

## Including Others in Continuous Improvement Efforts

### PURPOSE

Improve on how you include others in various aspects of your continuous improvement efforts so you can check your assumptions and resist top-down, inequitable change practices.

### DIRECTIONS:

1. Read through the grounding section and identify a possible starting place for your inclusive leadership efforts.
2. Engage in one or more of the subsequent reflection exercises to identify actions you can take to be more inclusive.
3. Make a specific commitment for how you will be more inclusive in your continuous improvement efforts.

### Ground

Not all change yields improvement. Most educators can relate to the scenario where a change that is intended to improve, address, or fix a problem instead falls flat, takes too long to get off the ground, causes harm, or reproduces the same outcomes. As named in the “Continuous Improvement Pitfalls” tool, there are many factors that might bring about this situation, and many mitigation strategies you can try to avoid those pitfalls. One of the biggest mistakes is working in isolation from others.

This tool is designed to challenge leaders to recognize and avoid the following continuous improvement pitfalls by engaging in inclusive leadership practices that help deepen current understandings of problems and enhance the degree of authentic, meaningful collaboration in change processes.

Continuous Improvement Pitfalls	Mitigation Ideas
<b>Instead of ...</b>	<b>Try ...</b>
Addressing symptoms, not root causes	Working to deeply understand the problem
Working in isolation or excluding	Collaborating in authentic, meaningful ways



**TIP:** The continuous inclusion of other voices and perspectives throughout any improvement effort is one key to challenging top-down, inequitable change practices and engages all stakeholders as active agents in the improvement process.

Specifically, this tool prompts leaders to reflect on and identify ways they can be more inclusive in the following continuous improvement activities:

- ☐ Data Analysis
- ☐ Problem Identification
- ☐ Solution Design and Implementation

**How are you currently including others in your continuous improvement efforts?** What would different stakeholders (*e.g., other leaders, teachers, families, and students*) say about your current inclusion efforts?

## Including Others in Data Analysis

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### Reflect

First, name the data you will be analyzing. Then, use the questions below to reflect on your current data analysis practices.

**Which data are you analyzing?** Who determined this was the important data to analyze? Who collected it? How? Are there other important pieces of data (*including qualitative data or experiential data*) that should also be included?

**Who is represented in the data itself?** Whose perspectives are currently represented in the data you analyzed? Does the data include the perspectives of a diverse group of stakeholders (*staff, students, caregivers, families, etc.*)?

**Who will work to interpret the meaning of this data?** Who has worked to analyze or draw conclusions from the data in the past? Does this group include a diverse group of stakeholders? Those closest to the data?

**Who will be most impacted by this data?** Or most impacted by any changes/improvement efforts that may result from this data analysis? What might be the benefits of including those most impacted in the data analysis process?

**How does your role and/or identity impact how you experience or interpret this data?** Why is it important to be aware of this? (*You might consider your racial identity, gender identification, relationship to power, decision making, etc.*)

## Identify

Now, select one or more of the following strategies to be more inclusive in the way you use and analyze data in your continuous improvement efforts.

### Be aware of bias in the data itself

Data itself is easily subject to bias. For example, measurement constructs can reflect historical, systemic and individual biases, or the methods used to collect the data can be flawed. It is not safe to assume that the data you are analyzing is automatically objective.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Reflecting on which data was or was not chosen for analysis and why*
- ☐ *Interrogating existing data collection processes*
- ☐ *Removing information from data sources, such as removing student names from student work, that can easily trigger biases*

### Be aware of bias, including your own, when interpreting the data

It is easy to look at data and see the story you are expecting it to tell. Both implicit and explicit bias can play a role in making meaning of data. Bias can play both intentional and unintentional roles in how you make meaning of data.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Training all those collecting and making meaning of data to be aware of different types of bias*
- ☐ *Asking multiple people to code and/or interpret the same set of data*
- ☐ *Creating diverse groups to analyze data together*

