LIBERATORY DESIGN

mindsets and modes to design for equity

Liberatory Design is the result of a collaboration between Tania Anaissie, David Clifford, Susie Wise, and the National Equity Project [Victor Cary & Tom Malarkey].

Access the full deck at
www.liberatorydesign.com
and tag #LiberatoryDesign to share how you are designing for liberation.

LIBERATORY DESIGN MINDSETS

## Introduction to Liberatory Design Mindsets

The Liberatory Design Mindsets invoke particular stances and values to ground the Liberatory Design process. These Mindsets catalyze creative courage, conversation, reflection, community-building, storytelling, and action.

These Mindsets aim to:

- Bring self-awareness and intention to our design practice.
- Help us recognize oppression in how we live and work and realize alternate ways of being and doing.
- Expand our frame of reference for what is possible.
- Inspire creative courage and set a foundation for liberatory collaboration.
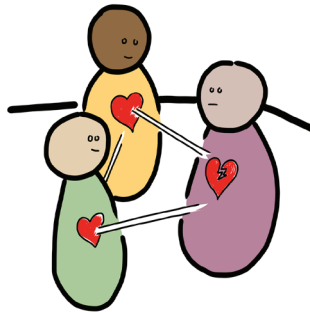
Use them creatively: combine, sequence and embody them in whatever ways support your process.
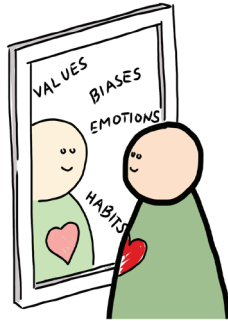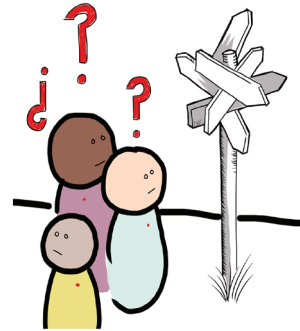
Practice Self-Awareness

Who we are determines how we design. Looking in the "mirror" reveals what we see, how we relate, and how our perspectives impact our practice.
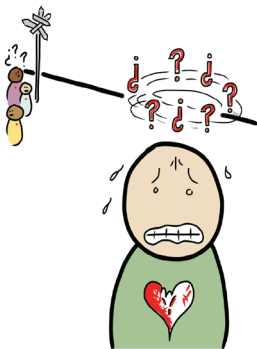
Build Relational Trust

Invest in relationships with intention, especially across difference. Honor stories. Practice empathetic listening.
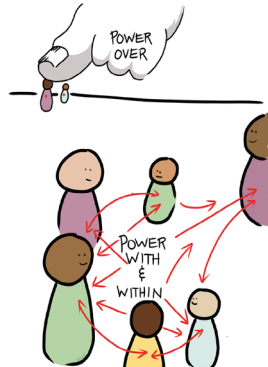
Embrace Complexity

Recognize that equity challenges are complex and messy. Stay open to possibility. Powerful design emerges from the mess, not from avoiding it.

Work with Fear and Discomfort

Fear and discomfort are anticipated parts of equity design work. Identifying the sources of such feelings offers us a context to work through them and continue to design.
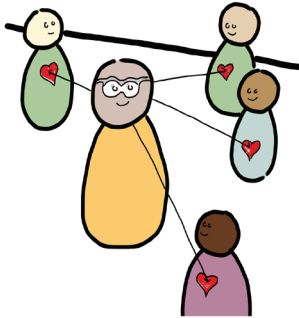
Work to Transform Power

Explore structures and opportunities for interactions in which power is shared, not exercised.

Exercise Creative Courage

Every human is creative. Creative courage allows us to push through self-doubt and creative fragility so we can design bravely against oppression.
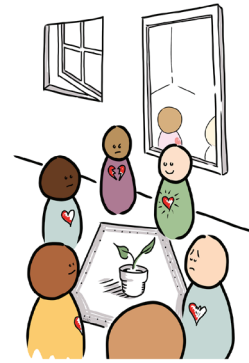
LIBERATORY DESIGN

Focus on Human Values

Get to know the community we are designing with in as many different ways as possible. Anchor all of our decision-making in human values.
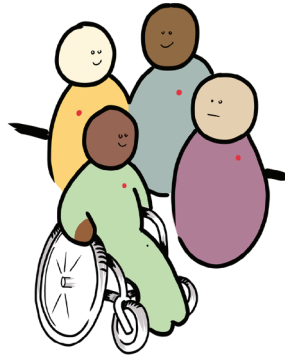
Seek Liberatory Collaboration

Recognize differences in power and identity to design "with" instead of "for." Design for belonging.

