

Tool: Empathy Walk

Overview

An **Empathy Walk** develops your capacity to “hold space” for someone who is very different from you and establish a relationship across a significant boundary. It is adapted from the work of MIT Professor Emeritus Ed Schein, who has shaped the field of organizational culture, learning, and leadership over the past 50 years.

Application

The Empathy Walk can be useful in preparing for a presencing process, as it allows participants to experience the perspective of someone different from them.

Principles

- **Suspend judgment and engage in empathic listening.** (Refer to the Listening Learning Module.)
- **Step into the perspective of someone else** and let go of established mental models and assumptions.
- **Practice stillness** to encourage spaciousness throughout the conversation.

Resources

- Scharmer, Otto. 2007. *Theory U*, Second Edition, Chapter 15. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Schein, Edgar. 2013. *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Schein, Edgar. 2011. *Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Schein, Edgar. 1999. *Process Consultation Revisited: Building the Helping Relationship*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press.

Process

Setup

- **People:** Individuals who are different from one another.
- **Place:** In person or through a video conference.
- **Time:** 1–2 hours.
- **Materials:** No materials are needed for this process.

Steps

Step 1: Contemplate Difference

Spend some time thinking about a world that is very different from yours and how the people living in it would be different from you. Be creative; let your imagination go. Brainstorm about the contexts and characteristics of 3 to 5 types of people that you could connect with within a week, if you wanted to.

Step 2: Choose a Person

Now choose one of those people and figure out how to get in touch with them in the coming week. Is the person connected to you through your work? Is it someone you could reach through a family member, or through a friend?

Note: Be mindful of the difference in perceived power that might exist between you and the person you are contacting. Our interactions across differences like race and class are often shaped by a long legacy of injustice, pain, and trauma. Reaching out across these differences with deep care and an understanding that pain risks being hurtful to that person.

Step 3: Connect

- **Make contact** with this person, explain your intentions, and ask if they would be interested in a conversation with you. Be explicit about giving the person a gentle way out: the intention is to create an experience that holds value for you both, not just for you to extract knowledge.
- **Schedule a meeting** with the person. You can meet one on one. Or, if you are participating with a team, you can meet this person together, again with their permission.
- **Through conversation**, try to develop a sense of what it would be like to view the world from this person's perspective. How you go about this, what you say to the person, what kind of time you actually spend, etc., is all up to you. There are no rules or guidelines. Be creative. The idea here is to go out into the world and practice empathy, relationship building, and deep listening with another person.

Step 4: Reflect

After your conversation, write a reflective journal entry about what you experienced, how you felt, how you reacted, and what you learned.