

Step-Back Consulting

(Excerpted from "Background from the Harvard Macy Institute" by Professor Robert Keegan, *Professor of Adult Development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education*)

Here's how Step-Back Consulting works:

1. Each presenter/consultee will describe, in approximately five minutes, her/his challenge, whatever obstacles she/he has faced, and what she/he has tried.
2. The rest of the group will then have no more than five minutes to ask each presenter/consultee clarifying questions and hear answers. Use this time to think about what you need to know to step into the shoes of the presenter and ask questions to get those answers.
3. For the next 15 minutes, the presenter/consultee "steps back," becoming an observer. The group takes on "ownership" of the challenge as if it is theirs. Although it would be tempting to provide more details or context, the presenter's job is to remain silent and observe actively. A scribe will take notes of the suggestions generated during the discussion. Presenters/consultees may also keep notes of ideas and internal reactions, but may not speak during this part of the exercise.
4. At the end of the exercise, the presenter/consultee "steps-back in" and shares her/his experience (3-5 minutes) experience as an observer, and any ideas that emerged that merit further action/consideration/exploration.

Step-Back Consulting is based on the following learning principles:

1. For powerful small group learning to occur, all members must have a role that matters to them and keeps them active.
2. Groups are helped by a sense of urgency and energy, a feeling that there is something important to do and hardly enough time in which to do it.
3. If consultees do the talking, then, without even intending to, they will work toward, and generally succeed at, getting the group as a whole to think about things in just the way they are currently thinking. In other words, without intending to, we "succeed" at preventing the emergence of new ways of organizing reality. We succeed at keeping fresh ideas out, we succeed at not learning! On the other hand, the less the consultee talks, the greater the chance for the consultee to learn.