

Pillars for Engaging Lived Experts in Systems Change Work

Child welfare systems are not likely places for a lived expert to be and feel positively engaged – often fast-paced, bureaucratic, and potentially a reminder of negative past experience. Yet we need people impacted by our systems to meaningfully influence the process for true change to occur. This paradox can be challenging to navigate. If we can intentionally create an experience for lived experts that’s meaningful and supportive, we don’t need our whole system to change all at once to successfully engage lived experts now. Here’s how.

Start by intentionally preparing trusting teams and spaces for the lived expert to engage.....

Instead of inviting lived experts to join existing tables built inside the system, work to co-create a new table centered on their voice.

- Build a team around the lived expert(s) who are willing to practice these pillars
 - Carefully consider who is chosen to work with persons impacted by the system—choose those who can more naturally experience empathy and build trust
 - Create a clear profile (ie- behaviorally specific guidance) of what it takes to effectively engage lived experts and ask team members commit to those practices
- Develop the team to do their own “innerwork” (personal preparation) and build readiness to humble themselves to community voice and partner with lived experts, including:
 - Be willing to hear and incorporate feedback without defensiveness
 - Learn to make space, rather than take space
 - Willingness to engage with compassionate curiosity when challenges arise
- Advance the team’s understanding of the historical and cultural conditions affecting people impacted by the system
 - Use local racial disparity and other social indicator data as a guide
- Consider spaces, locations, and times for meetings that work for the lived experts first
 - Make sure spaces are welcoming and familiar (ie – *bring meetings to community*)

Then begin engaging lived experts using these Pillars.....

Intentionally create conditions within the team for the lived expert(s) to be and feel valued, heard, and connected

- Shift the balance of power by continuously prioritizing what lived expert need first
 - Have enough lived experts at the table to balance the representation
 - Normalize conversations about intentions to shift power (ie - *say it out loud*)
 - Work to demonstrate willingness to hear and incorporate the lived expert point of view (ie – *we are changing the process to work better for you*)
- Intentionally develop relationships to support the hard work and emotional labor
 - See each moment as an opportunity to build or lose trust
 - Show up as humans first and be willing to mutually share

- Pace the work based on how the team forms, not based on a pre-set project plan (ie - *move at the speed of trust*)
- Allow for the real conversations to occur without judgement

See and value the lived expert in their full humanity – and let go of the rest.

- Acknowledge that a lived expert role is based on harnessing who a person is in life – not what they've learned from a profession. When there is discomfort, it hits at the core.
 - We need to shine a light on the unique contribution of the individual lived expert(s) while minimizing the places where sharp edges would be deeply felt.
- Identify and name the person's inner strengths (ie - *first, often, and actionably*)
- Loosen the focus on professionalism whenever possible
 - Develop situational expectations (ie – *expectations meet the moment and make the moment work for the individual*)
 - Be sure others know and buy in to situational expectations
- Seek to understand challenges with *compassionate curiosity* and strong consideration for what might be beneath a behavior
- Create sacred space for the lived expert to give authentic feedback about their experience, even if it's imperfectly delivered
 - Find ways to take action on feedback, even if it's just in small ways
 - Work together to balance how negative feedback does not create a bad vibe in the process

Work together ongoing for the lived expert to be and feel successful.

- Establish a clear and actionable role that is influential to the work **and** aligns with the lived expert's strengths (ie - *make the role work for the lived expert*)
- Provide a supervisor or role mentor who can develop a highly relational, trusted partnership to sustain the emotional labor of the work
 - Respect the partnership as a vehicle for the lived expert's success
 - Allow this person to speak up for the lived expert if that's requested
- Create space for frequent check-ins focused on success first and areas of growth second
- Work in the growth edge in a supported way, driven by the individual's pace
 - Share growth areas rooted in validation of inner value and tied to a sense of purpose
- Give agency for when and how a lived expert shares their experience (avoid tokenizing)
 - Lived experts should decide how and when they share their story