

# Idea Generation Tool

## Assumption Reversal



© 2005–2015/16, Future Think LLC. All rights reserved. All other trademarks are the property of their respective companies. futurethink clients may make one attributed copy or slide of each figure contained herein. Additional reproduction is strictly prohibited. For additional reproduction rights and usage information, go to [www.futurethink.com](http://www.futurethink.com). Information is based on best available resources. Opinions reflect judgment at the time and are subject to change. To purchase reprints of this document, please email [innovate@futurethink.com](mailto:innovate@futurethink.com).



## Idea Generation Tool

### Assumption Reversal

---

## WHAT IS ASSUMPTION REVERSAL?

Assumptions hold us back from coming up with new approaches and thoughts. We operate as if our assumptions are sacred, carved-in-stone certainties, and we ignore big opportunities for unfounded reasons. Assumption Reversal is a simple technique that pushes people to stop thinking about what *can't* be done and start thinking about what *can* be done. This technique can lead us to discover new and novel ideas.

Use this tool when your company or teams are stuck in a rut, uninspired, or looking for disruptive thinking. When employees realize their perceived boundaries are self-imposed, they learn how to regain control and find fresh motivation.

*For a video introduction to Assumption Reversal, click on the image above or go to: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jCDyoEcLswg>*



## Idea Generation Tool

Assumption Reversal

### FACILITATION GUIDE

<b>NUMBER OF PEOPLE:</b>	Small teams of up to eight people.																		
<b>SUGGESTED AUDIENCE:</b>	Relevant for all levels of staff.																		
<b>PREP:</b>	Ask participants to think about a specific issue facing your company, a problem you face when servicing customers, or an internal barrier to being more effective at work.																		
<b>SUGGESTED TIMING:</b>	<table><tr><td>1. Define the Challenge:</td><td>5 min.</td></tr><tr><td>2. List Assumptions:</td><td>10 min.</td></tr><tr><td>3. Pick 3 Assumptions:</td><td>5 min.</td></tr><tr><td>4. Partner and Reverse:</td><td>10 min.</td></tr><tr><td>5. Brainstorm Ideas:</td><td>10 min.</td></tr><tr><td>6. Share or Draw the Best Idea:</td><td>10 min.</td></tr><tr><td>7. Group Discussion:</td><td>25 min.</td></tr><tr><td></td><td><hr/></td></tr><tr><td></td><td><b>75 min.</b></td></tr></table>	1. Define the Challenge:	5 min.	2. List Assumptions:	10 min.	3. Pick 3 Assumptions:	5 min.	4. Partner and Reverse:	10 min.	5. Brainstorm Ideas:	10 min.	6. Share or Draw the Best Idea:	10 min.	7. Group Discussion:	25 min.		<hr/>		<b>75 min.</b>
1. Define the Challenge:	5 min.																		
2. List Assumptions:	10 min.																		
3. Pick 3 Assumptions:	5 min.																		
4. Partner and Reverse:	10 min.																		
5. Brainstorm Ideas:	10 min.																		
6. Share or Draw the Best Idea:	10 min.																		
7. Group Discussion:	25 min.																		
	<hr/>																		
	<b>75 min.</b>																		

### SUGGESTED MATERIALS:



Blank copies of the worksheets for participants.  
(See the end of this tool.)



Whiteboard or flipcharts if completing the exercise as a group.  
(Use them to write down all group ideas; no idea is a bad idea.)



Colored markers, pens, and pencils.  
(Separating ideas by color will help organize your thoughts.)



## HOW IT WORKS

It's challenging for people to think of solutions that are counter to their entrenched assumptions, so here are some tips to ensure success when using this tool.

### 1. Define the Challenge.

Gather your team in a room. Share the challenge or problem that you want to work on. Don't choose a challenge that's too vague, too large, or too complex. You want to be as focused as possible with your challenge so that you will be able to break it down into specific parts. For example, a challenge like "improve our products" is too vague, but a challenge like "improve our widget packaging process" is more specific and more tangible to work on.

### 2. List Assumptions.

Challenge your team to break down the problem into as many discreet parts as possible, listing their assumptions for how things are done, who is involved, milestones or steps in the process, etc. (See call-out box on Worksheet #1, with different assumption categories to consider.) Task participants with listing at least 20 assumptions, if they can. The key is to break down the problem into as many parts and details as possible. For example, "needing approval meetings" is too vague an assumption. However, "attending weekly, in-person approval meetings" is more detailed and useful to explore solutions for.

### 3. Pick 3 Assumptions.

Have people select 3 assumptions to work on from their list, and circle them. You can guide them on what type of assumptions you'd like them to choose, or you can let them decide. If you have time, you can have everyone work on all their assumptions. It's up to you.

