

Ideation Tool and Supporting Guidance

Forming ideas takes time, space and creativity. Crafting a fresh, new idea can be a difficult process. Ideation is part of developing solutions and enables people to craft solutions that are long lasting, and not simply starting with solutions they already had in mind or using solutions they have already tried. The ideation tool is about disrupting how solutions are sourced and greenlit. Often, people start with solutions that don't actually respond to the problem they are trying to solve (e.g., an app, a committee). Additionally, people impose limitations on ideas based on risk aversion and end up recycling the same things that don't work. Oftentimes, it is the person with the most power who makes the decision about which ideas move forward and the criteria with which they make this decision is not transparent. These are some of the problems that ideation and idea selection criteria were created in response to. Ideation is a tool that can help us disrupt inequitable systems through innovative solutions.



The ideation “tool” is a process that enables teams to generate fresh ideas to solving a problem, especially ones that may not have emerged in previous discussions. It is a part of the **equitable ways of thinking and working** element of the Coherence Lab Framework.



HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

This tool provides the skeleton materials necessary to walk a team through the ideation process. **Feel free to tailor these materials to meet your specific needs and context and leverage existing opportunities within your team to engage in this work (e.g., divide between multiple existing meetings, use existing meeting structures to work through the tool, iterate on the process over months as work allows). Please make electronic copies of the materials for team use.**¹ The sections of this tool include:

- Objectives
- Tool (i.e., a facilitation process)
- [Additional resources](#)

There are many ways this tool can be used. One example is as follows:

State teams in the Coherence Lab Fellowship¹ engaged the process to brainstorm various ways they could address their problem. For example, the Ohio team used the ideation steps described below to generate ideas around strengthening the feedback loop between district leaders and state leaders and connecting district leaders to state supports more efficiently and effectively. Two of the ideas became prototypes which led to new insights and relationships that were sustained beyond the Fellowship.

¹ Additional information about the Coherence Lab Fellowship and Instructions for how to make electronic copies can be found in the [Coherence Toolkit Overview](#).



OBJECTIVES

By using this tool, you will be able to:

- Practice using strategies to clear the way for new and creative solutions
- Generate multiple solutions
- Capture ideas that don't need a process to begin to be implemented



FACILITATION PLAN (2.75 hours)

Note: This process is most effective in person. As needed, it's possible to re-create this process virtually using this [online tool](#).

Time	Title	Description and Materials	Person(s) Responsible
1 hr	Pework	Every problem is an opportunity for design. By framing our problem statements as a How Might We question, we're starting to set ourselves up for innovative solutions. We use the How Might We format because it suggests that a solution is possible and because they offer you the chance to answer them in a variety of ways. "How might we" catalyzes our thinking and presumes that there are multiple ways of achieving a goal and solving a problem. "How might we meet ____ need" is also rooted in the experience of those most proximate to the problem. Watch the short video for additional context. As prework, generate "How Might We Statements" based on your understanding of the problem. Use context from your empathy interviews to guide the process.	Team lead or relevant team members
5 min	Introduction to How Might We	How Might We (HMW) statements are a tool that helps us bridge from a problem statement and empathy work into ideating potential solutions. As prework, some of the team generated How Might We Statements based on our understanding of the problem. We're going to use these in some of our ideation exercises. As we're working feel free to add, delete or adjust the HMW statements. Facilitator note: <i>There are a series of suggested activities for the remainder of this process. You may find one working particularly well and want to extend the time for it. Alternatively, you may find your team struggling with one of the exercises. Please use your judgment in determining the highest, best use of time to advance ideating. The transformation card activity requires (and deserves) the most time. You also</i>	



		<i>need to build up to get them ready for this.</i>	
20 min	Criteria for selecting solutions to pursue	Share rationale for developing criteria: • When we are generating solutions, we can sometimes fall into old patterns—things like rallying around the first semi-good idea that was shared; deferring to the leader's idea due to power dynamics; deciding an idea is good because a few key team members like it. • Before we start generating ideas, we want to set out the criteria we will use to select ideas to explore more deeply in the future. You might be thinking—can't we do this after we generate ideas? We could, but another old pattern that can emerge is retrofitting selection criteria to ensure your ideas get picked. • Based on the thinking you've done about the problem you are solving and the kinds of solutions it will require, let's create 1-3 criteria. Criteria will be different for every group, but it's important to give people something to base their criteria on (e.g., organization values, true resource constraints like time, money, human power) • Examples of criteria are: explicit focus on equity; actionable within this time frame; connects to/leverages existing priority work Facilitator note: <i>For this exercise, you can use a Google Sheet or Jamboard to capture criteria and then vote on the 1-3 criteria that the team decides they will use to select ideas.</i>	
20 min	Brain Dump Activity	Materials: • 1 sharpie per person • 1 pack of post-it's per person • Large Poster Paper (one per sheet): ◦ Existing ideas that might be worth exploring ◦ Ideas that always come up, that need to be acknowledged, but that we should try to avoid ◦ Ideas that we can implement immediately (5 min) Brain Dump: Now we are going to do an ideation exercise called a brain dump. It is highly likely that you have been thinking about solutions since you started working on this project, and especially since you wrote How Might We statements in the prework. This is an opportunity to get those ideas—the good, the bad, the usual, the crazy—out. The way we're going to do this is by taking the next 5 minutes to reflect on the How Might We statements and get all our ideas out—one idea per post-it note. There is no pressure at this point to come up with new ideas, this is really just a place to capture the ideas you already have or heard in your empathy interviews. (15 min) Share and sort: Find a partner, someone you don't know as well. Share your ideas with each other, one at a time, alternating. Group them by the categories on the poster papers.	Facilitator



