

HOW MIGHT WE



This Citizen Engagement Technique is part of a series that Cities of Service has created to help city leaders work with citizens to solve problems. To learn more and access additional techniques, visit citiesofservice.org.

“How Might We” is a brainstorming exercise that cities can use to gather ideas and feedback from citizens. In this exercise, citizens review existing city or partner data about other citizens’ firsthand experiences and then brainstorm possible improvements to a service by responding to a series of creative questions.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

Prior to implementing any citizen engagement technique, it is important to set goals and expectations, identify stakeholders, and more. For a checklist of steps you should take before you begin, please visit citiesofservice.org/techniques.

HOW TO LEAD A “HOW MIGHT WE” SESSION:

1. Welcome citizens to the meeting and remind them of the meeting purpose, the challenge they are helping to address, and how their input will be used.
2. Break citizens into small groups of five to eight with a trained facilitator for each group.

3. The small group facilitators share the insights that emerged from earlier information gathering. These could include insights such as, “Bus stops are uncomfortable” or “The bus schedule is unreliable.” Each insight should be printed or written on a separate poster, and there should be plenty of room on each poster for notes.
4. Each facilitator instructs their group to brainstorm various ways to address each insight using the language, “How might we ...” “How might we ...” prompts can directly invite ideas, or they can invite participants to think outside the box. Creative prompts will lead to more discussion and yield more inventive solutions than directly asking participants how they would solve the problem. Group members write each idea on the poster under the insight. Using the example insight of “People are frustrated with wait times at bus stops,” here are some examples of different approaches you can take:

- a. **Amp up the good or lessen the bad.** “How might we increase comfort at bus stops?” (Amp up the good.) “How might we decrease standing time?” (Lessen the bad.)
- b. **Focus on emotion.** “How might we design a bus stop that makes people feel calm?”
- c. **Question the assumption.** “How might we rethink the need for a bus ticket?”
- d. **Create an analogy from the insight.** “How might we make bus stops more like the lines at theme parks?”



- e. **Focus on one element.** “How might we make purchasing a ticket more of a first-class experience?”
 - f. **Take it to an extreme or opposite.** “How might we increase ambiguity around bus arrivals and departures?”
5. Once all groups have responded to all of the “How might we ... ” prompts, ask the groups to share their ideas to the full room. After everyone has shared, lead the room in a discussion of the most promising or most creative ideas.
 6. At the end of the session, collect the posters and explain what will happen to the information citizens provided. Remind citizens of potential parameters or restrictions that could influence their ideas or suggestions, like legal requirements, grant requirements, or financial limitations.
 7. Thank citizens for their participation and remind them how they can stay up to date on the project’s development.
 8. Capture the lessons from citizen input and integrate them into the final design.
 9. Report what you’ve learned to citizens and explain how their input will be used by the city.

EXAMPLE:

Chicago found that its 311 system was being underutilized. Instead of using 311 to report and track service complaints, residents were mostly using it to ask operators for information. The most common call to 311 was to ask, “When is Lollapalooza?” The city wanted to modernize the system to increase accessibility, accountability, and transparency. To do this, they focused their citizen engagement efforts on the 60% of 311 users who only used the system for information instead of placing service requests and on young adults who had little to no connection to city government or 311.

Chicago’s director of design, along with a local contractor, hosted 11 in-person design workshops about the 311 system. These conversations generated a lot of information, which they distilled into key insights about attitudes toward 311 and barriers to its use. They finished their workshops with the “How Might We” exercise to engage participants in solution brainstorming.

First, they outlined the five stages of using 311: realizing you need to make a request of city government, deciding to use 311, submitting the request, tracking the request, and following up on the request. Then they divided participants into small groups and asked them to propose solutions using two “How might we ... ” prompts for each stage.

- After everything you’ve heard, how might we fix specific barriers in this stage?
- How might we accomplish the goal of 311 in this stage in a different way?

Through this exercise they received several suggestions of simple system enhancements, many of which they are now incorporating into the new system design, including an option to follow up with the city to share feedback or simply to offer a thank you for a job well done.

For guidance on using this and other citizen engagement techniques, or to learn more about customizing solutions for your city, contact Cities of Service at info@citiesofservice.org.