Attend to Healing

The effects of oppression are complex and often hinder our ability to take action. Integrate ongoing healing processes when designing for equity.
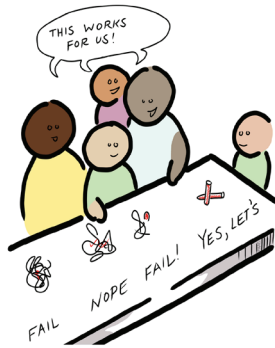
Take Action to Learn

The complexity of oppression must be addressed with courageous ongoing action. Experiment as a way to think and learn – without attachment to outcome.

Share, Don't Sell

Practice transparency and non-attachment in sharing ideas with collaborators.

Recognize Oppression

Learn to see how oppression, in its many forms, has shaped designs that lead to inequity.

LIBERATORY DESIGN

Build Relational Trust

Why?

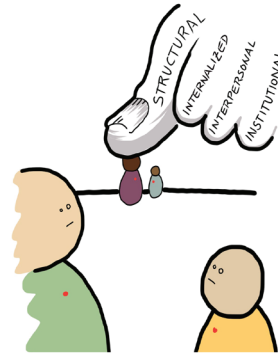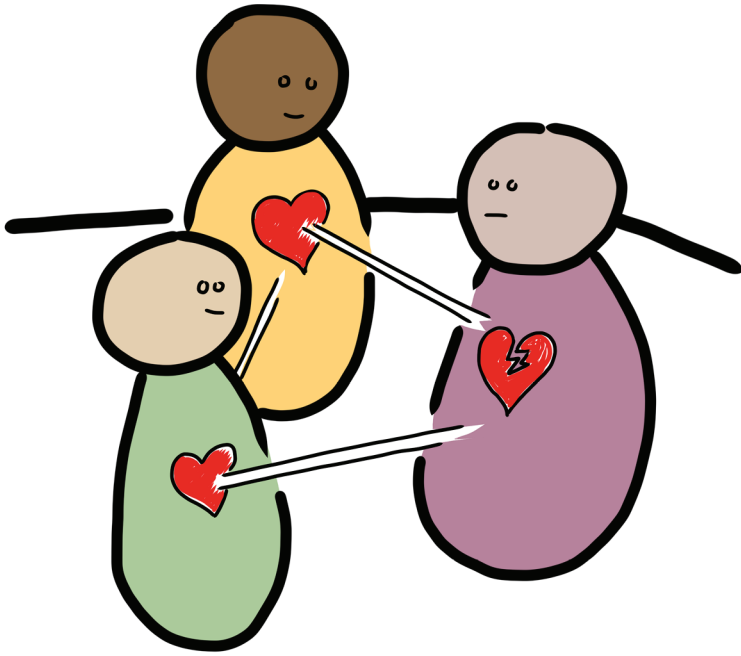Relational trust is the glue in Liberatory Design work. When working across difference on difficult challenges, teams must invest in each other to develop trust, share openly, and collaborate authentically.

If we are courageous in identifying and processing emotions with our team, we create opportunities for healing and prevent distortion of our work.

How:

- Facilitate personal connection by inviting people to share what matters to them.
- Dedicate time and space for people to bring forward their full selves and identities.
- Demonstrate the importance of nonjudgmental listening.
- Create space for community to reflect, express, and process thoughts and emotions.
- Cultivate a culture that invites dialogue and collective sense-making.

Build Relational Trust

Invest in relationships with intention, especially across difference. Honor stories. Practice empathetic listening.

