APPLYING HCD TO JOB DESIGN

PROCESS EVALUATION REPORT

PREPARED BY DESIGN IMPACT **|** JULY 2021

National Fund for Workforce Solutions

DESIGN IMPACT

WORC
Workforce & Organizational
Research Center

BILL & MELINDA
GATES foundation

## MAKING JOBS BETTER
INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the National Fund for Workforce Solutions (National Fund) received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to work with small- to medium-sized businesses to activate the National Fund's Job Design Framework and make jobs better. The National Fund invited Design Impact (DI) and the Workforce & Organizational Research Center (WORC) to engage five regional workforce collaboratives and eight employers to identify, develop, and test job quality interventions.

This report evaluates the impact of applying a human-centered design (HCD) process to job design with small- to medium-sized businesses (SMBs).

The evaluation report consists of four sections:

The first section looks at the **HCD process overview**. The second section explores the **process evaluation methodology**. The third section details **mindset shifts among participants**, featuring significant ways participants' mindsets and behaviors changed as a result of experiences in the HCD process. Finally, the fourth section identifies **recommendations for deepening and sustaining the HCD process** when applied within SMBs. Throughout, we've also included employer spotlights that highlight stories of change.

It is our hope that this report inspires others in the workforce development field to apply creative and inclusive change processes to job design with employers — centering worker voice as we make jobs better, together.
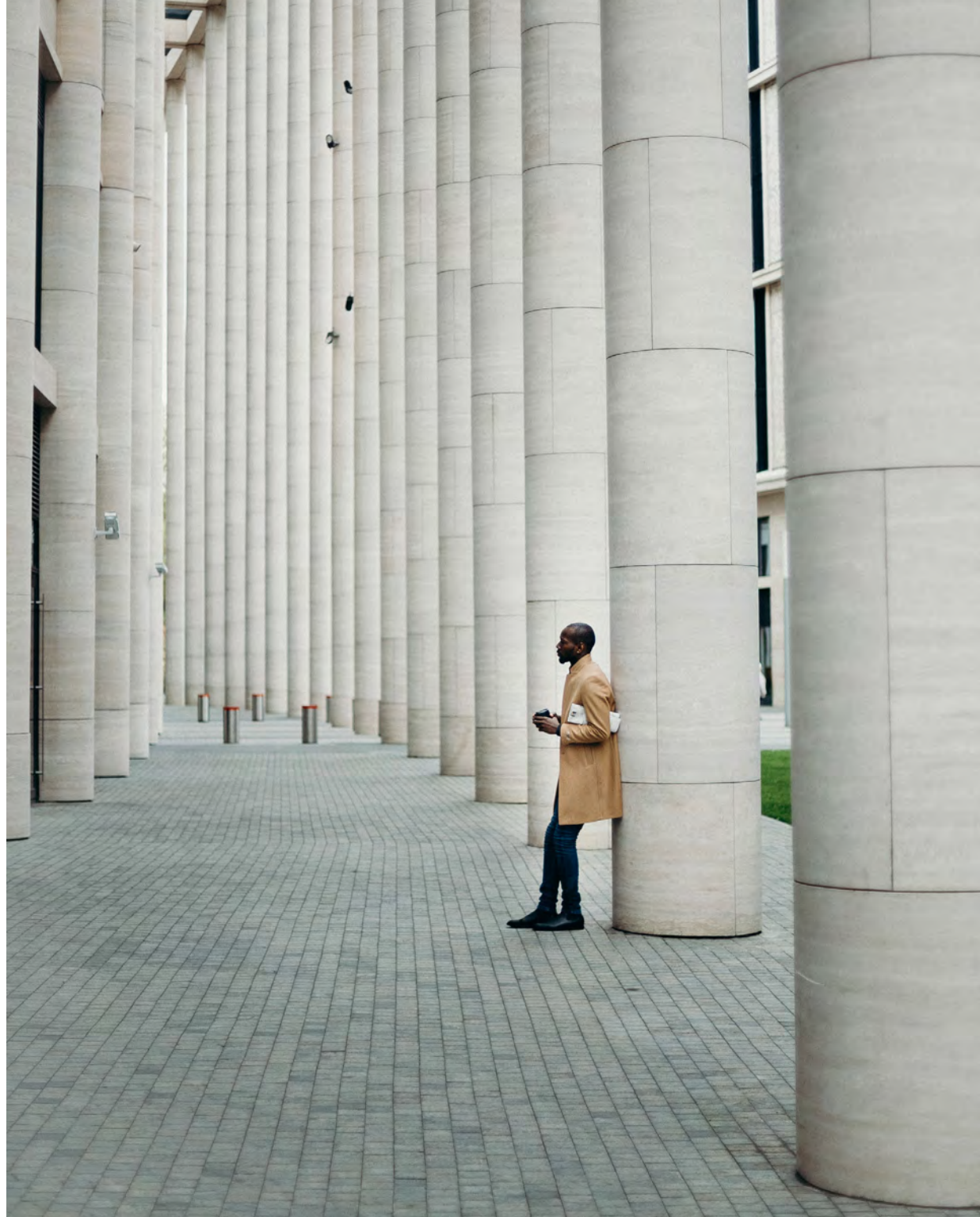
TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROCESS OVERVIEW

From summer 2020 to spring 2021, DI led teams at employers through a human-centered design (HCD) process incorporating equity, creativity, and leadership development. This process was designed to equip employee-led teams to make jobs better by understanding key issues at their organization and co-creating small-scale tests to address them.

WHAT IS HCD?

HCD is a creative problem-solving process centered on the principle that those closest to a problem or issue have critical insight into the needed or potential solutions. HCD typically entails four key steps:

DISCOVERY:

- *Listening with empathy to understand people and issues*
- *Discover all aspects of the problem*

SYNTHESIS:

- *Make sense of emerging patterns and themes*
- *Identify the most pressing opportunities*

IDEATION:

- *Brainstorm ideas and potential solutions*

PROTOTYPING:

- *Test ideas with stakeholders*
- *Understand viability and desirability through small tests of change*

HCD differs from traditional change processes in its focus on collaboration, building empathy and deep understanding, considering divergent possibilities, and learning through action. The HCD process is inherently inclusive, centering voices that are often left out of organizational decision-making. **This democratizes the design process and allows the unique perspectives of multiple stakeholders to shape the end deliverable.**

HOW DOES HCD COMPARE TO OTHER MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS?

Elements of HCD appear in other management systems, many of which are prominent among businesses focused on social impact. However, companies have used these systems to great success, sometimes in partnership with HCD.

