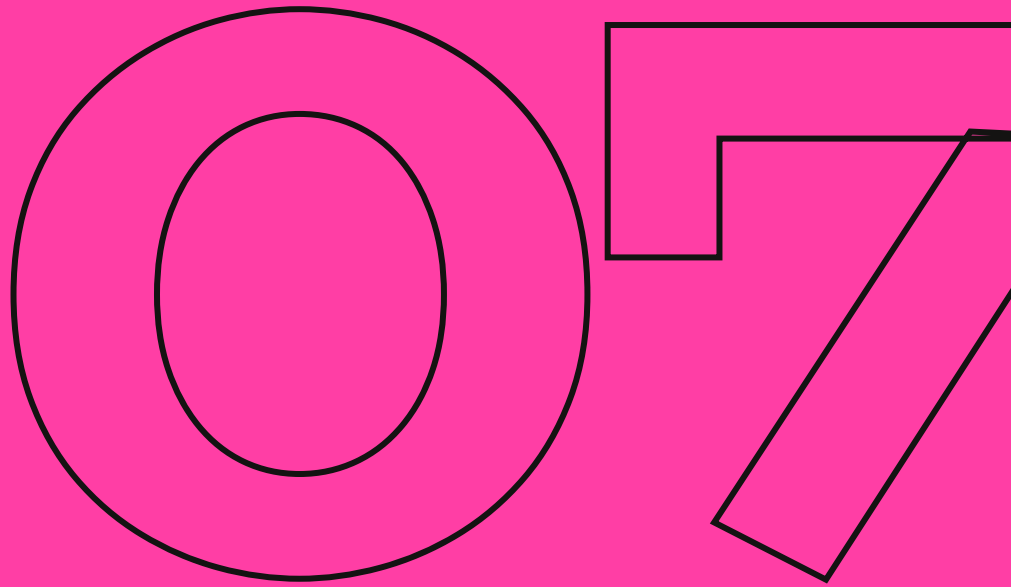




The tokenism test

Ten warning signs that participation may look better than it works.

Tokenism is not always cynical. Sometimes good people build a process that has no power, no route to decisions and no way to tell participants what happened.

How many of these feel uncomfortably familiar?

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- | | | | |
|----------|---|-----------|--|
| 1 | The solution already exists ☐ | 2 | One person represents everyone ☐ |
| | People are asked to “co-design” something whose important features are fixed. | | A single participant is expected to speak for an entire community or experience. |
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| 3 | Story beats expertise ☐ | 4 | The power is elsewhere ☐ |
| | Personal disclosure is valued more than analysis, ideas or challenge. | | No one in the room can make or meaningfully influence the relevant decisions. |
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| 5 | Participation starts late ☐ | 6 | Access is an afterthought ☐ |
| | People arrive after the problem, priorities and options have already been defined. | | The organisation chooses the format first and asks people to fit around it. |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 7 | Everyone else is paid ☐ | 8 | Dissent gets smoothed out ☐ |
| | Lived expertise is treated as voluntary while professional expertise arrives on salary. | | Complicated or critical feedback becomes a tidy consensus in the final report. |
| <hr/> | | | |
| 9 | Success means attendance ☐ | 10 | Nobody closes the loop ☐ |
| | The measure is who came, not what shifted. | | Participants never hear what happened next. |
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Tokenism is a design problem, so redesign it.

Make influence explicit

Write down the decisions that are genuinely open and the ones that are not.

Build a group, not a mascot

Create enough diversity of experience that nobody carries the burden of representing everyone.

Invite challenge

Make disagreement useful. If critical feedback feels dangerous, the process probably needs more power, not less criticism.

Measure change

Track which decisions, designs, practices or assumptions changed because people were involved.

A photograph of participation is not evidence of influence.

DISCUSS

Pick one warning sign. What would we change if we took it seriously?