Practice Self-Awareness
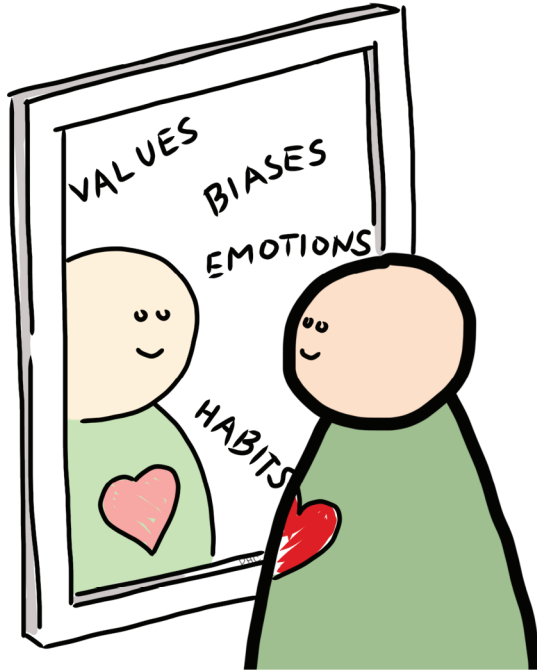
Who we are determines how we design. Looking in the "mirror" reveals what we see, how we relate, and how our perspectives impact our practice.

Practice Self-Awareness

Why?

Liberatory Design requires us to minimize the effects of our biases and maximize our potential for non-oppressive partnerships. Practicing self-awareness increases our capacity to work with humility, curiosity, and courage.

How:

- Acknowledge and challenge our assumptions.
- To surface what we don't know, ask: "What is unfamiliar to me in this situation? Why?"
- Ask: "How does my identity – my race, class, gender, or another identifier – position me in society relative to privilege and oppression?"
- Ask: "How might my identity impact people and process?"
- Seek out new knowledge about privilege and oppression to expand our awareness and understanding of equity.
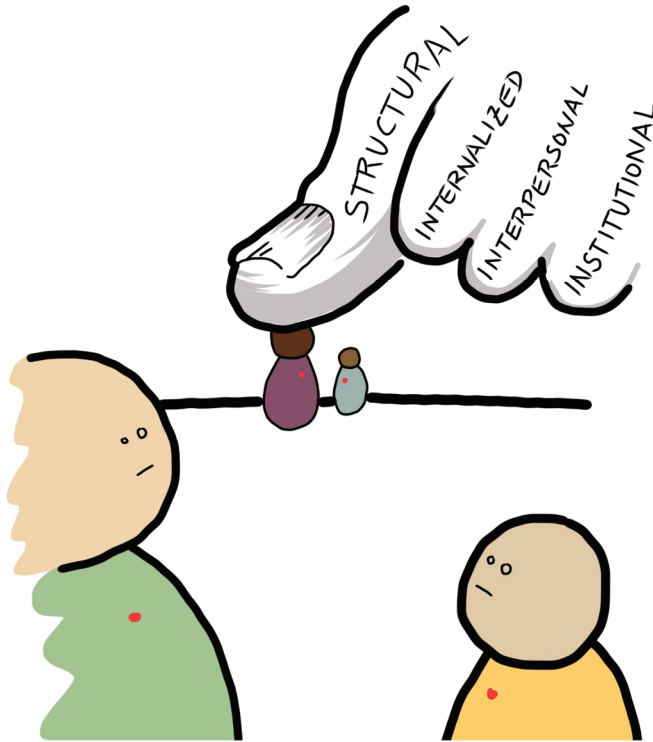
STRUCTURAL
INTERNALIZED
INTERPERSONAL
INSTITUTIONAL

Recognize Oppression

Learn to see how oppression, in its many forms, has shaped designs that lead to inequity.

Recognize Oppression

Why?

Inequities do not exist in a vacuum. They are shaped by oppression and design decisions made across history. Oppression plays out on many levels (individual, interpersonal, institutional, systemic, and structural) - and across various forms of identity.

Liberatory Design enables us to better understand oppression's causes and more effectively design to catalyze liberation.

How:

