



LIBERATORY DESIGN

mindsets and modes to
design for equity

What is Liberatory Design?

Liberatory Design is a process and practice to:

- Generate self-awareness to liberate designers from habits that perpetuate inequity.
- Shift the relationship between the people who hold power to design and those impacted.
- Foster learning and agency for those involved in and influenced by the design work.
- Create conditions for collective liberation.

What is this card deck?

This deck is a resource to support your Liberatory Design practice. There are two parts:

1. **Mindsets:** to invoke stances and values to ground and focus your design practice.
2. **Modes:** to provide process guidance for your design practice.

Also included are several Move cards that show some ways to use Liberatory Design.

Who co-created it?

Tania Anaissie, Victor Cary, David Clifford, Tom Malarkey and Susie Wise with input from countless friends and colleagues.



LIBERATORY DESIGN MINDSETS



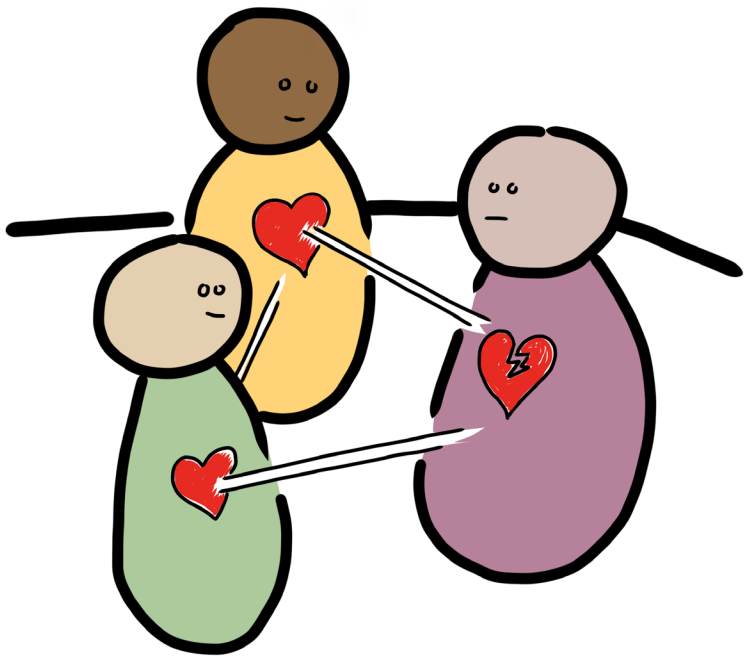
Introduction to Liberatory Design Mindsets

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.



Build Relational Trust

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

Build Relational Trust

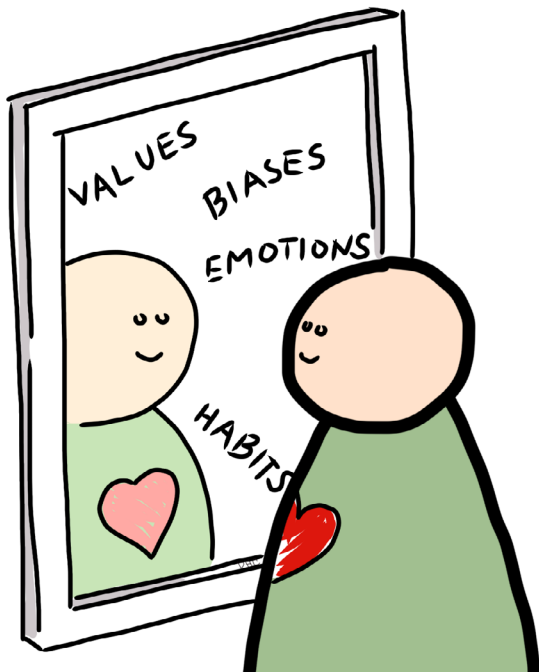
Why?

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.



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.

