

An Activity to Develop Empathy for Partners' Perspectives on a Problem of Practice

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This activity is intended to help develop empathy for different perspectives on a problem of practice that a partnership is addressing. It is likely to work best when there is already a focus for joint work, but when people are likely to have very different conceptions of the challenges that the partnership will face in addressing the problem of practice. These differing conceptions can arise from the fact that people occupy different roles within the same organization or because they work in different types of organizations. They can also arise from differences in individuals' values, identities, and histories. Whatever the source, the activity is one that pushes each person to become explicit about their own conceptions of the problem to be solved and to describe the problem from different points of view.

Part 1: Discussion in Role-Alike Groups (15-20 minutes)

Form groups that are composed of people with similar roles in their organization or in the partnerships. If there are power or status differences within an organization, it may be useful to create groups of people who are peers in that organization. Groups should be no larger than four people. Name the groups A, B, C, D, and so on.

In role-alike groups, participants develop answers to the questions:

What do we see as the biggest challenges to overcome, to meet the goals we have set for the partnership right now? (Be sure to replace the last part of the question with specific language about the goals, such as “to meet our goal of increasing the high school graduation rate by 15%.”)

What do you think [Group B, C, D, E] sees as as the biggest challenges to overcome?

Part 2: Discussion in Mixed Groups (20 minutes)

Next, form groups composed of one member of each of the different groups. Share out what that group discussed. When sharing what they imagine other groups' views to be, the person sharing should invite a member of that group to correct or help refine their understanding of how they see the problem.

Part 3: Whole Group Discussion (20 minutes)

Begin the whole group discussion by asking participants to share what they learned about other groups' perceptions of the problem from the mixed group discussion. Next, the facilitator leads a discussion of what commonalities and differences in problem conceptions they heard. If desired, build some elements together of a shared description of the key challenges the group needs to address.