• Name identity-related patterns of inequity we see in this context.
• Listen to the experiences of those most negatively impacted.
• Identify what designs (structures, policies, processes, practices) over time have produced these - intentionally or unintentionally.
• Notice how our own identities and positional power shape what we see and hear and how we frame challenges.
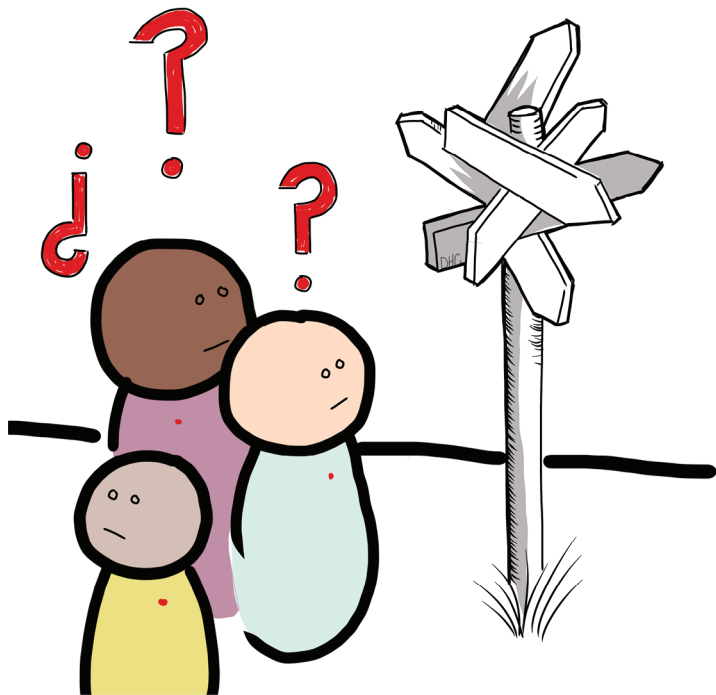
Embrace Complexity

Recognize that equity challenges are complex and messy. Stay open to possibility. Powerful design emerges from the mess, not from avoiding it.

Embrace Complexity

Why?

Equity challenges are complex; however, there is often urgent pressure to quickly "fix" them or develop "solutions" – which usually leads to ineffective results and unintended consequences.

Complex challenges don't have ready-made or reliable solutions. So keep the "problem space" open – i.e. seek to better understand the various factors at play in the challenge while simultaneously learning about what approaches are more likely to be effective.

How:

- Acknowledge the confusion and discomfort caused by the uncertainty present in our work.
- Bring together multiple perspectives on the challenge, especially from those most harmed, to open up ways of thinking.
- Create opportunities for sense-making before decision-making.
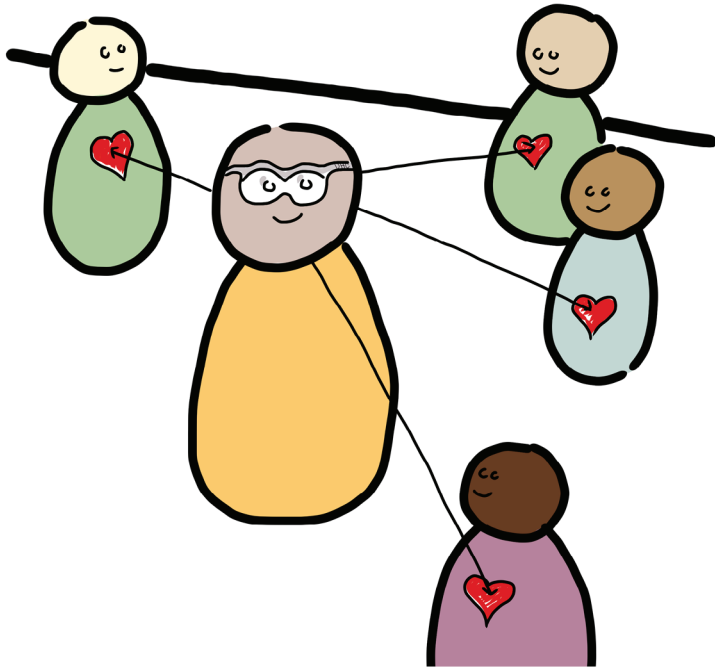
Focus on Human Values

Get to know the community we are designing with in as many different ways as possible. Anchor all of our decision-making in human values.

Focus on Human Values

Why?

In order to design for genuine shared power across communities, place relationships at the center of our work.

To do this, invest in the work necessary to know a community and recognize the expertise of the people who are closest to the issues being addressed in the design challenge.

Listen attentively and honor the stories that are shared with us. Honor the humanity of our design teams and create space for reflection.

How:

- Listen from a place of love. Be humble and acknowledge that we are not the expert.
- Honor the stories, experiences, and emotions that community members share.
- Stay connected to the community we are working with through every phase of the project.
- Be a participant in collective sense-making.

Seek Liberatory Collaboration

Recognize differences in power and identity to design "with" instead of "for." Design for belonging.

Seek Liberatory Collaboration

Why?

Design work can be fraught with power and identity dynamics that can result in unintended consequences.

To fully realize the potential of Liberatory Design, it is critical to reframe the relationship between designers and the communities in which they are working to one of partnership and equity, not patronizing expertise.

