

ISSUE AND DIALOG MAPPING:

GETTING THE WHOLE PICTURE CHANGING THE GAME CHANGING THE ORGANIZATION

“They must often change who would be constant in happiness or wisdom.”

~ Confucius (551 BC - 479 BC)

Abstract

Our world is changing so fast, sometimes we are left to ponder exactly what "normal" is. It affects the individual and the organization, and impacts everything from moment-by-moment personal decisions to long-range strategic planning. The "pain" that accompanies it ranges from a vague uneasiness to a wrenching vision of certain, impending doom.

Recurring or persistent problems are disruptive and potentially expensive. But the real damage may be more subtle and insidious as organizational memory fades, and old workarounds accumulate and become accepted ways of doing things. As that concrete hardens, growth and agility become more difficult, productivity suffers and future options become narrower and more precarious.

Eventually the time comes to question how old ways of looking at things affect the playing of this rapidly evolving game. Modern dialog and issue mapping can bring clarity and speed to the organization grappling with problems and change.

Practical experience with dialog mapping shows it to be a tool for discovery and for igniting critical thought - even a weapon in the competitive arsenal - and a powerful graphic cognitive recording and rendering pad.

The distinction in use and resulting artifacts turns on management approach, the exercise leader, and the nature of the situation in which it is being used.

Background

[Horst Rittel](#) is considered the founding father of dialog mapping. In a seminal paper written in 1970¹, he describes Issue-Based information Systems (IBIS), of which dialog mapping is a tributary:

Issue-Based Information Systems (IBIS) are meant to support coordination and planning of political decision processes. IBIS guides the identification, structuring, and settling of issues raised by problem-solving groups, and provides information pertinent to the discourse. It is linked to conventional documentation systems but also activates other sources. Elements of the system are topics, issues, questions of fact, positions, arguments, and model problems.

Generally, the use of dialog mapping starts with a topic or a "trigger statement". From that, sub-topics form, and in the ensuing discussion issues and arguments arise that are mapped, along with pro's and con's of possible solutions. Through this interplay, an array of causes and solutions emerge as the participants constantly form and re-form the context, and all of it mapped on a screen visible to the entire team. Questions are asked, and the questions and answers alike can be turned into issues or arguments.

The mapping exercise produces documentation that describes the settlement or explanation of the subject issues. Most often it also includes at least one solution, or at least a path to the solution.

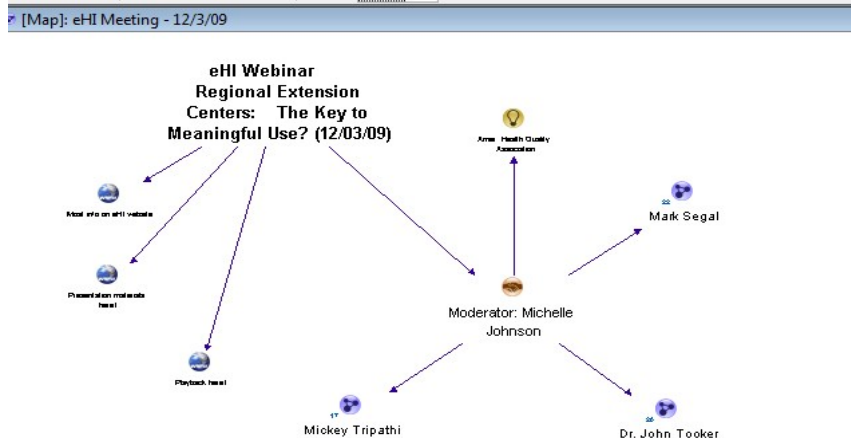
[Compendium](#), described as a hypertext content mapping tool, is one of the most long-lived and widely used tools for dialog mapping. An open-source initiative developed initially in research labs at Verizon, it provides a robust platform and a vibrant worldwide community of users. The Compendium home page describes it as "...a tool to support the real time mapping of discussions in meetings, collaborative modelling, and the longer term management of this information as organizational memory." (<http://compendium.open.ac.uk/institute/tools/tools.htm>)

This paper explores practical use of Compendium in a couple of settings:

- A typical presentation environment, where dialog mapping adds new dimensions to the material and event.
- A situational or problem solving setting, where it is a fast and powerful platform for generating streams of solutions along with artifacts for future reference.