The chart below outlines several popular management systems:

Open-Book Management (OBM)	Teal Organizations	Entrepreneurship Operating System (EOS)
• Popularized by *The Great Game of Business* (Jack Stack & Bo Burlingham)	• Based on *Reinventing Organizations* (Frederic Laloux)	• Popularized by *Traction* (Gino Wickman)
• Trains all employees to think like business owner, empowers workers by openly sharing financials	• Prioritizes wholeness, self-management, and evolutionary purpose as key to success	• Focuses on systems that establish accountability and group problem solving
• Invites workers at all levels to take ownership over decisions big and small that may positively impact bottom line	• Workers feel ownership and autonomy over their experiences	• Helps connect individual roles to organizational strategies
	• Teal companies are orderly but egalitarian	• Popular among many small companies

Each of these systems include elements of HCD and have much to teach us. Yet, none of them directly apply all the tools and approaches of HCD to the workplace. **"True" HCD is particularly distinct in the ways that it engages worker voice in discovering problems as well as solving them.**

APPLYING HCD TO JOB DESIGN

Building on the "human-centered" nature of HCD, DI created its process to center individuals who stand to be most impacted by job design efforts. At each employer partner, core teams included a mix of human resources and operations leaders, frontline managers, and frontline staff.

HCD is useful in addressing complex problems such as job design because it invites participants to slow down and deeply understand issues in ways that center worker voice. Empathic discovery enables practitioners to understand divergent perspectives on key issues while building collaborative relationships. Practicing empathy through discovery challenges participants to keep an open mind, embrace a learning mindset, and continually reground in the needs and expertise of those closest to the issues associated with job design. Additionally, HCD's focus on iterative learning through ideation and prototyping allows for ongoing flexibility and adaptability.

Empathy: How to use diverse perspectives to improve job quality.

Change: How to lean into learning through small scale tests.

Collaboration: How to share power and create new ideas as a team.

Through this process, DI observed three key ways applying HCD to job design builds organizational capacity to design jobs inclusively and collaboratively:

Building Empathy - When teams learn about organizational issues through multiple, often divergent lenses, they build empathy and understanding across roles. Focus groups were a pivotal, eye-opening experience for teams that allowed them to create needed solutions, demonstrating the value of engaging diverse perspectives to improve job quality.

Small Change, Big Impact - When teams practice small tests of change, they learn to iterate on job design interventions in a way that maximizes impact, rather than focusing solely on implementation or rollout

Fostering Collaboration and Trust - When employers approach job design with cross-functional, cross-level teams that center the expertise of frontline workers, they learn how to share decision-making power across levels to create new ideas together and build trust.
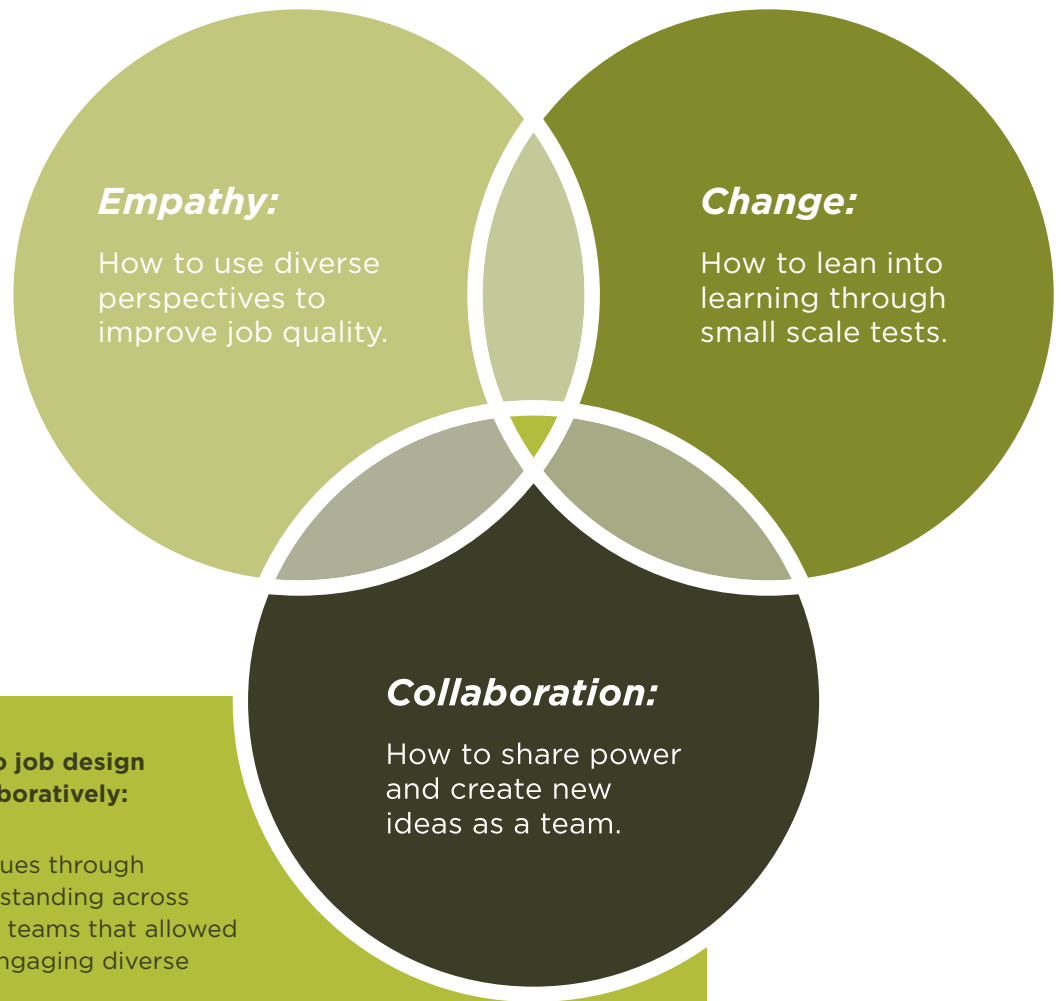
HCD can feel like a big undertaking — building something in partnership with a diverse group of stakeholders requires organizations to carve out the time and patience to slow down. Yet by inviting frontline workers to collaborate, cocreate, and bring their skills and expertise to the table alongside leaders, organizations can develop more effective, sustainable ideas that better meet employee's needs.

WORKING WITH EMPLOYERS TO MAKE JOBS BETTER

Beginning in August 2020, DI worked with cross-functional, cross-level core teams from eight small- to medium- sized businesses over a 10-month period to apply HCD to job design efforts. Employer partners spanned sectors including food service, childcare, manufacturing, and senior care. Teams at each employer included leaders, HR, managers, and workers. Senior leaders supported the process throughout, both by ensuring teams had dedicated resources and time for the work, as well as helping champion ideas generated into prototyping and ultimately, sustainability.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, DI facilitated this process virtually through a series of remote core team working sessions with each employer, supported by remote one-on-one coaching with team leads and periodic remote senior leadership check-ins. While a remote process provided some challenges (detailed later in Recommendations), our learnings suggest virtual HCD processes can prove highly impactful for organizations.

