Futures Wheel

1 hour 30 min

Strategy

The Futures Wheel maps the cascading consequences of a trend, event, or decision. Developed by futurist Jerome Glenn, it helps teams systematically think through primary, secondary, and tertiary impacts, revealing intended and unintended consequences. The visual nature of the Futures Wheel clarifies cause-and-effect relationships. It's useful for impact assessment, policy analysis, and strategic planning where ripple effects matter. Combine this with impact scoring or stakeholder analysis. It's great input for scenario and risk work. I've found it can get unwieldy with very large groups, so keep it focused.

H HOW TO RUN

1 Define the Central Node — 10 min

Place the trend, event, or decision in the center. Frame it clearly and specifically. Ensure all participants share the same understanding. I've seen groups struggle when this isn't crystal clear.

2 First-Order Consequences — 20 min

Brainstorm direct, immediate impacts. Draw these as spokes from the center. Aim for 6-10 primary consequences. Include both positive and negative impacts.

3 Second-Order Consequences — 25 min

For each first-order impact, identify its consequences. Add these as secondary spokes. Look for cross-connections between branches. Consider different stakeholder perspectives.

4 Third-Order Consequences — 20 min

Continue outward for significant branches. Focus on the most important or surprising chains. Identify potential feedback to the center.

5 Analysis and Patterns — 15 min

Color-code impacts (social, economic, environmental, etc.). Identify reinforcing loops. Mark critical uncertainties. Highlight unexpected consequences.

O OBJECTIVES

- Map direct and indirect consequences of changes or decisions
- Identify unintended effects and externalities
- Understand cascade effects through multiple orders of impact
- Build shared understanding of complex implications
- Support more informed decision-making

M MATERIALS

- ☐ Large paper or whiteboard (minimum 3×4 feet).
- ☐ Multiple colored markers.
- ☐ Sticky notes for additions.
- ☐ Camera for documentation.
- ☐ Reference materials on the central topic.

P PARTICIPANTS

4 to 8 people

F FACILITATOR NOTES

REMEMBER

- Keep consequences specific and concrete. Encourage wild ideas early on.
- Use "What happens next?" prompts. Prevent premature convergence on obvious impacts.
- Rotate who adds consequences to maintain energy. Quality check: Are consequences distinct? Is the wheel visually clear?