¹ ISSUES AS ELEMENTS OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS / Werner Kunz and Horst W. J. Rittel
Working Paper No. 131
July 1970

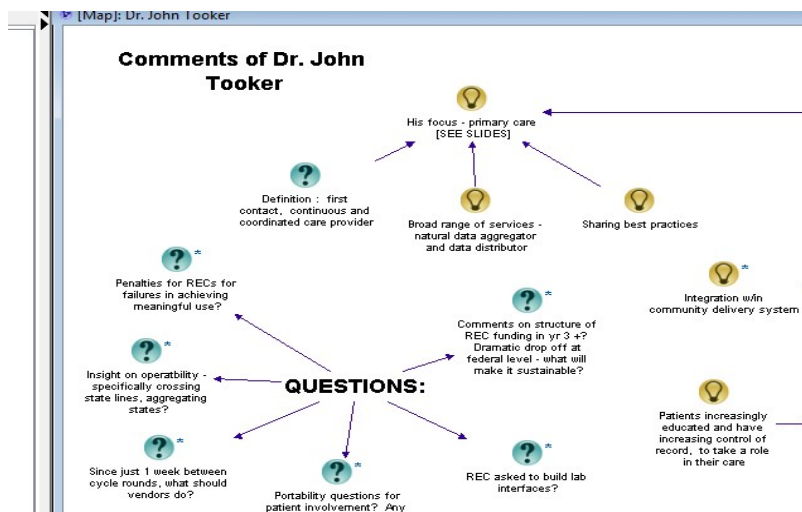
Mapping presentations



In a prepared or conference-type setting, presentation material is usually available either in hard copy or electronically. Since the content is static, so, too, is the dialog mapping – at least at the onset.

For example, mapping a late 2009 national electronic health summit² webinar generated a visual shorthand of the meeting, including a map node pointing to the online version of the presentation material.

But there was a notable addition in the form of ideas presented during a follow-on Q&A session, and also some riffing among the panel members during and between the presentations. Neither of these were included in the prepared material. Trapped and recorded in the map, these were available to be cataloged, searched and linked. In an arena of dynamic human-to-human abstract exchange, mapping provides a static framework for weaving together ideas into a much larger fabric.



² <http://www.ehealthinitiative.org/regional-extension-centers.html>

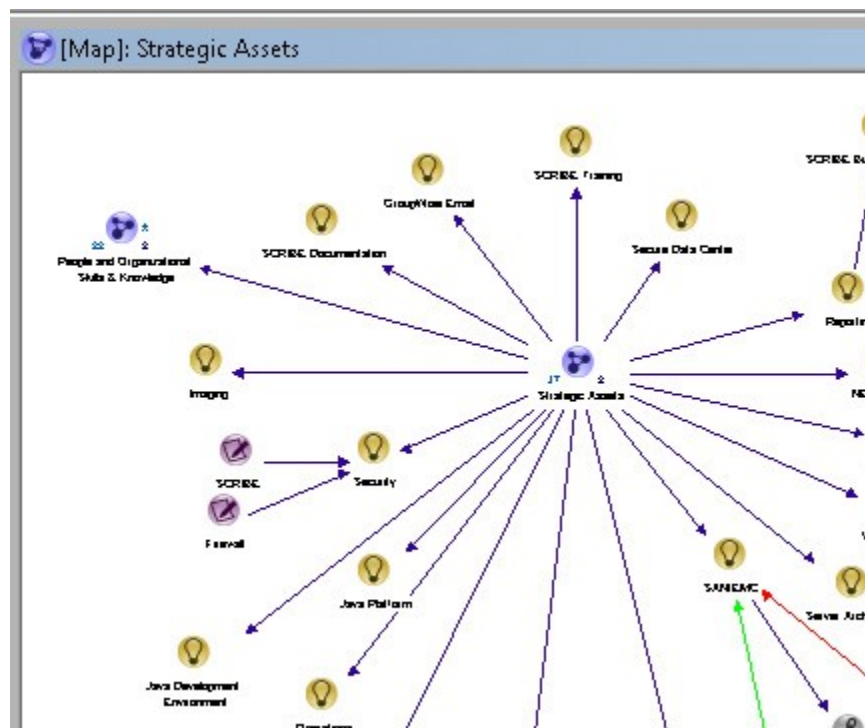
In a setting where there is a problem (or issue or situation), and a group of people assembled with the charge of addressing it, mapping is extremely effective at (a)illuminating the situation and contexts, (b)rapidly assimilating the individuals into a cohesive working unit, and (c)drawing out from the collective knowledge and intelligence a net of ideas, causes, effects and most likely, a set of solutions.

As an exercise progresses it crosses back and forth over a magical line between perceived practical realism, and a realm of collective creativity.

The group, itself, experiences a tectonic shift – extended silences, for example, as things begin to emerge, underlying causes start to become apparent, and solutions and ideas start to bubble up. Having provided the canvas (mapping), the pallet (the team), and the easel (the meeting) the observer is witness to the creative process itself.

Natural resistance to a new method dissipates quickly, and an important factor becomes knowing when to stop – at least for the day. Mapping might be compared to sprinting as a group, a high energy expenditure over a short duration. Being mindful of how the exercise is segmented has a few benefits:

- The energy level of the group remains somewhat intact, allowing it to be recalled later
- Ideas that were presented have time to percolate within the group
- The mapper has a chance to organize what just happened and prepare for the next step
- Management has an opportunity to assess and reflect, and prepare for the next step



As the mapping unfolds, the mix of ideas and group dynamics can lead off into areas that, while possibly worthwhile for future consideration, are not salient to the situation at hand. To forestall the session coming untracked, coordination and planning between management, the exercise leader and the individual actually doing the mapping is important.