How:

- Actively seek diverse identities, roles and skill sets in building our design team.
- Acknowledge and build from the strengths, stories, and skills of team members.
- Define specific conditions for collective learning, risk-taking, and action.
- When framing the question, "How Might We…?" ensure that the "We" is diverse and inclusive.
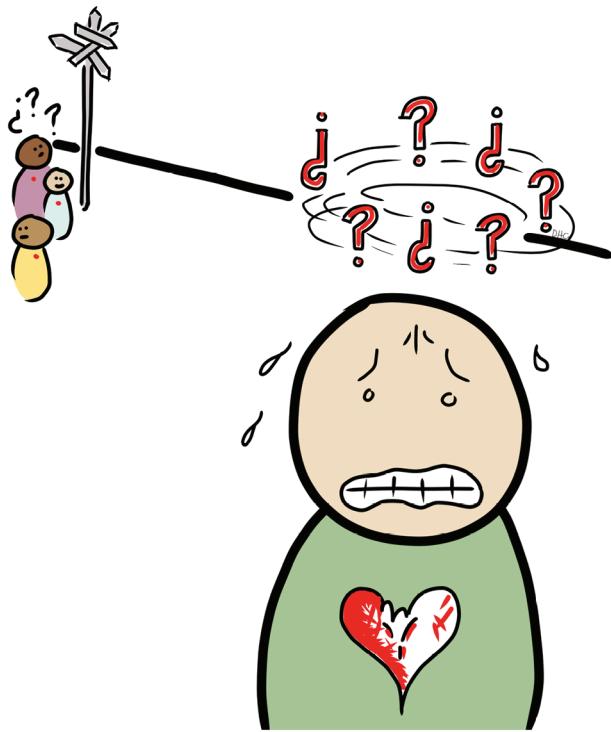
Work with Fear and Discomfort

Fear and discomfort are anticipated parts of equity design work. Identifying the sources of such feelings offers us a context to work through them and continue to design.

Work with Fear and Discomfort

Why?

Working on high-stakes challenges where processes and pathways are emergent can be stressful. The resulting fear and discomfort are expected parts of the Liberatory Design process because the journey through an equity challenge is ambiguous.

Fear and discomfort do not have to be obstacles in our work. They can also be a source of growth, insight, and creativity.

How:

- Create and hold space to process that fear and discomfort are present in our work.
- Establish protocols to help name fear and discomfort and explore their sources.
- Reflect on the impact of the fear and discomfort. Does it fuel our creativity or is it causing harm?
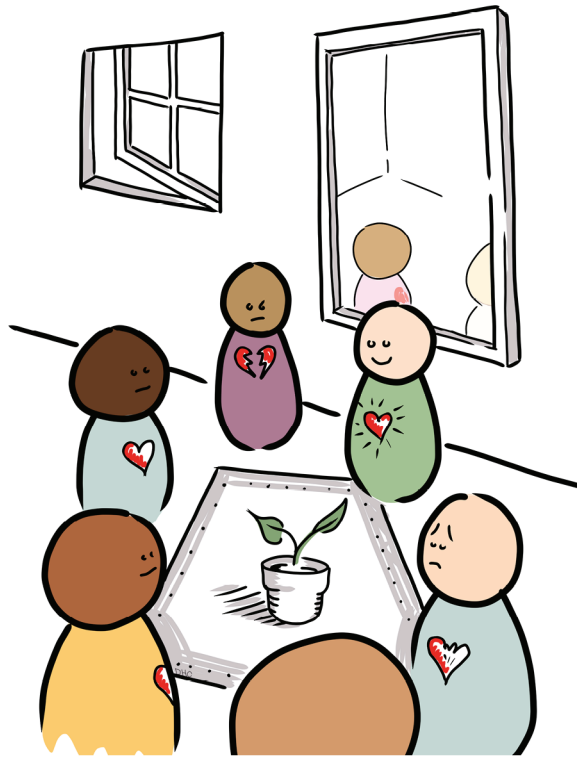
Attend to Healing

The effects of oppression are complex and often hinder our ability to take action. Integrate ongoing healing processes when designing for equity.

Attend to Healing

Why?

As adrienne marie brown says, "We all have the capacity to heal each other." Equity work is challenging and emotional. Trauma, past and current, is often an unrecognized factor as we seek to collaborate and build trust within our teams. To be effective we must attend to our well-being and healing on an ongoing basis.