### Value all forms of data and knowing

Our desires to be “data-based” in our continuous improvement efforts may cause us to ignore other valid, diverse, important modes of knowing. Qualitative or more “academic-based” ways of knowing must be balanced with and are not automatically superior to other methods, such as lived experience.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Inviting those who are most proximate to the data to add context and experience to analysis conversations*
- ☐ *Collaborating with those who are most proximate to the data to develop and tell the emerging data stories*
- ☐ *Engaging in critical conversations when emerging data stories do not seem to match lived experiences*

### Create psychologically safe spaces for analyzing and discussing data

Be thoughtful about the spaces you create for data conversations. Depending on the degree of relational trust, past experiences with inclusion efforts, or organizational histories, individuals may not yet feel they can engage openly and without fear of retaliation, especially if they see the data differently.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Developing data discussion norms in collaboration with all of those participating*
- ☐ *Using protocols and processes that promote equity of voice in data discussions*
- ☐ *Making explicit empathetic listening commitments when engaging in data discussions*

## Commit

Finally, use the space below to write a commitment for how you will be more inclusive in data analysis. Be specific in terms of what, when, and how. Consider how you will measure success and hold yourself accountable.

## Including Others in Problem Identification

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### Reflect

First, name the problem you are working to solve in your continuous improvement efforts. Then, use the questions below to reflect on your current problem identification practices.

**What problem are you currently working to solve in your continuous improvement efforts?** Who determined this was a problem? How?

**Whose voices or perspectives are captured in the current articulation of the problem?** Whose are left out? Does the current articulation of the problem include the voices and perspectives of those most proximate to the problem?

**Who do you think might agree with the way the problem is articulated or described? Why?** Who would agree this problem is one of the highest-priority problems to tackle right now? How do you know?

**Who do you think might not agree? Why?** How might they have characterized or described the problem differently? What problem might they have named as highest-priority? How do you know?

**To what degree is there a deep, shared understanding of the problem among all stakeholders?** Have all potential root causes of the problem been surfaced and identified? Would all stakeholders be able to articulate them using shared language?

## Identify

Now, select one or more of the following strategies to be more inclusive in how you identify and define problems in your continuous improvement efforts.

### Acknowledge the people connected to the problem

When we fail to acknowledge the people experiencing the problem, those causing or perpetuating the problem, and our role in the problem, the problem becomes dehumanized. By acknowledging the people connected to the problem, we are identifying who needs to be included as part of any solutions.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Identifying those most impacted and affected by the problem and centering their voices in the problem-identification process*
- ☐ *As a leader, explicitly naming your role in the problem and/or your relationship to the problem*

### Surface and include the root causes of the problem

For most problems, there are multiple causes. If we do not wrestle with the full complexity of the problem and identify root causes before we develop solutions, we end up treating the symptoms of a root cause, set ourselves up for failure, or ultimately reproduce the same problem in a different form.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Engaging in “5 Whys” or “5 Hows” reflection protocols as part of the problem-identification process*
- ☐ *Completing fishbone diagrams mapping out potential categories of root causes with various stakeholders*

### Eliminate bias from the problem statement

Biases play a role in the way we think about, frame and describe problems. Biases surface in the ways we explicitly or implicitly blame others for problems, prematurely assume solutions, or fail to recognize all contributing factors (e.g., *institutional, system and ideological conditions in which the problem exists*). By eliminating bias, we may be able to identify a more meaningful, sustainable, and impactful set of solutions.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Testing your articulation of the problem by seeking input and feedback from others*
- ☐ *Removing blame and assumed solutions from the problem statement*
- ☐ *Articulating the problem from multiple vantage points*

### Consider context around the problem

When we describe problems absent of context, we limit our understanding of what is impacting the problem. For example, actions and attitudes of the past may be having lingering effects on a current problem. By understanding the full context around problems, we can uncover hidden dynamics, learn from previous attempts at solutions, and more deeply understand how societal forces (*such as racism, sexism, classism, etc.*) contribute to the problem.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Investigating how this challenge has been addressed in the past and learning about the results of those efforts*
- ☐ *Interrogating the systemic barriers contributing to or exacerbating the problem*
- ☐ *Including context narratives as part of the problem statement*

## Commit

Finally, use the space below to write a commitment for how you will be more inclusive in the way you identify and define problems. Be specific in terms of what, when, and how. Consider how you will measure success and hold yourself accountable.

