*US Digital Service logo: a blue and white striped shield with white stars and wings
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USDS equity delivery Team

To Be Fair: Defining Fairness in Your Project Context

A 60-minute team exercise helps you and your project team articulate what fair outcomes look like for the people served by a particular program or service, and helps you make commitments that advance those fair outcomes.

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# Definition of Fairness Worksheet

## Step 1: Describe your team’s problem statement **Articulate why your team is here in the first place: what is the problem that motivates your team’s project?**

## Step 2: Describe who you are impacting. **Who do you want to impact through your program, product or service?**

## Step 3: Describe what success looks like for one person. **Brainstorm the key experiences, outputs and outcomes you might care to measure for the people your program, product or service is impacting**—in other words, the key elements of a successful customer experience. These things should be observable and/or measurable.

## Step 4: Identify factors that might lead to differences in experience.

# Think about the entire public population your team is impacting. **Brainstorm the dimensions (a.k.a. categories) of diversity within your population that you feel are key to look at for the purposes of assessing fairness--in other words, the dimensions which might lead people to have significantly different experiences.**

## Step 5: Create standards of fairness.

### Using the experiences and outcomes (i.e. elements of *success*), the target populations (i.e. *people*), and the dimensions of diversity (i.e. differentiating *factors*) you have identified, **create several sentences using the two sentence templates below**. You don't need to use every template, and you can use the same template multiple times. Note that each blank corresponds to either *people*, elements of *success*, or differentiating *factors*. Feel free to generate more standards using other experiences, outcomes, or dimensions of diversity that you didn't previously identify, as long as those standards use one of the templates provided. The parts of the sentences that are ***(parenthesized and italicized)*** are optional -- fill them in only if it feels appropriate. The most important thing: record only standards that you believe are **fair**.

**Templates:**

Among people who \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,   
**(** if they have the **same** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **)**  
they deserve the **same** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_   
**(** even if they have **different** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **)**.

Among people who \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,   
if they have **different** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_   
they deserve **different** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  **(** even if they have the **same** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **)**.

## Step 6: Make commitments.

### **Based on the standards of fairness you've articulated for your project, what commitments do you need to make to the people you are impacting? List those commitments below.**

## Step 7: Identify KPIs

### **Of the standards of fairness you've identified as most important, which are the ones you want to track (a.k.a. hold yourselves accountable to) and measure in the form of success metrics or key performance indicators (KPIs)?**

# Overview

*To Be Fair: Defining Fairness in Your Project Context* is a 60-minute team exercise that helps you and your team articulate what fairness looks like in the outcomes your program or service creates for the public. This exercise can help you assess to what extent the impact of your project is distributed equitably, and chart out a plan for equitable impact.

The objectives for this exercise are to:

* Define what a fair distribution of outputs and outcomes looks like for the people impacted by your program or service
* Make team commitments that will help ensure the impact you create is equitable
* Provide a basis for concrete success metrics that assess the extent to which your project's impact on the public is equitable

## How might we use this?

This exercise can be run as:

* A visioning exercise to help your team align on what success looks like for equitable service/program delivery, across and within populations of interest
* An assessment-focused exercise to help your team identify appropriate metrics/KPIs (key performance indicators) that measure how equitable your project impact is, either before or after project implementation has begun

We recommend using the outputs of this exercise with a data scientist or data analyst to identify short, medium and long-term impact measures suitable to your project.

A worksheet to accompany this exercise is included at the top of this document.

## Estimated time commitment

* 60 minutes, not including follow-up conversations

# Discussion Guide

We recommend one facilitator (who is not a team leader, to allow everyone to participate actively) and one notetaker/timekeeper.

## OPENING (5 min)

Hi everyone, today we are doing an exercise on defining fairness in the context of our project. You should all have a worksheet in front of you that says *To Be Fair: Defining Fairness in Your Project Context*, which will help guide us.