This includes practical things, like introductions and breaks. But prior to starting there should be a reasonably well-outlined series of points and/or problems to be addressed, along with a method of cataloging these other tangential ideas, and handling them in the context of the group setting. “Reasonably” is used here, since as the saying goes, “No strategy survives engagement with the enemy,” and the exercise could materialize whole new and worthwhile directions for thought and energy once it gets rolling.

Management and/or executive sponsorship and involvement in the dialog mapping endeavor are critical of course. Along with that it should be kept in mind that using dialog mapping technology is still new, and there are at least a few additional things to consider, including a mirroring of management style, and overcoming novelty and resistance

1. Management style considerations

Mirror, mirror...

If the adage, “Life is a mirror” is true, then it might also be true that a team is a mirror for the leadership of the team. In a setting where initiative is considered rebellion and imagination is rewarded with grunt work, there is little likelihood of a meaningful outcome to a dialog mapping exercise. (Such a management style would not be likely to entertain the option anyway.)

But for organizations more inclined to letting employees do their job the best way possible within a defined framework, or who want to steer that direction, mapping could well not only solve a problem, but open the door to whole new capabilities in thinking and acting for the team.

And for groups already imbued with not only responsibility and accountability, but also the authority to perform, there will likely be quick success.

In either of these latter two cases, that powerful, elusive commodity called, "resonance" should also start to emerge. And the after-effect could be positive and long-lasting. Management may, in fact, consider beforehand ways to keep such an energy active and directed towards an enterprise horizon rather than let it spill off its own direction(s), or simply evaporate and be lost altogether.

2. Novelty and resistance

A caterpillar, watching a butterfly flit by, turned to his caterpillar friend and said, “One thing I can promise: you will never see me riding one of those butterfly things.”

We are all accustomed to change, even if we all process it differently. “New” is inevitable, and happens sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. Daily grappling with the evolving enterprise can become *de rigueur*, but watching and participating in the real time unfolding of that evolution – that is something that most individuals and organizations still have not experienced.

Dialog mapping elicits a telling blend of curiosity, personal and group jockeying, doubt, and a measure of fascination with something technically novel. It starts out with the issue or problem bound in the way the enterprise has always defined such things. Along the way, with the use of the tools, individualized associations give way to a unified telling of the story of the problem and the path to the solution, expressed in the local language of the enterprise.

In short order, not only the problem itself, but the underlying context of the problem becomes visible.

A first step – and action

“That's just the way it is...” (Bruce Hornsby)

In an installment of the radio program, "**Earth and Sky**" broadcast on Georgia Tech radio station WREK during the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, a scientist lamented how (in his view) the perennial **study** of the environment is damaging to the pressing need for action. "We can 'talk' as we go along. But we need to MOVE!" he seemed to be saying.

Sometimes, problems persist because they are deep and systemic, appearing to defy definition, let alone solution. That doesn't necessarily mean they fit in the category of "wicked problems³," or that the organization should resign itself with a sigh, and "Oh, well..."

It is more likely that they continue because of the questions being asked. If the level of thought being brought to bear remains the same, there is little chance of significant change in the underlying root problem. In such unchecked circular logic it is less, "the power of analysis," and more "the curse of perpetual study". And as the spiral of problem and contemplation deepens, the organization sways and hobbles under the accumulating weight.

Albert Einstein said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." Done properly, dialog mapping provides a tool to achieve clarity along with a potential activation of new levels of organizational intelligence. It allows close scrutiny of a problem in all its manifold variations, and brings a high degree of focus to forming solutions through the generation of ideas.

The proper use of dialog/issue mapping also has the potential affect of capping analysis time: the situation – the **entire** situation, including problems, personalities, impediments, and even agendas – becomes so clear that it precludes its continuing unaddressed. Throughout, everyone in the group sees the same picture, along with who owns what pieces of the problem, and the solution.

And in this is one of the subtleties of mapping: being prepared – for success. Not success in mapping, or even in the result of the mapping artifact. But being prepared for the **response** to the successful mapping result. Certainly, the map itself is not predictable. But, oddly enough neither is the response and, depending on the situation and the organization, the response to the result may be surprising.

The whole exercise should be undertaken in an air of flexibility and resilience, and the happiest result comes with a certain degree of detachment from the outcome.

The beginning of the mapping exercise, is the beginning of the action toward a solution.

³ A problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize. Moreover, because of complex interdependencies, the effort to solve one aspect of a wicked problem may reveal or create other problems. (SOURCE: Wikipedia)