

Blue Sky thinking

The Blue Sky Thinking tool is a problem solving tool that is helpful in planning meetings or in general team meetings.

When people are struggling to come up with solutions it is often because they are getting bogged down in the issue or question, making it difficult to see beyond that point. The blue sky thinking process helps people to think freely and to generate creative ideas first without placing limitations on their thinking.

People can bounce off one another's ideas – everyone gets to come up with ideas without being judged.

Most importantly it helps people to come up with fresh ideas that can result in new actions.

What you need

- **Flip chart on the wall or a whiteboard and markers.**
- **A facilitator to keep people focused ideas, ensure they stick to the process, and that they save discussion until they are setting actions.**
- **A scribe who can write fast enough to keep up with everyone's ideas.**
- **A team of people who are ready for action.**

What you do

Pose the issue as a question, for example: How can we make sure Mandy stays at the centre of her planning meeting and that everyone listens to her?

Then spend between 3 and 5 minutes getting as many ideas recorded as possible (agree on the amount of time at the start of the process based on time available). If you spend too much time generating ideas, you will likely run out of time to set actions – this may be fun but not very productive. Limiting your time can create a sense of urgency and help people to stay focused and creative. The rules for this are:

- **Be as creative and wacky as possible.**
- **Shout as many ideas as possible (do not discuss them!)**
- **Do not criticise or amend ideas, no matter how far fetched they may seem.**
- **Building on other people's ideas is fine.**
- **Wait for the silence to end – a wave of creativity often follows.**
- **Record all ideas even if they seem similar.**

When time is up, it's time to sort through ideas.

The facilitator reads through and asks the group 2 questions about each suggestion.

Is it positive?

Is it possible?

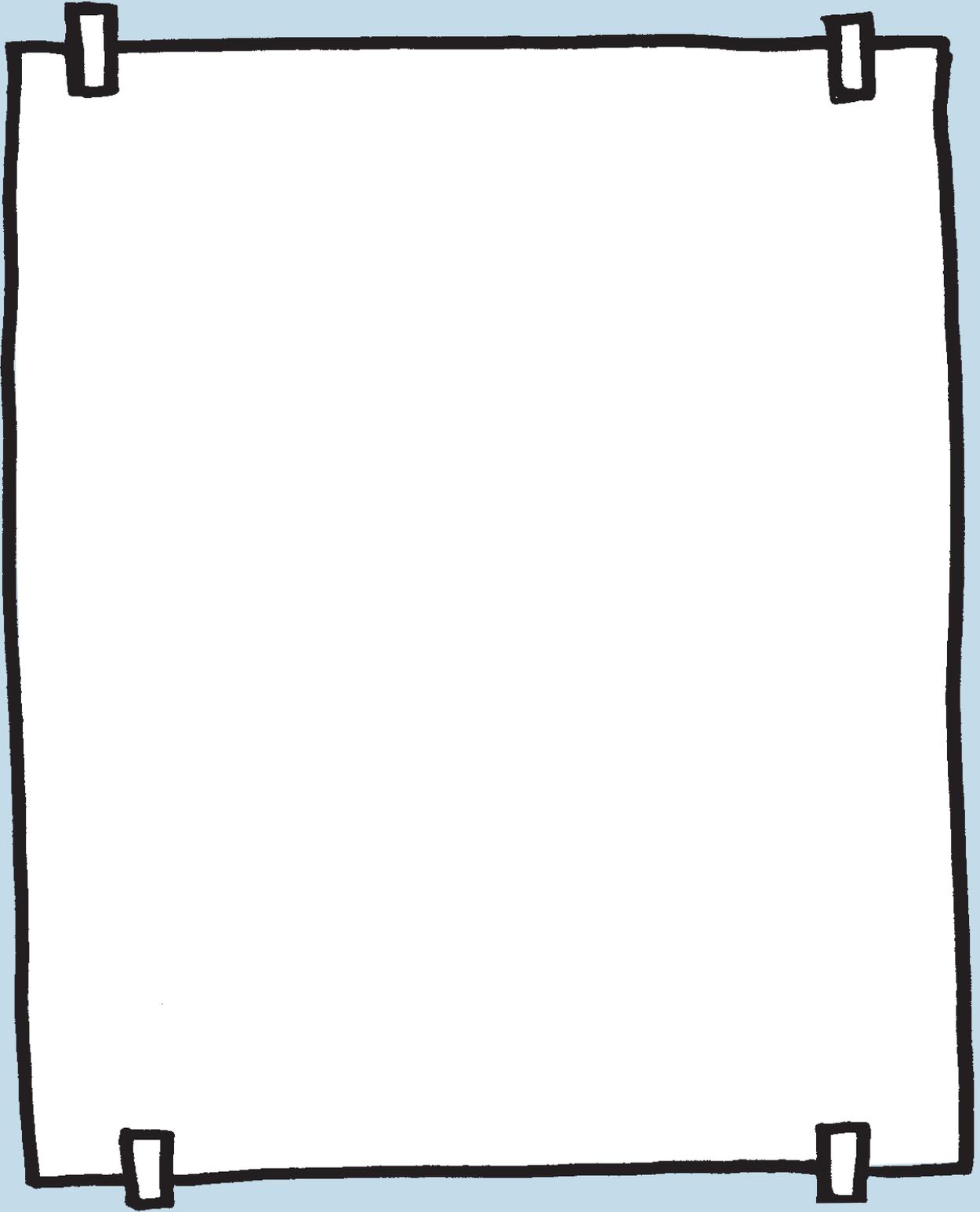
If you can answer yes to both questions then circle the idea. If not, don't dwell on it, move on to the next point. Once you've gone through all the ideas write an action plan for each circled idea – if you have a large amount of ideas and a small amount of time, you may want to start with one or two, and revisit the ideas during each subsequent meeting until you have tried all the positive and possible ideas.

