

Generating What If? questions

Time: 60 minutes

Facilitation guide:

Introduce the session using the following text:

The previous exercise was all about expanding the imagination, allowing ourselves to create new 'memories of the future' in order to create a 'North Star' to move towards. But how do we give this solid form, to ground it in reality? Through the generation of good What If questions, that's how.

What makes a good What If question? The former Mayor of Bogota, Antanas Mockus, beautifully described it like this:

“What people love most is when you write on the blackboard a risky first half of a sentence and then recognise their freedom to write the other half”.

Explain that we will now create the What If questions that people asked today that were pivotal in unlocking the future vision that they just explored.

1. Encourage them to make the questions quite specific, not general things like “What if everyone loved each other?”, but more specific questions that relate to changes that can be initiated at community scale, such as “What if all our parks had community gardens?”, “What if every street had a car club?” or “What if we decided on part of the council budget spend?”.

2. Explain that it is really important at this point to distinguish between 'Yes, But' and 'Yes, And'. For so many of us, our experience of imagining new ideas and suggesting them is that they are met with a 'Yes, But' response, detailing all the potential problems, which shuts down our imagination. In theatrical improvisation, 'Yes, And' is vital. Someone makes an 'offer', a suggestion, and the next person accepts that and builds on it. It creates a completely different atmosphere, as ideas emerge and are nourished and respected. So make it clear that when a 'What If' suggestion is made, 'Yes, but' is banned. Instead, people are invited to respond with 'Yes, and' suggestions.
3. Put people into small groups of 3 - 5 people for 40 minutes, and ask them to capture the What If questions that emerge on paper or a shared document.
3. Bring everyone back together and then have a 15 minute break - encourage everyone to move around, even to go outside for a bit.
4. Over the break go through notes made and group the What If questions into themes for use in the next exercise. This means that the note-taker will not get a break at this point.

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