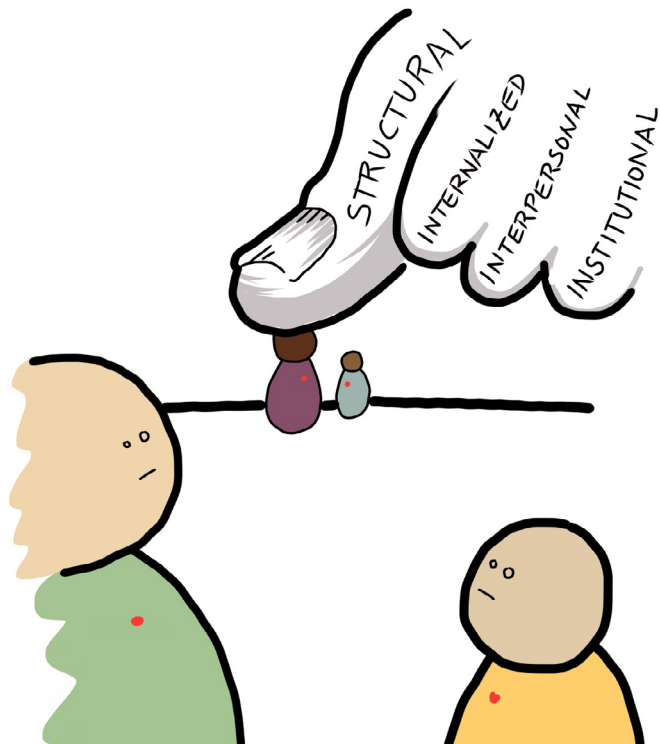
Practice Self-Awareness

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.



Recognize Oppression

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

Recognize Oppression

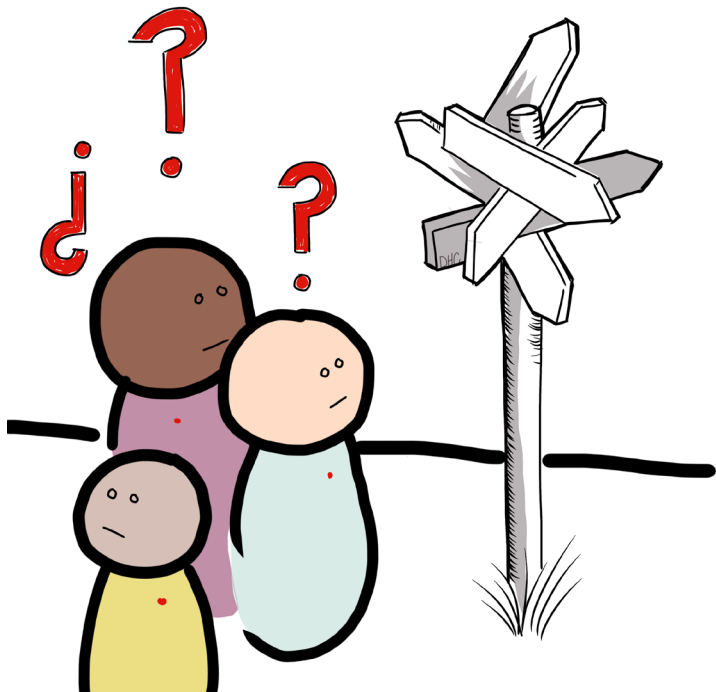
Why?

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

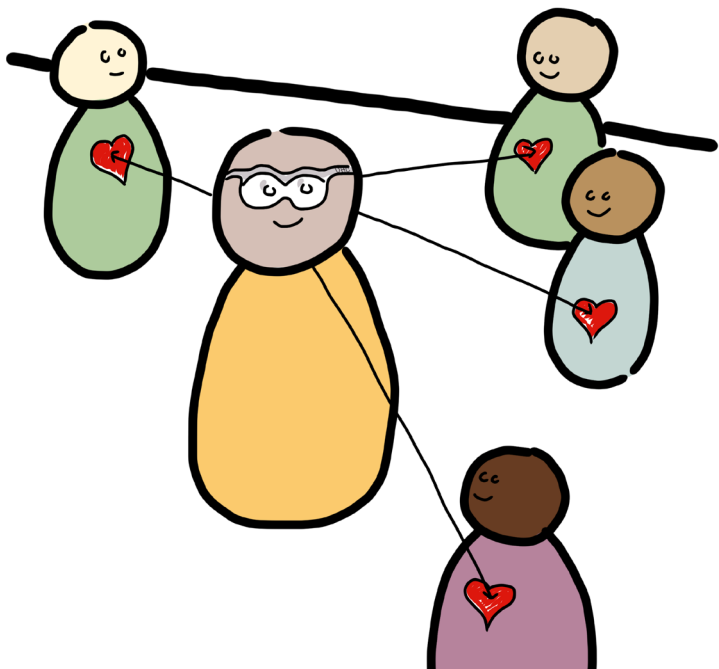
Why?

