Florida Materials Navigator

SETTING A VISION

Listening Session Planning Guide

Listening Session Planning Guide

Developed by Community Design Partners

INTRODUCTION

A listening session is a facilitated space where a group of people are asked to share their thoughts and experiences about a topic that affects them. Listening sessions offer a chance to truly hear what matters to a community.

Information from listening sessions can help your team:

- Identify or prioritize a problem to work on
- Understand the root causes of a problem
- Inform your theory of action
- Design better solutions based on specific needs of stakeholders

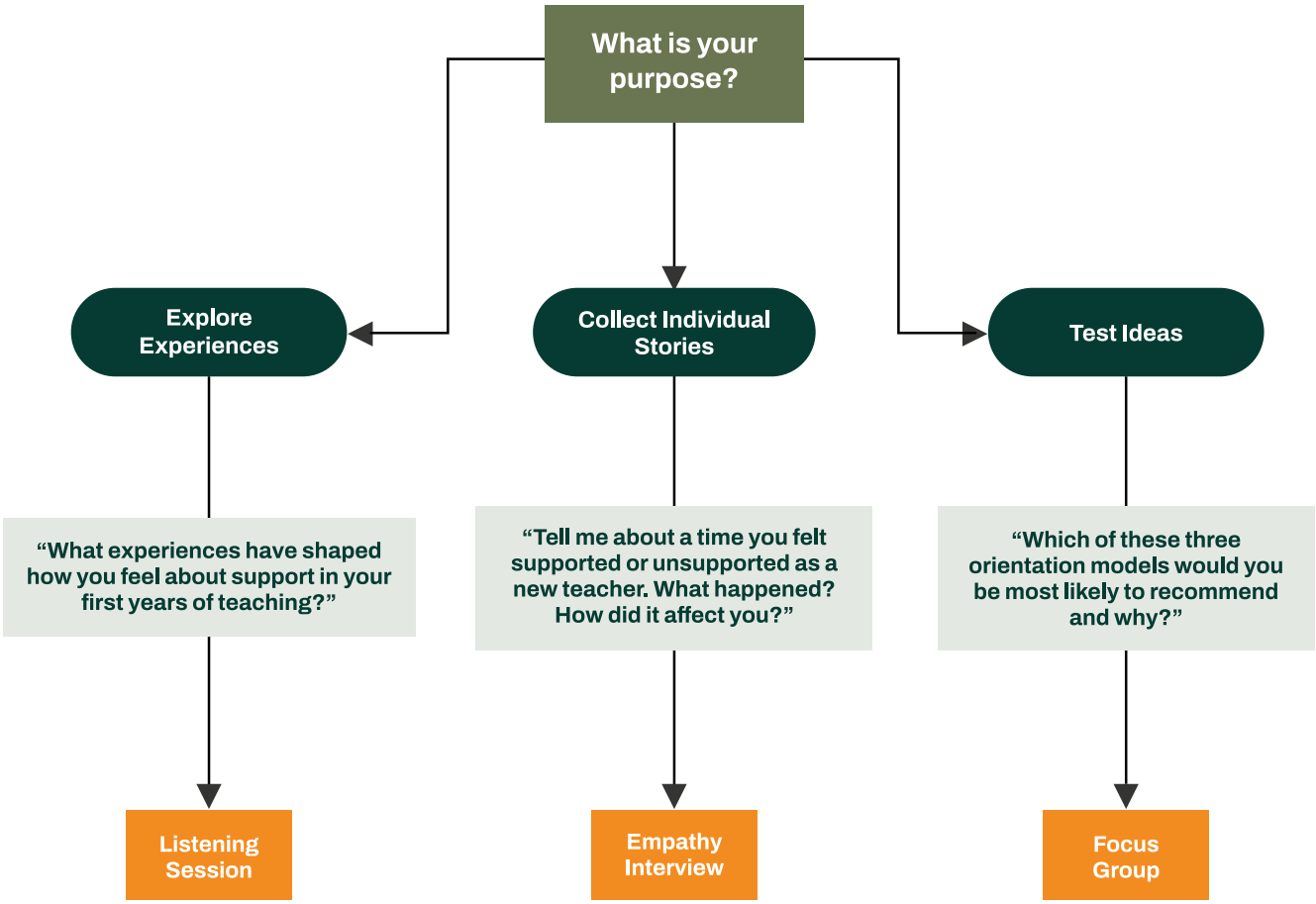
As an added benefit, relationships and trust can increase when stakeholders know their voices make a difference. This requires that listening sessions go beyond just listening; they result in influence or action, and participants are informed of—or involved in—those actions.