### Primary Objectives

Through this exercise, participants will:

* Define what a fair distribution of outputs and outcomes looks like for the people impacted by our program or service
* Make team commitments that will help ensure our project's impact on the public is equitable
* Establish a basis for concrete success metrics that assess the extent to which our project's impact on the public is equitable

### Norms

As we go through this exercise, I encourage you all to

* Be as present as possible
* Stay curious, think big and stay open-minded
* Lean on your values, especially in moments of uncertainty

### Overall Flow

The exercise will be in four parts: first, we will articulate the problem statement that motivates our team's work. Second, we will brainstorm outcomes and experiences that are important for the people our program is serving, as well as populations of interest among our program audience. Third, we will articulate our own individual definitions of fairness in the context of our project, based on the outcomes and populations we’ve brainstormed. Finally, we will come back together to establish a shared definition of fairness for our project, and make commitments to ensure the impact of our project is equitable.

## GROUP DISCUSSION (20 min)

### Articulating Our Problem Statement (5 min)

*Note: Your team may wish to complete this phase of the exercise in advance, to save time.*

Now, let's start things off by articulating why our team is here in the first place: what is the problem that motivates our team's project?

*Note: Facilitator should ask the team to provide their problem statement in a shared format with optimal visibility so they can use the statement for reflection as they go through this exercise. We recommend a digitally accessible document (.docx, accessible PDF, a displayed PowerPoint slide that is viewable) and/or a shared easel or whiteboard.*

### Identifying Outcomes and Populations of Interest (10 min)

Now that we have reviewed the problem statement for our project, let's identify the target audience for our project, plus the experiences and outcomes that matter most for the populations impacted by our project. Then we'll identify impacted populations and subpopulations.

**First, let’s articulate: who are the people we want to impact through our project, broadly?** List them all out.

**Next, through out-loud collaborative brainstorming, let's list off the key experiences, outputs and outcomes we might care to measure for the people our project is impacting—in other words, the key elements of a successful customer experience.** These things should be observable and/or measurable. For example, we might say things like "wait times", "quality of customer service", "application burden", "benefit utilization", "acceptance rates", or "rates of heart disease". We also might include things related to the intersection of customer experience and our team's process, like "consideration of someone's needs as we prioritize new features". Consider, also, factors like time requirements, levels of awareness of a service/program, comprehension, ease of access/use, quality of support, experiences of stress, as well as health, wealth, and safety. Try to avoid things that are hard to observe/measure—for example, instead of "ability to complete a form", consider "completion of form"; instead of "opportunity to improve financial stability", consider "incidence of poverty or bankruptcy."

*Note: Keep track of all of the experiences and outcomes listed off during brainstorming. You may wish to use sticky notes for this.*

Next, let's think about the entire public population our team is impacting. **Together, let's brainstorm the dimensions (a.k.a. categories) of diversity within our population that are key to look at for the purposes of assessing fairness.** In addition to classic dimensions of diversity such as race, gender, age, disability, and other legally protected classes, consider also things like levels of awareness, skill, comprehension, time availability, enthusiasm, access (including access to information), self-confidence, financial resources, trust, and emotional state. You may also wish to consider dimensions that are tailored to your specific project, e.g. "urgency of financial need", "distance from a medical provider", "familiarity with asylum process", or "application status".

*Note: Keep track of all of the dimensions of diversity listed off during brainstorming. You may wish to use sticky notes for this.*

## INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE (10 min)

Now, let's begin the individual portion of the exercise, using your worksheets. If you look at your worksheet, you will see two sentences containing some blanks:

Among people who \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,   
**(** if they have the **same** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **)**  
they deserve the **same** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_   
**(** even if they have **different** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **)**.

Among people who \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,   
if they have **different** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_   
they deserve **different** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_   
**(** even if they have the **same** \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ **)**.

**Using the target populations your team has specified, the experiences and outcomes your team has brainstormed, and the dimensions of diversity you have identified, take the next few minutes on your own to write out several sentences using the two sentence templates above.** The target audience should be used to fill in Blank #1 in these sentences, the dimensions of diversity should be used to fill in Blanks #2 and #4 in these sentences, and the experiences/outcomes should be used to fill in Blank #3.

