

The Equity Transformation Cycle (Dugan & Safir, 2021)



The Equity Transformation Cycle represents a fluid, yet structured, process that is grounded in core values-- **radical inclusion**, **curiosity**, **creativity**, and **courage** -- and centers street level data. As you move through the cycle you will learn to listen deeply to voices at the margins, uncover the root causes of inequities, reimagine your current approaches in partnership with key stakeholders, and move a change agenda with courage.

A Few Features:

- Notice that the cycle is nonlinear because addressing complex change is nonlinear.
- Notice that the arrows in between cycle phases go in both directions to signal that the process is nimble and built for the unpredictable rhythm of complex change. This is the emergent nature of working toward equity.
- Note that the model is built for short, 6-8 week cycles, though it can be adapted to design spiraling quarterly or semester long cycles. Like design thinking, the cycle helps us iterate our ideas and build our collective capacity to respond to changing street level conditions.
- Note that the cycle can be applied to work at every level of the system-- a classroom, a department, a school, the district.
- The entire process is built on the idea of **emergence**-- the theory that simple rules interact with one another in complex ways to shape a change process, the outcome of which cannot be predicted. Think of a chess game. There are basic universally known rules, but when two players sit down to engage in a strategic game of chess, the result cannot be predicted. It is always emergent.

LISTEN: The Mindset of Radical Inclusion

Equity-centered transformation always, *always*, begins with deep listening. Not with planning an intervention or designing professional learning, but with the choice to listen deeply to the least heard and most marginalized voices in your community. The listening phase of the cycle may emerge from satellite or map data, or it may arise from an inciting incident.

In this part of the cycle, we use the word *listening* in the broadest sense — as a physical, emotional, cognitive and relational act rather than just a method of gathering data. Listening is a dynamic exchange that brings humanity to the process of school transformation. We listen to ensure that the solutions we devise are shaped by the voices at the margins rather than our projection of what people might need.

Mindset:

Our guiding mindset at this stage is ***radical inclusion***. In practicing this mindset, we commit to identify and include the voices of those who may have never had a seat at the decision-making table, but whose experiences and perspectives matter.

The listening stage invites us to be humble, acknowledging that our best-honed leadership and instructional tools may not hold the solutions we need.

Guiding Questions:

- What is the equity challenge we need to address right now, and why does it matter?
- Who is most impacted by this challenge?
- How will we listen deeply to their voices to better understand their experiences?

Traps to Be Mindful Of:

- *Transactional Listening*: Our approach to listening is as least as important as the time we set aside to do it. If we listen to a student or a parent in transactional ways, we run the risk of alienating and further marginalizing the person.
- *Unchecked Bias*: Another pitfall we must guard against is listening with unchecked implicit biases or a narrow cultural frame. Before engaging in this stage, consider, “*What assumptions, stereotypes, or deficit-based scripts might I be holding right now? How can I open up new ways of thinking and understanding?*”

Notes:

Possible Share Structure: It Says..., I Say...

UNCOVER: The Mindset of Curiosity

In this phase, we examine all the available street data in conjunction with map and satellite data to uncover the root causes of our equity challenge. It is critical to do this in a collaborative fashion by studying the data with a team. By listening deeply to voices at the margins in the LISTEN phase of the cycle, we disrupted the habit of diving into planning, before gathering street data. Even at this stage, however, it's easy to jump into a solution space before we have thoroughly explored the data. The process of UNCOVERING helps us slow down, reflect, and *value* the street data by making it the centerpiece of team conversations. A meaningful dialogue will help us stretch our thinking and challenge our assumptions.

Mindset:

The critical mindset at this stage is **curiosity**: setting aside our preconceived notions, checking our confirmation biases, and thinking deeply before coming to any conclusions. As we study the data, we try to uncover patterns, hidden stories, and misconceptions while maintaining a stance of wonder. Uncovering root causes and hidden truths can be difficult. How do we retain what educational justice organizer Jitu Brown calls “ferocious humility”, recognizing how much we *don't* know? It is important to stay curious. Curiosity helps us look and listen for deeper meaning.

