WORKSHEET + WORKED EXAMPLE

Turn the Problem Around

A preventable failure condition, a protective change, and a check on unintended effects.

15 minutes | Inversion · Find what to prevent

Use it in three moves

1. State a useful outcome, then imagine conditions that would obstruct it.
2. Compare the imagined obstacles with evidence from the actual situation.
3. Remove one real obstacle and check whether the change helps.

Name the outcome you want

Keep it concrete and include the people who should benefit.

Imagine making that outcome harder

List actions or conditions that would reliably get in the way. Explore the system, not ways to blame a person.

Which of those conditions already exists?

Use evidence. A vivid imagined failure is a possibility, not a finding.

Turn the Problem Around

YOUR WORKING NOTES / CONTINUED

Choose one condition to remove or reduce

Reverse the mechanism, not merely the wording. Name an owner and the practical change.

Check what the prevention could disturb

Could your fix remove useful flexibility, create a bottleneck, or shift work elsewhere?

Try it and look again

What will you observe, with whom, and when?

A question for me

Which obstacle am I treating as normal because I no longer encounter it myself?

See one way through

FICTIONAL WORKED EXAMPLE / NOT THE ANSWER TO YOUR SITUATION

Name the outcome you want

A new colleague can ask for help and complete their first customer handoff with support.

Imagine making that outcome harder

Give conflicting instructions; hide the escalation route; interrupt every practice attempt; treat questions as incompetence.

Which of those conditions already exists?

The handbook names two different escalation contacts. The colleague says they are unsure which to use.

Choose one condition to remove or reduce

The onboarding owner confirms one route, updates both pages, and introduces the backup contact before the first handoff.

Check what the prevention could disturb

One contact could become a bottleneck. Agree a backup and response expectation with both people.

Try it and look again

After the first handoff, ask the colleague to describe how they got help. Recheck if the route failed or felt difficult to use.

The thinking behind it

An obstacle may be something people learned to expect from authority. Remove the practical barrier and change the response that keeps it in place.

Inversion is a general reasoning practice: examine the opposite of the desired outcome to uncover constraints and preventable failures. This activity uses original prompts, not the collection worksheet's named DFE sequence. A premortem imagines a future failure; inversion can also improve an ordinary process today.

Read You Have a Culture Problem by Nic Payne