Assumptions Reversal Exercise – Facilitator's guide

OBJECTIVE: TO ASSESS THE VALIDITY OF OUR ASSUMPTIONS.

This is a fun exercise that helps participants to explore alternatives to their assumptions. It also gives direction to new scanners wondering where to begin scanning for weak signals. This activity is easily scaled; it can be carried out with a small group of scanners working individually or a larger group working in scanning teams. This guide provides instructions for a group of 25 working in scanning teams of 3-5 people.

People:
- 1 facilitator
- 15–25 participants
- 1 note-taker (optional)
- 1 or 2 assistants (optional)

Materials:
- Facilitator flipchart/writeable wall and marker
- Assumptions (2 per team on flipchart or sticky notes)
- Assumptions reversal example (written on a flipchart or PowerPoint slide)
- Minimum one laptop per team (the more the better)
- Flipchart and markers for each team (optional)
- Projector/computer (optional)

Post on the wall:
- Poster with assumptions question (optional)
- A visual agenda (optional)
- Rules of engagement (optional)
- 2 headings on sticky notes (optional): What worked? What could be better?

Agenda at a Glance

TIME	ACTIVITY
5 minutes	1. General meeting introductions (if needed)

40 minutes	2. Give context for the assumptions reversal exercise (7 minute)
	3. Provide self-facilitated activity instructions (3 minutes)
	4. Perform self-facilitated teamwork
	  • Generate assumption reversals (5 minutes)
	  • Team members scan for evidence (15 minutes)
	5. Report back to the group (8 minutes)
	6. Summarize points of the assumptions reversal exercise (2 minutes)

10 minutes	7. Reflect on and/or evaluate the exercise

EST. TOTAL TIME: 55 minutes

Meeting Space: A large room with seating for all in groups of 3–5, conducive to hearing other participants, seeing the facilitator's flipchart and working in teams. Breakout rooms for teamwork are optional.

BEFORE THE MEETING

Prepare the room

- The facilitator will need a flipchart, writeable wall space or a PowerPoint slide to demonstrate a sample assumptions reversal.

- In a large room, seat participants so they can see each other as well as the facilitator and flipchart/presentation. Arrange seating to facilitate work in teams, or spread out into breakout rooms. If using breakout teams, consider having an assistant or two available to help monitor progress and answer any questions that might arise.

- Each scanning team will need at least one laptop (preferably one per team member). A flipchart for each team may also be desired to report back findings to the larger group.

- Post on the wall any visual aids that will be referred to in the meeting.

- The facilitator will need some assumptions for each team to work with; aim to have enough for 2 per team. They can be handed out on sticky notes or listed on a flipchart.

  ° If this activity follows an assumptions exercise with the group, they can vote on the most important assumptions to identify which ones to explore further with assumptions reversal. (A second round of voting might help if there are too many top candidates.)

  ° If there isn't time for a full assumptions exercise, consider adding 5 minutes to the meeting to generate just enough assumptions for the reversal exercise (2 per team). Have a note-taker record the conversation with a screen for all to see the list. This may not yield the most important assumptions, nor will every participant be able to contribute an idea, but it is fast. It will still deliver the point of the exercise: how to use assumptions as a starting point to direct our scanning.

ANNOTATED AGENDA

TIME	ACTIVITY	NOTES

5 minutes	1. **General meeting introductions (if needed)**
	• Introduce facilitators
	• Provide context for the session (why are we here?)
	• Allow participant introductions if they are unacquainted
	
	• Consider adding a few minutes to the agenda to:
	  ° build rapport through an ice-breaker activity
	  ° review ground rules to ensure a good discussion
		• If this is one of several activities, consider using a visual agenda to situate this activity within the day's events.
		• A list of rules of engagement posted in the room during the meeting is a visual reminder of the group's commitment to support a good discussion.

7 minutes	2. **Give context for the assumptions reversal exercise**
	• (If needed, first review or point to the list of assumptions that will be the basis for the exercise.)
	• Explain the purpose of assumptions reversal:
	  ° "Now that we have identified some common assumptions about [our policy area], we are going to explore whether there is any evidence to the contrary using an assumptions reversal exercise."
	  ° "Often we are drawn to information that confirms beliefs we already hold; the purpose of this exercise is to hone our critical thinking skills and form the habit of intentionally looking for what challenges conventional beliefs. With an open mind, we can better detect areas of potential surprise."
		• **Tip:** If participants will be expected to scan regularly for a project, it may be valuable to have them file their scan hits in a common space, such as a shared drive or an online collaborative tool like www.pearltrees.com. If so, consider how and when participants will be trained on the use of the tool.

