

Possibility Thinking Protocol

Facilitation Guide



Tool for
Performance Character

 30 minutes

 Educator-prep
Leader-prep

Materials

- Select Facilitator, Presenter, and Feedback Partner roles
- Something to take notes or write with

Making Connections

Principled Innovation asks us to work with others and recognize the limits of our own knowledge so that we can better understand and tackle the complex issues our communities face.

Connecting Character Assets:

[Curiosity](#)
[Creativity](#)

About this Guide

Coming up with creative solutions through collaborative thinking can be exciting and build connections among a group. In the Possibility Thinking Protocol, participants explore a problem through asking “What if...?” questions and engaging in a series of creative transformations of both problems and solutions.

This short-form feedback process utilizes facilitator, presenter, and feedback partner roles to assist individuals and teams to generate possibilities and proactively address potential problems before taking action.

The Possibility Thinking Protocol is adapted from [Taking Beautiful Risks in Education, \(Beghetto, R. A. \(2018\). Educational Leadership, 76 \(4\), 18 – 24\)](#) and the [assumption flips](#) are adapted from *Big Wins, Small Steps* (Beghetto, 2016, Corwin).

Protocol Overview

Part 1:
Generating Possibilities
Steps 1-5

Part 2:
Anticipating and Proactively Addressing Setbacks
Steps 1-4

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Part 1: Generating possibilities

1 Facilitator introduces the protocol

(1–2 minutes)

The facilitator quickly provides an overview of how and why the protocol is being used.

2 Presenter shares a challenge

(1 minute)

The presenter (an individual or representative of a team) concisely describes a challenge, problem, or impasse they are facing.

3 Feedback partners ask clarifying questions

(2–3 minutes)

The feedback partners (in pairs or small or large groups) ask any clarifying questions they have about the challenge, problem, or issue presented. The presenter provides clarification.

4 Feedback partners pose "What if?" possibilities

(5–15 minutes)

Participants in the exercise provide as many new and different ways of thinking about the problem, or potential ways to respond, as they can.

Preface all suggestions with "What if?" to signal that this is just a possibility to be considered.

"What if?" possibilities should encourage the presenter and everyone to challenge and flip their assumptions about the problem or issue. (*see next page*)

During this step, the presenter listens quietly without interrupting or clarifying, perhaps taking notes.

The goal is for the presenter to take in as many different perspectives as possible without short-circuiting the process with interruptions.

5 Presenter identifies and describes the most promising possibility

(2–3 minutes)

The presenter reflects on all the possibilities presented and selects the most promising or provocative one that offers a new and different way of thinking about and acting on the issue.

The presenter then briefly shares with the group the possibility selected and initial steps that can be taken to put this possibility into action.

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Tactics for Flipping Assumptions

CAUSATION FLIP: Challenge assumptions about cause and effect

What if the cause of a problem is actually the effect or the effect of problem is actually the cause?

COEXISTENCE FLIP: Challenge assumptions about compatibility and incompatibility

What if features of a problem that seem compatible are incompatible or features of the problem that seem incompatible are actually compatible?

COMPOSITION FLIP: Challenge assumptions about multiple and singular

What if a problem that seems to be made up many different elements is actually made up of a singular element or a problem that seems to be made up of one element is made up of many different elements?

CONTEXT FLIP: Challenge assumptions about what is unique and common

What if something that seems to be unique to a particular context actually applies across many contexts OR something that seems to be common across contexts only applying in certain contexts?

EVALUATION FLIP: Challenge assumptions about good and bad

What if some seemingly positive feature of a problem is actually negative and or some seemingly negative feature is actually positive?

FOCUS FLIP: Challenge assumptions about individual and social/contextual

What if a seemingly individual problem is actually a social/contextual problem or a seemingly social/contextual problem is actually an individual problem?

FUNCTION FLIP: Challenge assumptions about what is effective and ineffective

What if some seemingly effective aspect of situation is actually functioning ineffectively or some seemingly ineffective aspect of a problem is actually functioning effectively?

MOVEMENT FLIP: Challenge assumptions about tandem and inverse

What if things that seem to move or change together actually have an inverse relationship or things that seem to move in opposite directions actually move in the same direction?

OPPOSITION FLIP: Challenge assumptions about similar and different

What if things that appear similar are actually different or things that appear different are actually similar?

ORGANIZATION FLIP: Challenge assumptions about structured and chaotic

What if things that appear organized are really disorganized or something that seems disorganized and chaotic is actually organized and structured?

RELATIONSHIP FLIP: Challenge assumptions about related and unrelated

What if something that seems related is actually unrelated or things that seem interdependent are actually independent?

STABILITY FLIP: Challenge assumptions about fixed and flexible

What if things that seem stable and fixed can actually change or something that seems dynamic and changing is actually stable and fixed?

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Part 2: Anticipating and proactively addressing setbacks

**Part 2 is best used before launching a new project or initiative, either immediately following Part 1 or at a later date

1 Facilitator introduces the protocol

(1–2 minutes)

The goal of this protocol is to anticipate and proactively address potential hazards of implementing a project idea or action, or problems likely to arise.

The facilitator asks the group to imagine that implementing the idea has resulted in a spectacular failure.

2 Imagine and explain the reasons why the initiative failed

(5 minutes)

Everyone in the group individually (and anonymously) writes on a sticky note one reason why the action or project might have failed.

3 Consider and address each imagined reason for failure

(20 minutes)

The facilitator reads aloud each imagined reason for why the action or project failed.

Then the group uses "What if?" questions to explore possibilities for proactively addressing these anticipated challenges.

This process continues until each reason has been read aloud and participants have shared ideas for addressing it.

The facilitator can note similarities between concerns (and unique concerns) and challenges brought up frequently.

4 Summarizing statements and next steps

(5 minutes)

The facilitator guides a discussion of what the group learned from this process, summarizes what was learned, and outlines next steps for the group.

Such as planning concrete actions to address one or two of the setbacks or even engaging in another round of possibility thinking to address a new challenge that emerged during discussion.