Developing Shared Understanding

**CONSTELLATION MAPPING**

**WHAT** This is a sophisticated method for building shared insight into the dynamics around a given challenge, identifying possible solution pathways, and engaging stakeholders in contributing resources to the solutions.

**WHEN** This method is especially helpful when you need people to thoroughly understand a complex challenge together, generate practical pathways to action, AND build genuine commitment to working together, all at the same time.

**WHO** This method works well for groups of up to 30 people working on issues that are complex and not well defined. Participants should represent a diversity of perspectives on the challenges and be able to commit resources to addressing the challenge.

**HOW** Instructions to participants:

1. We’re going to quickly generate as many items as we can related to this issue. There are three types: Challenges are problems related to the issue (write these on red notes), Opportunities are potentially positive outcomes of addressing the issue (write these on green), Resources are things you can leverage directly or indirectly to positively impact the issue (on blue).
2. Write one item per note—legibly!
3. Each item must somehow relate to the focus issue, each item must be specific (use concrete examples where possible), and each participant can create an unlimited number of items—the more, the better.

After people have written lots of items, tell them to generate two more items each and then post all of them on the wall. It’s okay if they start to connect related items as they post, but they shouldn’t go too deep yet.

After the participants have posted all their items, take a short break and then gather everyone near the wall. Make sure everyone can see the notes well and then invite them to start connecting elements. Read items aloud as you connect them together. (The hexagon-shaped notes fit neatly together into patterns.)

**WHY** Benefits of Constellation Mapping:

- Each person’s distinct perspective and information becomes part of the whole picture.
- Items often come together to produce insights that no individual participant would have seen.
- As people connect problems with resources and opportunities, the connections point to possible “solution paths” that can address the problem multi-dimensionally.
- People begin to see the relationship among various elements and understand the dynamics of the problem.
- The process of connecting items that everyone generated builds shared understanding and commitment.

**WHAT’S NEXT** Use the output to seed a storyboarding process, where the group creates possible stories about what’s happening now and what the desired future looks like, and then uses storytelling to chart how this group might make that future happen.

**MATERIALS**

| Hexagon-shaped notes from thinkingtools.net (red, blue, and green) |
| Sharpie markers (one for each participant) |

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