What, So What, Now What?

Idea In Short

What, So What, Now What? is a simple yet powerful Liberating Structure designed to facilitate reflection and generate actionable insights from experiences, data, or events. It guides individuals and groups through a structured process of observation, interpretation, and action planning. This method turns reflection into concrete action.

This structure provides a clear and concise framework for making sense of complex information and translating it into meaningful action. It encourages participants to move beyond simply describing what happened and delve into the significance of the event and the implications for future action. This three-part process ensures that reflection leads to tangible outcomes.

The process is divided into three distinct phases: What, So What, and Now What. Each phase has a specific focus and set of guiding questions. This structured approach helps participants to move through the reflection process in a logical and productive way.

What

The first phase, "What," focuses on objective observation and description. Participants describe what happened, what they saw, what they heard, and what they experienced. The goal is to create a shared understanding of the facts, without interpretation or judgment. Questions that guide this phase include: "What did we observe?" "What are the facts?" "What happened?" This phase is about establishing a common ground of understanding.

So What

The second phase, "So What," focuses on interpretation and analysis. Participants explore the significance of the observations made in the "What" phase. They consider the implications of the facts, the patterns that emerged, and the lessons learned. Questions that

guide this phase include: "What does this mean?" "Why is this important?" "What are the key insights?" This phase is about making sense of the observations.

Now What

The third phase, "Now What," focuses on action planning. Participants identify specific actions they can take based on the insights gained in the "So What" phase. They consider what they can do differently in the future, what steps they need to take, and who is responsible for taking action. Questions that guide this phase include: "What actions should we take?" "What are the next steps?" "Who is responsible?" This phase is about translating insights into action.

This structure can be used in a variety of settings, from team meetings and project retrospectives to personal reflection and coaching sessions. It is particularly useful for making sense of complex events, data, or experiences, and for generating actionable insights that can lead to positive change.

The structure can be adapted to suit different contexts and time constraints. The time allocated to each phase can be adjusted depending on the complexity of the topic and the desired level of detail. The method can be used individually for personal reflection or in groups to facilitate shared learning and action planning.

Case Study - Analyzing a Project Post-Mortem

Imagine a project team has just completed a complex software development project. They want to conduct a post-mortem to learn from the experience and improve their future projects. They decide to use What, So What, Now What? to structure their discussion.

What

The team starts by describing what happened during the project. They note that the project was delivered slightly behind schedule and over budget. They also mention that there were some communication challenges between the development team and the client, and that some features were more difficult to implement than initially anticipated. This phase focuses on the facts.

So What

The team then explores the significance of these observations. They realize that the communication challenges contributed to misunderstandings about the project requirements, which led to rework and delays. They also realize that their initial estimates were too optimistic and did not adequately account for the complexity of certain features. This phase interprets the facts.

Now What

Based on these insights, the team identifies specific actions they can take to improve future projects. They decide to implement a more rigorous requirements gathering process, including regular meetings with the client and more detailed documentation. They also decide to improve their estimation techniques by involving the development team in the estimation process and using more conservative estimates. This phase generates action.

This example illustrates how What, So What, Now What? can be used to turn a project post-mortem into a valuable learning experience. By moving through the three phases, the team was able to identify key lessons learned and develop concrete actions for improvement.

Advantages & Potential Limitations

What, So What, Now What? offers several advantages. It is a simple and easy-to-learn method that requires minimal explanation or preparation. It is also a highly effective way to structure reflection and generate actionable insights.

This structure encourages participants to move beyond simply describing what happened and delve into the significance of the event and the implications for future action. This helps to ensure that reflection leads to tangible outcomes.

It can be used in a variety of settings and contexts, from individual reflection to team meetings and large group gatherings. It is a highly versatile tool that can be adapted to suit different needs and time constraints.

It also promotes shared understanding and alignment within a group. By going through the three phases together, participants develop a common understanding of the situation and agree on the next steps.

However, there are also some potential limitations to consider. The effectiveness of the method depends on the willingness of participants to engage in honest and open reflection. If participants are not willing to share their true thoughts and feelings, the insights gained may be limited.

It is important to create a safe and supportive environment where participants feel comfortable expressing their opinions and perspectives. This can be particularly important when discussing sensitive or challenging topics.

The structure is primarily focused on reflection and action planning. It does not provide detailed guidance on how to implement the actions identified. Further planning and execution are typically needed after the What, So What, Now What? session.

Summary

What, So What, Now What? is a valuable Liberating Structure for turning reflection into concrete action. It provides a simple yet powerful framework for making sense of experiences and generating actionable insights. This method turns reflection into concrete action.