- Provide an example:
  - ° "For example, Wendy Schultz demonstrates how assumption reversal can creatively examine **the role of restaurants**."

- Copy this chart (or another example) onto a flipchart or a PowerPoint slide to present the exercise visually. Source: http://www.slideshare.net/wendyinfutures/crazy-futures-why-plausibility-is-maladaptive

RESTAURANTS

Basic assumptions
- ° Restaurants serve food
- ° Are located outside the home
- ° People pay for the food
- ° The food is prepared by the restaurant
- ° The restaurant earns a profit
- ° People go to socialize

Assumption reversals
- ° Restaurants give food away
- ° They don't serve people
- ° People bring their own food
- ° Not-for-profit restaurant

Data emerging
- ° Serving pets and not people
- ° Collaborative co-cooking
- ° Restaurant is run by a local co-operative

- ° "We start with current-day assumptions (why we go, what we do, how they run, what they provide, etc.)." (Speak to examples in the chart.)
- ° "Then we consider what could be extreme alternatives to or opposites of each assumption. That's the assumption reversal. There may be several alternatives. Some assumptions may not have an opposite." (Speak to examples in the chart.)
- ° "Then we look out to the world for instances that support the alternative assumptions, e.g. alternative business models." (Speak to examples in the chart.)

Option: If the group needs to warm up (e.g. first thing in the morning), consider facilitating the demonstration instead of presenting it. Ask participants for a few assumptions and alternative assumptions about restaurants or another tangible subject such as schools or hospitals. Fill in the first and second columns and, if participants can think of examples that counter the conventional model, fill in the third. Allow a few extra minutes if the example is facilitated rather than presented, but keep it brief; be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

3 minutes	**3. Provide self-facilitated activity instructions** • Divide the group into teams of 3–5 people • Provide instructions:	• Provide each team with a marker and a flip chart.

- ° "In your team, you will examine one or two of the common assumptions that our policies take for granted, and identify several alternative assumptions that would make the assumption untrue. Try to think of as many as you can."
- ° "Then you will scan for instances that support these alternatives."
- ° "Record your results on a chart, then we'll quickly report back what we found."

- Provide each team with one assumption (written on a sticky note or read out from a flip chart). Have a back-up assumption ready in case the team either completes the exercise very quickly or comes up with little for the first assumption.

- Before the group breaks off for the activity, answer any questions that may arise.
  - ° Indicate if there are any scope limits you want to impose on the scanning. For instance, if the group will be scanning for new alternative models of healthcare, is it acceptable to include scan hits from developing countries? Should they be limited to Western models only? Should teams look for Canadian models first?

| 20 minutes | **4. Perform self-facilitated teamwork** |
| | • Allow teams to spread out if possible and manage their own time, with the following suggested timing: |

- ° Generate assumption reversals (5 minutes)
- ° Team members scan for evidence to support the reversed assumptions (15 minutes)

	• Provide a 5-minute warning to ensure participants are recording their results on paper or a flipchart.	
8 minutes	**5. Report back to the group** • Give each group a minute to share the assumption they started with, the list of alternative assumptions generated and a few examples that support the alternatives.	
2 minutes	**6. Summarize points of the assumptions reversal exercise** • "This activity reminds us to assess the validity of our assumptions by first considering alternatives and then scanning for evidence that supports these alternatives." • "Sometimes general scanning for weak signals of change can be overwhelming and unproductive. Using this approach can give your scanning some focus."	
10 minutes	**7. Reflect on and/or evaluate the exercise** • Give participants an opportunity to provide feedback on the exercise. • This might take the form of: 　° A Q&A discussion 　° Participant completion of an evaluation form 　° Informal evaluation—On their way out the room, participants are asked to post one comment on a sticky note for each of three wall headings: 　　- What Worked? 　　- What Could Be better?	• Provide evaluation forms or sticky notes as appropriate

BUILDING A FORESIGHT WORKSHOP: COMPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES TO CONSIDER

Before the exercise:

- Deliver the Assumptions presentation and/or the assumptions exercise. The assumptions reversal exercise then reminds participants of the foresight message that we must remain open to the possibility that our core assumptions about the future could be wrong.

- Deliver the Introduction to Scanning presentation (module 3). This exercise provides a starting point for new scanners wondering where to look for signs of change.

After the exercise:

- Develop a cascade diagram (module 3). Starting with a new weak signal from this exercise, the group can develop a cascade diagram to explore potential future consequences if the weak signal were to grow into a substantial change. Alternatively, the facilitator might wish to reverse a few assumptions with the group, omit the scanning activity, and simply proceed to developing a cascade diagram using an alternative assumption.