This information was developed by Helen Sanderson Associates (Australia) in 2011, for Ageing Disability and Home Care, Department of Human Services NSW, as a resource to support the Lifestyle Planning Practice Guide and Tools. Most of these tools are Person Centred Thinking tools, and were either developed by The Learning Community for Person Centred Practices, or Helen Sanderson Associates. They are used here with permission. We would like to thank the residents, family members and staff for their time and support in developing examples.

These instructions are not intended as a substitute for training. If you are using these tools for the first time and have not attended a Person Centred Thinking course, please seek support from a colleague or manager who has attended training.



Blue sky Thinking for



Actions from Meeting date.....

meeting

Who

Will do what

By when



Blue sky Thinking for Mandy

Mandy has a few words that people who know her well understand, and can clearly indicate yes or no if someone spends time explaining the question, and if there are pictures, photos or object symbols to help her understand. She has many people in her life that tend to speak for her because it can take a long time for her to get her message across and to understand what others are saying. When Mandy is overwhelmed with lots of people talking about her, she can become upset and angry. In the past she has hit out at staff during her planning meetings. Some people felt it would be better if Mandy didn't attend her meeting so her team used the Blue sky thinking tool to figure out how to involve Mandy in a meeting that would be a positive experience for everyone.

How can we make sure Mandy's meeting is a positive experience for everyone?

Go through photos with Mandy before the meeting to help her prepare.

Make sure someone who knows Mandy's communication really well is at the meeting.

Make it fun – balloons, Mandy's favourite music, colours, food and drinks.

Have set times when no one but Mandy is allowed to speak.

Think about the best way to set the room up so Mandy feels comfortable – talk to people who know her well.

Have Mandy there just for some of the time.

Make sure we can have a break if Mandy is getting restless.

Give Mandy an inflatable base ball bat so she can hit people and it won't hurt.

Have lots of photos, object symbols and pictures ready to use at the meeting.

Work with Mandy before the meeting to decide what objects she wants to bring that help people understand what's important to her.

Make a rule that Mandy gets to talk first and last on any topic that is discussed.

Have one person there who can go out of the room with Mandy if she needs or wants to.

Gather the information from Mandy before the meeting and involve Mandy in writing it up for people to see – use pictures and photos too.

Gag people who are talking FOR or ABOUT Mandy rather than talking WITH her.

Find out how long people can spend at the meeting so we don't have to rush if we don't need to.

Use a talking stick to stop everyone else "jibber jabbering" while someone else is talking.

See if we could have two shorter meetings so there is plenty of time, but people don't get too tired.

Make sure everyone knows why we're in the room.

Give chewy lollies to people who sometime talk over the top of Mandy so their mouth is full and they can't talk.

Use ground rules that make everyone aware that it's Mandy's meeting and we need to listen to her.

Get everyone to wear Sumo suits.

Actions from Mandy's meeting Meeting date.....

