



CHANGE TOOL: UPSIDE DOWN THINKING

Upside Down Thinking is both a mindset and a tool people can use to challenge status quo thinking and practice and foster innovation or creative solutions to problems and challenges.

Upside Down Thinking is a relative of the Wicked Question and can be used by Critical, Systems, Creative, and Lateral thinkers. Wicked questions are, simply put, *provocative inquiry* to which there is not a clear-cut answer.

Usually a Wicked Question has a structure that juxtaposes two very different or conflicting ideas or concepts. For example, “How can we commit to achieving outcomes while remaining open to the possibility we are measuring the wrong outcomes?” Or: “How do we change or dismantle systems that we are required to implement and control?”

Upside Down Thinking is a heretical proposal or proposition. It is not phrased as a question, but rather is a statement that turns around our habitual and conventional thinking and practice into a proposal that may seem outlandish, far-fetched, or perhaps just, at first glance, an unacceptable proposition.

Individuals can engage in this type of thinking on their own, but thinking together upside down can be a powerful catalyst for deepening understanding about what we take for granted and help us adapt or make large-scale changes to remedy those elements of our routines, our habitual processes, and sacred cows that are holding us back from achieving substantive change.

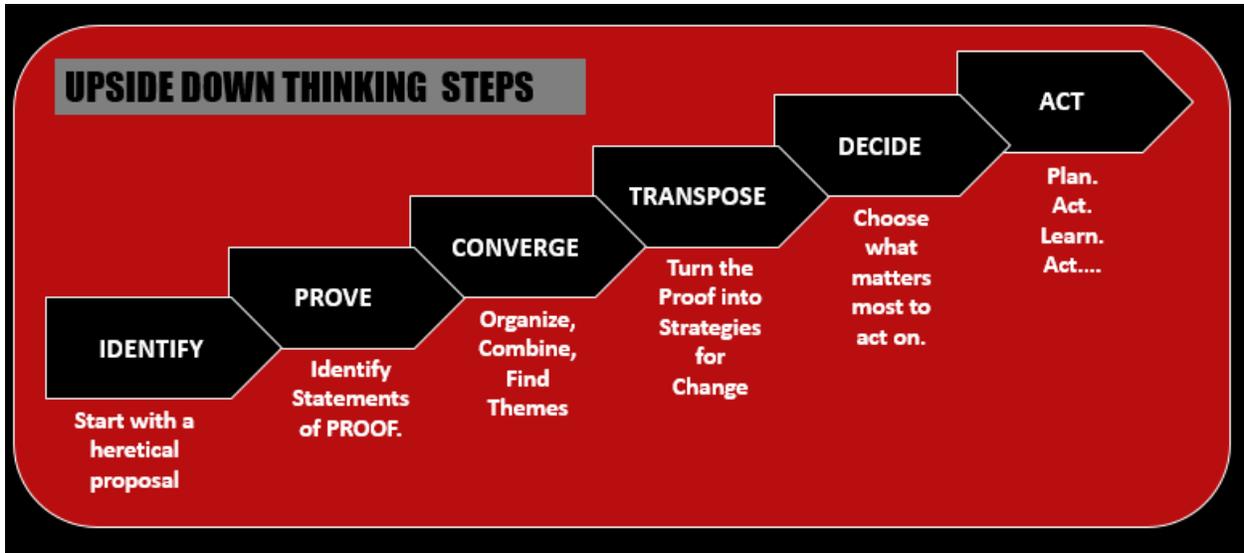
Upside Down Thinking is about breaking out of, or breaking through, conventional thought. It's about refusing to be limited by logic or “what's been proven.” The status quo is its enemy.

Typically, a heretical proposition is a concise, bold statement that represents the opposite of accepted thinking. For example, the Upside Down Thinking version of the two wicked questions mentioned earlier could be: “Outcomes and their logic models destroy organizational creativity and innovation.” Or: “The systems we create are designed to marginalize the people we are here to help.”

Once a group has a heretical proposition in mind, everyone is asked to work together to prove the proposition to be true. The point is not to debate its validity, but rather to abandon our tendency to argue about such things and just focus on identifying all the reasons the statement is or could be true.

The intent here is to use these statements of proof to help advance understanding and possible solutions to aspects of our work and thinking that have become dogma we rarely question, if ever.

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In the box to the right you will find a listing of various types of heretical propositions that have been identified or used by other community change practitioners. While there are many ways to facilitate an Upside Down Thinking session, the first two steps (identify and Prove) are often the hardest. Working through an example statement like the ones here is a good way to get the group's feet wet as opposed to tackling something closer to home.

Participants can be challenged by the second step (Prove) because it is natural for people to defend what is currently the accepted way of thinking or doing things. Having participants understand the whole process as above can help them move forward. Remember, the goal in the "Prove" step is to do just that, prove the heresy to be true, not argue about it or resist it.

From there the process is rather straightforward in terms of converging the brainstormed proof statements into thematic groupings and then transposing them into strategies for change, then prioritizing them and finally putting them into action.



For more information about Upside Down Thinking, and Upside Down Thinking Training and Events, contact Mark Holmgren at mark@tamarackcommunity.ca

Examples of Heretical Propositions

- All the attention we pay to ensuring Diversity is "in the room" has increased the stereotyping and marginalization of people.
- Social inclusion is our way of ensuring an acceptable amount of social exclusion.
- Intake criteria are the rules we create to say "NO" to those we don't want to help.
- Volunteer programs have destroyed people's desire to help others.
- Funders should apply to agencies to deliver their funding.
- Social programs don't help people overcome their problems. They work to keep people marginalized and without hope of substantial change.
- Agendas are tools we use to avoid talking about what really matters.
- We need a maximum wage and it should be set by low income people.
- Public Consultations should be called Public Manipulations attempting to sell people our views.
- The purpose of subsidies is to make those who don't need them feel good about themselves.
- The Child Tax Benefit is a way for the government to subsidize low wages paid by profitable corporations.