The HCD job design process took place over six key phases:

Phase 1: Orient

Orienting to the process and building the team

Pre-Work
Getting to Know the Company

Session 1
Planning with Employers

Session 2
Core Team Kickoff

Phase 2: Discover

Identifying areas of research and learning

Session 3
Determining Project Focus

Session 4
Planning Your Focus Group

Fieldwork
Run Focus Group

Phase 3: Sense Making

Reviewing research, identifying opportunities

Session 5
Learning from Focus Groups

Session 6
Defining the Opportunity

Leadership Check-in

Fieldwork
Gather feedback on opportunity areas

Phase 4: Ideation

Identifying ideas and developing concepts to test

Session 7
Brainstorm Ideas

Session 8
Select your Lead Ideas

Leadership Check-in

Fieldwork
Gather feedback on ideas

Phase 5: Prototyping

Introduction and planning on testing selected ideas

Session 9
Build to Prototype 1.0

Session 10
Learnings from Prototype 1.0

Leadership Check-in

Fieldwork
Test your prototype

Phase 6: Planning for Launch

Building the business case for investment, refining and scaling prototypes

Session 11
Learnings from Prototypes 2.0

Session 12
Launch Planning

Leadership Check-in

Fieldwork
Continue testing prototype

JOB DESIGN PROTOTYPES

Through the HCD process, all eight employer teams identified opportunities and tested solutions in the form of prototypes. **These prototypes included:**

Huddle Practices:

A bi-weekly convening that built stronger relationships between supervisors and team members.

An Internal Rewards Program:

Improving supervisor and staff relationships and create a culture of recognition.

Onboarding Buddies:

Helping new hires build relationships and gain insight to a new company, thus increasing retention. Buddies also benefit from informal leadership roles that build coaching and relational skills.

A Staff-led Forum:

Giving frontline employees space to share concerns and ideas in an open, empathetic, and collaborative environment.

Stay Interviews:

Annual meetings to provide structured touchpoints for employees to share feedback and ideas for improving company culture and practices.

A Smartphone Application:

Improving communication and knowledge sharing, organization wide, between staff.

Soft Skills Training for Supervisors:

Equipping foremen to manage conflict, resolution and relationship building within work teams, ensuring that frontline workers feel supported by both their manager and their peers.

Cross-training Staff:

Ensuring that each function of the manufacturing process can be completed by more than one individual. This increases production capacity while simultaneously offering employees an opportunity to learn new skills and develop new pathways within the company.

Notably, many of these prototypes were designed to create more **empathic** and **collaborative work environments**, whether by operationalizing practices that center worker voice, expanding understanding across roles, or fostering relationships and interpersonal skills. As such, HCD may be a welcome process for organizations seeking to improve organizational outcomes around individual performance, employee engagement, and commitment to the organization.

HCD PROCESS EVALUATION:

APPROACH & METHODOLOGY
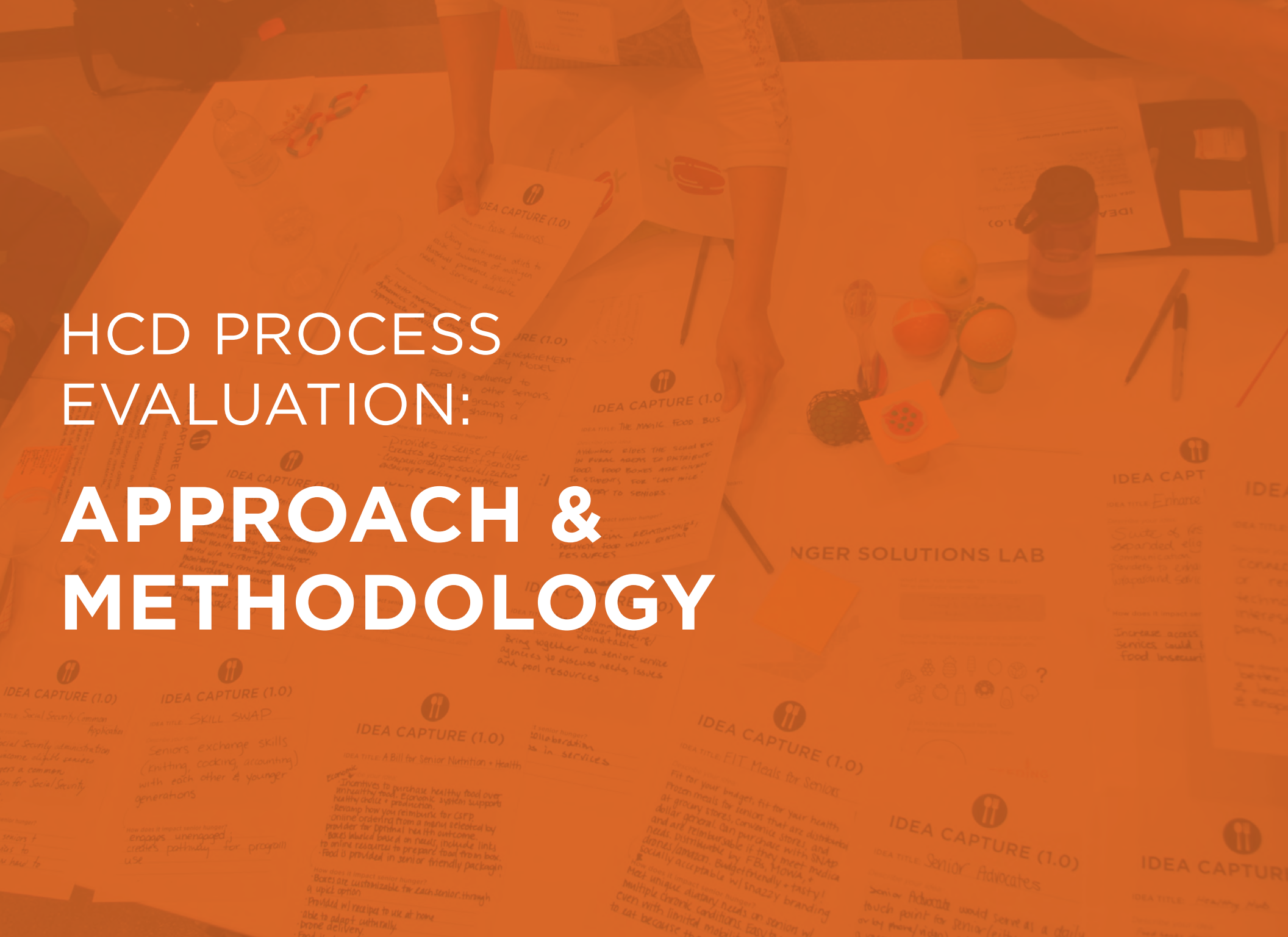
At the time of this evaluation, employers are continuing to test their prototypes, measure their impact, and plan for sustainability. Rather than focus on the impact of the prototypes, this report evaluates **the impact of the HCD process** on the people, teams, and organizations who participated in it.

HOW WE EVALUATE OUR IMPACT

DI's theory of change outlines that sustainable social change lies at the intersection of creativity, equity, and leadership. This unique combination is highly effective in empowering individuals and teams to develop innovative, collaborative, and inclusive practices in their work. For more on our theory of change and how it guides DI's work, visit our website.

