

IDENTIFYING COMMONLY-HELD ASSUMPTIONS EMBEDDED IN POLICY

INTRODUCTION

This activity allows participants to reflect on some of the prevailing notions that are currently influencing policy makers. It encourages participants to draw from recent policy discussions and policy papers in order to consider assumptions embedded in existing policies.

WHAT

- Current assumptions shape policy analysis. They are buried in public discourse and policy documents. They should be explored to ensure that policy development is effective and efficient.
- An assumption is a statement that is generally accepted as true or certain, without proof.
- Assumptions may be conscious or unconscious.
- Assumptions create a mental model which deduces or infers certain conclusions.
- In the policy domain, assumptions consciously or unconsciously shape our thinking about the system and its future.

WHY

- There is mounting evidence that the world will drastically change over the next decade, driven by ongoing economic, social and technological revolutions. So it is important to examine some of the current underlying assumptions in policy about the present and expected future.
- Identifying policy assumptions provides a baseline for envisioning alternative futures.
- Exploring current assumptions allows participants to either confirm or challenge their validity over the course of a foresight study.

PHASE
Exploration

LENGTH
1 day to 1-2 weeks

STEPS

1. If you are holding this activity in a group, ensure each participant has three large sticky notes, with extra close at hand. Sticky notes should be large enough to clearly fit about eight words.
2. Define your policy theme and provide an example of an assumption that is relevant to the policy theme you are exploring.
3. Ask the group of participants to note down assumptions about the policy theme they are exploring. Encourage them to think about the assumptions that are embedded in the policy area they are exploring and are currently influencing policy makers. Encourage participants to reflect on current policy papers, thinking and discussions. Avoid personal assumptions.
4. Provide participants a few minutes to write down one or more assumptions that will be collected and shared with the group.
5. Ask participants to read out 1-2 of their assumptions and hand it to the facilitator. Keep the time focused on sharing assumptions and not debating the validity of the assumption.
6. After the brainstorming exercise, facilitators cluster related assumptions and ask participants to dot-vote for the most important assumptions (using sticky dots or markers). Participants when voting should consider: "Which assumption is central to policy makers, for the system we've described?" or "Which assumption, if wrong, might have the highest impact on the future?". That is to say, that if the assumption turned out to be wrong in the future, it would be very consequential for the system.
7. The facilitator should highlight the assumptions that were prioritized, and engage the group in a discussion as to the reasons why.
8. Post the selected assumptions in a shared space (network folder or work place). Participants can continue to add to this list; as they learn more about the system, they will recognize additional assumptions. The list of assumptions may also offer a focus for scanning, as participants can look for the existence of weak signals that challenge these assumptions. Reflect on and/or evaluate the exercise.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The links below are material published by Policy Horizons Canada, which provide additional information on the *Assumptions Activity*.

Horizons Foresight Training Manual - Module 2: Assumptions - Presentation:
<http://www.horizons.gc.ca/eng/content/module-2-assumptions-presentation>

Horizons Foresight Training Manual - Module 2: Assumptions Exercise - Facilitator's Guide:
http://www.horizons.gc.ca/sites/default/files/uploaded_media/2016-272-guide_assumptions-eng.pdf



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