Listening sessions are a great method to choose if you:

- Want broad feedback about participants' experiences and perspectives
- Are able to gather *groups* of people that you most need to hear from
- Have facilitators experienced with listening sessions
- Want to build shared community engagement experiences

There are other qualitative methods like focus groups and empathy interviews you might consider instead. Empathy interviews are able to go more deeply into individual stories. They can also be easier to arrange since they are 1:1 instead of a group. Focus groups mostly diff er by purpose: they test specific concepts or products instead of understanding broader experiences, concerns, and priorities.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT ENGAGEMENT TOOL



The guide is designed for anyone planning listening sessions. It is organized into eight parts that cover planning, implementation, and reflection:

1. **Articulate your why**
2. **Identify and recruit participants**
3. **Develop the protocol**
4. **Hold the listening sessions**
5. **Analyze the data**
6. **Take action**
7. **Circle back to participants**
8. **Reflect and evaluate impact**

1 ARTICULATE YOUR WHY

The first step is to reflect on your ***why***. Before you jump into how to do this, pause and reflect on the following questions:

- What is the purpose of your project?
- What are your hopes and dreams if this project is wildly successful?
- How will listening sessions support these goals, hopes, and dreams?
- In what ways will listening sessions impact this project?

As a team, complete this sentence:

The goal of conducting listening sessions is to learn more about _____ *and* _____ *in order to* _____.

Define A Clear Goal

It's important to avoid setting goals that are either too broad or too narrow. Both extremes can limit the usefulness of what you learn.

- Too broad: "We want to learn about teachers' experiences."
  → Findings will be overwhelming, unfocused, and hard to translate into action.
- Too narrow: "We want to know if teachers prefer professional learning sessions on Tuesdays or Thursdays."
  → Findings will be limited to one decision point and miss the bigger picture.
- More useful: "We want to understand what supports new teachers find most helpful in their first year and what challenges make them consider leaving."
  → Focused enough to guide action, but broad enough to surface meaningful themes.

Examples of listening sessions

Problem of practice	Listening sessions helped…
New teacher retention	Understand from new teachers what supports are most helpful and what challenges new teachers face in order to expand or change district supports.
Student belonging	More deeply understand perspectives from specific student groups on where, how, and why they experience belonging, both in and out of school in order to identify priorities.
Math instruction	Understand from educators and administrators the strengths and needs of the mathematics support system before narrowing the focus of the team's first year of work.
Transition to high school	Learn from students and their families what was easy and difficult about the transition from middle school to high school in order to design new supports.

Next, consider these questions about your context:

- What capacity, skills, and resources does our team have?
- What's our timeline?
- How high or low are the stakes?
- Given our answers above, are our plans for listening sessions too ambitious, not ambitious enough, or about the right level of ambition? Do we need additional help?

Finally, before you start planning, consider three critical values that can ground your planning, implementation, and reflection.

Practice authentic care	Deep, authentic attention to the stories and needs of others through focused listening. Honor, support, and amplify the many beautiful and brilliant ways each person navigates this world.
Ground in vulnerability	A willingness to authentically engage with oneself and others, even in the face of discomfort. Vulnerability is made up of beliefs and behaviors such as openness and authenticity, empathy and compassion, acceptance of imperfection, and the courage to share.
Embrace complexity	Lean into the messiness of solving problems; there are no easy answers. See complexity as a strength and a way to understand the problem and find better solutions.

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Jumping straight into logistics without clarifying why you're holding listening sessions and how they fit your context
- Being too broad or too specific with the goals of your listening session
- Treating listening sessions as a checkbox activity rather than as a genuine tool to inform action

2 IDENTIFY AND RECRUIT PARTICIPANTS

Insights from people most impacted by the problems we are trying to solve can shape what problems we focus on, what we decide are the root causes of a particular problem, and what changes we make to a system. Carefully attending to participant outreach and recruitment is a crucial element for successful listening sessions.

