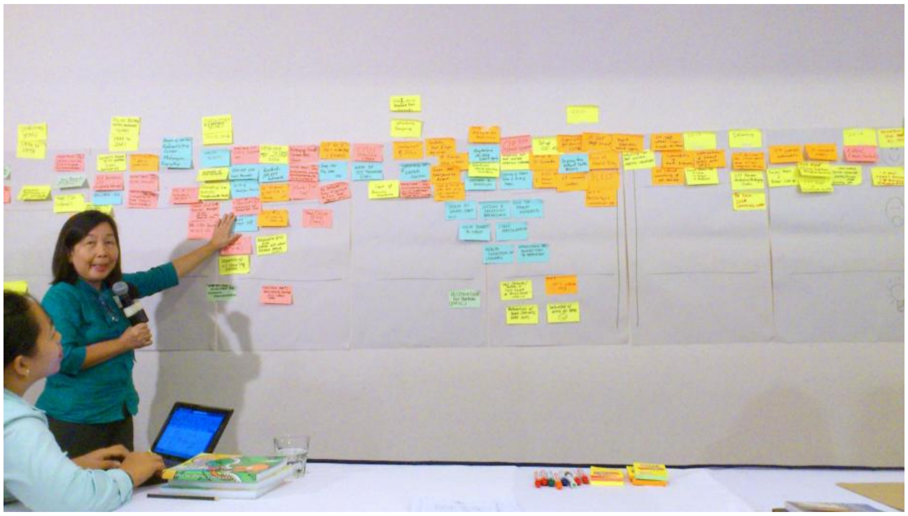
The Timeline Method

Guideline for Facilitators



A method for joint reflection on a network process

The Timeline is a method for participative monitoring and evaluation. It uncovers the history of the network, as seen through the eyes of those involved. It's relatively straightforward and not too time consuming to create a Timeline. This guideline leads you to all the steps to take to make such a Timeline with participants.

It's different to the other tools of the FAN Approach, which are designed to recognise patterns and determine action. The Timeline contains steps and leads to a result.

A Timeline session is made with the people engaged in the network. They take some time to reflect on their own process (by this do you mean the process/story of the network?) and discuss patterns, which are usually implicit. When there are both veterans and newcomers it helps everyone to arrive on the same page.

There is no need to seek consensus about a shared analysis here. This can be reached in the Learning History, which the Timeline provides a basis for.

Contents

Timeline preparation

The Timeline is visualised on a series of flipcharts attached to each other. The number of flipcharts depends on the number of participants. (10 participants need four, 20 participants six, 30 participants eight).

The papers are hung vertically (portrait style), attached to each other. You may use wallpaper, wrapping paper or paper tablecloths as well if these are easier to acquire. It's best to hang them on a long empty wall. If this is not available, use tables, or even lay them out on the floor. What matters is that everyone can see what has been written on the Timeline.

Prepare by dividing the paper vertically, into three sections running from left to right, by drawing two lines.

- The upper row is for Positive moments (which can be indicated by a smiley).
- The middle row is for Negative moments (sad smiley).
- The bottom row is for Flash moments (flashing light bulb).

Divide the Timeline horizontally into periods of time that make sense for understanding the history of this network, from the start (or before if relevant) until present. If you know a lot about the network you can do this before the session. You can also do it with the participants at the start of the session, by asking for important milestones.

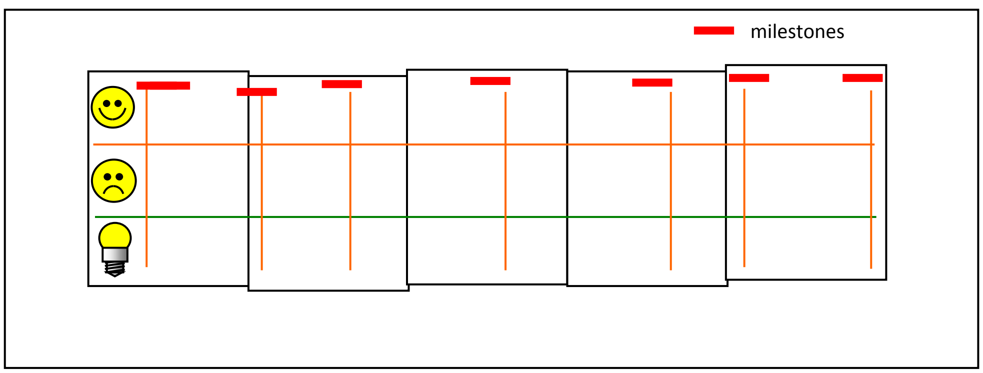


Figure 1: example of a Timeline setup

For each participant you need a marker and about ten Post-it stickers (ideally 12.5x7.5 cm). Post-its are handy, because they are self-adhesive, but you can also improvise with pieces of paper and tape. What counts is that what's written on the stickers is easy to read from a distance.