How:

- Establish protocols to name situations when someone feels pain or when there is opportunity for healing.
- Practice healing in group and private settings. Consistent use of check-ins, somatic work, counseling, retreats, or creative outlets support team well-being.
- Make it a part of your design process, prioritizing healing in project planning.
- Explore existing frameworks for equitable conflict management. E.g. restorative justice practices.
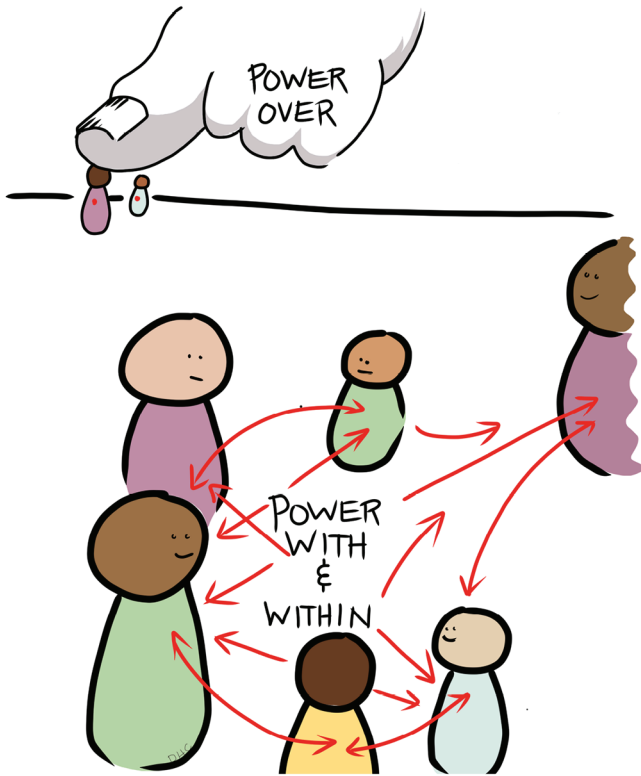
Work to Transform Power

Explore structures and opportunities for interactions in which power is shared, not exercised.

Work to Transform Power

Why?

Transforming power structures within a team or organization catalyzes a sense of shared purpose, greater self-direction, and a general commitment to better work quality.

When people share power instead of having it wielded over or against them, they can be more human and authentic. They are also more capable of challenging inequities in their interactions.

How:

- Pause to reflect on team dynamics. Ask, "How are we working together as a team?" "How are we working with those most impacted?"
- Build a strategy to transform power in our conversations, meetings, and decision-making.
- Co-create protocols to name and shift power imbalances in action as they manifest.
- Ask: "To what extent do our design solutions transform power and how do we know?"
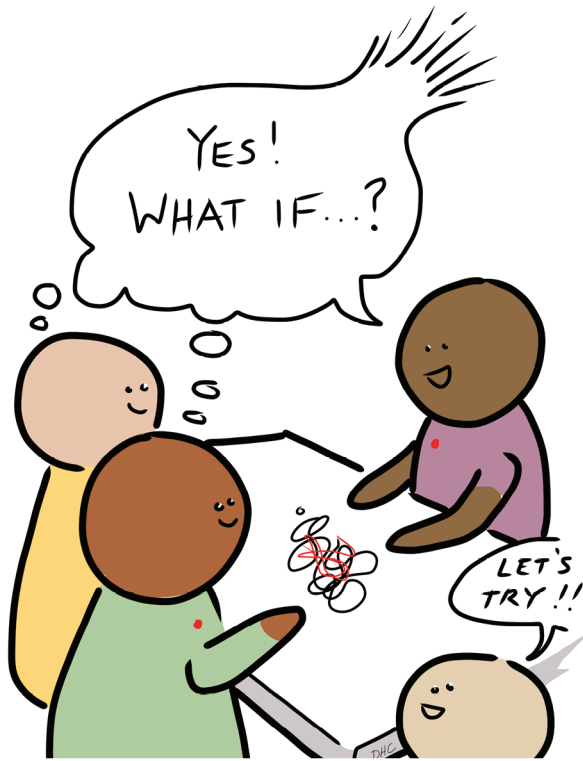
Exercise Creative Courage

Every human is creative. Creative courage allows us to push through self-doubt and creative fragility so we can design bravely against oppression.

Exercise Creative Courage

Why?

Oppression creates fear of change. Succumbing to fear quells creativity. We must act courageously to imagine possibilities beyond the confines of dominant culture.