Identify participants

Who you'll invite for a listening session depends on the purpose of their involvement. Some examples include:

- To better understand retention efforts, engage new teachers
- To better understand the root causes behind chronic absenteeism, invite eighth-grade students who had a high number of missed days the previous year
- To better understand what outreach and communication processes are effective for sharing student progress towards graduation, invite family members of high school students
- To better understand effective support systems for 12th grade students, invite recent graduates

You also want to consider:

- **Demographic representation.** Are we selecting a diverse representation of stakeholders (age, gender, culture, economics, etc.)?
- **Relationships.** Can we use current relationships to invite participants to our listening sessions?
- **Power dynamics.** Have we considered how language proficiency, different levels of expertise, professional positions, etc. might impact who attends and who participates in listening sessions?
- **Language needs.** Do we have multilingual interviewers or translators?

Use the next activity to brainstorm and narrow potential participants.

Activity: Identifying Stakeholders

Stakeholders are people who have experience with and knowledge of the problem the group is working to solve. This activity is designed to be done with your team.

1. On a series of sticky notes, list all possible groups of people who might be impacted by and/or involved with the problem you have identified. Be as specific as possible. For example, "teacher," is general, while "first-year math teachers in high schools" is much more specific. Include different stakeholder groups with different roles, one group per sticky note.
2. Consider each sticky note. To what degree is the group impacted by the problem? To what degree is the group involved in your work on solutions?

Place the sticky notes in four quadrants:

High Involvement + Low Impact

People who are working on the problem but aren't impacted by any solutions

High Involvement + High Impact

People who are working on the problem and are directly impacted by any solutions

Low Involvement + Low Impact

People who are not working on the problem and aren't impacted by the solutions.

High Involvement +High Impact

People who are not working on the problem but are highly impacted by the solutions.

For example, if you're working on improving mathematics, 6th grade students are highly impacted because they all have math class, but they are likely not involved on your improvement team (top. The district curriculum team might be involved on your team but not as directly impacted as classroom teachers, for example.

Use this quadrant analysis to help prioritize the voices of the people you most need to hear from by looking first to the quadrant of not involved but highly impacted.

Source: *Modified from Introduction to Human Centered Design developed by Accelerate Impact*

Recruit participants

Don't underestimate the time and capacity needed to recruit participants for listening sessions. Make a **communication plan** of invitations, reminders, and follow-up. Recruitment is often most successful when communication comes from an already familiar, trusted source. Consider a cadence of communication that is modified to meet your context such as the one below:

Communication cadence example

What	When	Details
Invitation email 1	2 weeks prior to session	All information about what it is and how to sign up
Invitation email 2	5 days prior to session	Opportunity reminder and how to sign up
Reminder 1	1 day before session	Reminder of when and where
Reminder 2	Same day as session	Reminder of when and where
Thank you email and compensation	1 day after session	Thank participants and summarize what happens next. Include compensation or when/how they'll receive it, if relevant.
Circle back to participants*	Within 3 weeks or as soon as possible	Send a copy of the analysis and describe what is happening with the findings

*See part 8 of this guide for more information.

Here's some sample language you can modify for the first invitation:

> Dear _____,
>
> I'm writing to invite you to a paid virtual listening session with educators like you from our district.
>
> **Why?** Our team has begun work on understanding and improving systems that help recruit and retain educators in our district. It is essential to more deeply understand educators' experiences so we can identify their needs to improve our systems. To do that, we need to hear from you!
>
> **What and when:** We're hosting two virtual meetings with teachers like you. The sessions will be facilitated by an outside facilitator from the group, XYZ. Information shared by participants will be analyzed and provided to our team for planning. Findings will not be tied to your name or any other identifiable information.
>
> Follow this link to sign up for one listening session. We will send you a calendar invitation after you sign up.
>
> **Compensation:** You will receive a $50 e-gift card of your choice for attending.
>
> **Questions?** Reach out to _____.
>
> We look forward to seeing you soon!

Additional considerations

Compensation is important. Participants' expertise and time are valuable. Honor people's time with payment, gift cards, or other meaningful compensation.

Mode and/or location can impact participation. Consider the pros and cons of listening sessions that are in-person versus online for your participants. Choose in-person locations that are accessible to participants and offer travel, childcare, or other supports. For online sessions, provide technology support or resources if needed.