It helps if you can take pictures of the flipcharts after the feedback session. Audio recordings of the reading and the feedback session are also helpful when writing the report. If you make recordings of any kind, tell participants that they are for internal use only, and that personal statements will be made anonymous in the report. And of course keep your promise.

Instructions for participants

- Explain why the Timeline is made.
- Explain the expected result of this session (the "… and then" story).
- Tell what the next steps in the research will be.
- Invite participants to recall all the moments they consider most significant in the history of the network, from the start of the network (or their involvement) until the present day.
- Moments are to be categorised in three ways:
  - Positive: adding energy,
  - Negative: taking energy away,
  - Flash: when new insights broke through or new opportunities opened up.
- Points of attention while writing the stickers:
  - one card per moment,
  - write a statement, rather than just one word,
  - use a marker and write clearly so it can be read from a distance.
- When participants are ready, they go to the Timeline and stick the Post-its at the appropriate time and place (eg. positive, negative or flash).
- Afterthoughts are allowed. If someone gets another idea while reading contributions from others, they make another card and stick it on the Timeline.

This usually takes 20-25 minutes.

> ***writing statements:*** *Suppose that a capacity building event in Accra is seen as a moment with positive impact. Don't just write down "Accra", but what you found so good about what happened there:*
> *"We began to understand each other."*
> *"The atmosphere was playful."*
> *A statement is always a sentence. Post-its are small, imposing brevity (rather like the 160 characters allowed on Twitter). Reduce things to their essence. Milestone events, such as important meetings or signing a contract etc. can be written on the Timeline directly, as points of orientation for participants.*

Reading the Results

After the last participant has stuck his/her statements on the Timeline, the facilitator reviews the result with the group. It usually works best when they all leave their chairs and tables and stand around the Timeline so that everyone can read the cards.

The idea is to arrive at a common understanding of what has been written down. The reading has three components:

- General impression
- Reading the cards
- Points for further discussion.

<u>General Impression</u>
Ask participants what they see at first glance. In some periods you will see more positive cards, in others more negative ones. Do they recognise this? And where do you find most of the flash moments? A Timeline can be read as a kind of barometer of the energy level in the network. Often you will find the flash moments after difficult periods.

<u>Reading the Cards</u>
Read the cards from the beginning to the present, and make sure you understand their meaning. When there are many participants and many cards there will may be clusters of similar statements. They don't all have to be read one by one. If cards have been placed in the wrong row, ask permission to move them to where they belong.

> ***A card cannot be removed because someone else contests its validity.*** *Participants might have different opinions on what moments were relevant or how they contributed to the development of the network. Discussions on what is right or true are not permitted. Every opinion counts. If someone sees things differently, they can write another statement. Different opinions should be appreciated.*

<u>Points for Further Discussion</u>
At the end of the reading, ask what thoughts it generates about the continuation of network. List them on a flipchart, so that you can discuss them in order of priority after the Timeline session, or wherever it fits in the agenda.

Interviews For Supplementary Information

The Timeline gives a general impression that can easily be shared, but there are always more stories behind it that don't appear. Sometimes this is because they just don't fit into short statements on a Post-it. Other issues require a bit more trust before people can speak about them. A skilful facilitator will feel which statements on the Timeline require further investigation to better understand the process this network has gone through.

Information generated through interviews can fill in the gaps in the story. It is not necessary to interview everyone. Just select those who might provide important additional insights. Stakeholders who may not have attended the Timeline session can also be helpful.

There is no specific format for the interviews. Participants are invited to explain on their statements on the Timeline in further detail. Other stakeholders are asked about their involvement in the network, the importance of the network for them, and relevant moments in the past. The format of the Timeline can also be used as a basis for the interview.

The starting point is energy:
- What are driving forces for the participants?
- What has contributed to the energy they feel for the network? Made them more enthusiastic and willing to put in effort?
- What has drained energy away?
- Why were flash moments really a breakthrough? Breaking through what and leading to where?

