Build Empathy and Capacity

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Deepen trust, develop diverse leaders and build capacity for change.

Empathy-building is an important building block of meaningful communication and relationships. Building empathy is also a great way to increase a team's readiness for authentic partnerships—not just with students and families, but also other stakeholders who work in your system. These resources will help your team learn more about the importance of empathy and begin to develop this skill.

In addition to building empathy and community relationships, it is also important to provide your team with deliberate learning opportunities to build their own equity consciousness and leadership skills. This an important foundation to explore and identify potential biases to prevent improvement efforts that inadvertently amplify inequities.

Resources

- Building an Improvement Team
- Community Agreements
- Meeting Roles
- Perspective Prism
- Narrative Storytelling

Building an Improvement Team

The starting place for any improvement initiative is to build an improvement team that reflects the system that you are trying to improve, especially the people most impacted by the policies and practices of that system. By involving the people most impacted by the system, you will illuminate blind spots to clarify the purpose of the improvement efforts, identify what measurement will be most meaningful and innovate new ideas.

To create a multi-disciplinary team, think about the system that you want to improve, and recruit team members that represent a slice of this system. For example, an improvement team in education might include district or system leaders, school leaders, teachers, after school care providers, school support staff, and certainly families and students. This will help you to make sure that different perspectives and lived experiences are included in your design.

It is important to create an open and inclusive space in which team members share their different perspectives on what is and is not working, as well as principles to facilitate shared decision making and collaboration.

Throughout your improvement journey, you may need to continuously revisit and evolve your team composition. Resources to support your teams growth can be found in the section on Building Empathy & Capacity.

Preparing For Our Work Together: Community Agreements

Improvement teams create community agreements to guide their work together. Community agreements are an important first step to address and remove hierarchy from the team's work and to encourage active participation across the team. Community agreements support positive team dynamics by clarifying expectations while also providing a framework for decision-making and conflict resolution.

TYPICAL AREAS FOR COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS TO ADDRESS:

- Participation
- What we expect from each other
- How we listen to and learn from each other
- Confidentiality and sharing
- Decision-making and consensus
- Conflict resolution

EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS:

- Be present in the here and now.
- Listen first to understand. Ask clarifying questions.
- Be genuine with each other.
- Give each other the benefit of doubt.
- Practice humility. It's okay if we don't know the answers.
- Each of us brings valuable lived experience.
- Celebrate the positive.
- Resolve conflict through learning by doing. Test ideas and assumptions.

OUR COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS:

Preparing For Our Work Together: Meeting Roles

Effective teamwork is critical for improvement and improvement methods can be used to impact team functioning. Strong team work facilitates role clarification, better hand-offs, and participation of all team members. Sharing and alternating responsibilities and leadership is one way that your team can avoid reproducing inequitable habits that amplify some voices while minimizing others or assigning disproportionate work.

Below are some suggested meeting roles that may be useful for you in your work together. Your team may decide to identify additional or different roles for your work.

LEADER	NOTE-TAKER
Responsible for ensuring the flow and direction of the meeting	Responsible for recording main points of discussion
FACILITATOR	**PARTICIPANT**
Responsible for ensuring active participation from all participants	Responsible for participating in discussions, brainstorming and planning
TIME-KEEPER	**COMMUNITY LIAISON**
Responsible for managing time	Acts as a point person to ensure all stakeholder voices are incorporated

THINGS TO REMEMBER:

The most successful multi-disciplinary teams represent the stakeholders who do and are impacted by the work.

Team engagement generates more ideas, reduces the need for buy-in or resistance to change, and can help spread changes as they are implemented.

All-in atmosphere discourages blame and can help shift culture.

Improvement teams may be permanent or can be ad-hoc for a specific slice of the work.

Perspective Prism

We each bring our individual lived experiences and areas of expertise to the issues and problems that we seek to improve. To fully study the system, as well as build empathy and capacity for the people involved, it is important to consider the issue from multiple angles and perspectives. Just like a prism shows us different wavelengths of a spectrum of colors (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet), this activity will help us to see insights from different perspectives. Ideally your improvement team includes a variety of roles so that stakeholders can contribute their perspectives directly. This activity will likely lead you to identify additional stakeholders whose perspectives are important to fully understand the issue.

Instructions:

- Identify the issue that you are working on together.
- List the key roles or stakeholders involved with that issue.
- Take turns going through the roles, imagining the issue from different perspectives.
- People who identify with the role of focus take the lead in sharing their perspective (this rotates with each color).
- Capture notes, quotes, insights on sticky notes. It is helpful to have markers with each color to coordinate with roles.
- Remember brainstorming practices: Listen without criticism; Build on each other's ideas and perspectives.

Some materials that you will need for this activity include:

- Rainbow color markers
- Flipchart paper and sticky notes
- Time keeper and phone / computer alarm

This activity can take as little as 45 minutes and could certainly benefit from more time if possible.

