

ACT Academy

Online library of Quality,
Service Improvement
and Redesign tools

Simple rules – provocations

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What is it?

This is an extension of the simple rules tool. Provocations are concepts, ideas or scenarios that are different and often offbeat. They can act as catalysts to help you break away from more conventional ways of thinking about issues.

Provocations can help you unlock thinking and identify new ideas for any situation where you perceive a need for some fresh thinking.

Provocations are particularly useful if there is a general belief that better services can only be delivered if more resources ie beds, doctors, nurses, cleaners, radiographers, x-ray machines, etc are made available.

When to use it

This is a particularly useful tool to use when you feel a group is stuck or is simply coming up with variations on the same old themes. Whenever you notice that current thinking seems to focus too much on particular resources within the system, create an outrageous scenario that removes the resource that is so important.

How to use it

1. Use the simple rules tool to identify the underlying rules that are operating within the system.
2. Select the simple rule that seems to be central to the way people currently think about the issue. For example, the clinician needs to see and report on all the tests in a separate session.
3. Provoke thinking by eliminating or drastically modifying the rule by creating a scenario that describes a new situation. You could pass a new law to make the current simple rule illegal, invent a mysterious virus or discover an environmental hazard that forces facilities to close.

Generate ideas of how the system or process could now operate, ensuring the new rule is followed.

Examples

1. A mysterious virus has attacked all secretarial staff with responsibility for typing up diagnostics results. How would you redesign the process for how results are reported?
2. An inspection agency has noted the presence of a mysterious chemical in all non-patient areas of radiology: only the actual diagnostic rooms can be used. How can you rearrange services so that you have a fully functioning system providing both tests and results?
3. The Government has issued a new policy, effective immediately. It states that no one can stay in a hospital bed longer than 12 hours while waiting for diagnostic tests. What will you do?

TIPS

- Have fun with this tool, it is meant to be playful and tongue-in-cheek. Remind your group that this is play with a purpose. The goal is to explore the outrageous suggestion or scenario, but to come back to reality with some new ideas.
- You can do a provocation spontaneously: this adds to the climate of purposeful play and free thinking. Either suggest something off the top of your head, or ask the group for some really far out ideas – then just go with it as described.
- You can also prepare provocations in advance. Think through a list of things in the system that people would believe to be essential for it to operate. Use several of these provocations to make sure that you aren't just substituting one taken for granted resource for another.
- When using provocations, be prepared for some people to struggle with the concept of taking away something that is seen as an essential part of the system or the way in which things have always been done. Stick with it; insist that the doubters deal with it and point out that this reaction is exactly what many people experience in times of crisis, but then they have to get on with it and do something.

What next?

- Review all the ideas that have come from using the provocation. [Six Thinking Hats®](#) can help you get down to the final few ideas.
- Run several small scale tests to learn more and see what works in practice ([PDSA](#)).
- Share the findings. Consider using [stakeholder analysis](#) and [communications matrix](#).
- Implement the best ideas.

Other useful tools and techniques that may help you

- [Brainstorming](#)
- [Fresh eyes](#)
- [That's impossible!](#)
- [Process mapping](#)
- [Communication matrix](#)
- [Stakeholder analysis](#)

Additional resources

Von Oech, R (2008) *A Whack on the Side of the Head*, Grand Central Publishing, 25th anniversary edition

Plesk, P (1997) *Creativity, Innovation and Quality*, ASQ Quality Press

Background

In his book, *A Whack on the Side of the Head*, Roger von Oech suggests that if you begin with an outrageous thought, you will come up with more innovative concepts and ideas.