It is important to separate observations from interpretations and conclusions. The Timeline focuses on perceptions to fill the narrative story: things that happened, that are seen as important.

Preparing a Draft Narrative Story for the Feedback Session

After the Timeline session and additional interviews, the facilitator and the key person in the network sit down together to make a draft narrative story. This story will be told during the feedback session with participants. The result of that session provides the material for the Timeline report, which serves as a basis for analysis.

If you approach the Timeline as a movie script, you now have to divide it into scenes that describe the most important events for the network. Usually you can recognise such scenes by concentrations of cards on the Timeline. Four to six scenes is common.

A scene has:

- a beginning; a situation
- a major development that might have been caused by outside forces or things that happened within the network
- interventions by network members that made a difference
- an ending; a situation which is different from the start

Give each scene a newspaper heading as a title.

Good titles make statements, eg. "Sense Of Urgency Leads To Network" or "From Drawback To New Strength" etc.

Bad titles don't communicate much, eg. "Introduction," "The Accra Workshop," "Conclusions" etc.

Prepare a narrative story reflecting the essential elements of each scene.

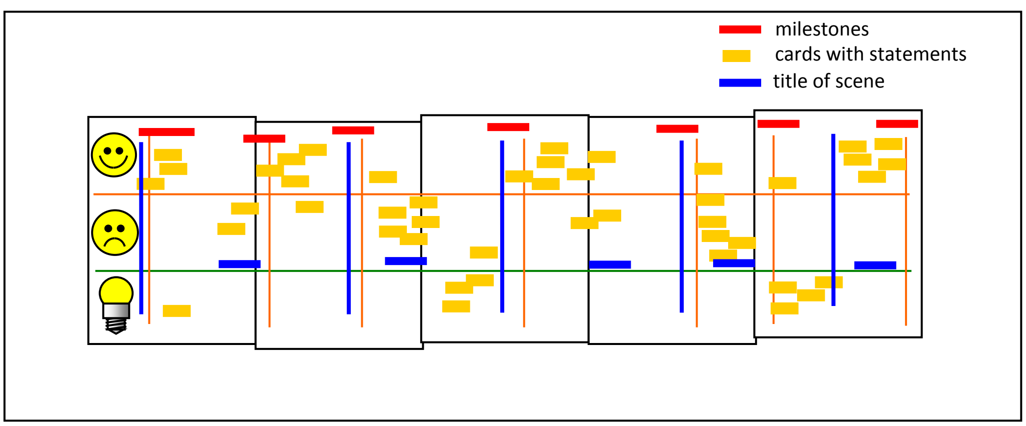


Figure 2: example of a Timeline, prepared for the narrative story

The Feedback Session

If the group meeting is of a few days duration, the feedback session should be planned to happen towards the end of it. This gives the facilitator time to conduct interviews in the free time between formal discussions, and to draw the narrative story.

The feedback session is held to make sure that the narrative story really reflects what participants find most important. Again, all participants should recognise their own stories. This is not the same as consensus between participants on what was most relevant. If there are different opinions, they should all be reflected.

Experience shows that the feedback session generates additional insights at a deeper level. After time together in the meeting, the level of trust is usually higher, and people willing to tell more. The summary also reminds participants of extra facts that matter, even though they may not have thought of them in the first session.

Ideally this feedback session is held with all participants. If this is not possible, a selection of participants can do the job as well.

The report is basis for analysis
A Timeline report is the written version of the narrative story discussed and supplemented in the feedback session. More is not better. Four to eight pages (excluding annexes) should be enough to capture what matters most. The same scheme can be followed, describing the scenes and giving them newspaper titles.

To complete the story, give a short introduction to the network in the beginning, and list the main topics for further discussion as proposed by the participants in the end.

In principle, the draft report is sent to the participants for comments. Since the report is a compilation of what those in the network consider important, additions are welcome. They will serve as a basis for analysis.

Origins
The Learning History methodology has been developed by Kleiner and Roth (1997). Its roots can be traced in the movement of "Appreciative Inquiry" (Cooperrider et al. 2000), and the Critical Incident Method (Flanagan 1954).

The version as described here, dividing a Timeline and the Learning History, is the result of several researches in which the author was / is involved, notably: "Networks in Animal Husbandry" by Wageningen University and Research, facilitating over 120 networks of farmers to work on their initiatives for sustainable production, and "The Healthy Networks Learning Programme", commissioned by PSO, investigating ways to improve the effectiveness of North-South networks of NGO's.