

The Nine Boxes

CUSTOMER

	What's the problem?	Who is impacted?	Visualize the solution
OPEN "Tell me about..." "And then...?" => STORIES	1	4	7
CONTROL "How many..?" "How much..?" "How often...?" "Where...?" => FACTS	2	5	8
CONFIRM "If I understood correctly <rephrase>. Did I understand that correctly?" => NO go back to OPEN question => YES choose next row	3	6	9

INTERVIEWER

Background

The 9 boxes is an interview technique from “Solution Selling”. You can find more information in several books and courses.

The rules of the game

You must start in the first row, first column, box 1

You want to end up in the last column of the last row, box 9

First you ask OPEN questions. The customer answers by telling “stories”.

Drill deeper and ask about facts in the story with CONTROL questions.

Verify you understood what your customer told you by rephrasing the information and asking if this is correct. If the answer is NO, ask for clarification with an open question. If the answer is YES you can choose in which row to ask questions: stay in the current row to explore more or go to the next row.

Explore the 3 rows in sequence:

- Understand what the problem is
- Understand who is affected how by the problem
- Create a vision of the world where the problem is solved

In “Visualize the Solution” don’t just ask “Tell me what the solution is”. Ask the customer to “Imagine a world where this problem is solved. What does it look like? How do you (or the other roles impacted by the problem) do their work?”

Mapping the boxes to user stories

A common format for user stories is “As a <role> I want <some functionality> TO <achieve some goal>”

Who’s impacted => Roles

Description of the future => Roles doing

Facts => non-functional requirements, business rules, details of the story

Visualize the solution => Goal, Acceptance test

Advanced use of the boxes

Most customers start in the last box: they already have a solution and they ‘just’ need someone to implement their solution and all their problems will be solved. They think... Usually it doesn’t go this well: they get what they asked for, not what they need.

Your task is to bring them back to the first box and go through the whole process. Maybe you will end up with the same solution (but now you understand it better), maybe you end up with a different solution.

The best way to do this is to ask about acceptance tests: “If we implement that solution, how will you know/test that your problem is solved?”. From that answer you can bring the customer back to box 1 with “Can you tell me more about that test?” or “How does that test show that your problem is solved?”

Have fun!

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