People-Centered versus Curriculum-Centered Design

When putting together a workshop or meeting, there is much to consider. One consideration is the **curriculum:** *does the content of each activity build on the previous in logical ways? Another is the* **people and their knowledge, situation, and preparation:** *does the design respond to the psychological needs of the participants in order to access the content?*

These are different design approaches and sometimes compete. The field of "curriculum developers" trend towards highly curriculum-centered, building from one core competency to another. However, these designs fail if they do not account for people's psychology.

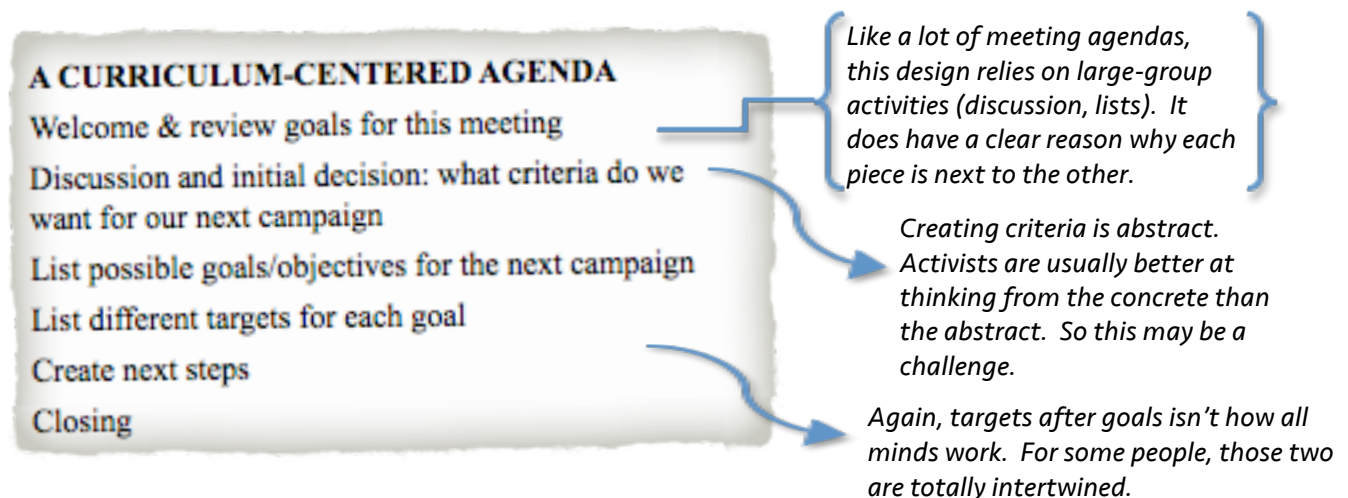## THE APPROACHES IN ACTION: AN EXAMPLE

A group of environmentalists thought it was possible they might be close to winning their campaign. There was a flurry of activity and growing numbers at their events – plus indications their target (opponent) was ready to crack. So to think ahead, they called a session to think about a next campaign and what new campaigns goals they would select.

Therefore they held a 2-hour session. It wasn't a decision-making meeting, but instead a chance for free brainstorm to think about the next campaign. *So what agenda should they use?*

THE CURRICULUM-CENTERED APPROACH

The **curriculum-centered approach** starts with the list of things needing to be done: step 1: decide on criteria for the next campaign, step 2: brainstorm possible goals/objectives, step 3: from those goals, decide which targets they should select.

That agenda might look something like this:

A CURRICULUM-CENTERED AGENDA

Welcome & review goals for this meeting

Discussion and initial decision: what criteria do we want for our next campaign

List possible goals/objectives for the next campaign

List different targets for each goal

Create next steps

Closing

Like a lot of meeting agendas, this design relies on large-group activities (discussion, lists). It does have a clear reason why each piece is next to the other.

Creating criteria is abstract. Activists are usually better at thinking from the concrete than the abstract. So this may be a challenge.