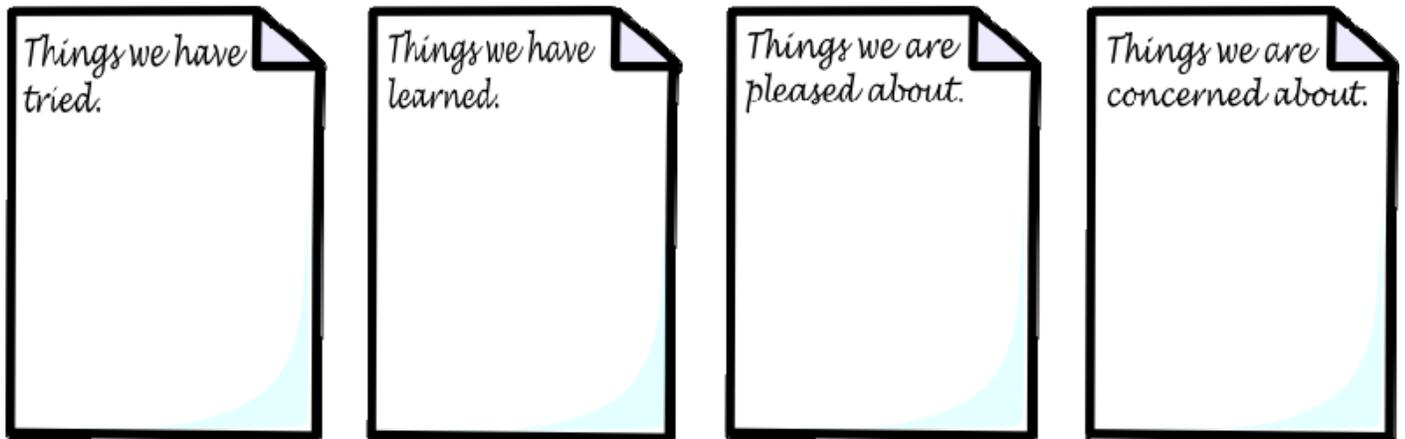
Who	Will do what	By when
Eli and Suki	<p>Spend at least 25 minutes with Mandy every time we are working with her, going through things like good and bad days for her to help get prepared for her meeting.</p> <p>Ask Mandy how she wants to set up the meeting room/where she wants to have it. Use pictures and objects to do this – check what we learn with other staff in staff meetings.</p> <p>Spend time with Mandy, gathering pictures, photos and objects to use in the meeting.</p> <p>Work with Mandy to write what we learn on posters to put on the walls at the meeting.</p>	<p>Starting 18/8/10</p> <p>finished by 30/10/10</p> <p>3/11/10</p>
Jordan	<p>Contact Jo from Mandy's community program to find out if she can be Mandy's main communication support at her meeting and find a date that will suit her.</p>	<p>1/9/10</p>
Alison	<p>Send questions out to family, friends and staff from community programs to get ideas about how to set up the room/where to have Mandy's meeting so she feels really comfortable.</p>	<p>1/9/10</p>
Milly	<p>Make a poster that has ground rules and purpose of the meeting written on it, including in big letters IT'S MANDY'S MEETING, SHE GETS THE FIRST AND LAST WORD!</p>	<p>3/11/10</p>
Jordan	<p>Agree times with people who are coming to Mandy's meeting and develop an agenda with timings that include break times.</p>	<p>3/11/10</p>
Alison	<p>Ask Alex (manager) if we can get a casual staff person that Mandy knows who can be there to go outside with her if she needs to.</p>	<p>29/10/10</p>
Milly	<p>Work with Mandy to make a "Talking stick" that she likes but isn't dangerous, and that she is happy to share with others/set others hold e.g. something soft.</p>	<p>3/11/10</p>



TIPS for Using the 4 + 1 Questions:

- 1) On separate pieces of paper (flip chart paper is preferred) write at the top the following:
 - a. Things we have tried.
 - b. Things we have learned.
 - c. Things we are pleased about.
 - d. Things we are concerned about.

Each sheet will look like the following:



- 2) Tape all sheets on the wall so that everyone can see each sheet.
- 3) Everyone will choose a colored marker to write with. Each person will have a different colored marker to make it easy to identify the different perspectives of each person. OR have everyone use the same color if there is a sense that people would appreciate being anonymous.
- 4) Everyone will write on each paper answering the questions:

"Since we last got together..."

 - a. Things we have tried.
 - b. Things we have learned.
 - c. Things we are pleased about.
 - d. Things we are concerned about.

- 5) Questions may also involve around things that are more specific like:
 - a. "Regarding Sally's new health plan..."
 - b. "Jon's experience with activities in the community..."
 - c. "In learning to communicate better with Angolina..."
- 6) TIPS or guidelines to share with group before people start writing their ideas on paper:
 - a. No talking or problem solving when everyone is writing.
 - b. Everyone must be comfortable with writing; people must feel that spelling and grammar do not matter.
 - c. There are no "Stupid Questions/Answers".
 - d. Anyone that feels they cannot write should be supported by having someone write for them.
 - e. If the person being supported is present, identify a person(s) to assist if needed.
- 7) After everyone has contributed, the team will discuss each idea or input. Clarify where needed and document on the large paper.
- 8) Put up another piece of large paper and title it "Next Steps – What, Who, & By When".



- 9) The team should then answer the following:

"Based on what we now know, how should we move forward?"

NOTE: The team may decide what new things to try and/or actions to be taken when the team meets again.