DI assesses impact by evaluating how **mindsets**, **actions**, and **conditions change over time**. We understand that in order for conditions to change we must first change our actions and mindsets. In organizational change processes, we recognize that organizations are made of people; thus, for culture change to be sustainable, people's mindsets and behaviors must also change.

DI defines mindsets as beliefs, values, and attitudes that drive actions toward social change. We define actions as behaviors that ultimately change conditions. DI defines conditions as changes in culture, structures, process and resources across individuals, organizations, and systems.

This evaluation process focused primarily on **mindset shifts that took place during the HCD process**.

SELECTING MINDSETS TO EVALUATE PROCESS IMPACT

At the onset of the process, DI invited each employer team to select three mindsets they wanted to grow through the process. Teams selected from the following mindsets to center their work:

• Value open and transparent feedback as critical for growth

• Value all employees as powerful contributors to the whole

• Value diverse perspectives and experiences as a part of job quality efforts

• Value quality staff relationships as part of defining business success

• Value equity and inclusion

• Value vulnerability as a key leadership tool

• Value risk-taking, failure, growth, and change

• Value the role that empathy plays in problem-solving

EVALUATING MINDSET SHIFTS

DI assessed change among participants through a blend of individual reflections, focus groups and one-on-one interviews.

Throughout the process, we facilitated discussion around the implications of the selected mindsets and invited teams to lean into practicing them.

At key points, we also asked participating individuals to reflect on their growth using three open-ended questions:

• What are you noticing in yourself?

• What are you noticing in this team?

• What are you noticing in your organization?

The practice of setting and reflecting on these mindsets became self-affirming: participants grew in their ability to center these mindsets and their ability to notice where their behaviors were (or were not) aligned with their intentions.

> **"** We chose the outcome 'Value Equity & Inclusion.' Now, I pause and take a moment and view things through an equity lens. Through the process, I looked back on the way I handled past workplace situations. Honestly, before this process, I didn't use that lens. I'm seeing it with my supervisors too. It has really changed our mindset on how we approach, interact with, and evaluate employees. We are conscious now of what may be happening and what may be inequitable to other people. **"**

In addition to the focused reflections from the eight teams, the evaluation included a set of three retrospective focus groups and three individual interviews conducted at the end of the process with participants across organizations. These groups were segmented to represent frontline staff, managers, and organizational leaders. DI recorded and synthesized the reflections, focus groups, and interviews across organizations to arrive at the impact and recommendations reported in the following section.
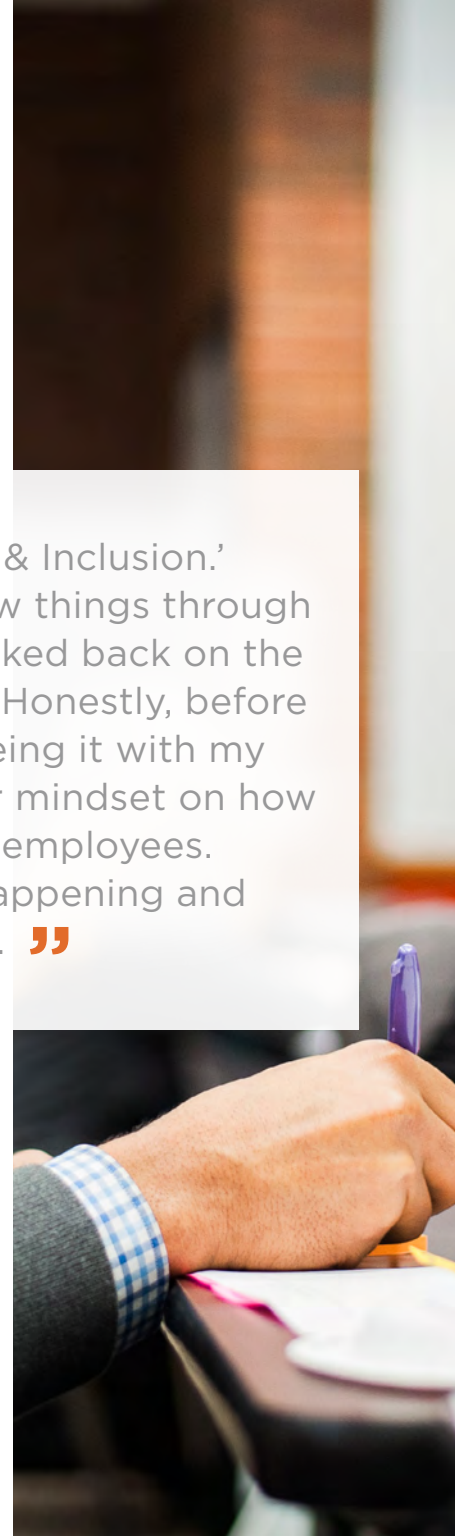
OUR IMPACT:

MINDSET & BEHAVIOR SHIFTS RESULTING FROM THE HCD PROCESS

# IMPACT OVERVIEW: FOSTERING CREATIVE & INCLUSIVE LEADERS

Across employers and roles, major themes emerged around developing creative capacity, identifying trust and power, and building a sense of belonging within the organization.

Learnings suggest that this process supported individual growth as well as alignment to strategic business outcomes. When viewed collectively, these themes point to a process that develops creative and inclusive leaders at all levels of the organization. Participants learned to listen and to use their voices. Through the process they built individual agency, trust across difference, and a sense of belonging in the organization. These mindsets and behaviors foster movement against key business outcomes that positively impact organizational performance. Critically, these changes occurred in leadership, managerial, and frontline participants, as can be seen in the following reflection:

> **"** I have learned to step back more and allow others to find their way. Things don't have to be perfect. [Now] we're going to work together, not just me doing the work when others want to step up and take the reins. **"**

