Doing more together – building trust and getting things done

Ed Morrison, ‘father’ of Strategic Doing, a methodology that allows people to form collaborations quickly with measurable outcomes, returns to the Sunshine Coast and reflects on the mammoth task of leading 200 leaders through a Strategic Doing workshop.

Can the Sunshine Coast become the healthiest region on the planet by 2030? There’s no doubt. The energy and commitment I saw during our Futures Conference demonstrated that. Over 200 people became fully engaged in figuring out both big outcomes and small next steps.

Let’s assume that each person who attended the Futures Conference could mobilise a network of 30 people. That’s a network of 6,000 engaged citizens. We can develop the Sunshine Coast to be the healthiest terrain in the world, but only if we keep our emerging networks focused and moving ahead steadily. Within each collaboration, we need to concentrate on ‘doing the doable’, each month we need to take small and steady steps. As out networks grow and develop — as our bonds of mutual trust build — we will take on larger and larger challenges. We will transform the Sunshine Coast to the world’s healthiest region in 15 years.

Still skeptical?

Try this little thought experiment. Recall a moment in your life when you accomplished something very meaningful. Maybe it was reaching an educational milestone, a graduation day for yourself or your children. Or perhaps it was starting a new business or successfully completing a difficult project or pulling off a complex event. As you think back, you can undoubtedly remember some of the steps you took down the path. Your success did not magically appear. It took work, focus, and the continuous commitment to taking small steps.

As it is with each of us, so it is with regions. Success takes persistent effort. I speak from experience. In 1993, a small group of us began the transformation of Oklahoma City. This old oil town had stagnated for a decade before we started our work. Today, Oklahoma City with a population of over 600,000 anchors a dynamic and vibrant metropolitan region. We started this transformation with six people. Now Oklahoma City is an internationally recognised hot spot.

Or take Charleston, South Carolina. In 2001, two of us developed the initial design of the Charleston Digital Corridor. Now Charleston stands out as a hotbed of technology companies. Oklahoma City and Charleston are now models that others follow. In both places, we used a dramatically new approach to regional transformation.

Instead of working for the perfect plan, we started with a set of informed guesses about what might work.
Alignments emerge from thinking and doing together

When we saw promising outcomes from a collaboration, we put more energy and resources behind it. When our ideas faltered, we quickly made adjustments or abandoned the idea and moved on to something else. This strategy approach is designed specifically to build productive collaborations quickly in open, loosely connected networks, the type networks that characterise a regional economy.

After consulting with communities and regions for 20 years, I came to Purdue University to distil this new approach and teach it to others. This new discipline, called Strategic Doing, is fundamentally different from the conventional approach to strategy. Whereas strategic planning is slow, methodical and linear, Strategic Doing is fast, agile and relentlessly experimental.

In this 2015 Futures Conference, we experienced a few hours of Strategic Doing. By answering simple, but not easy questions, each table generated

The Strategic Doing Credo

We believe we have a responsibility to build a sustainable future for ourselves and future generations.

No individual, organisation or place can build that future alone.

Open, honest, focused and caring collaboration among diverse participants is the path to accomplishing valuable, shared outcomes.

We believe in doing, not just in talking — and in behavior in alignment with our beliefs.

Strategic Doing Design Team
Turkey Run State Park, Indiana
October, 2011
everything they needed for a strategy to build a new collaboration. When you look at the results of these table discussions, the strategies are remarkably diverse and sophisticated. Yet, they are all aligned. Each one will move us toward a healthier region.

*Strategic Doing* is expanding globally. In the past four years, we conducted workshops in 35 states within the United States and five foreign countries. We are developing a handful of deeper partnerships in order to do things the discipline. Our work with the University of the Sunshine Coast stands at the top of our list.

Scott, one of the students interviewed onstage by Ted O’Brien during the Futures Conference, captured my thinking. He said he wanted to see the civic leaders of the Sunshine Coast “do things differently”. We are betting that the Sunshine Coast can be a model for other regions throughout the world on how to engage citizens to build a prosperous region.

Just like Oklahoma City and Charleston, the Sunshine Coast will become a place that others will follow.