Color	
RED	**Role/ Perspective:** **Sample Discussion Questions:** What are the issues that contribute to the problem? What do you hear from others about the issue? What data or information do you have about this issue?
ORANGE	**Role/ Perspective:** **Sample Discussion Questions:** What are the issues that contribute to the problem? What do you hear from others about the issue? What data or information do you have about this issue?
YELLOW	**Role/ Perspective:** **Sample Discussion Questions:** What are the issues that contribute to the problem? What do you hear from others about the issue? What data or information do you have about this issue?
GREEN	**Role/ Perspective:** **Sample Discussion Questions:** What are the issues that contribute to the problem? What do you hear from others about the issue? What data or information do you have about this issue?
BLUE	**Role/ Perspective:** **Sample Discussion Questions:** What are the issues that contribute to the problem? What do you hear from others about the issue? What data or information do you have about this issue?
PURPLE	**Role/ Perspective:** **Sample Discussion Questions:** What are the issues that contribute to the problem? What do you hear from others about the issue? What data or information do you have about this issue?

Perspective Prism - Example

This example shows viewpoints about chronic absenteeism from different stakeholders. This is a simplified example. You would likely have many flip charts or sticky notes for each perspective. In this example, this team would likely follow up by engaging stakeholders mentioned, such as bus drivers or school nurses.

RED	**Role: Principals/ Assistant Principals** Our school is held accountable for attendance. It is hard to talk about this issue openly when decisions about our school's success and funding are tied to our results. We need to build a system across the district that centers on engagement and relationship building.
ORANGE	**Role: Parents** The bus schedule is inconsistent – it comes late or early. If my children miss the bus, I don't have a way to get them to school. My child has a chronic health condition that necessitates intermittent or extended absences. I spend a lot of time navigating policies across multiple stakeholders from the school and school district.
YELLOW	**Role: Students** My family speaks two languages at home and I'm learning English. I feel like my teacher doesn't think I'm smart. I don't feel like I fit in with other students. I stay home to avoid the kids that bully me. I fall behind when I miss school, then it gets overwhelming and feels impossible to catch up.
GREEN	**Role: School Counselors** I hear about many factors that contribute to avoiding coming to school: mental health, anxiety, and the overall school climate. Many students take care of siblings and work. It is hard to come to school when they need to help with these responsibilities.
BLUE	**Role: Attendance Office Managers** I try to talk to families directly to understand what is going on, but it can be difficult to reach anyone. I have a lot of responsibilities but receive little support or professional development. I don't have the agency to bring together administration, support staff, and teachers to build consistent practice.
PURPLE	**Role: Teachers** This feels outside of my control. With so many things going on in student's homes, it's hard to focus on basic needs and instruction. Missing school impacts progress in learning and a sense of belonging in school. I feel pressure to build relationships and engage students in curriculum. How do I do this when they are not at school?

Perspective Prism - Template

RED	**Role:** **Discussion Questions:**
ORANGE	**Role:** **Discussion Questions:**
YELLOW	**Role:** **Discussion Questions:**
GREEN	**Role:** **Discussion Questions:**
BLUE	**Role:** **Discussion Questions:**
PURPLE	**Role:** **Discussion Questions:**

Narrative Storytelling

Narrative story telling is a powerful way to build empathy and trust across different stakeholder groups in a community. One way to build a culture of transparency and empathy is to continuously provide opportunities for community members to share their story with others. An Ignite Talk is a powerful, persuasive speech or monologue that lasts no longer than five minutes, and demonstrates an important element of vulnerability. The goals of the Ignite Talk are to evoke empathy and amplify the importance of the community's work together. A powerful Ignite Talk leaves others with a sense of importance and urgency for why we are here together and why we do this work. Given the vulnerability involved with sharing a personal story, Ignite Talks help to build trust and break down barriers between stakeholder groups.

TIPS:

- Focus on a key takeaway

- Be succinct, specific, vulnerable, personable and honest

- Paint pictures with your words

- Write in the first person and use feeling words such as "I felt..." "It hurt when..." "I wished..." "I was afraid..."

- Follow style of a persuasive/empowerment speech:
  -Write a strong opening
  -Offer persuasive evidence
  -Address the counter-argument
  -Conclude with a call to action

- Why is this story an important one to tell?

- What is it that you wish others knew/would do?

- What is it like to be you and go through what you go/went through?

- How do you want your audience to feel, think, react or act?

Diagnostic

What is the problem that we are addressing? What is the extent of the problem? What is the specific source or sources?

Prognostic

What could the future look like? What is our strategy to reach this vision of the future?

Motivational

Why is this urgent? What is our call for action that connects with the motivational and emotional drivers of our audience?

Attribution: The first Ignite was held in 2006 in Seattle, Washington by Brady Forrest and Bre Pettis, and was sponsored by O'Reilly Media and MAKE magazine.