You don't need to hear from everyone. Even if you have the capacity to listen to everyone, you likely don't need to. You'll reach what's called "data saturation," a point where additional data does not reveal new insights.

Not everyone will sign up or show up. Depending on your context, you can expect a portion of people to not sign up in the first place and another portion to sign up but then not attend. Plan recruitment numbers that account for attrition.

You won't learn everything. Listening sessions are designed to go much deeper on issues than other methods, like surveys. However, you can't learn everything you likely want to learn. A good listening session will cover a few topics well and probably raise more questions, too.

Group size should be manageable. Usually listening sessions are 4-10 people per facilitator. Larger groups will need breakout rooms, multiple facilitators, and multiple note takers.

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Recruiting only the most accessible or familiar voices, leading to a narrow perspective
- Overlooking accessibility needs and other logistics that make it hard for people to attend, including power dynamics, compensation, location, language, and time
- Underestimating recruitment time and effort, such as sending only one invitation and expecting a high turnout

3 DEVELOP THE PROTOCOL

A well-designed protocol is critical to the success of a listening session.

Start with the purpose

Return to the why and who your team previously articulated. At the top of your protocol, write the goals of the listening sessions.

Brainstorm topics

With your team, list all the specific topics you want to learn about related to the why. Then, prioritize your list: what are the most important topics to cover?

Write questions

Take your list of topics and turn them into questions using multiple question formats that aren't leading in nature. Include potential probing questions as appropriate. Strive to create a protocol that is lively, engaging, and active. (An example is provided on the following pages.)

Listening Session Question Formats

Round robin	Ask the same question of each person (facilitator calls on each person with the option to pass).
Popcorn	Ask a question and have the participant then pass that question to someone else.
Close-ended start	Start with a close-ended question like the examples below. ► If I need help, I feel comfortable asking for it (1-5 scale where 1 is never and 5 is always). ► I think I'll stay in this profession for many years (1-5 scale where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree). After each person shares their response, ask people to explain why and what it would take to change their answer.
Think time	Provide participants with "think time" by having them respond to an open-ended prompt on a sticky note (in a live session) or in the chat feature (in an online session). Then ask volunteers to expand on their short answer. Extended version: Have people post ideas on posters (or virtual DRAFT 11 posters) and encourage participants to add stars, hearts, or comments to others' ideas. Then discuss.
Artifact prompt	Share an artifact and ask questions based on the artifact. For example: ► Data point ("Why do you think this is an important finding?") ► Photograph ("What does this make you think of?") ► Report excerpt ("What's your reaction?") ► Quote ("How does this quote resonate—or not—for you?")
Drawing	Encourage participants to draw their answer to a question and then ask them to explain their drawing.
Corner Questions	Have participants move to a corner (or virtual breakout room) with a question they most want to talk about. This method requires multiple facilitators/note takers and usually directs people to the four corners of the room.

Remember that for any strategy, participation should always be optional.

Check and adjust timing

Most listening sessions are about one hour in length. Estimate the total amount of time you think each question will need for a thorough response. Then, adjust the order of the questions so that the fl ow makes sense and the priority topics are first. Most people underestimate the discussion time needed for each question in a listening session.

Write the introduction

The first 5-10 minutes of a listening session should include:

- A warm welcome
- Information about the listening sessions: Why is it happening? For whom? What will you do with the findings? Will responses be anonymous (any names or identifiable information shared)? Is the session is being recorded? Why? What will happen to the recording and transcription? When and how will they hear what happened as a result of the listening session?
- Agreements for the space. Consider this list:
  (1) Listen from a place of love. (2) Answering is always optional. (3) Confidentiality. (4) Share the space. (5) Disagreement is okay. (6) Take care of your needs.
- Begin with a soft opening question such as, "*Share your name, how many years you've been in this job, and a highlight of your day so far*," or "*Share your name, where you work, and a hobby or skill you have.*"

At the end of this section, you'll find a sample listening session agenda. Note that section 5 in this guide contains more information on how to facilitate an introduction.

Get feedback and adjust

Once your protocol is ready, ask team members and/or a few potential participants for feedback and adjust as necessary. If you are conducting multiple listening sessions, schedule time after the first round to adjust the protocol based on experience.

