takes over an hour to complete Stage 1, so delegates will welcome a five-minute comfort break. At this time, blu-tak the flipchart pages to the walls and number them. Ensure everyone can see them comfortably if possible.

Once everyone is back in the room, we review the flipcharts by asking, *“Looking at these flipcharts, please tell me which of these noticeable differences you are noticing now or have noticed in the recent past, even just a little.”*

As the delegates identify the items they have noticed now or recently, draw a ring around them in a different coloured pen. Keep going until they have identified as many as they wish to.

Once you have completed this stage, be sure to compliment them like this:

- “Thank you for identifying these. So, we spent the first hour identifying how everything would be in our <Best Year Ever>. Every one of these items you have noticed is a part of how you would like things to be. Congratulations – you are much nearer to your <Best Year Ever> than you perhaps thought.”

Stage 3 – Identify the next steps action plan – usually takes 15-20 minutes

The final stage of this workshop is to review the flipcharts again. This time, ask the delegates to *“Consider the flipcharts again. Let’s imagine we were a little closer to our long-term <future perfect>”*. (I usually stand in the middle of the room and take a deliberate step.)

- “Which of these would you like to notice in (for example) six months?”
 - With a third colour of pen, mark these with an asterisk at each end.

These are the next steps for noticeable differences. These steps finish the workshop.

You can run as many of these workshops as needed. If you follow this format, delegates will produce a broadly similar output, with some interesting differences depending on who is in the room.

Post Workshop Analysis

- Once all the workshops are complete, arrange to meet with your client and any others they choose. Note that this stage is best done with a very small team.

- Go through the workshop outputs and identify the major themes. The noticeable differences can be themed and turned into a description of their perfect future – The Vision.
- Then, look at the themes and the noticeable differences with rings around them. These can be captured as Current Strengths.
- And then, finally, look at those marked with asterisks and, again, the emergent themes. The team can turn these into activities that already or will deliver the noticeable differences described. This plan helps prioritise resources and activity in the next six months. These are the client's Next Steps Actions.

The final document can be written as a two-page plan and presented to all stakeholders. They will recognise the outcomes as coming from their work, be engaged with the plan and see the logic in the next steps. The client can get on with delivering the plan, knowing everyone has bought into it.

Appendix

Solution-Focused Numberless Scaling – Training Notes

This workshop follows the familiar solution-focused process. It is a time-related numberless scaling process.

When I facilitate one of these workshops, I do not spend time explaining to participants that this is the process we are using. It is vital that they trust the process as the answers are clear by the very end.

After the icebreaker, the first stage is to use the Miracle Question to establish a rich description of the Future Perfect; the longer spent on this, the more interactional perspectives there are, the better the workshop outcomes.

The second stage is to review 'what is contributing to what we want', i.e. to review the current strengths. We don't need to explain scaling as a process or the scale (what zero or one looks like), nor establish where people are on their scale. This workshop technique assumes that they have made some progress. If the Miracle Question Stage has produced a detailed description, then this stage always finds some examples of noticeable progress.

The final stage of the workshop is to imagine the group is one small step closer to their Future Perfect. This stage replicates the final part of the scaling process, where we ask the client where they would like to be and what they and others would notice next. Again, we presume that the group would like to progress, so we present them with the 'next step' when we ask the question. We use a shorter time frame to ensure that the emerging Action Plan is deliverable.