

Section 1: Note to Users

These tools aim to help you to develop foundational skills such as listening, asking probing questions, managing conflict, and so on.

It is useful to engage with these tools before, during, and after the training workshop to prepare you for facilitation in a community-led approach. Extensive practice with reflection is needed in order to master the skills that these tools seek to develop.

The tools may be used individually or in small groups. This section enables individual reflection by providing space for reflective writing, using a workbook format. Each tool in this section requires 60–90 minutes to complete.

On an ongoing basis, it is useful to think about which skills you need additional practice on, which challenges (internal or external) make it difficult for you to use a particular skill, and how you will take steps to improve. In small groups, you may want to reflect with three to five colleagues, with group discussion of the questions posed in these tools and of what can be done to deepen particular skills within your agency.

FAC 4. Empathy

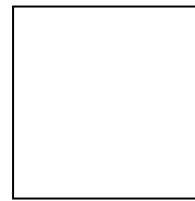
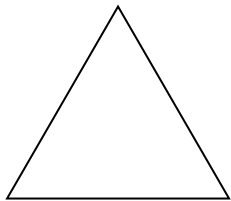
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. defined empathy as the ability “to walk a mile in another person's shoes.” Empathy differs from sympathy, in which we accept or support another person’s feelings as our own. In empathizing, we do not agree or disagree with the other person’s feelings, ideas, or views. Instead, we try to put ourselves in the other person’s position and understand fully how they see things.

Being able to empathize with someone requires that we be curious about another person’s perspective and seek to learn as much as we can about it, without judging. This requires being open to new perspectives so that we do not see things through our own lenses. In a significant way, we have to background our own ways of understanding, adopting instead the viewpoint of the other person as closely as we can.

A Visual Example

A visual task can illustrate what it means to empathize with the view of another person. Imagine you are seated at a table looking across at another person (participant), as below. On the table are two figures. Which one is on the participant’s left?

PARTICIPANT



YOU

Most people figure out that the square is on the participant’s left. How does one come up with the correct answer? Often, people do this through a process of position-taking (empathy) that involves visual imagery. They imagine themselves sitting in the position of the participant, and then they look to see the imagined objects in front of them. Seeing both in their mind’s eye, they then name the object that is on the left.

An interesting feature of this task is that it requires getting out of one’s own perspective. Indeed, if you fixate on how you see things (with the triangle on your left), it becomes very challenging to see things from the standpoint of the participant. We have to background or let go of our own position and views in order to see things from the participant’s point of view. This is always true of empathy—it is a process of not privileging our own position and views but of moving into a different space where we go as far as possible in seeing things from the participant’s perspective.

Yet the task above is artificial and highly unusual in that we can see the same objects that the participant sees. This ability to see exactly what the participant sees is seldom the case in real life, where the participant has life experiences that we cannot immediately see or apprehend. As a visual metaphor, the situation below is perhaps more accurate.



Here, the participant sees three particular things—a wavy line with arrows on both ends, a circle with a diagonal line, and a single, tilted braces symbol. However, a barrier between you prevents you from seeing what the participant sees. You can learn about what the participant sees only through a verbal exchange. The objects happen to be difficult to describe precisely, in the same way that one’s personal experiences and beliefs can be difficult to put into words.

In this context, if you want to know what the participant sees, you have only one way of finding out—you have to ask and rely on what the participant says. As the participant speaks, you will find yourself making inferences based on what she says and then asking probing questions to obtain clarification and sharpen your idea of what she likely sees.

A Verbal Example

Read the following statement, trying to empathize as fully as possible with the mother who is speaking.

For me, the worst part of the war was not the shelling, attacks, and losses but the constant hunger and threat of starvation. Hunger never left me alone, and even at night, I dreamt of food only to wake up feeling so hungry! But the hunger was not mine alone—my family was starving. Can you imagine my suffering on thinking that my two daughters might starve to death?

Now imagine you are this mother. Empathizing with her, think how she suffered during the war and jot down your understanding of her suffering.

Write below:

Did you capture the relational nature of her suffering? Outsiders from relatively individualistic societies tend to focus on individual suffering, whereas people from more collectivist societies frequently emphasize the relational aspects of suffering. This relational perspective was evident in her concern over the possibility that her daughters might starve to death.

Challenges to Empathy

Among the diverse challenges to empathy, one of the most prevalent is our tendency to cling to our own preconceptions and to impose our own values. For example, a child protection specialist who encounters a young teenage boy living on the streets in the former Soviet Republic of Georgia might begin asking a string of questions, resulting in the following exchange:

CP worker: “Where do you sleep at night?”

