Assumption reversal

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>
> *We simply assume that the way we see things is the way they really are or the way they should be. And our attitudes and behaviours grow out of these assumptions.*
>
> STEPHEN COVEY

What's it all about?

Assumption reversal was developed by Stephen Grossman, a creativity consultant who wanted to find a way to manage the paradoxes that are often inherent in many problems. To give an example; as many cultural organisations are experiencing at the moment, you may be managing reducing resources at the same time as community need is growing. The felt contradiction of delivering more with less can serve as a significant block to problem solving and decision making.

The reversal technique encourages you to alter an aspect of the problem or your assumptions about it. By turning your assumptions on their head and creating a mirror image view, you can generate new ways of approaching problems and issues. Your original assumptions are not necessarily wrong but in reversing them you can generate new approaches. There is also the possibility that your underlying assumptions are not correct. If so, this technique will also help you to discover that this is the case and avoid the limitations that this can cause.

What's it for?

The purpose of this technique is to deliberately question your underlying assumptions about a problem to help spark new ideas for addressing it. The assumption reversal approach helps you escape from your usual ways of addressing issues. The technique is most commonly used for problem solving and decision making, overcoming obstacles or barriers and dealing with general problems. Grossman uses the example of the problem of improving restaurants.

Basic assumptions: restaurants create menus and are located outside the home. They serve people food; people pay for the food and the food is prepared by the restaurant

Reversals: restaurants give food away; they don't serve people and they don't prepare food

Possible solutions: people cook their own food, serving pets and not people, restaurant is run by a local co-operative etc

Using the tool

1. State your problem clearly and simply. Describe the problem in detail and if you are working with a group answer any immediate questions

2. List your assumptions and the issues related to the problem you are addressing

3. Reverse your assumptions and the direction of the problem statement. It does not have to be an absolute reversal; it could be any change in the original problem or issue. Record the opposite statement for all of the assumptions you have generated

   For example, your original problem statement might be: 'How do we improve communication within the team?' The reverse would be: 'How do we make communication worse within the team?' Then list a whole range of ideas to show how you could make communication worse

4. Use each reversal as a starting point for new ideas. Once the ideas have been generated, agree the actions

What next?

Think about how you manage your time. What assumptions do you hold about how you should work and what it means to be productive, for example, do you think you must always be available to others. Use the assumption reversal technique to see if there are some creative solutions to dealing with your workload.

Quick tips

- Prepare an honest problem definition and statement before you start using the technique

- It is not a technique for finding one correct answer. It helps you look differently at existing information

- Assumptions can be very fundamental and taken for granted so don't be surprised if it takes a while to identify and change them

- Don't stop at the reversal of the problem. Use this to stimulate new ideas

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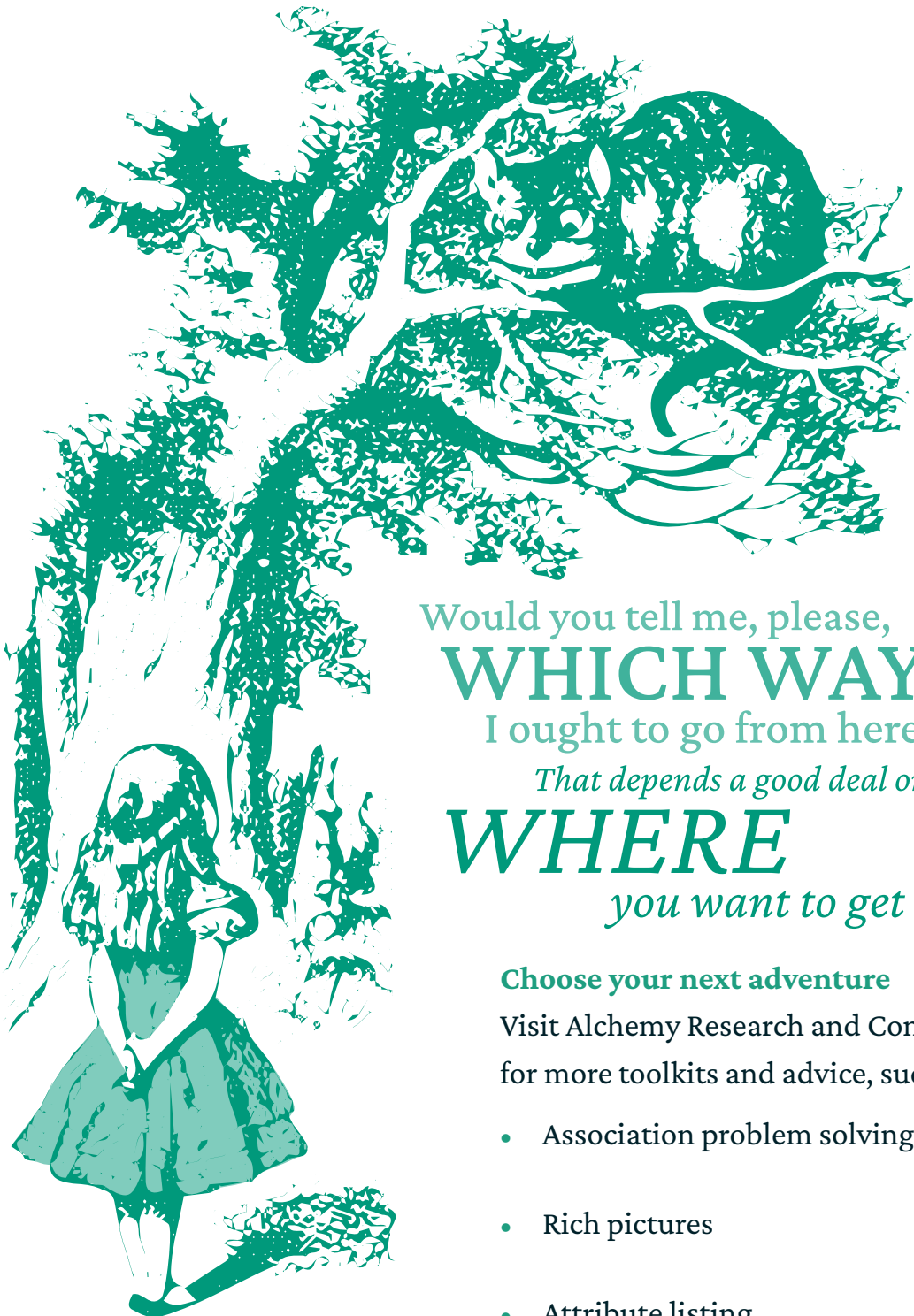
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