

Turn the Curve

Exercise

**Population Results Accountability
and Decision Making
Group Process**

**Fiscal Policy Studies Institute
Santa Fe, New Mexico**

TURN THE CURVE EXERCISE

Whole Population Well-Being

Purpose: To provide hands on experience with results-based decision making by allowing a group to work on actually turning the curve on a specific indicator of child, adult, family or community well-being.

1. Large Group Work

! Results and Indicators: Choose the starting point for the exercise from the 3 options below. Option 1 is recommended for groups which have some experience with developing results and indicators. Option 2 is recommended for groups who need to practice choosing indicators. Option 3 is for groups at the very beginning of thinking about the well-being of a particular population. (Options 2 and 3 are given at the end.)

Option #1 (Given set of results and indicators): Let's pretend that the we have an adopted list of results and indicators for children and families (or another population e.g. elders). We will pretend that (the working list in the results-based decision making package, or a list from another state or county) is our adopted list.

! An indicator curve to turn: If possible there should be at least 4 indicator baselines prepared before the session, so that each table can choose what they wish to work on. If this has not been done, then poll the group to identify an indicator that is particularly important right now (where the future trend line is "not OK"). Prepare a working baseline for the group as follows: Draw the x/y axes on a piece of flip chart paper. In the middle of the x axis write the word "now." Then have the group answer the following questions on a consensus basis:

- What do you estimate is the current value of the indicator? Plot this point above the word "now."
- Has the indicator been getting better or worse over the last few years? This tells the direction of the historical part of the baseline.
- Has it been getting (better or worse) fast or slow? This tells the steepness of the historical part of the baseline. Plot this line leading up to the current value.
- Where do you think it will go in the next few years if we don't do anything differently than we are now? Plot the answer to this question as the baseline forecast.

This technique can also be used by groups who wish to work on a baseline other than the ones prepared or chosen by the group as a whole.

! Partners: In the Turn the Curve exercise we are going to talk about turning this curve. We know that

results accountability work involves more than just one agency or department. So let's talk about who are the partners who have something to contribute to making a difference on this curve? Brain storm list of potential partners (e.g. churches, schools, police, media, businesses, etc.) on a separate page of flip chart paper.

2. Small Group Work: Divide people into groups of six. Six is optimal because it is too small for anyone to hide, and large enough for diverse opinions and vigorous discussion. Five or seven is OK if groups don't break evenly. Have them sit together around tables in a large room, or use breakout rooms if available.

Here's a technique, based in chaos and complexity theory, to break large groups into smaller groups. Announce your intention to form groups of six. "Each person is responsible for finding five other people to work with. Go!" In less than a minute the group will divide itself into smaller groups. No need to count off. An interesting twist on this method would be to require that "At least one person you work with is someone you didn't know before today's session."

Remind people that they will not have enough time to do this "right." Remember this is an exercise. Remind people to have fun.

Ask each group to do the following:

! Pick a time keeper and a reporter.

! Who are you? (5 minutes)

(part 1): Pick what geographic area you represent. This can be a whole state, county, or city or another defined geographic area such as a neighborhood.

(part 2): Each person must wear two hats: The first hat is their everyday role, and the second hat is a role from the list of potential partners which is shown on the flip chart at the front of the room. Groups are free to add to this list to identify other partners. Only one person per role. (Optional: You may ask that at least one person be from an agency of particular importance to the indicator chosen e.g. schools if 3rd grade reading scores; or human services department if rate of child abuse).

! The Curve to Turn (5 minutes): Pick a curve to work on from those presented. (Develop a baseline if necessary - see above.) Discuss the baseline and present at least one forecast of the path you are on if nothing changes. Ask yourself "Is this OK?" If the answer is "yes" then pick another curve.

! The Story Behind the Curve (15 minutes): What's going on here? Why does the baseline look the way it does? What are the causes? What are the forces at work? As you try to answer this question keep a side list of things you would like to know more about. This is your information agenda.

! What Works to Turn the Curve (20 minutes): What do you think would work in this community to turn this curve? Make sure the discussion gets to what each partner could contribute. Make sure the ideas have sharp edges. Be specific. Make sure at least one idea is a no cost or low cost idea.

! Prepare to report (5 minutes): Choose the three best "what works" ideas to report. (One should be for the lead agency if one is identified.) At least one reported item should be no cost low cost. And the group should

identify the funniest or most “off the wall” idea from the discussion.

3. Group Reports: Ask each group to report the following:

! What place did you choose to be?

! (Optional) What are the three most important things going on in the story behind the curve? What are the causes? What information did you want that you didn't have?

! What are your three best ideas about what would work to turn the curve? Be specific! (who would do what, when, where, how) At least one idea must be no cost/low cost. And the funniest idea.

4. Debriefing the exercise

! How many people think that at least one idea from their group could actually be done and would make a difference?

! What did you learn from this? (e.g. collaboration vs blame) What was hardest (most frustrating) about this work? Why?

! How many people would like to have other opportunities to work in this way?