### 4. Partner and Reverse.

Once individuals have selected their assumptions to focus on, have them pick a partner to help reverse them. The reason to partner is that working with someone different will help stretch thinking, provide wilder suggestions, and stop people from saying "we can't do that" when reversing something. Let people know that their goal is to reverse each assumption as many ways that they can. Reversing doesn't just mean listing the opposite of their assumption, but the alternatives to it. For example, the reversal of "weekly in-person meetings" isn't just "no meetings," but also annual meetings, hourly updates, virtual meetings, or quarterly Skype calls. The goal of reversing is to come up with alternative and even OUTRAGEOUS solutions. Tell people that this is expected, and that their partners have to help them generate these offbeat suggestions. You don't want the reversals to result in the status quo!



## Idea Generation Tool

### Assumption Reversal

---

#### 5. Brainstorm Ideas.

Look at the reversals on each worksheet. Ask people to see if any of their reversals are great ideas on their own, or if there are a few reversals that, when put together, create an ideal solution to explore.

#### 6. Share or DRAW the Best Idea.

Ask your team to draw their best idea. Drawing is an excellent technique to build a narrative around an idea for which there might not be an existing context. It improves collaboration and helps individuals better share a vision that might only exist in their own mind. Finally, it frees people from the business jargon and bullet points of PowerPoint presentations and encourages both big-picture vision and details.

#### 7. Group Discussion.

Have a discussion that reviews each part of the process. Use these important questions to explore more insights:

- How many assumptions on average did we have?
- Which assumptions were the most difficult to reverse?
- Was it hard to come up with ideas based on our reversals? Why?
- Which reversals sparked the best ideas? Why?
- What was it like to draw your idea?
- Was drawing helpful? What happened when you did it?
- How was this exercise different from how you typically present ideas?
- What were the benefits of drawing your idea (versus using PowerPoint)?



## REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

Step 1. DEFINE: The role, function, product, process, or problem to improve is: Weekly In-person Status Meetings

Step 2. List Assumptions

Step 3. Pick 3 Assumptions (circle on your worksheet)

Step 4. Partner and Reverse

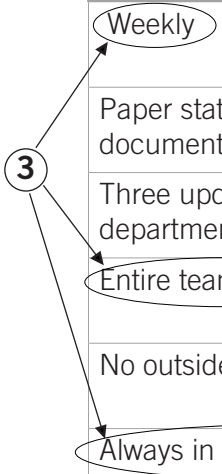
Step 5. Brainstorm Ideas

Consider the assumptions you have about:

- Responsibilities
- Routines
- Reporting Needs
- Approval Needs
- Positioning
- Pricing
- Features
- Packaging
- Service/Support
- Staff Capabilities
- Logistics
- Customer Focus
- Contracts
- Marketing
- Delivery
- Other...

② ASSUMPTIONS (It is true that...)	④ REVERSALS	⑤ NEW IDEAS
Weekly	Never, quarterly, ongoing with alerts	Quarterly meetings in the park where attendance is optional!
Paper status template documents	Online, Google Doc, freestyle	
Three update items per department	One item only, unlimited, only ideas involving others on the team	
Entire team attends	Invite anyone you want, attendance optional	
No outside participants allowed	Open invitation	
Always in Conference Room A	At your desk, via chat/IM, in a park, at a restaurant	

3





## Idea Generation Tool

Assumption Reversal

Step 6. Share or DRAW the Best Idea.



**Idea Generation Tools**  
Assumption Reversal

---

**WORKSHEET #2**

Step 6. DRAW THE FINAL IDEA: Using the new ideas generated, draw and present your final solution.



futurethink Innovation Simplified | innovate@futurethink.com | P 646-257-5737 | © Future Think LLC. All rights reserved 9

Step 7. Group Discussion.







## Idea Generation Tool

Assumption Reversal

---

### WORKSHEET #2

Step 6. DRAW THE FINAL IDEA: Using the new ideas generated, draw and present your final solution.



## Idea Generation Tool

Assumption Reversal

---

### TIPS FOR SUCCESS

#### Specifically Define Your Challenge

“Improve weekly in-person status meetings” will take you a lot further than simply saying “improve meetings.”

#### Strength in Numbers

Encourage participants to list at least 20 assumptions.

#### Check Alignment

Are everyone’s assumptions the same? Why or why not?

#### Focus on Alternatives

The reverse of an assumption isn’t just the opposite (food vs. no food), it’s an alternative (bad food, organic food).

#### Sky’s the Limit

Encourage novel, offbeat and outrageous reversals in order to get beyond the status quo. Be open to *all* new ideas.

#### Reinforcements

Not all assumptions need to be changed. Some reversals can reinforce and validate assumptions (i.e. perhaps restaurants *do* need food).

#### Expand Your Audience

Using the Tool with outsiders who aren’t familiar with your problem, process, or service can lend fresh perspective and unexpected reversals.