

PICTURING THE FUTURE

Once they have finished talking through what happened and established what the current reality is, ask them to picture what the situation might look like a year from now *assuming that today's mediation is a flaming success.* (Or "next week"....pick the appropriate time frame.)

Your goal is to have them see, smell, taste, hear what that scenario might feel like. This serves both to motivate and to guide the search for options which follows; instead of compromising to patch up something that's not working well, they're creating a future that they want to step towards.

It's one year from now. You're both still working for this department, (still married, still living next door, still partners in this venture). What's the happiest scenario you can imagine?

If needed, use further prompts such as:

You whistle on your way to work, enter the building in a good mood, say hi to someone.... and it feels great to be there. Who is there, what is happening?

In addition to [the other party at the table], who else is working with you or supporting you in a way that makes things better?

Imagine for now that you have all the power you need to make things turn out the way you want....

Optional approaches:

- Ask everyone to take 5 minutes privately to think to themselves first. This prevents being reactive or piggy-backing too quickly in response to others' images.
- In some settings you can ask people to draw (stick figures and symbols are okay!). This can strengthen their connection to their hoped-for scenario, and sometimes some creativity.
- If the answers are likely to be hostile, ask the question in separate meetings.
- For participants who are highly verbal or have trouble visualizing, instead of a "picture", ask them each to list 5 keywords about their hope for the future.

Discuss their views of the future

Once each person has shared their picture of the future without comments from others, discuss what pieces they heard from the other

side that they too would like to see happen.

- *What would need to happen for you to get from where you are now to this future place?*
- *What resources do you need? Who could help it happen?*
- *What's already in place, already happening, that you can build on?*

If their visions are far apart—one sees a fresh romance after the family moves to Italy, the other pictures herself happily living with the kids in her Mom's house in Ohio—have them revisit their interests and priorities in light of what they've just imagined for themselves, what they've heard the other side say. Can they moderate their image to include the other side's and still have a good feeling about it? (Maybe she never thought of living in Italy....)

There's no point in trying to generate options when the parties have deeply contradictory visions of what the future should look like. We have seen this lead to sensible and detailed agreements, where at the last minute someone says, "Sorry, I just can't."

Assuming, however, that there in fact *is* some overlap in their hopeful imaginings, you have helped turn their minds from the past to the future, and are ready to get down to the practical side of building agreement, starting with a topic list:

OK, let's move forward now to decide what topics you all need to discuss in order to be able to get there – somewhere close to your best hopes.