- HR Director

Next, we outline three significant ways people, teams, and organizations changed through the HCD process. For each theme, we have included the growth mindsets (beliefs, attitudes, and values) that were present for each, a key insight or aha moment that emerged, quotes from participants that demonstrate this change, and how these leadership shifts connect to key drivers of organizational performance.
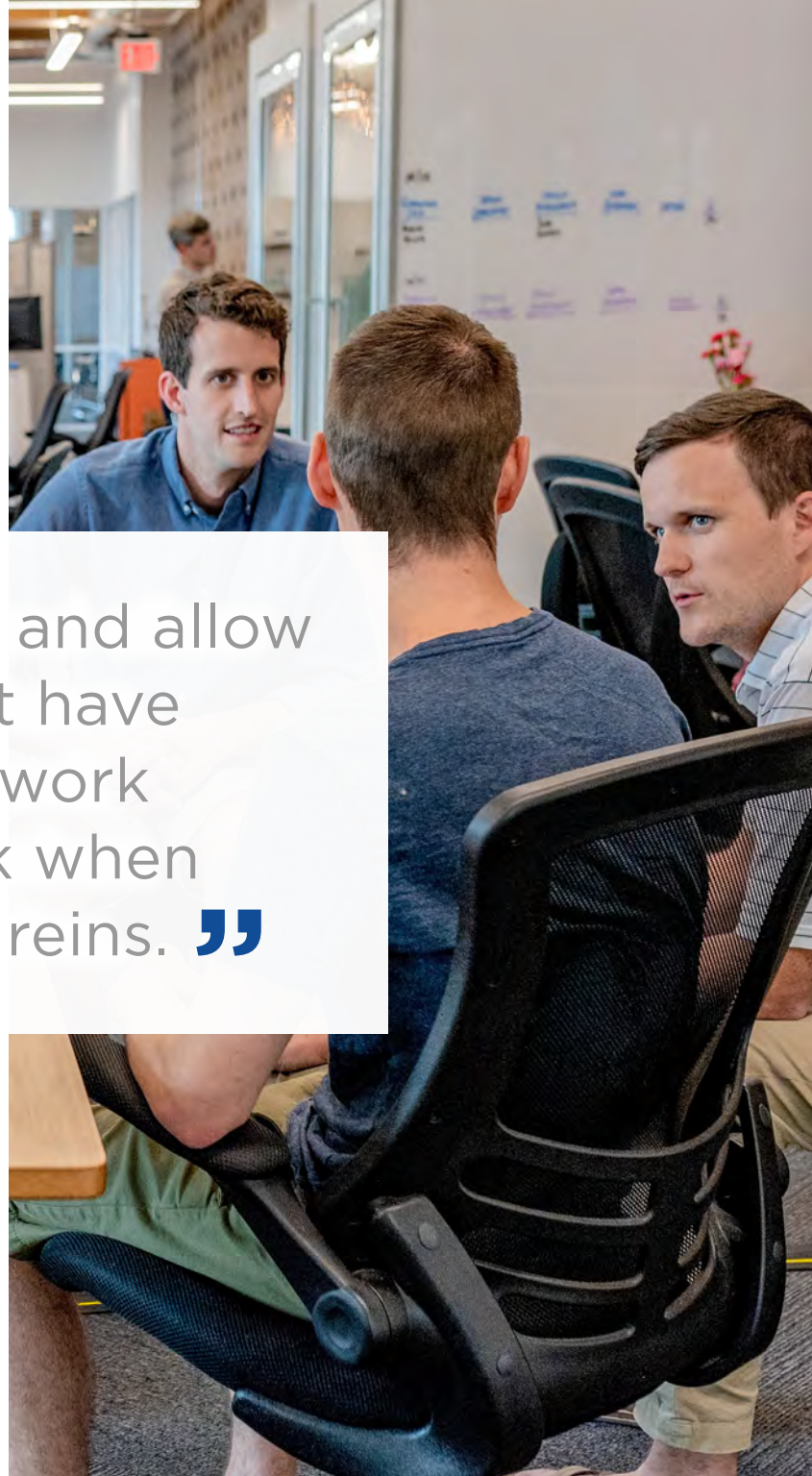
CREATING SPACE FOR LEADERS & CAPACITY FOR CHANGE

For frontline employees, being invited into the HCD process was intimidating at first — many were not accustomed to being asked to share their expertise with leaders. The individuals on the teams began the process with a desire to make their organization and jobs better and, through the process, realized the impact that their individual growth can have on the organization.

By centering the process around worker voice, DI created a dedicated, supportive environment through which employees could overcome resistance and defensiveness in the face of change and different perspectives. This fostered their growth not just as individuals, but also as leaders within the organization.

This supportive environment was echoed by project leads and organizational leaders, who continually asked and deferred to frontline workers and supervisors as the "experts." In turn, managers and leaders learned that centering worker voice was not only the "right" thing to do, but it was in fact critical to being able to understand how complex issues impact staff. Through this process, individuals and teams felt more comfortable with change, ambiguity, and emerging processes. They learned to pivot, see failures as learnings, and ultimately build individual and organizational capacity for navigating change.

RELEVANT MINDSETS:

- Value open & transparent feedback as critical for growth
- Value risk-taking, failure, growth, and change

INSIGHT:

Staff has the desire and ability to change with an organization but the organization needs to provide them the space and support needed to step into leadership.

> **"** Having staff involved [in prototyping] made this work. They were our strength and knew who would want to be involved. They have the capacity and now they have the comfort level to step into those roles as leaders and influencers. They really got it done. **"**

> **"** The power of people coming together to work on something is affecting many others, not just the ones in the [core team]. **"**

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT:

Supporting the development of staff's creative capacity and ability to work in teams informs individual performance. Individuals grow in their confidence to use their voices to better the organization and in their creative problem-solving skills. When nurtured, this development ripples beyond the project and impacts others in the organization.

PRACTICING LISTENING, BUILDING TRUST

Through this work, teams built their capacity to listen with intention. They stretched their empathy by working across roles and levels, embraced divergent perspectives by conducting focus groups and getting feedback on prototypes, and practiced vulnerability by reflecting on personal and team growth. DI worked with teams to develop and operate with a set of shared commitments — or working norms — and modeled or interrupted dynamics to uphold them through the process. Together, these practices created trust among core team members and fostered individual openness to embracing new points of view. Because of this, all participants felt their contributions were valued and respected.

Core team sessions created space to ensure each participant had a voice, influence, and power within the team. With this, participants gained experience operating in a shared power model, one quite different from the traditional decision-making hierarchies in most organizations. This created an environment where individuals learned to listen and to be heard, helping employees gain a sense of ownership over organizational problems and the outcomes of their work.

" You can't lead alone. It takes a team to be a great leader. This project was about more than the prototype. It was about dropping boundaries, building rapport and communication. When everybody got comfortable and was able to say their thoughts, it got really interesting. Everybody had a great perspective. Everybody had one thing or another that they spoke about that I took to heart. It helped me grow. We forgot all about titles while we were in the program. "

HOW WE WORK TOGETHER:

These working norms were introduced and reaffirmed at the beginning of each core team session.

- Listen with empathy

- Bring a learning mindset instead of an expert mindset

- W.A.I.T. (Why am I talking? / Why aren't I talking?)

- Set a safe space: What's said here stays here. What's learned here leaves here

RELEVANT MINDSETS:

- Value vulnerability as a key leadership tool

- Value equity and inclusion

INSIGHT:

It is not enough to listen — we must also be open to what we might hear. When we listen with empathy and vulnerability, people feel heard, which validates others' expertise and expands their influence.

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT:

Centering empathy, vulnerability, and inclusion allows teams to operate in a space of shared power and create trust. This amplifies individual feelings of influence, belonging, and commitment to the organization, increasing their desire to be a part of positive change. It also helps leaders and businesses as a whole see how critical frontline employee voice is to sustainable organizational change.

THEME 3:

SHARING AN ORGANIZATIONAL VISION

Through this process, participants worked outside of their normal roles and siloes, which helped them see connections between their work, others' work, and the overall organization. Within any organization it is easy to feel invisible to those who don't share your role — whether you are a leader or on the frontline. However, when provided meaningful space to connect, individuals grew their understanding of ways organizational issues impact all corners of the organization. This fostered a sense of participants seeing themselves as part of a broader community, which increased their motivation to support each other and address organizational issues together.