Guiding Questions:

- What were our assumptions going in, and how does this data challenge them?
- What does the street data reveal and not reveal?
- What underlying patterns are becoming visible?
- What more is there to this story?
- What is most surprising in this data? What root causes are revealing themselves as we analyze the array of data?
- What invisible mental models may be shaping the outcomes we currently have?
- What entry points are emerging for disrupting business-as-usual and trying something really different?

Traps to Be Mindful Of:

The biggest pitfall at this stage is a failure to slow down and engage in a messy meaning-making that is required to dig up root causes. It is easy to defend our current ways of doing things-- to boomerang back from the edge of truly transforming our practices. In this stage of the cycle, collaborative discussion protocols can help us stay focused and disciplined as we build our capacity to have rigorous street data conversations.

Notes:

Possible Share Structure: It Says..., I Say...

REIMAGINE: The Mindset of Creativity

The third phase of equity-centered transformation invites us to reimagine our current reality with a mindset of creativity. When we engage in this phase, we aspire to resist boomeranging back to the same responses and strategies we've been using. Now that we have centered voices from the margins and begun to uncover root causes, we have an opportunity to radically reshape our pedagogy, leadership, and school culture. We can't do this in an echo chamber, however. Transformational thinking will emerge from convening a range of perspectives around the table. How do we push ourselves beyond the usual solutions and the curse of knowledge – the phenomenon where technical expertise becomes a barrier to innovation? We bring the stakeholders we initially listened to back into the conversation as co-designers. The reimaged phase is about inquiry *with* those at the margins not inquiry *for*.

Mindset:

The critical mindset at this stage is **creativity**. To reimagine, we must convey to everyone assembled that no idea is too “out there,” and we are seeking to use all means at our disposal to create new ways of being and learning together. We can stimulate creativity through the design of the meeting space, through the agenda, and by structuring conversations that foster healing and invite openness and different ways of thinking.

Guiding Questions:

- What are the people we listened to telling us about what they want and need?
- In what new directions do the root causes begin to point us?
- What creative ideas and approaches are naturally emerging from the data and the dialogue?
- What would success look like if we move in these directions?
- What do you feel excited to do or try next?

Traps to Be Mindful Of:

The biggest pitfall at this stage is reverting back to the same strategies you've been using because they're familiar, comfortable, or don't shake the table. At the reimagine phase, it is easy to fall back to past practices (maybe with some minor tweaks), even dysfunctional ones. Doing something really different may be terrifying enough to elicit resistant responses. With openness and with the right voices in the mix, we can reimagine the current landscape.

Notes:

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MOVE: The Mindset of Courage

Change is *hard*. Just because we reimagined the landscape of possibility doesn't mean we have fortified ourselves to act. As we shift toward moving the work, we have an opportunity to get courageous and orient ourselves in a whole new direction. In this action stage, we are mindful of common equity traps, and we proactively plan to avoid them. It's time to envision the possibility of success, while acknowledging the possibility of failure. In this stage of the cycle, we embrace vulnerability and learn from mistakes, looping back to the LISTEN, UNCOVER, and REIMAGINE stages to inform our plans as needed.

Mindset:

The critical mindset at this stage is **courage**. When we commit to move, no matter what the outcome, we commit to be courageous in the face of inequity. We will meet with resistance, recalcitrance, defensiveness -- all of those things that stymie progress. But as Frederick Douglass wrote, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." Remember that the solution to an equity challenge is often unknown and emergent. It can only be revealed by continuing to gather street data, uncover root causes, and reimagine our systems, structures, and ways of being together.

Guiding Questions:

- What is the team's call to action now, emerging from the data?
- What will you try and do together in the next four to six weeks?
- How will you monitor the implementation and the impact? How will you know it has succeeded or failed?
- What additional data will you gather?
- What will help you be courageous together and stay the course?

Traps to Be Mindful Of:

- The biggest pitfall at this stage is inaction or retreat because of fear of pushback.
- Another pitfall is unclear communication and support. As you are trying out something new, it is especially important to be mindful of what your staff might need to carry out the plan – structurally or instructionally.
- It is important to gather and uncover street data as you implement an action, and it is important to be open to revising in response to this feedback.

Notes:

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