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Trying to cover too many questions, leaving no time for depth
- Using only one type of question format or one type of engagement strategy
- Asking leading, unclear, or biased questions
- Skipping an introduction that sets a clear purpose and establishes agreements

Example Protocol

Listening session with middle school math teachers **Goals: Explore strengths of mathematics instruction and systems from teachers' perspectives. Uncover math professional learning and other priority needs from teachers' perspectives.**		
Min	**Details**	**Facilitator and resources**
5	**Welcome and overview** Explain the purpose of the listening session: *Welcome to each of you. Thank you so very much for taking time out of your day to attend this listening session. My name is _____ and I'm with ____in support of a district project aimed at improving mathematics instruction and outcomes. I'm here with my colleagues _____ [others introduce themselves]. We're here because a group of district representatives are trying to more deeply understand and enhance mathematics instruction and professional learning in our schools.* *We can only do that by listening and learning from each other. The things you share from these listening sessions will help produce district profiles, which will be used to better understand district strengths and challenges in mathematics education. We'll be looking at feedback from all listening sessions and interviews so we can identify what educators need. Then we'll design some ideas to meet those needs. We are recording this session, but only so we have an accurate record of what you say. We will destroy the recordings after we analyze all the listening session data. Anything you say will not be connected to your name; reports will not include participant names.* *Your participation is completely voluntary. You can skip questions or leave at any time.* *Does anyone have any questions before we begin?*	
	HIT RECORD	
5	**Participant introductions** Let's take a minute for everyone to introduce themselves. Please share: ► Your name and role ► How long you've lived in this community or taught at this school ► What is one word to describe your experience as a student in mathematics? *I'll go first to model.* Go around the room for all answers.	

Example Protocol (continued)

1	**Agreements** On the wall/in chat you see the agreements we suggest for this space. I'll read them now and I would ask you all to consider which one you want to hold at the center during our time together. ► Listen from a place of love ► Answering is always optional ► Confidentiality ► Share the space ► Disagreement is okay ► Take care of your needs Do you see any agreements you'd like to add or discuss?	
10	**Question 1** We are going to jump in right away to better understand your hopes and dreams for mathematics instruction. **What do you hope students experience as part of their journey in mathematics education in your district? What might they see, hear, and feel?** We will take 4 minutes to individually write answers to the questions. I will play music and when the music stops we'll regroup and share what you're comfortable sharing. Ask for volunteers to share what they wrote. Ask probing questions to go deeper.	
10	**Question 2** For this next question please take 2 minutes to write some notes about mathematics instruction **strengths** in your district or school. (After 4 minutes) I would like for you to now pick one strength and use the sentence stem that's on the board/in chat to expand on this strength. I will show the prompt, there will be some think time, and then you can respond when you are ready. I might ask follow-up questions to better understand your responses. *A strength in mathematics instruction in our district/school is _____ and I think this because I have seen/experienced _____ and _____.* If time permits after folks have had a chance to respond, follow up by asking why they believe these areas are strengths, specifically. Ask, "What were the conditions that supported these strengths?"	

Example Protocol (continued)

10	**Question 3** For this next question we'll follow the same format we did for question 2. We would love for you to take about 4 minutes to write some notes to yourself about the mathematics instruction **challenges** in your district or school. (After 4 minutes) I would like for you to pick one challenge and use the sentence stem to expand on it. I will show the prompt, there will be some think time, and then you can respond when you are ready. I might ask follow-up questions to better understand your responses. *In our district, the biggest challenge in mathematics instruction is _____ because _____.* Make sure to emphasize that they should be focused on mathematics instruction and not deficits of students or their families. After each person has responded, follow up by asking "why" a few times for folks who have shared a challenge. This series of whys will help elicit root causes of the challenges and help folks clarify what they identified.	
15	**Question 4** I'm going to read a statement and I want a quick round of answers of the level of agreement you have with the statement, where 5 is the highest agreement and 1 is the lowest agreement. *Across our district, we have the resources and support we need to ensure students meet math standards.* Have each person share their number. Let's start with the highest responses. For anyone who gave this a 4 or 5, can you explain why? Let's turn to the lower responses. Can you explain your thoughts behind your number? *Ask probing questions as appropriate. These might include: How might the district better support mathematics instruction? What about professional learning, specifically?*	
?	**If time remains:** We just talked about a lot of things. I'd like to open up the space for a few minutes if there are other things on your mind related to what we just talked about. Does anyone have anything else they'd like to share?	
5	**Closing** Ask everyone to share an appreciation for something they heard or learned. Explain compensation and have people fill out the survey to receive the gift card. Share what will happen next with the information collected from this listening session: *Thank you so much for your time today. As we said at the beginning, your input will help our work to improve math instruction. Once our analysis is done, we'll send you an email with a copy of the findings.* *We also hope to hold a second round of listening sessions in the spring and bring you back to dive deeper into some topics from the findings. Before we leave, does anyone have any questions?*	

