

Mapping Our Pandemic Experiences and Our Paths Forward

This year, we will hopefully be moving gradually out of a pandemic-focused existence. We will be emerging from a time of shared experiences of uncertainty, fear, rapid and unpredictable changes, grief, exhaustion... and also, from very different experiences, depending on what our actual journeys through these times have been, and how we respond as individuals and relationships to various kinds of challenges.

This handout focuses on tools that can help people in your workplace, family, or other groups, understand the diversity of experiences you've all been having during the pandemic, and the ways those experiences are shaping each of your ideas about moving forward as we slowly shift out of the pandemic. It is important that the facilitator of the exercises be committed to **creating an environment where the responses to people communicating their experiences are empathy and curiosity**. Otherwise, these exercises can become more fuel for assumptions and judgment, rather than an opportunity for people to feel seen and heard, and cultivate compassion and collaboration. (See last page.)

It is a list of continuums and categories you might map - in person, or using a virtual white board like Mural. For a **basic overview of mapping as a facilitation tool**, see the handout by that name on the [Tools for Team Building and Facilitation page](#) of my website.

Uses and Requirements:

- Some of these are easy to do with almost any group. Others require a degree of trust, a willingness to explore -- or at least express -- experiences and perspectives that may be painful or feel vulnerable.
- Some of what is suggested will be relevant only to groups that will be actively working to redesign systems as we move out the other side of the pandemic. Those maps -- or variations on them -- may also be useful before that stage, as groups are continuing to evolve pandemic-responsive systems.
- Some can be used as "icebreakers" and done as stand-alones or in sets to help folks simply know each other better and feel seen and heard -- an important part of the trust-building process in groups.
- Some will be best done in sets to help explore important territory as preparation for decision-making.

You can, of course, adjust the wordings, create variations of all kinds, and add more categories that feel useful. **Please be mindful about not using language that implies that one end of the continuum or one category is “right” or preferred in any way.**

I do not recommend doing all of these all at once. Pick some that feel particularly relevant to your group and goals in the moment. You can also circle back and do more later.

The Basic Form: To map something, you establish a question and a set of options (two or more), put labels in different parts of the room, and then ask people to move their bodies into lines or clusters representing where they are “standing” in relationship to the question.¹

Cluster or Identity Maps

These are maps of how people identify when there are multiple options. Often these are done in rounds. In round 1, with the initial categories established and posted on the walls, you invite people to move into the category they most strongly identify with. From there you can either (a) simply invite a next round (can be done multiple times) so people can claim other (multiple) identities or choose to stay where they are, or (b) you can first invite participants to propose additional categories, put those signs up in addition to what’s there, and then do more rounds. It’s good to offer an “other” category; you can invite people standing there to name their experience/identity.

1. Creative Survival Strategies I Used During COVID
 - a. Got a pet
 - b. Spent more time outside
 - c. Built or repaired things
 - d. Played more games
 - e. Cooked more
 - f. Took up a new hobby
 - g. Learned a new musical instrument, or spent more time practicing
 - h. Exercised more
 - i. Developed a new art/craft capacity, or did lots more art/craft work
 - j. Read a lot more than usual
 - k. Developed/pursued a new intellectual interest
 - l. Dug deeper into existing intellectual interests
 - m. Other

¹ If you are using an online visual collaboration tool like Mural, you will post the options spread out on the virtual white board and ask people to represent their bodies with sticky notes with their initials.

2. Relationship to Children
 - a. I have been living with children
 - b. I have no regular contact with children
 - c. I have been trying to support children I don't live with
 - d. My work is supporting/teaching children
 - e. Other
3. COVID Infection (*There is a simpler version of this in the continuum maps section below.*)
 - a. I did not get COVID
 - b. I got a very mild case of COVID which passed quickly, with no lasting effects
 - c. I got a bad case of COVID but was not hospitalized
 - d. I got a bad case of COVID and was hospitalized
 - e. My COVID symptoms have lingered for many months

4. A circle map of people lost to COVID

For this circle map, put everyone at the edges of the room to start and put concentric circles on the floor using yarn, with plenty of room in each. Label each concentric circle from inside to outside:

- a. Lost family member(s) (biological or not)
- b. Lost close friend(s)
- c. Lost immediate coworkers or people I knew in other groups I belong to (church, choir, kids' school, etc.)
- d. Have people in those inner categories who lost people they love
- e. Lost people I knew, but who I was not close to
- f. Know other people who lost people they love
- g. None of the earlier circles are true of my experience of COVID

People can straddle more than one circle as needed.

There is a simpler version of this in the continuum maps section below.

Continuum Maps

These are line maps, showing where people are standing between two positions or experiences.

1. I was a germ-pod of one ----- I had at least 5 people in my germ pod
2. My workload increased ----- I was unemployed
3. My work put me in physical contact with lots of strangers every day ----- I worked from home.
4. I feel good about my workplace's response to COVID; like they prioritized health and safety and valued employees ----- I do not...