I’m sure of it.

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**10 rules of Strategic Doing**

**Before you start:**

1. Create and maintain a safe space for deep, focused conversation.

2. Frame a conversation around an appreciative question.

**What could we do?**

3. Uncover hidden assets that might help you answer your question.

4. Link and leverage your assets to create new opportunities.

**What should we do?**

5. Rank all your opportunities to find your ‘Big Easy’.

6. Convert your Big Easy into an outcome with measurable characteristics (Where you are going).

**What will we do?**

7. Define at least one Pathfinder Project with guideposts (How you will get there).

8. Draft a short-term action plan with everyone committed to taking a small step.

**What’s our 30/30?**

9. Set a 30/30 meeting to review your progress and make adjustments.

10. Notch, connect and promote relentlessly to build and spread your new habits of collaboration.
Strategic Doing workshop

Aside from gathering leaders to discuss the future of the region, the organisers aimed at empowering the delegates with a new tool to their skills set. The Strategic Doing workshop achieved those two goals - a hands-on learning experience as well as providing a platform to collaborate on a real issue.

This article is written from the perspective of Ed Morrison who led the workshop.

Creating the healthiest region on the planet

The youth of the Sunshine Coast have posed a big question for us. “Imagine that the Sunshine Coast is world-famous as the healthiest place on earth. What would that look like?”

This is a compelling and complex question. To answer it, we need tap into our collective ingenuity.

Strategic Doing helps us do that.

A strategic discipline incubated at Purdue University, this approach mobilises the strength of collaboration. It enables loose networks of people to design complex projects quickly. By guiding their conversations, people generate powerful new ideas. They then create an action plan to test their ideas and keep their collaboration on track.

Through its partnership with Purdue, the University of the Sunshine Coast is now introducing this discipline to Australia. We can use Strategic Doing to answer the big question that the next generation has posed for us. On November 27, we saw the power of simple rules at work. In a matter of hours, over 200 civic leaders began designing 15 collaborations, all designed to answer the big question that the next generation has posed to us.

As we move forward, we will continuously ask and answer these four simple (but not easy) questions.

What could we do?

Opportunities emerge when we connect our assets. By ‘assets’ we mean our gifts: our experience, our resources, our connections, our passions.

Strategic Doing begins with careful listening, so we can identify the assets in our network. We explore how we might “link and leverage” these assets in new and different ways. As we do, new opportunities emerge.

“Imagine that the Sunshine Coast is world famous as the healthiest place on Earth…”

What would that look like?

Regional Economic Policy Advisor
Ed Morrison

Sunshine Coast assets

- Lifestyle
- Natural environment
- Weather
- Villages of close-knit communities
- Distinct identity
- Education opportunities
- Wide spaces
- Friendly people
- Family oriented
- Cafe culture

Sunshine Coast Futures Conference 2015
What should we do?

We cannot pursue every opportunity. We need to start our collaborations by focusing on one. We call it our ‘Big Easy’. It’s a big opportunity that will be relatively easy to start.

Once we have identified our ‘Big Easy’, we convert it into a clear outcome with concrete characteristics. Clear, concise and descriptive words help us see where we are going in our mind’s eye. By exploring and building upon each other’s ideas, we can agree on what success looks like.

As the participants in the 2015 Futures Conference discovered, finding our ‘Big Easy’ takes only a few minutes if we follow a simple scoring system.

At the same time, if we’re careful and write down all our other opportunities, nothing gets lost. If we find out that our ‘Big Easy’ opportunity is not so easy after all, we can quickly move to our next opportunity.

What will we do?

Translating ideas into action involves defining a Pathfinder Project with clear guideposts to mark our path forward. We need to figure out how we can get ‘there’ from ‘here’. Thinking through a logical sequence of steps helps us agree on what we need to be doing to move together.

At the same time, each of us needs to make a small commitment to move our words into action. In networks, execution is a shared responsibility. We have all seen what happens when we start to move together. If we each take small steps, collectively we take a big step.

What’s our 30/30?