4 HOLD THE LISTENING SESSIONS

It's time to listen! Listening sessions should have:

- A thoughtfully arranged space
- A method to record comprehensive notes
- Qualified, trained facilitators

Prepare the space

For in-person sessions, create a comfortable environment that considers the necessary accommodations for all participants:

- Make sure there is ample signage to reach the location
- Arrange furniture so people are comfortable, can see each other, and can access their seats and navigate through the space
- Set out nametags, supplies, and snacks
- Use microphones or other sound amplification if necessary
- Post agreements in a visible location
- Greet participants and make them feel welcome as they enter

For virtual listening sessions, ensure that people have the correct login information and a number to call or text if they are having trouble with technology. Ask people to test their cameras and microphones as they enter.

Take notes

Make a plan to capture notes that are as close to verbatim as possible. You can record the session (preferred) or manually take notes.

Record the session

- Most virtual platforms (such as Zoom) have built-in recording options.
- For in-person sessions, test the recording program you choose before the listening session to see if you need to adjust the audio (e.g., add microphones).
- Choose a recording option that will automatically generate transcripts of the audio. If that doesn't exist, you can replay the audio into a transcript-generating program. Remember that most automatically generated transcripts are imperfect; return to the original recording if you need.

Manually take notes

- Pre-assign a note-taker (or two) for the session.
- Capture as much information as possible including verbatim quotes (using a computer often helps).

Make sure you set up systems to store the data securely and remove identifying information from any transcripts or quotes that will be shared. In most cases, destroy recordings after they are no longer needed.

Facilitate

As a facilitator, your job is to create a container where deep listening—and honest sharing—can happen. The table below describes some dos and don'ts for facilitating listening sessions.

Facilitation Dos	Facilitation Don'ts
► Explain the purpose of the session and set the tone	► Ask leading questions
► Establish and monitor agreements	► Force someone to answer
► Minimize your own talking time	► Engage in the conversation
► Ask probing questions as appropriate	► Off er your own opinions
► Draw out all voices who want to contribute	► Get defensive
► Maintain focus while allowing organic discussion	► Take sides
► Provide appropriate response when things are uncomfortable, emotional, or inappropriate	► Suggest solutions
	► Judge participants' offerings
	► Talk too much

Decide Who Should Facilitate

Choose facilitators with the skills and experience required to meet these goals. Also consider how existing relationships, power dynamics, or identities might help or hinder honest participation. Sometimes an external facilitator with no connection to participants is the best option. Other times, a known and trusted figure is the best choice; it depends on your context and purpose.

Train Facilitators

Effective facilitation of a listening session involves the recognition and employment of different perspectives and different skills to create an inclusive environment. A well-facilitated discussion allows each participant to explore ideas while recognizing and valuing the contributions of others. The key is to recognize which strategy you need to employ in each situation and be able to apply the most appropriate action or prompt. Below are some specific strategies for different situations.

Probe for more information from an individual:

- "Tell us more."
- "Tell us more about _____."
- "Can you give us an example?"
- "What do you mean by _____?"

Encourage—but don't require—quiet participants:

- "It is important that we hear from everyone in the room."
- "I notice not everyone has spoken to this topic."
- "Can we hear from someone who hasn't yet had a chance to talk?"
- "Person X, is there anything you'd like to add?"
- If the above statements aren't helping, another strategy is to change the format. Have people talk first to a partner which might feel safer. Then, they report out to the whole group, either what they've said or what their partner said.
- Ultimately, remember that participation is voluntary. If gentle requests to participate are turned down, respect their wishes.

To quiet a long-winded/dominant participant:

- (Insert yourself in a short lull.) "Thank you for your ideas. Person B, do you have any comments about this topic?"
- "I'm going to ask you to pause there so we can get some reactions to this topic from a few other people."