15 min	Wishing Exercise	(1 min) Introduction: Now we are going to try some exercises to help us push through the common, usual suspect type ideas to new and innovative ideas. This ideation technique is called "Wishing." In teams of 4, you'll take turns going around the circle completing the sentence starters "I wish" or "wouldn't it be nice if." This activity is intentionally fanciful, but it helps uncover the deep roots of the issue. You should say it out loud and then write them down (one phrase per post it) and put them on the wall or on the table where everyone can see them. (5 min) Generation: Get in groups of 4, and start wishing! (9 min) Whole Group Discussion: Stop generating new post-its and let's start having a conversation around the ideas you just generated. Pick one of the post its, then ask: • How might you make one of your wishes true? • What would be necessary? • While the entirety of the wish may not be possible, what pieces might be initial steps in that direction?	Facilitator
15 min	Worst Idea Exercise	(1 min) Introduction: Now we are going to try an ideation technique called "Worst Idea." In teams of 4, you'll take turns going around the circle naming the worst way you could solve this problem. Sometimes we can't think of any ideas for how to solve the problem we're working on, but we can always think of ways that would definitely NOT work. For this exercise, the goal is to come up with bad, illegal, terrible, stupid or gross ideas. You'll get a good laugh, and be surprised at how you can actually get some good ideas from your awful ones. You can think about the opposite of your bad ideas, or search for the hidden gem of a good idea in each bad idea. You should say each idea out loud and then write them down (one idea per post it) and put them on the wall or on the table where everyone can see them. (7 min) Generation: Get in groups of 4, and start generating your bad ideas!" Intentionally break into <i>new</i> groups of 4 (7 min) Whole Group Discussion: Stop generating new post-its and let's start having a conversation around the ideas you just generated. Pick one of the post its, then ask: • What makes this idea so bad? • What is the opposite of this idea? • What might be the hidden gem in this idea?	Facilitator



5 min	Favorite Idea	Materials: Poster Paper with "Favorite Idea" written at the top This is a quick way to take a pulse check. You will only have 5 minutes. Pull out your favorite ideas so far and put them on the favorite idea board.	Facilitator
20 min	Equity Pause	Individually reflect on the following questions: • What parts of your identity are most activated through these activities? How might that be affecting the ideas you are generating? • What power dynamics might be at play as you make decisions about ideas? How will you interrupt them? • What needs have I unintentionally/intentionally deprioritized in my proposed solutions?	
40 min	Transformation Card Activity	Materials: Index cards (5 min) Introduction: This activity is called Transformation Cards. The activity prompts us to look at all the resources and assets we already have at our disposal but prompts us to consider using them in new ways to solve our problem. First, we will list all the assets and resources we have, this can include, but is not limited to, people, funding sources, buildings, processes, events, relationships, data, etc. You will list each asset on a separate index card. You will have 5 minutes to list them, but you can always add to this list as you go. Once you have a starting list of assets and resources, you will use the transformation cards to prompt you to think about your resources and assets a little differently. (5 min) List Assets: The goal here is to be illustrative vs exhaustive at this point; give yourself fodder for the next part of the activity. List things at any grain size for now, you can always add cards as you go. (30 min) Transformation Cards: Use one transformation card at a time as a prompt to look at your assets and resources and consider how you might transform what you have into a solution to the problem. Now we're going to transition into sorting through all the ideas you generated throughout this session. In your small teams, sort through all your ideas and identify your favorite 3-5. Let's take some time to share our favorite ideas. Divide the team into small groups of 2-3 people. Each Small Group will present their favorite 3-5 Ideas and share the ideas and why it is exciting to them.	Facilitator



10min	Optional: Combine Ideas	As a whole group, share, combine and/or adapt ideas. Based on what each small group shared, identify areas of overlap between solutions.	
25 min	Feedback and Closing	Materials: Dot stickers in green, yellow and orange (5 min) Dot Voting: Each participant will get a total of 10 dots (2 green dots, 4 yellow dots, and 4 orange dots). Please put your green stickers on the ideas where you have the most energy. Please put your yellow dots on the ideas that worry you the most. Please put your orange dots on the ideas that you think are least likely to succeed. Please put a yellow dot and an orange dot close together for the idea that you think is the most risky. You will only have 5 minutes to do this. Trust your gut instinct. • What ideas do you have lots of energy around? (Green) • What are you most worried about? (Yellow) • What idea do you think is least likely to succeed? (Orange) • What idea feels the most risky? (Yellow and Orange together) (20 min) Dot Voting: Provide a minute for participants to step back and look at the pattern of stickers. Ask what they notice. Ask them to use the criteria to select the most promising idea based on the dot voting. Prompt discussion based on patterns and relate back to the criteria. Facilitation note: Be careful not to narrow too quickly. The goal is NOT to narrow down to 3-5 ideas; rather the group will have the opportunity to develop criteria in the prototyping tool to select ideas to consider for prototyping and checking their solutions against the criteria.	Facilitator

RESOURCES

Additional resources can be found in the [Coherence Resource Guide](#).