All people are creative despite what we might believe about ourselves. Building our creative muscles requires courage to trust our own creativity and to celebrate the creativity in others especially as we design for equity and liberation.

How:

- Cultivate an environment that inspires curiosity and courage to think, feel and act creatively.
- Work together to define what creativity looks like, feels like, and means to our team.
- Invite sharing and celebration of wild ideas along with the mistakes that will come when trying them.
- Develop more capacity to listen with open hearts and curious minds.
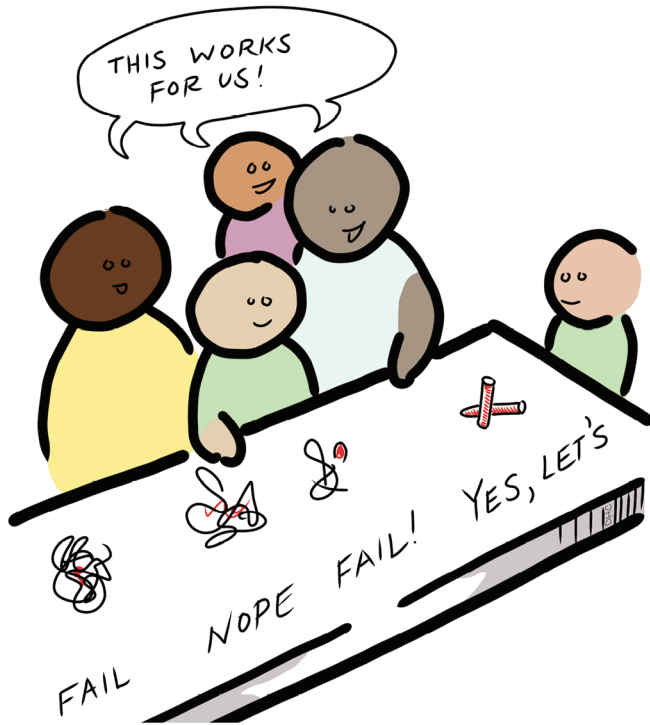
Take Action to Learn

The complexity of oppression must be addressed with courageous ongoing action. Experiment as a way to think and learn – without attachment to outcome.

Take Action to Learn

Why?

Oppression thrives on risk-averse behavior. Since we won't know the answers in advance, we must try small low-risk actions that enable us to learn without placing the physical or emotional wellbeing of a person or community at risk.

Low-risk experimenting builds agency and creativity - and gets us past feeling "stuck" or needing to "get it right" immediately.

It provides greater insight into the challenge and information about which ideas might work.

How:

- Co-create experiments that are designed with learning as the goal.
- Build trust using safe-to-fail experimentation that increases in scale or risk over time.
- Balance quick action with thoughtful reflection.
- Develop a direction or an approach rather than decide on a solution.

Share, Don't Sell

Why?

When sharing work, find ways to invite people into the process as collaborators instead of trying to convince them of value. Sharing humbly invites questions and feedback that can advance the work. It also supports co-design.

Conversely, when we focus on selling an idea, we lose the opportunity to refine our work, incorporate new perspectives, and create effective solutions.

How:

- Share as an opportunity to learn with our team.
- Be transparent about team agreements, goals, expectations, and co-constructed narratives.
- Earn the trust of others through our actions, not just our words.

Share, Don't Sell

Practice transparency and non-attachment in sharing ideas with collaborators.

Sharing

Our hope is Liberatory Design supports you to catalyze equity design across the globe! To honor the co-creators when using Liberatory Design, please use this language:

- "Liberatory Design is the result of a collaboration between Tania Anaissie, David Clifford, Susie Wise, and the National Equity Project [Victor Cary and Tom Malarkey]."

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- You **can** adapt it and build on it.
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Thank you for honoring Liberatory Design's roots, and we can't wait to see what you do with it!

Credits

The Team

Liberatory Design and this card deck are the result of years of thought partnership, creative experimentation, and friendship between the co-creators [alphabetically]:

Tania Anaissie (Content + Visual Design)
Victor Cary (Content)
David Clifford (Content + Illustrations)
Tom Malarkey (Content)
Susie Wise (Content)

We also give special thanks to contributors that helped this version shine [alphabetically]:

Paul J. Kim (Text Editing)
Megan Robalewski (Visual Design)

And to countless other close friends and colleagues who shared feedback on our many prototypes!