

TOPSY TURVY

/ Turning brainstorming upside down/

WHAT IS TOPSY TURVY?

Topsy Turvy (also known as reverse brainstorming) is a method for generating creative, unconventional ideas and solutions, and for mobilizing untapped energies. It can be particularly useful for addressing recurring problems and issues. As the name suggests, the process involves turning a discussion 'upside down' by posing a question that runs counter to your real objectives, and encouraging participants to contribute negative or even anarchic ideas. These ideas are then reversed to formulate positive solutions. Taking an initially negative or 'destructive' approach to the discussion gives participants free rein to explore the flip side of an issue or problem, and thus spurs creativity.

REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator*
- *10 - 20 people*
- *Flipchart board*
- *2 flipcharts with plenty of paper*
- *Rectangular cards, in two colours (10 x 20 cm / 4 x 8 inch) (VIPP cards)*
- *Marker pens*
- *20 - 30 minutes*



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

Topsy Turvy is easy to implement and can be used to:

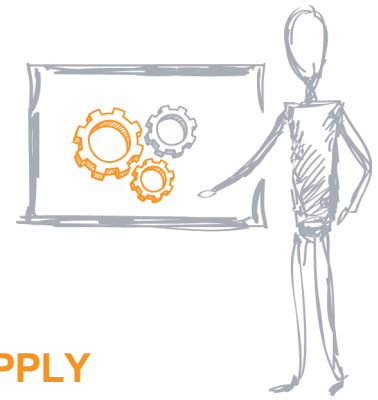
- ▲ **Generate original and potentially effective approaches to recurring issues or problems.** Instead of asking people familiar questions that generate the usual responses, Topsy Turvy helps establish a fresh perspective and encourages new ideas or thinking outside the box. By getting people to think of how things can go wrong, the method allows them to grasp the causes of a problem openly, without fear of being deemed pessimistic, and to explore negative aspects which are usually ignored – even though they may be important to consider. In turn, this

leads to renewed interest in an issue and encourages participants to steer away from stale, uninspired solutions.

▲ **Break up the monotony of group activities.** Schedule Topsy Turvy between group work sessions, or slot it in just before an afternoon group activity to raise participants' energy levels. But don't overuse it: Topsy Turvy works best as a way of adding variety, not as a steady diet.

▲ **Kick off a workshop.** Use Topsy Turvy as an icebreaker to discuss workshop rules in the first session. Ask participants, "How can we wreck this workshop?"...and then reverse these ideas to help create positive momentum. This is an excellent way to set the tone, build enthusiasm and cultivate a sense of camaraderie among participants as they jointly come up with disruptive ideas and then turn them around for a creative purpose.

When deciding whether to use Topsy Turvy, be sure that there is receptivity for truly innovative solutions and approaches that could result in substantial change. If you are only looking for limited improvements in a process, or small fixes to a problem, Topsy Turvy may not be the best approach; but if you want to tackle something difficult or find a broad-ranging solution, it may be just what you need.



HOW TO APPLY

1. Clearly identify the problem or issue to be discussed and on that basis, formulate a negative question, e.g. "What can we do to ensure that our project objectives are not met?" "How can I aggravate the situation further?"

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2. Write the question on the top of a flipchart board for participants to see.

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3. Reading out the question and ask participants to share their 'destructive' ideas without censoring their thoughts.

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4. Encourage the feeling of chaos by prompting participants for anarchic, disruptive suggestions. Tell them that any ideas, no matter how wacky, are welcome. Remind them that it is only a creative process and the real purpose will be revealed soon, but don't inform them yet of the way their ideas will be turned around later on. (Naturally, the principle of respect for others and their ideas always applies; anarchy does not mean rudeness.).

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5. As people share ideas, write them down on the flipchart. You can also use cards to collect ideas.

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6. When the ideas begin to dwindle, stop the process – normally within 10 - 15 minutes, or slightly longer if participants have just warmed up and need a bit more time. If cards were used, group similar ideas together.

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7. Next, turn all the negatives into positives: Take each negative idea and rewrite it as its positive mirror opposite. Use a new flipchart sheet or cards in a different color to capture the emerging list of creative, constructive ideas. Enlist the help of the group in the rewriting process.

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8. Optional: Depending on the needs of the group, the new, positive ideas may be further fleshed out, or prioritized at a later group session. The facilitator could also ask the group to vote on their favourite 2 or 3 ideas individually with dots.

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TIPS FOR SUCCESS



▲ The method may initially create some sense of confusion. Therefore the facilitator needs to be enthusiastic, confident and

reassuring, in order to be able to encourage participants to step out of their comfort zone. Some people may find it disturbing to consider 'destructive', negative ideas, so it is up to the facilitator to allay their concerns. This may take a few minutes, but as people become comfortable with the process, you can also expect them to become bolder with their ideas.

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▲ Ensure that everyone in the group knows what Topsy Turvy means (i.e., upside-down, disordered). Especially in settings where English is not one of the main languages, this term may need further explanation. Alternatively, if most participants are non-English speakers, feel free to introduce the concept using a term with similar meaning from another language (even if the rest of the session will be in English).

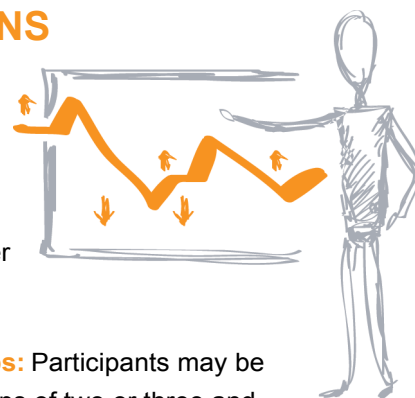
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▲ This can be a fun and novel way to motivate even the most jaded workshop attendees who have experienced most workshop tools and methods. However, the facilitator needs to keep a firm rein to ensure that the usual rules of respect for others and a focus on concrete (albeit initially negative) solutions still apply.

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VARIATIONS

Topsy Turvy is a simple method that can be used to introduce other group activities.



▲ **Mini-groups:** Participants may be divided into groups of two or three and asked to discuss the negative question/ scenario for a few minutes before sharing their ideas in plenary. This can be a good approach in situations

where people are uncomfortable with sharing negative views and thoughts. Caveat: the use of mini-groups may inhibit the spontaneity that gives Topsy Turvy its edge, so use it only when necessary.



REFERENCES

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