People-Centered Design Process Guide

People-Centered Design empowers leaders to solve problems by putting the experiences, needs, and perspectives of stakeholders at the heart of solution development. This approach ensures solutions are not only technically sound but deeply responsive to human needs and organizational contexts. As an emerging or mid-level leader in education or nonprofit spaces, this guide will help you facilitate collaborative problem-solving that honors both the people you serve and the challenges you face.

Goal

To provide education and nonprofit leaders with a structured yet flexible framework for guiding teams through a collaborative, people-centered approach to problem-solving that leads to more innovative, sustainable, and impactful solutions.

Advice

This guide outlines the three essential phases of people-centered design: Discover, Design, and Develop.

For each phase:

- Review the key activities and guiding questions
- Adapt the suggested tools to your specific context and resources
- Use the facilitation tips to create inclusive, engaging experiences
- Refer to the phase checklist before moving to the next phase

Remember that while presented linearly, the design process is ***inherently iterative***. Be prepared to revisit earlier phases as new insights emerge. The power of this approach lies in its flexibility and responsiveness to what you learn along the way.

Phase 1: DISCOVER

Purpose

Deeply understand the problem from multiple perspectives, especially those most affected by it. This phase challenges assumptions and reframes problems to focus on human needs rather than symptoms or preconceived solutions.

Key Activities

Activity	Description	Facilitation Tips
Initial Problem Statement	Articulate the challenge as currently understood, recognizing this is a starting point, not a conclusion.	Start with "How might we..." to frame the problem as an opportunity. Acknowledge that this statement will evolve.
Stakeholder Mapping	Identify all individuals and groups affected by or influencing the problem. Prioritize whose perspectives are most critical to understand.	Create a visual map showing relationships and relative influence. Consider who is typically not included but should be.
Empathy Research	Gather insights about experiences, needs, and contexts through multiple methods (Interviews, Focus Groups, Observations, Surveys, Artifact Analysis).	Create psychological safety by explaining how information will be used. Express genuine curiosity rather than judgment.

For details on methods, see our 5 resources on Making Empathy Practical

Phase 1: DISCOVER, cont'd

Key Activities

Activity	Description	Facilitation Tips
Insight Synthesis	Organize and analyze findings to identify patterns, tensions, and underlying needs.	Use visual methods like affinity mapping. Look for surprising connections across different data sources.
Problem Reframing	Revise the problem statement based on stakeholder perspectives and deeper understanding.	Share the reframed problem with key stakeholders for validation before proceeding.

Phase 1: DISCOVER, cont'd

Guiding Questions for Discovery

- Whose voices are essential to understanding this challenge?
- What assumptions are we making that we need to test?
- What patterns are emerging across different perspectives?
- What are the underlying needs, not just the expressed wants?
- How might we reframe this problem to focus on human needs rather than symptoms?

Discovery Phase Checklist

[ ] We've engaged multiple stakeholder groups, especially those most affected

[ ] We've gathered insights through at least three different methods

[ ] We've identified patterns and tensions across different perspectives

[ ] We've reframed our problem statement based on stakeholder insights

[ ] Our team has a shared understanding of the human needs at the core of this challenge

Phase 2: DESIGN

Purpose

Generate and evaluate potential solutions that address the human needs identified in the Discovery phase. This phase emphasizes inclusive ideation, constructive evaluation, and collective decision-making.

Key Activities

Activity	Description	Facilitation Tips
Establish Ideation Norms	Create shared agreements about how the team will generate and respond to ideas.	Post norms visibly during sessions. Gently remind the team when norms are not being followed.
Divergent Ideation	Generate many possible solutions through structured activities.	Mix individual, pair, and group ideation. Vary activities to engage different thinking styles.
Idea Clustering	Organize ideas into related groups to identify themes and approaches.	Involve the whole team in clustering. Create descriptive names for each cluster.
Idea Evaluation & Selection	Assess ideas against human needs and organizational constraints.	Be transparent about evaluation criteria. Balance intuitive and analytical assessment.

For details on the Ideation Process, see our resource, Ideation Toolkit for People-Centered Problem-solving

Phase 2: DESIGN, cont'd

Guiding Questions for Design

- How might we generate ideas that address the core human needs we've identified?
- How can we ensure all team members contribute to ideation, not just the most vocal?
- What evaluation criteria best reflect both stakeholder needs and organizational realities?
- How might we combine elements from different ideas into stronger solutions?
- How will we navigate disagreement about which solutions to pursue?

Design Phase Checklist

[ ] We've established and followed clear norms for inclusive ideation

[ ] We've generated a wide range of potential solutions

[ ] We've evaluated ideas against criteria that reflect stakeholder needs

[ ] We've selected solution(s) to prototype with stakeholder involvement

[ ] Our team has a shared understanding of why these solutions were selected

Phase 3: DEVELOP

Purpose

Transform promising ideas into testable prototypes (mockups or drafts), gather feedback from stakeholders, and iteratively refine solutions based on real-world experience and input. This phase bridges creative thinking with practical implementation.

Key Activities

Activity	Description	Facilitation Tips
Prototyping	Create simple, tangible versions of solutions that stakeholders can experience and respond to.	Start with low-fidelity prototypes to gather early feedback before investing heavily
Stakeholder Testing	Gather feedback by having stakeholders experience and respond to prototypes.	Create a safe environment where honest feedback is welcomed and valued.
Solution Refinement	Revise prototypes based on stakeholder feedback.	Document all feedback and show how it influenced revisions.
Implementation Planning	Prepare for wider deployment of the solution.	Involve those who will implement the solution in the planning process.
Continuous Improvement	Establish mechanisms for ongoing learning and adaptation.	Frame the solution as evolving rather than fixed.

For details on the Prototyping Process, see our resource, The Collaborative Solution Prototyping Tool

Phase 3: DEVELOP, cont'd

Guiding Questions for Development

- How might we create prototypes that capture the essence of our solution with minimal resources?
- Which stakeholders should we prioritize for testing and feedback?
- What are we learning about the solution's strengths and limitations through testing?
- How might we refine the solution to better meet stakeholder needs?
- What systems need to be in place for continuous improvement after initial implementation?

Development Phase Checklist

[ ] We've created prototypes that effectively communicate our solution

[ ] We've gathered feedback from diverse stakeholders

[ ] We've refined our solution based on stakeholder input

[ ] We've developed a realistic implementation plan

[ ] We've established mechanisms for continuous improvement over time

Bringing It All Together

While presented as sequential phases, people-centered design is inherently iterative. You may find yourself cycling back to earlier phases as new insights emerge. This flexibility is a strength, not a weakness, of the approach. Each iteration deepens your understanding and improves your solution.

Remember that the process itself builds team capacity, stakeholder trust, and organizational learning. How you design matters as much as what you design. By centering human experiences and needs throughout, you create not only better solutions but also stronger relationships and more adaptive organizations.

As a leader, your role is to guide the process while creating space for diverse voices and perspectives to shape the outcome. Trust the process, trust your team, and trust the wisdom of your stakeholders. The solutions that emerge will be more innovative, more sustainable, and more impactful as a result.

Overall Design Process Checklist

Discover Phase

[ ] We've engaged multiple stakeholder groups, especially those most affected

[ ] We've gathered insights through at least three different methods

[ ] We've identified patterns and tensions across different perspectives

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Design Phase

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Development Phase

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