## Including Others in Solution Design and Implementation

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### Reflect

First, name one or more of your whole-child aligned continuous improvement ideas. Then, use the questions below to reflect on your current solution design and implementation practices.

**What are your current whole-child aligned continuous improvement ideas, and who helped you design them?** What whole-child aligned problem are they intended to solve? Who helped you define that problem?

**Who is currently part of the group that will be working to implement these improvement ideas?** Are those closest to the problem and most impacted by these ideas part of the group? If not, what changes could be made?

**How might your identity create blind spots or biases when designing or implementing improvement ideas?** How can you collaborate with others to actively counter these blind spots or biases?

**What diverse expertise (*consider skills, knowledge, experiences, etc.*) is needed to execute on these improvement ideas?** Whom, from your varied stakeholders, could you include as authentic collaborators and partners to help meet these needs?

**What is your plan for learning from others about how implementation is going?** How will you know how your improvement idea is being experienced by different stakeholders? How will you know how it is impacting others?

## Identify

Now, select one or more of the following strategies to be more inclusive in how you design and implement solutions as part of your continuous improvement efforts.

### Expand your mental model for leadership

Leadership goes beyond formal positions and titles. Many people in the wider school community play vital leadership roles, including students and families, regardless of how traditional responsibilities might be structured. Everyone has invaluable skills, knowledge and experiences to contribute to improvement efforts, especially those closest to the problem.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Asking yourself who, by default, you are leaving behind or excluding (e.g., those closest to the problem)*
- ☐ *Including a more diverse, representative set of people in your vision for who is needed to support this change*
- ☐ *Relying on groups of people to innovate together as opposed to designing improvement ideas in isolation*

### Resist the notion that there is one right solution to any problem

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking there must be a perfect solution out there, or thinking that if only everyone would follow your idea and implement with fidelity, the problem would be solved. This way of thinking can hinder innovation, lead to delayed action, result in unrealistic plans, end in ineffective, compliance-based mandates or even deepen inequities.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Surfacing diverse perspectives when designing solutions*
- ☐ *Generating many possible improvement ideas before deciding on which solutions to try*
- ☐ *Allowing for variations in solutions and multiple iterations of solutions (e.g., if someone wants to pilot a potential solution at a small scale, encourage it and learn by doing)*

### Provide pathways for ongoing, authentic engagement in the improvement processes

Including others in the design and implementation of improvement ideas requires more than one listening session or one feedback session. Perfunctory or performative opportunities for engagement undermine inclusive efforts and contribute to overall distrust and disengagement. Create and maintain rich engagement opportunities in ongoing ways.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Sharing the power to make decisions and take actions aligned with the improvement effort*
- ☐ *Centering the voices of those most impacted in all stages of design, implementation and refinements*
- ☐ *Providing equitable access to information throughout the improvement effort so that everyone is empowered to act*

### Learn both from and with others during your improvement efforts

Not all change yields improvement. It is important to build out systems, structures and processes for learning from and with others during any change process, especially so that you can determine if the improvement ideas you designed are yielding the intended results as they are implemented.

#### This might look like:

- ☐ *Asking others about barriers or challenges they are experiencing and using what you learn to remove barriers, provide supports, and adjust improvement efforts*
- ☐ *Creating multidirectional feedback loops where different stakeholders can learn from each other*
- ☐ *Designing some shared capacity-building opportunities*

## Commit

Finally, use the space below to write a commitment for how you will be more inclusive in solution design and implementation. Be specific in terms of what, when, and how. Consider how you will measure success and hold yourself accountable.

## References

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