Deal with emotions (anger, sadness, etc.):

- "I want to remind everyone that this is a confidential place to express your views. I can understand that these topics have an emotional side to them. I wonder if anyone else can express how they are feeling right now?"
- Call for a five-minute break and talk to the individual(s) during that time.
- "There are a lot of emotions surfacing in this conversation. Do we need to take a break? Do we want to revisit our agreements for this space?"

To see some of these ideas in action, watch the accompanying video, **Facilitating Listening Sessions**.

After the Listening Session

After a listening session, facilitators can reflect on the questions below. Use the audio, video, or transcript to help deepen reflections:

- What went well? What didn't go as well?
- What was easy? What was hard?
- How did the protocol work? Is there anything about the questions we should revise?
- What was the ratio of talking time (facilitator: participant)?
- Did each person have the opportunity to contribute? What did we notice?
- How well did we avoid the common facilitator missteps (pressure someone to answer, get defensive, take sides, judge, suggest solutions, etc.)?

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Failing to create a space where participants feel comfortable sharing their opinions and experiences
- Allowing harmful power dynamics to play out, dominant voices to silence others, or other difficult issues to remain unaddressed
- Pressuring participants to respond
- Inserting your own opinions, solutions, or defensiveness
- Recording without consent or failing to clarify how notes/recordings will be used

5 ANALYZE THE DATA

There is no single right way to analyze listening session data. Start by revisiting your purpose: What are we going to do with the findings?

Then, consider your context on each continuum below:

We have a small amount of data ||||||

Using AI to analyze the themes in listening session data can save time, especially when you have a lot of data. But don't oversimplify or shortcut the process too much. A few hints include:

- **Set up for success.** Start with well-organized data and high quality transcripts or notes.
- **Use excellent prompting techniques.** Provide specific questions or prompts, rather than broad questions like, "List all of the themes." Focus on a single topic at a time. Apply best practices for prompting.
- **Think critically about AI output.** It can be easy to take AI output at face value. Don't. Keep prompting for more evidence, examples, and analysis.
- **Include quotes.** The power of qualitative data usually comes from the voices of participants. Ask AI for quotes for each finding.
- **Engage in collective sensemaking.** Plan ways engage with the AI output as meaningfully as your team might have engaged with raw data.

Activity: Team Listening Session Data Analysis

What: Team of 3-12 people identify the main ideas from the listening session data

Time: 60-90 minutes

Who: People with diverse perspectives in the system —can include people who participated in the listening sessions

Pre-work: Remove all identifiable names from the data and divide into sets of 1-5 pages.

Instructions:

1. Each pair of people read their first set of listening session data (1-5 pages). Together as a pair, write the five most important things they learned from that data set; one learning per sticky note. The sticky note can be a direct quote that captures the summary or their own summary sentence.
2. Repeat #1 until all data have been read and/or data saturation is reached, meaning there are few to no new insights from additional data at that point.
3. With the whole group, take turns reading aloud each sticky note, clustering them into themes.
4. Create a descriptive label or category for each theme.
5. Document the findings with pictures or another format that makes the findings usable for action.

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Underestimating the time and resources it takes to analyze data
- Choosing an analysis approach that doesn't match the purpose or resources
- Using AI without good prompting or critical thinking about the results
- Creating a report without a plan to use the findings
- Making sense of data with too few voices at the table

6 TAKE ACTION

You have done so much to hear from stakeholders and understand what's working and what's not working in the system. What follows are several possible next steps.

Root cause analysis. Use data from listening sessions to more deeply understand the root causes of the problem you are trying to solve. If you've already started a root cause analysis, use listening session findings to check and add new information. Refer to pages 9-10 in **this guide** to understand more about root cause analysis and tools like a fishbone diagram.

Narrow your focus. If you've been working on a large, complex problem such as chronic absenteeism, teacher retention, or mathematics achievement, your listening session data might help narrow your focus. What did users in the system say most often or most specifically? What needs arose? For example, a district team working on attendance decided to start by improving belonging and safety in schools after listening to students and families. Not clear at the outset, those focus areas were revealed as a result of holding listening sessions.

Brainstorm solutions and develop a prototype. Creating a prototype is a way to test what works, for whom, and under what conditions before we scale and spread the idea system wide. It's important you start small in order to learn fast and improve the prototype before it is implemented more broadly.