Answering our questions is an ongoing challenge. It is a continuous process of ‘learning by doing’. Only by committing to this continuous learning and adjustment can we figure out what works. As we collectively learn by doing, we build our collective intelligence. We also make another important contribution to each other: we build trusted connections. Strategic Doing works because it is both simple and fun. At the same time, Strategic Doing is a discipline. It takes practice to master. The more people that work together to improve their skills of collaboration, the faster the region will move to seize its opportunities to build a healthy region.

Over the long run, regions that are capable of building more trusted relationships will be more prosperous. They will spot their opportunities faster. They will moving into action faster. They will learn faster and be more resilient.

No one organisation, no one initiative will lead us to the healthiest region on the planet by 2030. Instead, meeting this challenge for the next generation of our children and grandchildren is a collective responsibility and a high calling. We will all have the opportunity to contribute.
Next steps

Launch your own civic forums to figure out who is already doing cool stuff.

**STEP 1** A small group of leaders comes together to sponsor a regular monthly forum. At each session, a guide serves to direct the conversation and keep it on track.

**STEP 2** Sponsors come up with a clever name to promote their forum. In Charleston, for example, the Charleston Digital Corridor has been running regular ‘Fridays at the Corridor’ for over ten years. In Youngstown, Ohio, an old steel town, young professionals decided to come together regularly and call themselves ‘Thinkers and Drinkers’.

**STEP 3** Each session starts with the guide outlining the topic and purpose of the forum; to find new connections and resources.

**STEP 4** Each forum is structured around someone doing something interesting or cool. It might be a small group of restaurants forming a network to source local foods, or a university collaborating with a chamber of commerce alliance to sponsor a business plan competition for young people. Every region has cool people doing cool things that no one really knows about. The forum helps tell these stories.

**STEP 5** After a short presentation of 15 minutes or so, the forum is open for discussion. The conversation focuses on the first question of Strategic Doing: What could we do to grow what we are already doing?

**STEP 6** Toward the end of the hour, a guide starts to sum up what participants have learned. The guide assesses whether the conversation is promising and might continue at a future forum.

**STEP 7** The session ends in an hour. Participants are free to continue connecting on their own, but it is important for forums to have a clear structure with a beginning and end.

Conducting short, regular civic forums represents a proven way for regions to build networks of citizens interested in collaborating. These forums, if they are regularly held, will attract new people, new ideas and new energy. Here’s how it works.
Workshops outcomes

Led by a trained table guide (named below), each group followed the Strategic Doing format to identify one feasible ‘Big Easy’ project based on their combined skills and assets.

1. New renewables in infrastructure
   Joshua Ryan

2. The Sunshine Coast healthy eating trail
   Scott Breust

3. Tapping unknown potential in community
   Geoff Wessling

4. Together we grow
   Helen Perry

5. What to do when the sun goes down
   Brian Anker

6. Stadium of health
   Liz Rivers

7. Heritage art therapy
   Kate Evans

8. Activating cultural places
   Uwe Terton

9. Healthy message broadcasting
   Russell Ousley

10. Healthy taste discoveries
    Bradley Nott

11. Youth health & wellbeing
    Estella Rodighiero

12. Intergenerational relationship through communication
    Zach Johnson

13. Generational sustainability
    Terry O’Brien

14. Connection, community and innovation
    Jeremy O’Leary

15. Healthy produce youth
    Kerrie De Clara

16. Healthy educated community
    Anne Lawrence

17. Heritage, health and wellbeing retreats
    Wayne Graham

18. Using art to help heal
    Phillip Loader

19. Feeling the vibe
    Mike Shadforth

20. Environmental technology park
    Ann Ross

Outcomes and scanned Strategic Doing packs are available at www.sunshinecoastfutures.com
Commitment to change

It became evident that some tables’ ‘Big Easy’ opportunities were very similar. Groups were given the chance to merge before committing to one hour action each towards their project. Teams then identified a time they will reunite to move forward.

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The 30/30 (or 7/7; 60/60 depending on urgency and need) is the learning by doing cycle. We ask the team in our next gathering “what have we each done in the past 30 days and what do we plan to do in the next 30 days?”.