



Aligning Purpose with Impact

Deepening Our Understanding of Communities



Objectives for Today

- Reflect on the "why" behind your work
- Understand the evolving nature of community needs
- Apply human-centered design and innovation principles
- Gain tools to listen, learn, and adapt your model
- Leave with actionable next steps for your community work





Foundational Principles



When Did Good Intentions Miss the Mark?

Symptoms that good intentions may be missing the mark:

- Low or inconsistent community engagement
- Feedback that feels misaligned or surface-level
- Programs not being utilized as expected
- Unclear or diminishing impact over time
- Community members expressing fatigue, skepticism, or lack of trust

These aren't signs of failure. They're signals—opportunities to pause, listen, and recalibrate.

The "Why" Behind Our Work

- Good intentions are not enough
- We need deep, evolving understanding of communities
- Avoid one-size-fits-all solutions
- Philanthropy and organizations must be responsive, not static

Avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions is critical. So is building in the humility to ask, 'What don't we know yet?' or 'Who haven't we heard from?'

Communities Are Dynamic

- Needs shift over time
 - A community once focused on education access may now prioritize housing stability due to rising costs.
- Power structures evolve
 - A grassroots leader may emerge, or longtime gatekeepers may lose trust—shifting who has real influence.
- Communication styles differ
 - Younger audiences may prefer short-form video or text updates, while older residents respond better to printed flyers or in-person meetings.
- Trust must be earned and maintained
 - Past experiences with extractive engagement—like being surveyed but never seeing results—can lead to lasting skepticism.



Keeping the Human in Mind



Human-Centered Design

Core HCD Principles:

- Empathy
 - Understand people's experiences, emotions, and perspectives by deeply listening and observing without judgment.
- Co-creation
 - Design solutions with the community, not just for them, by involving them meaningfully in the process.
- Iteration
 - Test ideas on a small scale, learn from feedback, and refine continuously rather than aiming for a perfect first solution.
- Adaptability
 - Stay open and responsive to changing needs, context, and insights—what works today might not work tomorrow.

Putting HCD into Action

Ways to integrate human-centered design into your work:

- **Empathy:** Spend time with the community. Shadow, observe, and listen without judgment or agenda.
- **Co-creation:** Invite community members to be part of designing the solution—not just reacting to it.
- **Iteration:** Test ideas on a small scale. Learn from what works (and what doesn't) before scaling.
- **Adaptability:** Stay open to new information and willing to pivot. What works now might not work next year.

These principles aren't just theory—they're daily practices that build trust and lead to solutions that last.



The Community



What Do We Mean by “Community”?

Community isn't just geography—it's:

- A network of relationships, identities, and shared experiences
- Shaped by systems, culture, language, and trust
- Dynamic—constantly evolving based on context and lived realities
- Defined not just by who is present, but by who has voice, power, and access



Activity – Community Ecosystem Map

Recognizing that you come from different communities, choose **one** of the following lenses for this exercise:

- Your local SVP affiliate's community
- A community your organization directly funds or supports
- A population group you've worked closely with

Then, respond to these prompts:

- Who are the people in this community?
- What systems impact them?
- What are their key assets, barriers, and trusted voices?

Example – Community Ecosystem Map

Example Lens: A rural immigrant community supported by your organization's food security initiative.

- **Who are the people in this community?** Primarily Spanish-speaking farmworker families; many are undocumented; multigenerational households; strong informal support networks.
- **What systems impact them?** Agricultural labor economy, immigration policy, local school system, public health clinics, housing regulations, food distribution networks.
- **Key assets, barriers, and trusted voices:**
 - **Assets:** Mutual aid groups, church networks, bilingual youth leaders, cultural resilience
 - **Barriers:** Language access, lack of transportation, fear of institutional systems, limited internet connectivity
 - **Trusted voices:** Promotoras (community health workers), local church leaders, school bilingual liaisons



Tools



Listening & Learning Tool: 5 Whys Root Cause Analysis

A simple but powerful method for getting to the root of a challenge by asking “Why?” five times. Use it when:

- You’re seeing a recurring issue but aren’t sure what’s really causing it
- You want to dig beneath surface-level assumptions

Example for “*Problem: Low turnout at a youth event*”:

- Why? Youth didn’t know about it
- Why? It wasn’t promoted in schools
- Why? The team didn’t have school contacts
- Why? Relationships weren’t built in advance
- Why? Outreach wasn’t part of the original plan

Insight: The issue isn’t “youth apathy”—it’s a systems gap in outreach.

Listening & Learning Tool: Community Listening Sessions

A structured conversation designed to center community voices before designing or funding anything new. Use it when:

- You want to hear from multiple stakeholders at once
- You're exploring a new issue area or updating priorities

Tips:

- Set the tone with humility: “We’re here to learn.”
- Use open-ended questions: “What’s changing in your community that we need to know?”
- Include multiple formats: verbal, written, anonymous, group discussion

Benefit: Community members feel seen and respected—and your work gains direction rooted in lived reality.

Listening & Learning Tool: Empathy Interviews

One-on-one interviews that uncover deeper insight into a person's lived experience, motivations, and obstacles. Use it when:

- You need stories and context to guide program or grant design
- You want to go beyond surveys or focus groups

How it works:

- Choose someone from your target audience
- Ask open, exploratory questions like “Tell me about the last time you...”
- Listen more than you talk. Follow their lead.

What emerges: Nuance, emotion, and real-life constraints that help you design with people, not for them.

Choosing the Right Tool

Tool	Use This When...	Best For...
5 Whys	You notice a recurring challenge but aren't sure what's really causing it.	Getting to the root cause of a problem
Community Listening Session	You want to gather input from multiple stakeholders at once.	Broad themes and early-stage exploration
Empathy Interviews	You want to understand lived experiences on a deeper, emotional level.	Detailed insights and storytelling



So, What Now?



Adjusting Your Model

An Iterative Framework for Responsive Action

Listen ↔ **Learn** ↔ **Pilot** ↔ **Reflect** ↔ **Adjust**

- **Listen:** Start by hearing directly from those most impacted.
- **Learn:** Synthesize what you're hearing. What patterns emerge? What's surprising?
- **Pilot:** Try something small. A prototype, a pilot program, or a shift in messaging.
- **Reflect:** Gather feedback. What worked? What didn't? What needs tweaking?
- **Adjust:** Update your model based on real learning—not assumptions.

What Adjusting Can Look Like

Real-world examples of following the model:

- **Listen & Learn:** Your affiliate hosts three listening sessions with Latin youth and uncovers that transportation is a bigger barrier than previously thought.
- **Pilot:** You fund a small test project with local nonprofits offering stipends for rideshares and community transit.
- **Reflect:** Post-pilot surveys show improved attendance and trust in your programs.
- **Adjust:** Your grant guidelines now include transportation as a core line item, and your team builds new partnerships with transit advocates.

Commit to One Action

Take a moment to reflect:

What's one small, specific action you'll take in the next 30 days to deepen your understanding of your community?

You're welcome to jot it down or share with someone near you if time allows.





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