RELEVANT MINDSETS:

- Value diverse perspectives and experiences as a part of job quality efforts

- Value quality staff relationships as part of defining business success

- Value all employees as powerful contributors to the whole

INSIGHT:

We often assume our issues are unique to us as individuals, but when we see the way organizational issues impact all of us, we increase our motivation to address them together.

> " I am noticing that I am a more active listener, understanding upper staff responsibilities are more than what they appear to be. Trying to do more self-reflection. "

> " We are stronger together. Many of us shared the same ideas and concerns. We can accomplish more with many minds instead of just one. "

ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT:

Employees want to feel like they belong at their places of work — to believe in the mission and purpose of their organizations. Yet, they often feel disconnected from this mission by hierarchy and siloed work environments. Inviting diverse staff to contribute meaningfully to solving organizational issues increases employee engagement, while actively developing solutions that contribute to the whole.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

APPLYING HCD TO FUTURE JOB DESIGN WORK WITH SMBs

RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the leadership mindsets, we learned ways the HCD process could be strengthened in future partnerships with SMBs. These recommendations focus on deepening engagement and sustaining the work beyond the project. Value diverse perspectives and experiences as a part of job quality efforts:

- Deepening time for connection

- Expanding staff engagement in the process

- Designing the process to reflect employer context

- Building a culture of risk-taking

- Supporting teams in navigating conflict

- Sustaining change through peer supports

A detailed description of each recommendation is included next.

DEEPENING TIME FOR CONNECTION

This process took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant DI facilitated a highly relational process built on trust and shared understanding entirely remotely. Employer teams had to accommodate new ways of meeting. Some joined video calls while trying to uphold safety precautions such as masks and social distancing. Others gathered around shared or individual mobile devices, or met entirely virtually. Early in the process, teams worked through technical challenges (familiarity with technology, poor connections, device availability).

Once we worked through tech challenges, we observed that power and team dynamics can be less visible to outside facilitators in virtual settings (e.g. if participants are off video or off-screen; or if it is difficult to discern who is speaking due to masks). To accommodate this, DI coached teams to "facilitate" among themselves, calling each other into the space with empathy and naming power dynamics when they saw them.

Despite these challenges, teams were able to build trust both with external facilitators and with each other. In small

> " The trust wasn't there. They had to build it, and even get comfortable talking with each other. Even though it was a virtual setting, they still had to meet in one room. It was hard because people weren't comfortable being honest and vulnerable with strangers. "

ways, a virtual process made scheduling and attending easier (some frontline employees even dialed-in mid-shift). That said, a key learning is that building trust in a virtual environment takes longer than it does in person, which sometimes means abandoning preplanned agendas to hold space for teams to connect or ask questions. Additionally, we received recommendations for more individual project coaching throughout the HCD process. Coaching in between sessions helped provide clarity for the project leaders and could be useful for participating staff as well.

RECOMMENDATION:

Create more room in the process for relational connections both with outside facilitators and among staff, particularly in virtual processes.

This may look like:

- Conducting tech assessments prior to initiating a virtual cohort and ensuring all team members are equipped with the necessary support (e.g. laptops, webcams, training around devices, or virtual tools)

- Building structures in the process for teams to "connect" as a core team outside of the process to build camaraderie

- Hosting periodic check-ins between outside facilitators and individual team members to build relationships and share concerns they may not feel comfortable sharing among the group

- Ensuring process facilitators and team leads are equipped to navigate power dynamics even amidst virtual barriers

EXPANDING STAFF ENGAGEMENT IN THE PROCESS

Participants lauded the focus groups, which were a key step in using employee voice to drive project focus and vital to engaging voices across the organization, including those not on the core team. They believed focus groups provided brave spaces for staff (with varying degrees of organizational power) to share perspectives and influence the organizational direction. The impact was heightened as organizations noted few other opportunities that invite staff to share their feedback and ideas openly. With this, organizations may see value in increasing these types of touchpoints within and beyond an HCD process to support inclusive decision-making and expand who holds power and influence.

Importantly, who participated in and ran the focus groups impacted the types of insights shared — when managers and leaders stepped out and frontline employees facilitated conversations among peers, they gained deeper insight from participants. Moving forward, organizations should consider power dynamics and psychological safety of participants when deciding who will facilitate the focus groups.

> " The focus groups were therapeutic for employees because they got to get things off their chest, and people were happy to be able to share. It was powerful to learn about the organization from their peers and people appreciated the opportunity to express themselves. "

RECOMMENDATION:

Design more opportunities to engage more deeply across an organization's employee base.

This may look like:

- Encouraging core team members to solicit feedback about the ideation plan before moving it ahead

- Holding open "office hours" to respond to any ongoing questions, concerns, or conflicts for HCD participants

- Embedding more focus groups into the process or extending the "discovery phase" to allow teams to engage more stakeholders

DESIGNING THE PROCESS TO REFLECT EMPLOYER CONTEXT

As the HCD process was applied across a range of sectors, we observed opportunities to better tailor the experience to reflect organizational workstyles and culture. While participant engagement was strong (as measured by attendance, energy, and execution of deliverables), we recognize that different groups had varying levels of readiness for the different aspects the facilitated process required. Barriers to investment included the time commitment required during the workday, the alignment of sessions with existing schedules, the type of "business" language used during the process to describe activities or expectations, or particularly of note, an insight that the process seemed oriented toward "people who work at desks."

DI worked with organizational leads to be responsive to the needs of each staff and organization, but in future efforts, more could be done to align the process with the specific contexts of organizations and participants within the process.

> **"** In long-term care, people are never sitting down, so it is very hard to sit down, and they are not good at it. In our industry we are short-staffed. It is hard to get people to focus the first 10-20 minutes of meetings. Their minds are elsewhere, so it takes a little bit of time. **"**

RECOMMENDATION:

Identify the shifts in the process needed to reflect the unique orientation of different industries, resulting in more impactful outcomes and the possibility to spread the process within specific sectors.

This may look like:

- Increasing asynchronous work time to allow teams to work on timelines and schedules that fit their needs

- Ensuring business terms are unpacked and understood — and jargon is avoided if possible

- Incorporating more kinaesthetic and hands-on activities into the process

SUPPORTING TEAMS IN NAVIGATING CONFLICT

Constructing teams that reflect the composition of the organization, from organizational leaders to frontline workers, ensures that there is buy-in at all levels of the organization that can lead to powerful learning for all participants. Traditionally, teams often focused on the direction or support they would receive from leadership; in this process, they learned it is equally important to center and prioritize the perspectives and support of managers and frontline staff. Participants reported that authentically listening as part of a diverse team requires vulnerability and that this sometimes resulted in tense exchanges and difficult conversations. However, these are the moments where the greatest learning can occur.

> " In the middle of the process when individuals weren't seeing eye to eye, I had to go to the person one-on-one and talk about the big picture and remind them of the long-term goals. I asked them to take a look at things from others' perspectives. I had to mend some things on behalf of conflicting parties. I learned to step back and look at the bigger picture and how to bring people back together. "

RECOMMENDATION:

Recognize that working across levels is new for many organizations and teams will need support to grow in their ability to navigate the power dynamics and conflict that may emerge through the process.

