

# POSSIBILITY THINKING PROTOCOL

Beghetto, R. A. (2018). Taking beautiful risks in Education. *Educational Leadership*, 76, 18 – 24.

## PART 1—GENERATING POSSIBILITIES

**Step 1. Facilitator introduces the protocol:** The facilitator quickly provides an overview of how and why the protocol is being used.

**Step 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.

**Step 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.

**Step 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 reverse side). 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.

**Step 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. Depending on how this protocol is being used, the facilitator might go through Part 1 again with a new presenter, until all have had a chance to share their challenges.

## 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.

**Step 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.

**Step 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.

**Step 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.

**Step 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).

*Notes:* Suggested times should be modified for the particular situation. This protocol is based on principles and ideas adapted from Beghetto, 2016, 2018; Klein, 2007.

# TACTICS FOR FLIPPING ASSUMPTIONS

Beghetto, R. A. (2016). *Big wins, small steps: How to lead for and with creativity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

## **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?

Note: Adapted from Beghetto, 2016; Davis, 1971; Weick, 1979.