

Future Thinking (for Organizations)

This exercise offers guidance on how to get teams thinking about the future.

So often we're concerned with near-term innovation and we're hindered by the status quo. Use this to help shake off the old ways of thinking and allow bigger, bolder ideas to flow. I've based this guidance on exercises I've undertaken with teams in the past. It blends future thinking theory with agile practices to get teams thinking big and bold and fast. This exercise also takes some inspiration from Harvard Business Review (HBR) who published details of an experiment they'd run along similar lines⁴¹.

Preparation

First set the scene and free your team of today's narrative. It doesn't matter where you are today when imagining the future. The drivers of your business growth today may not be the drivers of your growth tomorrow. Your team needs to be able to consider new drivers, to use the cliche, to think 'outside of the box'.

Define your time horizons

People often feel most comfortable considering what's just around the corner or what's super far into the future, rather than the mid-ground. Defining your time horizons is an exercise in itself to help bring your team together on what the future means to them. There's no right or wrong answer to this and different people have different views. Ask your team to whiteboard this out: ask them all to put markers on a timeline of where they see near, mid- and long-term futures starting and ending. Then discuss using the following prompts:

What do you know about now?

What can you imagine next?

What is considered unknowable?

Near-term may be 1-3 or 5 years. Mid-term may be 3 or 5 -10 years. Long-term may be 10 years and more or further out. Everyone's different though, your time horizons should reflect the pace of change in your sector and industry.

⁴¹ <https://hbr.org/2015/01/an-exercise-to-get-your-team-thinking-differently-about-the-future>

A BETTER VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK

Understand what type of future you're designing, near, mid or long-term. If you're designing near and mid-term, by the way, why not also consider how these ideas unfold in your long-term future?

Define a problem or scenario

Identify a simple question, challenge, problem or scenario. Asking people to imagine the future is way too broad, and no one can. Asked to imagine the future, we all start thinking space travel and stuff we've seen in the movies. Instead, we need a well-defined business challenge like: "How will we enable learning agility in the future of work?"

Define your drivers or vectors

Now it's time to define the drivers of your future state with regards to your specific problem. Let's take "How will we enable learning agility in the future of work?" as an example. The drivers of learning agility today may be professional development budgets, the quality of higher and further education and employee need. The drivers of learning agility in the future may be different: they may be the personal goals of workers, the fast-moving target for talent in your industry (the need for continual learning), the structure of work (independent consulting versus salaried), skills gaps, AI capability and so on.

Imagine

Now, for each driver, ask your teams to go wide. By going wide, I mean to have as many ideas as possible in a short time frame. A great way I like to do this is to use Crazy 8s. Crazy 8s is an agile practice that gets teams to be creative. Have your team fold A4 paper in half, in half again and again then unfold it. They now have a sheet of paper with space for 8 ideas. In 1 or 2 minutes, ask them to draw, yes draw! Ideas in each of the 8 spaces. You can then ask your teams to share their ideas with each other. One way is to post all the crazy 8s on a wall and ask the owners to talk the team through the ideas. You can use simple dot voting to get the team to vote on the ideas they'd like to develop.

Develop the ideas

Next, it's time to develop those amazing ideas. Ask your team to focus for longer on key ideas and develop scenarios around them. Imagine the team had an idea for ensuring learning agility that involved using AI - not to perform work instead of workers, but to spot where workers needed to upskill and

CREATING THE FUTURE OF WORK

suggest how best to help them. How could this work? What would it take? What would it mean for your organization? Is it an exciting opportunity? Can you see already that this idea, based on rethinking the drivers, is already very much further into the future, than simply rethinking existing professional development capabilities?

Of course, imagining the future of an organization is a big ask, that's why imaging the future for well-defined challenges is a much better approach. Having worked in many dynamic organizations I know some of these techniques really work, and quickly. Instead of multi-day workshops or strategy projects, initial ideas can be created in a matter of hours with a small, engaged team.

If you'd like to learn more about future thinking, I'd recommend reading Thinking, Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman⁴².

⁴² www.amazon.com/Thinking-Fast-Slow-Daniel-Kahneman/dp/0374533555