Boy: “I sleep in next to that building (pointing) where it’s warm at night.”

CP worker: “Are any family members here with you?”

Boy: “No, I’m here by myself and have friends.”

CP worker: “Are you in contact with your parents?”

Please reflect on this mode of questioning and whether you think it is a useful means of empathizing with the boy's perspective.

Write below:

Did you notice that the questions reflected the child protection worker's agenda and assumptions more than a desire to empathize with the boy's views and situation? The assumption behind these questions is that living in the care of one's parents and family is preferable to living on the streets.

But what if the teenager had been abused by his family and wanted nothing to do with them? Perhaps he likes being on his own and living on the streets where there is excitement and freedom from adult-imposed activities such as going to school.

So we can see that, when we start with our own agenda, we do not get very far in empathizing. Also, the questions asked could lead the other person to perceive the questions as being disrespectful. Or he might see the questions as reflecting the views of authorities, whom he wants to avoid. This perception could cause him to cut off the discussion or to be so guarded in his answers as to make empathic learning impossible.

Empathy also becomes challenging when we encounter beliefs very different from our own. For example, if a former girl soldier in Sierra Leone says, "I carry bad spirits from the bush," it might be hard to empathize fully since we may not understand what it means to carry bad spirits from the bush. In rural Sierra Leone, this can mean that as a soldier who had been around dead people in the bush, one has been contaminated by the spirits of the dead, who not only haunt but can cause significant problems such as bad health.

Without understanding the context and the local belief system, empathy does not come at once but occurs slowly through a process of respectful listening and asking probing questions.

Empathy becomes even more difficult when the views you are empathizing with threaten your own values and ways of being in the world. For example, assume you are a well-intentioned humanitarian worker who devotes their life to encouraging child rights. Yet you encounter a father who explains that he disciplines his children by beating them, following the local customs.

This can be very difficult to learn about since it clearly upsets you. Even if you listen, it may be difficult to probe on and learn more about it without flinching or even challenging what you see as a harmful practice. It takes practice to be able to background your own views and to keep the emphasis on learning about local views.

The best way of managing these challenges is to reflect regularly on questions such as these:

- How am I taking an empathic approach in my interactions?
- Am I asking questions or saying things that reflect my agenda and values that may create obstacles to empathy?
- When I hear things that are troubling or that anger me, am I able to move those feelings into the background so that I am not focusing on them and focus instead on the tasks of empathizing and learning?
- What are my personal obstacles to empathizing, and what steps am I taking to improve my ability to empathize more fully with other people?

Please continue this tool by turning to the following page.

Practical Exercise (to be done with a partner)

Goal: The goal of this exercise is to empathize with another person's views on how to improve education in his or her country.

Participants: You and a colleague or friend who alternate as interviewer and participant

Materials: Watch or other means of keeping time

Time: 45 minutes

Process:

- For the first 15 minutes, you are the interviewer who will try to learn as deeply as possible about the participant's views on how to improve education in the country (or some other topic of choice), preferably one that you have not previously discussed together. Your task is to listen fully and respectfully, avoid judging or arguing, and ask probing questions that help you understand as fully as possible the other person's views. Stop briefly for one minute after 5, 10, and 15 minutes to summarize back to the participant what you understand to be their view.
- For 5 minutes, have the participant reflect out loud on how they felt during the process. In particular, did he or she feel judged? Did they feel their views were understood or not understood? Were there other areas that could have been probed? Were the probing questions the right ones or were there others that might have been asked? Since this is a joint reflection, also note how you felt—did you find yourself disagreeing or wanting to argue or inject your own views? What did you do when that happened?
- Now reverse the roles, this time with you as the participant and your colleague as the person who seeks to learn about your views on the same topic. Ask them to avoid judging or arguing and to focus on drawing you out and learning about your views. As before, stop briefly for one minute after 5, 10, and 15 minutes to enable the interviewer to summarize back to you what they understand to be your view.
- For 5 minutes, reflect together on these questions: How did you experience this process—was it supportive, or was it hostile and threatening? Was this an enjoyable process for you? How does it make you feel when another person has listened carefully to you?
- Thank your colleague or friend for his or her time.
- By yourself, sit, relax, and compose your mind, taking a few deep breaths and focusing on them as a means of quieting your thoughts and becoming ready to think clearly and reflect in an honest, open manner. Based on this experience, what do you think you need to do more or less of as a means of empathizing with other people?