This may look like:

- Providing more direct support to teams in navigating power and positionality, especially as it shows up in hard conversations about work culture and roles

- Equipping teams to accept and implement feedback from people with varying levels of organizational power

BUILDING A CULTURE OF RISK-TAKING

Overall, participants expressed excitement about the future of the prototypes they created through the HCD process. In many cases, teams reported ways the process opened up new visions and ways of working for their organizations and viewed the prototypes as vital first steps to sustaining those cultural shifts. However, there were differences in how confident people felt in suggesting large-scale or long-term structural changes to their organizations. Some participants noted that they chose challenges that seemed manageable or even incremental, while others noted this opportunity gave them the chance to tackle challenges that seemed a little more aspirational and daunting.

These decisions were informed by the organizational investment in a culture of risk-taking. Plans and suggestions were made based on the core group and focus groups' understanding of how far organizational leaders would be willing to go to make large-scale changes. This tension even shaped how invested some people were in the process, as those who were in less senior roles often were interested in significant organizational changes, which differed from the incremental changes that senior leaders often supported.

> " The team was going the pragmatic route at first [because] they didn't think the organization was actually going to do anything... They kept saying, this will never happen. They needed that reinforcement... They needed to know that their ideas would be seen through. A key part of making the decision to go big is you need someone in leadership to stand up, support, and push the team. "

RECOMMENDATION:

Center a culture of risk-taking as a key feature of this process, along with an emphasis on building organizational cultures where it is permitted — even encouraged — to fail.

This may look like:

- Identifying a "champion" throughout the process who will encourage staff to think big and divergently

- Securing commitment from organizational leaders earlier in the process to ensure ideas are sustainable

- Engaging leaders in connecting prototypes to longer-term organizational goals to bring more accountability to the process

SUSTAINING CHANGE THROUGH STRUCTURED SUPPORTS

Each team in the process successfully prototyped an intervention that will impact organizational culture, but much of the benefit of this work is through the development of leadership capabilities in the core teams. Participants noted how useful "the container" that DI offered was for an opportunity for respite and as a chance to showcase other parts of themselves not normally displayed at work. The container for this development was created by the external facilitation team, and many participants rightfully reflected on the difficulty of maintaining this space after the process has ended and the facilitation team has moved on. At the same time, leaders reflected on the power of facilitated connections within organizations, and the possible usefulness of peer connections across other organizations that could be formed through the process.

" This year was tough. It was overwhelming to keep doing this work, but stepping away to this process became a refuge. To step away from the stuff that had to be done, the fear, the work and the intensity of that, and go away to something that was different. It became a respite and allowed the creative mind to work quite differently. **"**

RECOMMENDATION:

Create support structures that can help sustain mindset and behavior shifts beyond the boundaries of the project.

This may look like:

- Building peer coaching opportunities through an employer network

- Equipping team leads as change ambassadors who can facilitate and "hold change" once the process facilitators are no longer involved

- Create space within the process to ideate around structures needed to sustain this way of collaborating internally

EMPLOYER SPOTLIGHTS

WE ARE FAMILY - THE NEED TO DEEPEN WORKPLACE TRUST

The Challenge - *Restoring a Family Feeling in the Workplace*

A small business in the Midwest began this process with hopes to restore a familial feeling in their workplace. Through focus groups, they learned much of the staff felt alienated from each other, citing communication barriers, an inability to value each other's differences, and a feeling that staff's opinions on the direction of the organization did not matter.

❝ Staff didn't feel like a family anymore... I noticed people not having empathy, and communication was lacking. People felt that if they weren't management they didn't have a voice in the organization...Everybody just needs to be on the same page. People need to understand your vision. And they need to explain the vision to people to get the buy-in. Leaders also need to understand the perspective of the people they are working with. ❞

The Prototype - *Let's Talk About It: Open Staff Forum*

To respond to their most pressing issues, this organization created a test called "Let's Talk About It" This pilot created a brave space for staff to gather at least twice a month to ideate on workplace improvements, air grievances, or just build relationships with other staff members. This space was offered because some staff felt their opinions weren't normally heard, and this was designed to be a confidential space where people could talk openly about anything related to the workplace.

❝ We get together twice a month and talk about whatever is happening at the job. Ideas and rewards for staff, if people need to get something off your chest, share ideas, it's just an open forum...We framed the space as a confidential opportunity, and people were eager to share openly...You can speak and be heard, 'what is said here stays here.' ❞

The Impact - *Improved Communication and Engaged Participation*

The prototype was a success! Staff was eager to participate because it was their opportunity to share their thoughts openly, and to ideate on ways to improve the workplace. These conversations helped improve communication challenges because staff and managers were able to unpack important issues together. "Let's Talk About It" helped staff build empathy and navigate conflict. However, the prototype had the most impact on whether staff felt valued by the organization — a key driver of employee engagement, commitment, and retention. In these forums, staff was able to share openly and make plans to act on some of their suggestions on organizational improvements. Empathy, understanding, and belonging are a few words that describe the possibilities of this organization moving forward.

❝ [Before] Staff didn't know the chain of command. So sometimes there was misplaced anger...[Now] We learned not to take things so personally. My biggest takeaway from this was really understanding others, their views and how they see things...It's easy to assume things about people. Seeing or hearing how someone interprets things helps me understand their decisions and how they show up at work. We had to take a step back and understand individuals at every level. I feel a lighter feeling when I walk through the workplace. It is not a complete change, but my hope is that we can get back to being like a family. ❞

YOU CAN'T LEAD ALONE - A JOURNEY TO DECENTRALIZING ORGANIZATIONAL POWER

The Challenge - *Communication, power imbalances, burnout*

This employer entered the HCD process hoping to reinvigorate staff who were experiencing strained communication, staff-perceived power imbalances between individuals in the organization, and a deep look at how these challenges and others related to burnout at the organization.

❝ I'd be in staff meetings and be slow to talk. I used to be vocal, but over the years I toned it down because everybody doesn't want you to speak your truth. **❞**

The Prototype - *Onboarding buddies*

Through the HCD process, this organization was able to listen to the concerns of staff and center those in the type of prototype pilot they initiated. This helped strengthen connections between staff and organizational leaders, and led to more shared decision-making. This included starting a pilot buddy program for tenured and newer staff to participate in. New teachers would be paired with more tenured teachers to help facilitate their transition into the organizational culture, and give them key advice about technical parts of the jobs that would sometimes be hard to uncover without a dedicated resource.

❝ We want the new hired staff to be able to come in and at least feel at home a little bit. Sometimes you come in and nobody talks to you. People have said that if they would have had this buddy system it would have helped their transition. So far, those who are participating in the buddy program like it and feel more welcomed. Newcomers are pleased to have a go-to person when needed. **❞**

The Impact - *Bringing staff closer to management*

The HCD process brought the staff of this organization closer together despite differences in positional power. Seeing their ability to influence organizational efforts inspired participants to want to become more vocal leaders within the organization, to develop better rapport with management, and to restore their passion and commitment to the organization.