What you're doing here is articulating project-specific *standards of fairness*—standards for equal treatment of people in equal conditions (this is what we call "horizontal equity"), and for appropriate unequal treatment of people in unequal conditions ("vertical equity"), in the context of your particular project. As you're thinking, don't merely combine words and phrases for the sake of generating more sentences, or more standards. Instead, ask yourself, "Is this standard I've articulated, something I believe is fair?" **Record only standards that you believe are fair.** There's no one right answer here—let your values drive you.

Feel free to generate more standards using other experiences, outcomes, or dimensions of diversity that your team didn't identify, as long as those standards use one of the two templates above.

The parts of the sentences that are ***(parenthesized and italicized)*** are optional -- fill them in only if it feels appropriate.

## GROUP DISCUSSION (25 min)

### Establishing Standards of Fairness Together (15 min)

Now, let's come back together to discuss our standards of fairness as a group. **Let's begin by having each person read aloud 5-10 of the standards they created—choose the ones most important to you.**

*Note: Keep track of all the standards read aloud by the group—you may wish to have your notetaker write them all down on an easel or digital spreadsheet that is visible to everyone.*

Now that we've read aloud everyone's individual standards of fairness, **let's discuss as a group: which 5-10 standards feel most important for us to achieve as we implement our project? Take the next few minutes to reach consensus on which standards are most important to the team.** Make sure to include a few standards from each of the two sentence templates.

### Commitments, Metrics, and Next Steps (10 min)

All of this theorizing together is nice, but it doesn't mean much until we make it concrete. Now's the part where the rubber hits the road—our commitments, success metrics and next steps, based on our discussion thus far. **Let's explore the following two questions together.**

* Based on the standards of fairness we've articulated for our project, what commitments do we need to make to the people we are impacting? Some examples might include:
  + "We commit to creating an omnichannel experience for applying to our program."
  + "We commit to expediting support requests for customers in more urgent need."
  + "We commit to investigating and doing our best to eliminate demographic disparities in who receives benefits under our program, among applicants of similar income levels."
* Of the standards of fairness we've identified as most important, which are the ones we want to track (a.k.a. hold ourselves accountable to) and measure in the form of success metrics or KPIs for our project? (See the *Epilogue* below.)

*Note: Facilitator and note taker should record responses on easel boards or the implement of the team’s choosing. The questions above are provided as prompts and we encourage teams to explore their own questions.*

As we close out today, if you have any questions or comments, be in touch with your facilitator. That said, today's exercise is only the beginning of a larger discussion about how we work, the impact we have, and how we envision and measure success. I encourage you to continue this conversation with your teammates and to keep thinking about how we can translate today's themes into actionable next steps for our work together.

### Epilogue—Creating Equity Success Metrics

At this point, your team has identified standards of fairness that you want to hold your project accountable to. Well, here's some good news—**all of the standards you've outlined can be translated directly into quantitative (and sometimes, qualitative) metrics that you can measure your project against**. While we won't dive into the math of those metrics here, we encourage you to take your team's standards to a data scientist or data analyst, who can help you develop some precise measures to assess the equity of your project's impact on the public. **Once you have real-world data tracking your target outcomes along the relevant dimensions of diversity you identified, you're ready to start assessing the equity of your project's impact!**

# Appendix A: Creating a Quality Problem Statement

Great projects start by articulating why the team is here in the first place: **what is the problem that motivates our team's project?** Use these prompts to move from a wider problem space to a directed problem statement.

## Describe the problem your project is helping to solve.

## Is it a complete sentence?

Revise your statement below to be a complete sentence.

## Does it include a focus on the experience or outcomes of impacted members of the public?

Revise your statement below to include a focus on experience and/or outcomes of impacted members of the public. To the extent possible, call out who those communities or partners are in the revision.

## Is it free of any untested or unreasonable assumptions about what members of the public think, feel, want, or find most important or problematic?

Revise your statement as needed to remove any assumptions that have not been validated with impacted members of the public.

## Last step: Make sure your final problem statement makes no assumptions about the solution!

Remove any assumptions about the solution from your problem statement.