Seek more information. It might be the case that listening sessions prompt more questions than answers. That's okay! One next step could be broadening your data collection. Perhaps you need the voices of specific groups of people on a narrower topic. Perhaps you need to use other methods such as one-on-one empathy interviews to glean information. Sometimes, it's better to seek more information than move forward with limited information. Other times, we can get stuck "admiring the problem" and continue to collect data without moving into action. As a team, consider how much information is "good enough" to feel confident moving forward.

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Moving too slowly by "admiring" the findings without action
- Moving too quickly by jumping to solutions or skipping collective sense-making
- Taking action with too few voices at the table
- Ignoring or explaining away listening session findings, rather than sticking to the data

7 CIRCLE BACK TO PARTICIPANTS

It is critical to create a feedback loop where participants hear what happened to the information they provided. This helps create trust, demonstrates that their voices were heard and valued, shows transparency in the decision-making process, and encourages future participation. Below are three ways to circle back:

Send the findings + action steps. Be as transparent as possible by providing participants with the listening session findings and an update on what will happen with those findings. This allows participants to see the full scope of feedback collected. As soon as possible after the session, send an email like the one below and include the findings themselves.

> Dear [Participant Name],
>
> Thank you for participating in our recent listening sessions on [specific topic]. Your participation helped our [team] understand the [strengths and needs or other topics] of [audience].
>
> Attached is the full report summarizing participant feedback. The report includes themes, details, and anonymous quotes. All individual responses remain confidential.
>
> What happens next? Based on your input, we will [insert details of what's next or, if it has already happened, what happened].
>
> Thanks again for your participation.
>
> Best regards,
>
> [Signature]

Send the findings + invite participants to a follow-up discussion. Host a follow-up conversation for a findings dialogue. This creates opportunities for clarification and deeper participant engagement. Schedule an optional follow-up discussion, including an agenda, with questions such as: Can you tell us more about XYZ finding? Why do you think XYZ was a finding? Is there anything that you'd add? Was there anything that surprised you?

Send the findings + invite participants to join the design team. Your efforts can go even further if you not only hear from participants, but if you also invite some or all to become a member of the team using the information. The who, how, and when depends on your context.

There is so much possibility when we design *with* instead of *for*.

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Failing to share results and next steps in a timely manner with all participants
- Sharing results in an inaccessible format
- Treating "circle back" as optional instead of a core part of the process
- Never considering additional participation mechanisms after the first listening session

8 REFLECT AND EVALUATE IMPACT

Reflection is a critical part of learning that is often skipped or relegated to the last minute of a meeting. It is important to pause and reflect on what worked, what didn't, and how the team might improve listening sessions in the future.

One reflection protocol is called an After-Action Review (AAR). This protocol was first developed by the military as a required post-operation reflection and has been adopted by corporations, nonprofits, and educational institutions. You can modify the protocol to fit your particular context and use it for projects beyond listening sessions.

Activity: After-Action Review

Setup: Frame the After-Action Review

The goal of the AAR is to guide and improve our future work. This discussion is not about success or failure, but about sustaining our strengths while also finding ways to improve. This requires honest observations about what happened and acknowledges that no single person has all of the information or answers.

Share or develop agreements for this discussion, such as:

- Active participation
- There are no right or wrong answers
- No blame
- Be open to new ideas and creative in proposing solutions
- Consensus where possible, clarification where not

Part 1: Reflect and learn together

As a team, discuss each aspect of listening session work and document what happened in each of the four columns. The entire process is important but pay particular attention to the "expected" versus "actual" columns. It's in this discussion that you will begin to see patterns of difference that will help improve future listening sessions.

Listening session stage	What was expected to happen?	What actually occurred?	What went well and why?	What can be improved, and how?
Articulate your *why*				
Identify and recruit participants				
Develop the protocol				
Hold the listening sessions				
Analyze the data				
Take action				
Circle back to participants				

Part 2: Discuss key learnings and create next steps

Use the information above to discuss these three questions overall:

- Overall, what did we learn?
- What is a vision for the future of listening sessions?
- What are some possible next steps?

Pitfalls to Avoid

- Skipping reflection because "the session is done"
- Treating reflection as blame instead of as a learning opportunity
- Reflecting with too few voices at the table
- Not applying these learnings to the next listening session experience