❝ This program taught me I can be a better teacher, leader, and more open to colleagues and better assist others. It gave me an opportunity to get back to where I wanted to be. This [process] environment helped our team realize that we are all one team and it's not just about manager insights, but everybody's opinion matters…It helps to know that it doesn't matter what your position is, I can talk and speak freely.
The process helped sharpen my communication skills. **❞**

EQUITY AT THE CENTER - A MOVE TO HONORING INDIVIDUAL WHOLENESS

The Challenge - Ad hoc decision-making and inconsistent experiences

Through the HCD process, an organization hoped to spend time testing strategies to center diversity, equity, and inclusion in their operations. But in speaking with employees, they heard the need to slow down and listen first before launching new organizational changes. The process revealed that managers were responsible for communication and feedback, yet management styles (and effectiveness) varied widely, leaving staff seeking clarity and consistency on roles, expectations, training, and promotions. This caused frontline staff to feel disconnected from the organization and how decisions were made. Employees felt if their perspectives weren't heard in supervisory relationships, then diversity, equity, and inclusion would be unobtainable.

❝ We heard from the focus groups that staff felt disconnected from the company…Typically, we go 100 MPH [when making decisions] without any feedback. Now we know how to get a focus group together, to seek input on organizational decisions; how to ask questions…It was interesting to see how staff perceive things and the policies that the organization has. It helped us better understand people's roles more. ❞

The Prototype - Annual surveys centering employee voice. Open communication channels

In response to the tensions raised by employees, this organization instituted several new initiatives. They designed an annual "stay interview" survey to gather feedback from the staff on organizational direction, culture, and equity. This practice fostered more open communication channels, creating more clarity and consistency for employees and taking the onus of communication off managers. And critically, leaders are responding to what employees are elevating. Responding to employee requests for equitable training options, they are testing a second prototype: a new training program to help better understand paths to promotion within the organization.

❝ We asked our employees what made them want to stay, and where they wanted to grow into the organization. We have surveyed most of the company. We are looking to do this survey every year to address whatever the organizational issues are… This effort takes communication off 'only' managers. Now [leaders] are going directly to employees to build relationships and trust. Also, we decided to make training more accessible and equitable to everyone so they don't have to come to the main office. ❞

The Impact - Applying an equity lens

Through this process, participating leaders and staff learned the importance of pausing and viewing organizational decisions through an equity lens. A leader shared how applying empathy and equity is helping her better understand structural barriers that may be impacting employee performance and experience — prompting her to reflect on past terminations where she did not apply that lens. Moving forward, organizational leaders are committed to engaging staff in shaping institutional decisions and exploring ways to sustain an employee-led equity council.

❝ I thought we would focus on equity, but it turned out we will fold equity into everything we do…We are conscious now of what may be happening to staff and what may be inequitable [decisions] to other people…I am prioritizing equity and how I approach employees, and how I talk with managers about how they interact with staff. I know how important it is to get to know employees and understand their stories and individual challenges better. ❞

SUPPORTING COLLABORATION - COMMITTING TO EMPLOYEE GROWTH & LEADERSHIP

The Challenge - *Inadequate training for supervisors*

A construction group with nearly 200 employees decided HCD could be the collaborative process they needed to understand how to create valued and productive work crews and to reduce turnover. Their focus groups with both newer hires, experienced staff, and supervisors helped the team understand the root of the issue. Management was being promoted based on technical merit, not on their ability to manage people, build healthy team dynamics, and train people on the job and under pressure. Supervisors weren't supported to succeed and therefore couldn't support their teams. Teams reported an uncomfortable and stressful work environment, which impacted the ability to effectively train and retain new hires.

The Prototype - *Soft skills training for supervisors*

This employer believed that one way to increase job quality for both management and the crew was to train supervisors to be supportive and effective managers. They hired a facilitator to run a 90-minute conflict management training, off-site, for the six core team members and six additional facilitators. The training received positive feedback from all participants. They appreciated an opportunity to learn something new with fellow employees they didn't typically interact with. And even though a relatively small percentage of employees received this training, the buzz and positive feedback from across the company was evident.

The Impact - *A culture of support*

The success of this training supported the organization's early inclinations to invest more resources (time and staff) toward training staff. During the project, the organization promoted an employee to the position of training coordinator. This role alongside Human Resource leadership will convene employees regularly to best understand how to support staff and management training needs. They believe adequately trained employees will increase commitment to the organization, reduce turnover, and ultimately result in better customer service. In addition, the collaborative process and the human-centered approach has reoriented some of the company's leadership to seek out employee voice when making big decisions. They plan to facilitate more opportunities to create dynamic and diverse groups of staff to help problem solve.

❝ I'm noticing that I have to rely on a wide variety of people to achieve optimal success. It's ok to put your thoughts aside for a minute and let others arise. ❞

CLOSING & THANK YOU

CLOSING

Design Impact launched this work in the spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic radically upended the lives and livelihoods of millions of workers and their families. At the same time, the nation continues to endure a second pandemic of police brutality and racial injustice. The impact of this dual pandemic has been felt deeply among small- to medium-sized businesses, and even more acutely among frontline workers — who are disproportionately people of color.

Amidst this unprecedented tumult, the employers, funders, and community partners supporting this work **doubled down on their commitment to centering frontline workers in making jobs better**. In particular, we have been humbled by the resilience and commitment of the nearly 50 staff — many frontline — across eight employers who gave their time, ideas, and passion to this process. We look forward to seeing the ways that the empathy, inclusion, and creativity that defined this work continues to flourish as key enablers of good jobs at these organizations and beyond.

THANK YOU

We are thankful to the countless frontline workers, managers, and organizational leaders who embarked on this journey with us. You brought empathy, open mindedness, and commitment to this process. Without your hard work, active participation, and leadership at all levels, this work would not have been possible.

Community Partners Included:

• Baltimore Workforce Funders Collaborative

• Chicagoland Workforce Funder Alliance

• The Health Collaborative's Workforce Innovation department *(Greater Cincinnati)*

• Workforce Solutions Collaborative of Metro Hartford

• Preparation for Advanced Career Employment System *(Wichita)*

Employer Partners Included:

• It Takes A Village Family of Schools *(Chicago)*

• Carole Robertson Center for Learning *(Chicago)*

• Atwater's *(Baltimore)*

• Wepco Plastics Inc. *(Hartford)*

• Mahaney Group *(Wichita)*

• Life Enriching Communities *(Cincinnati)*

• Otterbein SeniorLife *(Cincinnati)*

• Maple Knoll Village *(Cincinnati)*

SPECIAL THANKS

Design Impact is a social innovation nonprofit that designs **inclusive** and **creative** approaches to complicated social problems. We combine **design**, **social justice**, and **leadership** practice to address pressing issues, equip communities, and inspire social change.

Website: d-impact.org