Again, targets after goals isn't how all minds work. For some people, those two are totally intertwined.
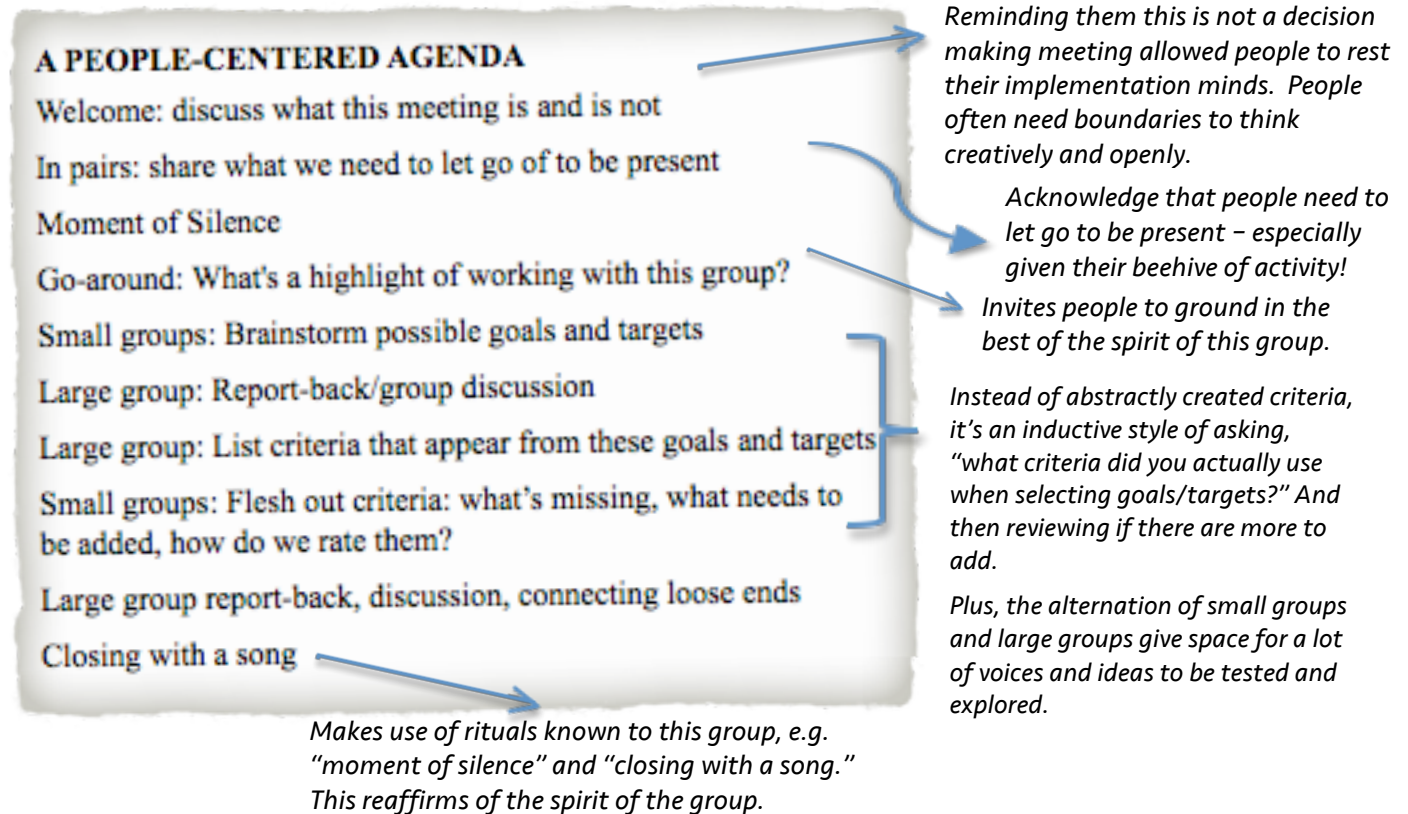
It has what appears to be a logical flow of the curriculum: deciding criteria before picking goals and goals coming before the selection of a target. It wins on moving through the steps of the curriculum – but it's not complete. It creates very little energy, doesn't set people up to be present to the task. In short, it is complemented by the people-centered approach.

THE PEOPLE-CENTERED APPROACH

The people-centered approach comes at a task from a different position. Instead, it thinks about the questions: *How do people think and work? How do they make decisions? What would get in this group's way? What sets them into the right tone for this session?*

The people-centered approach, by contrast, was modeled by one of their activist facilitators:

A PEOPLE-CENTERED AGENDA

Welcome: discuss what this meeting is and is not

In pairs: share what we need to let go of to be present

Moment of Silence

Go-around: What's a highlight of working with this group?

Small groups: Brainstorm possible goals and targets

Large group: Report-back/group discussion

Large group: List criteria that appear from these goals and targets

Small groups: Flesh out criteria: what's missing, what needs to be added, how do we rate them?

Large group report-back, discussion, connecting loose ends

Closing with a song

Reminding them this is not a decision making meeting allowed people to rest their implementation minds. People often need boundaries to think creatively and openly.

Acknowledge that people need to let go to be present – especially given their beehive of activity!

Invites people to ground in the best of the spirit of this group.

Instead of abstractly created criteria, it's an inductive style of asking, "what criteria did you actually use when selecting goals/targets?" And then reviewing if there are more to add.

Plus, the alternation of small groups and large groups give space for a lot of voices and ideas to be tested and explored.

Makes use of rituals known to this group, e.g. "moment of silence" and "closing with a song." This reaffirms of the spirit of the group.

This design worked amazingly well – getting people into deep reflection, all the while increasing people's motivation to work with the group. And while it did require more time on the set-up (15 minutes until people started listing possible goals and targets), it saved time on the whole because the *quality* of the thinking was so much fresher and less weighted than if they had run into the agenda with all the pressures of the next big action weighing them down.