5. My approach to the pandemic was largely supported by my family, friends and community ----- My approach to the pandemic was largely rejected by my family, friends and community (NOTE: family, friends, and community could all be separate categories/maps, and workplace could be added.)
6. I embraced the pandemic restrictions as necessary and useful ----- I felt the pandemic restrictions were unnecessary or counter-productive. (Note, could do as a cluster map with another category: "I felt the pandemic restrictions were insufficient or far too slow in coming")
7. I got COVID ----- I did not get COVID
(*Could make more complex on a cluster map -- see above*)
8. I lost family or close friends to COVID ----- I did not....
(*Could make more complex on a circle map -- see above*)
9. My community (any definition) was highly/disproportionately impacted by COVID ----- My community (any definition) was not highly/disproportionately impacted by COVID
10. My income took a huge hit ----- My income did not take a huge hit
11. I feel less economically secure now than before the pandemic ----- I feel as secure or more secure economically now than I did before the pandemic
12. I got evicted/am fearing eviction due to COVID ----- COVID has not impacted my housing security
13. I feel good about the flexible work rules we created in response to COVID and want to continue to use them ----- I want to go back to how we used to do things
[You can be more specific and ask about particular work rules.]
14. Working from home works great for me ----- Working at home is hard for me
[Follow up with an exploration of what specifically has been good or hard]
15. The technology systems we've used to support our work during COVID are working well for me (my team) ----- ... are not working well for me (my team)
[You can be more specific and ask about specific systems.]

System Design Extensions

Questions 13-15 above could lead directly into work around how the systems you've been using might evolve in the coming weeks and months. Some questions or activities you might want to include in your discussions are:

1. Questions Brainstorms

Pick a topic or idea and ask the group to spend three minutes identifying every

question they can think of that feels relevant. Then group those questions and decide how and when to address them.

2. **Equity Checks**

Think together about:

- a. Who benefits from aspect x of the systems we are using now?
- b. Who is burdened by it?
- c. How does that compare to who benefited and who was burdened by the pre-pandemic system we were using?
- d. How might the burdens and benefits shift in each of the options we are considering moving forward?
- e. Who will be impacted by the decisions we are making who are not in the room? What role(s) should they have in making this decision?

You will find a handout with an expanded version of this work on the [Tools for Team Building and Facilitation](#) page of my website.

3. **Identify Specific Benefits and Burdens** (complements #2 above)

- a. Ask: What have the benefits of this change been for... and then list different groups of people (or individuals in a small group).
- b. Ask: What have the burdens/challenges of this change been for... (as above)
- c. Look for creative ways to mitigate harm that might be caused by either continuing this change, or ending it.

4. **Do more mapping**

- a. To see how people are feeling about particular proposals (Great/ready to say yes ----- Don't like this idea at all OR Have serious reservations)
- b. To see how quickly people think a particular transition should happen (put two time periods on the wall as the poles)

Supporting Empathy and Curiosity

As I noted on the first page, for these exercises to succeed in helping people to feel seen and heard, and cultivating compassion and collaboration, we need to actively facilitate with a focus on empathy and curiosity.

Facilitators can do this work in many ways. For many concrete techniques, see Chapter 4, on Facilitative Listening, in the *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, and my handout [Working Through Differences to Find Mutually Acceptable Solutions](#).

Below is one way we might support empathy and curiosity, both when we are facilitating the full group in a meeting, and when we give directions for small group work.

We often think we are being empathetic when we respond to someone sharing their experience with “yes, I know just what you mean; I ...” and then **tell a story of our own**. There is a not subtle dance here that we need to learn. When we respond to someone’s feelings -- pain, fear, anger, frustration, grief -- by sharing a story of our own, we are **centering ourselves in the conversation**. This is not received as empathy, though it is likely a response to what you are hearing from the other person touching something in you.

Instead, for the person on the receiving end to experience empathy, **they need the focus to stay on them**. The most basic way to do this is to:

- Start with a simple acknowledgement - i.e. “It sounds like you are feeling deeply frustrated.”
- Follow with a check in - “is that right?” - to make sure you guessed accurately and give them a chance to share more nuances of the feelings they are having.
- Then ask a question or make a statement that indicates that you are not judging them for having these feelings, and invites, but does not request/demand, more information. The most basic is some version of “That sounds hard,” followed by “I’d like to understand better what that experience was like for you, if you are willing to share more,” or “would you be willing to share more with me about what that was like?” or “is there more you want me to know about that experience and how it’s impacting you?”

You may need to help people handle the discomfort of hearing things they don’t agree with. You can use these same empathy and curiosity techniques to support them as they try to work with this.

If we can build our capacity to hear each other’s experiences without immediately judging them, to notice that many things look very different when seen through the lens of the separate but equal reality of someone else’s mind and body, we are also building our capacity to stay resilient and curious when things get contentious. That, in turn, makes us better able to work together across differences to find creative and wise solutions to the difficult and complex problems we must learn to solve together if we are going to create a better future.