! Think of next steps: What is something I could do? What is something I could ask someone else to do, to advance this work? (Allow each person to think about this for 1 minute, then poll the group, or ask tables to report.)

! (Optional) Ask people to speak who took specific partner roles (e.g. what did the school folks have to contribute?) Who else should be in the room for this kind of work? How could you get them to the table?

! (Optional) Where did the groups come up with similar ideas? Does this work begin to suggest how these what works elements might be crafted into a real action agenda? (Note: remind people that this first effort is likely to be a Xmas tree, not a coherent strategy.)

! Review for the group the entire thinking process: results, indicators, baseline, partners, story, what works. Could you do this for real in your community? How many think they could lead this kind of process?

5. Optional Starting Points for Large Group Work

! Option #2 (Given a set of results only): Let's pretend we have an adopted list of results (for children and families, or another defined population). Let's pick one result and develop indicators for it. Brainstorm a list of candidate indicators. Make sure each is a specific data statement (e.g. "rate of full immunizations at age 6", not "immunizations"). Rate each candidate indicator High, Medium, or Low on three criteria, by asking the questions:

- Communication Power: Does the public understand what we mean when we use this data statement?
- Proxy Power: Does this data say something of central importance about the result we are trying to measure? (Remind people that this choosing process is a matter of approximation and compromise).
- Data Power: Do we have high quality data on a timely basis? (High only if people can go back to their office and open a report with the data in it; Medium if it can be developed relatively quickly; Low otherwise.)

Identify indicators which rate high (or highest) on all three criteria. These are the headline indicators. One of these will be chosen for the next step in the exercise. Note also those which rate high on communication and proxy, but low on data. These become part of the data development agenda. Continue with the work in option #1.

! Option #3 (Given a population only): Results-based decision making is about the well-being of a population across a given geographic area (e.g. state, county, city, community). Such a population can be defined as all the people in the geographic area, or a subpopulation by age (e.g. children or elders) or other condition (e.g. persons with mental illness). The one definition of subpopulation we do not use here is a client population of a particular program, agency or service system. This is the subject of service program performance measurement, a separate, interlocking form of accountability.

Identify results for this population by asking the question: "What do we want for these people?" and also "What do they want for themselves?" The answers are often phrases as "Children (elders...) who are..." (e.g. safe, healthy etc.). We are looking for conditions of well being that will stand up in the public square, that the lay public will understand. This is not yet about data. That comes next when we talk about indicators. And, generally, results statements are not about services. That comes later when we talk about strategies to achieve these conditions of well-being. Services are generally about means, not ends. And results are by definition ends. (See the exception to the rule about the relatively rare times when statements about "receiving needed service" may be the best we can do in articulating results.)

Develop a list of candidate results. This is a brainstorming process, and all ideas are OK, if they meet the "not data" and "ends, not means" tests. The list developed here will often be rough, with overlapping statements. In a non-exercise process, there is time to wordsmith these lists and create a balanced and complete set of results statements.

Turn the Curve Exercise

Population Well-being Indicator(s)

5 min: Starting points

- timekeeper and reporter
- geographic area
- two hats (yours plus partner's)

5 min: Baseline

- pick a curve (or curves) to turn
- forecast - OK or not OK?

15 min: Story behind the baseline

- causes/forces at work
- information/research agenda part 1

20 min: What works? (What would it take)

- what works / what doesn't
- each partner's contribution
- no cost / low cost ideas
- information/research agenda part 2

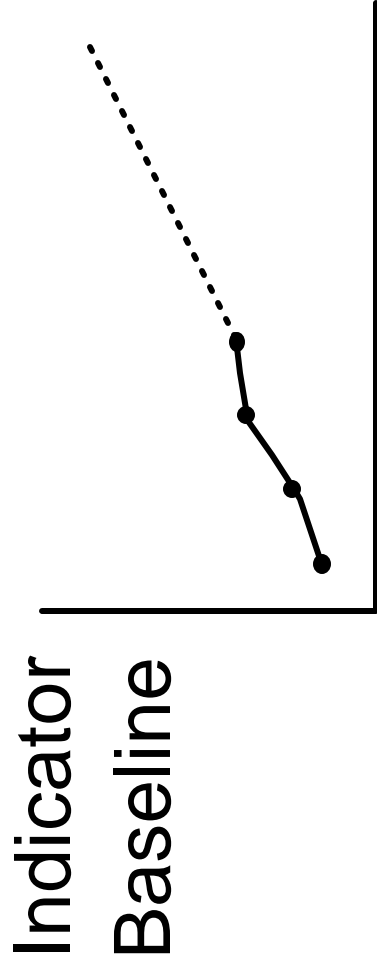
5 min: Report

- baseline story
- 3 best ideas (incl one no/low cost)
- off the wall/funniest idea

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Turn the Curve Report

Result _____



Story behind the curve

- _____
- _____
- _____

Partners

- _____
- _____
- _____

What Works - Best Ideas

- _____
- _____
- _____