

Facilitation Difficulty: 

 60 min.

 Up to 20

 No preconference

Purpose – To expand and clarify the vision of what the presenters are trying to accomplish, to identify opportunities and avenues for focused work or improvement, and/or to guide purposeful actions and reduce wasted efforts on any new plan or project. Presenters should be able to name a set endpoint for the plan or project, and should have an idea of what they want to accomplish, but should not be very far along in the process. This protocol provides a solid foundation for initial steps and ensure that the players, actions, and timelines will all be considered. The Futures Protocol works well because it uses the creative power of our brains to imagine the best-case scenario. It does not allow obstacles to get into the way of the generative process—there is no place in this protocol for the word “no!”

Group size – Up to 20

Preparation – Prepare at least two easels with chart paper and markers, and work in a space with a large empty wall where you can hang the chart papers as they are completed. Ask for one or two volunteers to help chart the ideas as they arise, and make sure someone sets a timer for each step of the protocol.

Facilitation tips – Two people charting is important to keep the flow fast-paced. If participants seem stuck, ask probing questions. You’ll end up with a large wall of chart paper that shows the progression between “past,” “steps,” and “future.” Remember, participants will begin by imagining the “future” so anticipate hanging those chart papers to the far right of the space available.

Steps:

1. **Setup** – Frontload how the protocol will be run and why. Quickly review the protocol steps, making sure that participants know that they will be required to talk about the future as if it is the present, and why that is important to the success of the protocol. (5 min.)
2. **Present** – An individual (or a group) presents what they are trying to accomplish. They also must state a time frame for this plan. When does it need to be implemented and/or put in place? This step is important even if the activity is being used within a group of stakeholders. (5 min.)
3. **Clarify** – If presented by a single person (or a small group) to participants not involved in the outcome, the rest of the group can ask clarifying questions. If the Futures Protocol is being used within a group of stakeholders, either skip this clarifying questions step or allow members to ask questions of each other to make sure they are all on the same page with the issue. (5 min.)
4. **Separate** – If the presenter is an individual or a small group, they should move away at this point and take notes or just listen. Ask one or two volunteers to help you chart the comments from the group in steps 5-7. Two people are needed to chart steps, as it is important to encourage a fast-paced, idea-generating session and not slow down too much for note-taking. The facilitator may or may not be one of those charting the ideas, depending on how much experience they have had with this protocol. (2 min.)
5. **Setup “future”** – Using whatever timeline seems appropriate (but no more than 5 years), have participants “project themselves into the future” to that date. Suggest that participants now “step into” this future time, leaving today behind them and imagining themselves re-gathered in this space on that date to describe the new reality. For the next step, participants speak as though this future date has

already arrived and the presenter's goals have been achieved. (1 min.)

6. **Project** – (10 min.) Everyone should take turns, thoroughly describing what it looks like, sounds like and feels like having accomplished this endeavor. Mark chart paper with the heading, "Future." As each piece of chart paper is filled, hang it on furthest right edge of space on the wall. Remind participants that they need to:
 - Speak in present tense. (*"Now that we've accomplished X, the students are smiling in class."* Instead of *"they will be..."* or *"they would be..."*)
 - Describe the best possible outcome. (Do not yet describe how you got there.)
 - Focus on the sights, sounds, behaviors, and feelings surrounding this accomplishment.
7. **Reflect** – (5-7 min.) Tell participants to stay within the mindset of their future time and now look backwards (to today's date), to describe from that vantage point how they perceived the situation at the project's/plan's inception. Mark fresh chart paper with the heading "Past" and begin charting participants' perspectives on what the situation looked like "back then." As each page of chart paper is filled, they should be hung in the leftmost segment of the wall. Remind participants to:
 - Speak in past tense. (*"Back then, we were stumped by XYZ."* Instead of *"We can't see how to..."* or *"There aren't any..."*)
 - Reiterate whatever was shared during Step 2 that feels relevant now, and what new perspectives have arisen in Step 6.
 - Include what was happening that prompted the change. What wasn't working?
8. **List "steps"** – (10 min.) Remind participants to continue within the mindset of their future time and brainstorm steps that were necessary to achieve the projected best outcome. Mark chart paper with the heading "Steps." As each page of chart paper is filled, hang the paper between the pages describing the "Past" and the "Future." Participants still should:
 - Continue to speak in past tense. (*"The first thing we did was get a champion on the school board to help us get the funds for XYZ."*)
 - Discuss in detail how, when, with what resources, and by whom.
9. **Presenter reflects** – Invite the presenter or presenters to re-join the group. Ask them to share their thoughts about the future as described by the group and ideas they have gleaned to help them move the project forward. If there is no presenter, shareholders can debrief with each other about the ideas that excite them the most. (5 min.)
10. **Debrief and reflect** – (5 min.) Begin with the presenter:
 - *How did the experience of presenting and listening feel?*
 - *Was the outcome of this protocol different than your previous attempts to envision the completed project?*
 - *Do you have a different appreciation of the protocol rules now that you have presented?*

Then open to debrief with the rest of the group.

- *How did the experience feel from your point of view?*
- *Did anything that arose in "the future" or reviewing "the past" surprise you?*

- *Can you envision using this protocol in your own work?*
11. **Possible next steps** – If you have time available in your meeting, you might want to continue to refine your plan while everyone is excited about the future they envision.
 - a. **Break into small work groups** – Using the information in steps 6-8, divide up the group into smaller working groups. Assign each group one of the “next steps” to flesh out. Participants should go into as much detail as possible within this assigned topic. Have the groups answer all the “who, what, when, where” questions, and develop even smaller “next steps,” then create a timeline that shows when each of those steps will be accomplished.
 - b. **Group share** – Have the small groups share out their plan in the large group. You might want to use a modification of the [Feedback Carousel](#) to gather feedback.
 - c. **Consolidate** – Choose a group of people to compile all the information from the above steps into one final plan.