Activity: Conduct Empathy Interviews with Stakeholders

Seek to understand the experiences of people in your district through personal interviews

Framing

For your design process to address the most pressing challenges that are holding you back from equity and resiliency, it is important to speak with students, families, teachers, and classified staff who are not typically asked for their opinions, especially those who do not feel supported or seen in the current system. Ideally, individuals are already included on your design team, and empathy interviews will add important data to the conversation.

Empathy interviews can be challenging for some. The process is slower and narrower than surveying or conducting listening circles, and the conversations can feel uncomfortable — especially when interviewing someone you've never met. However, they are a powerful tool to unearthing the root causes of gnarly problems when used in conjunction with other strategies.

Reflecting on your personal identity and the potential power dynamics at play before jumping into empathy interviews is critical.

Ensuring Equity & Resiliency

Equity looks like recognizing that you don't necessarily know the realities of your students', families', teachers', or classified staff members' experiences. Prioritize hearing the perspectives of those who may be or feel ignored, under-represented, or misunderstood by the existing system, especially students and families of color, those living in situations of poverty or houselessness, and those for whom the system simply hasn't worked. For example, instead of interviewing members of the Parent Teacher Organization, seek out the perspective of those families who are not as connected to the school. If you are unsure who to include, look at your district's data and ask: who is least academically or socially "successful" in our system today according to our measures of success?

Resiliency looks like conducting empathy interviews regularly throughout a design process, especially as new challenges arise and you gain new information, to continue to evolve your understanding from the perspective of others.

Steps to Implementation

Suggested time: 1 hour to identify stakeholders, 20-30 minutes per interview

1. Gather your team in a room (in-person or virtual); make sure your team has done the work to review your district's historical context and current data.

2. Identify and interview five to ten people each.
   Note: Consider your district data to determine whom it is most important to hear from. Seek a diverse mix of perspectives, ensuring that individuals from traditionally underrepresented groups are prioritized.

3. Update the empathy interview protocol *(see Appendix: Workpages)* to ask a mix of broad questions and inquiries that follow-up on hunches your design team wants to explore (based on your district data review).

4. Review Stanford d.School's "Interview for Empathy" one-pager together *(see Appendix: Workpages)*.

5. Define your tactical plan and deadline for conducting empathy interviews using the empathy interview planner. *(see Appendix: Workpages)*

   • Have a plan to interview in pairs or record the interview, if possible.

   • Consider reaching out to individuals who have existing relationships with interviewees to participate in the interviews as well, to establish rapport and mitigate against power dynamics.

6. Before each interview, make a copy of your updated empathy interview protocol and highlight the questions you will ask to personalize the experience.

7. During interviews, seek a deep understanding of each stakeholder's thoughts and feelings. You can do this by remaining neutral, exploring emotions, and asking questions that encourage storytelling (review Interview for Empathy as needed).

8. After completing the interviews, collect all notes in your empathy interview planner so that the data is accessible across your design team; in the next step, you will reflect on this data and look for trends.

This activity was inspired by the "Build a Question Guide" stage of the IDEO Design Thinking for Educators Toolkit.

To explore the root causes of academic equity gaps, **Cedar Rapids** conducted interviews with students and teachers to evoke stories and emotion from those whom the system was not working well for.

Mastery conducted multiple rounds of interviews with teachers and students to better understand the challenges they're facing.

Monterey interviewed a diverse array of stakeholders, including students, parents, and teachers, emphasizing inclusion for historically underrepresented groups like Spanish-speaking families – and even conducting a whole board meeting through empathy interviews.

See Appendix: Case Studies for more details

Additional Resources

- Resource/ Supplemental Activity: Co-Designing Schools Toolkit: Get to Know Your Students

- Community Forums: Listening Circle instructions

- Stanford d.school - Interview for Empathy