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

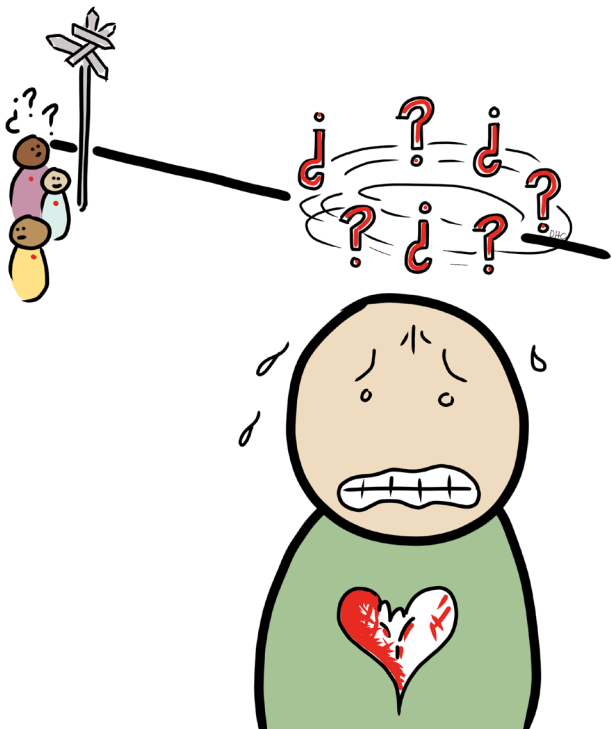
Why?

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

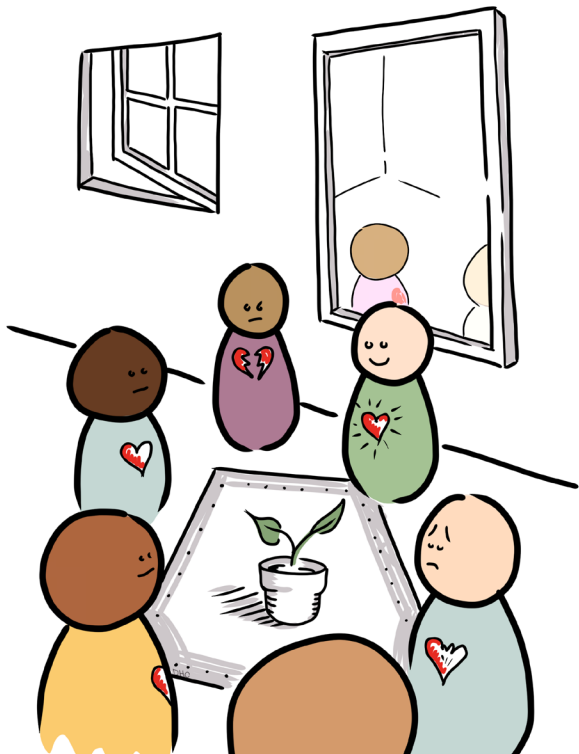
Why?

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.

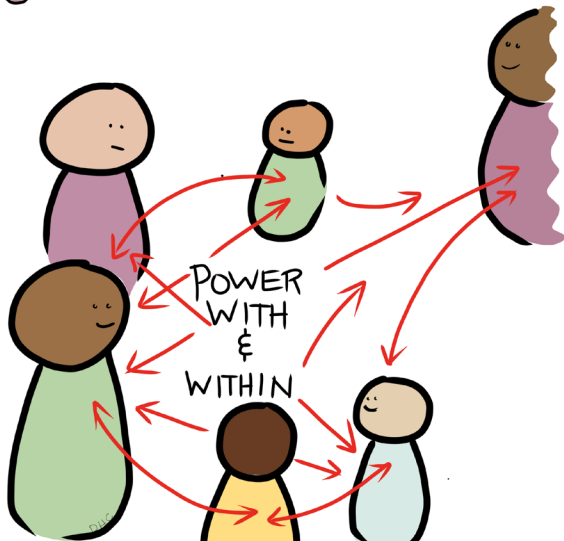
Attend to Healing

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

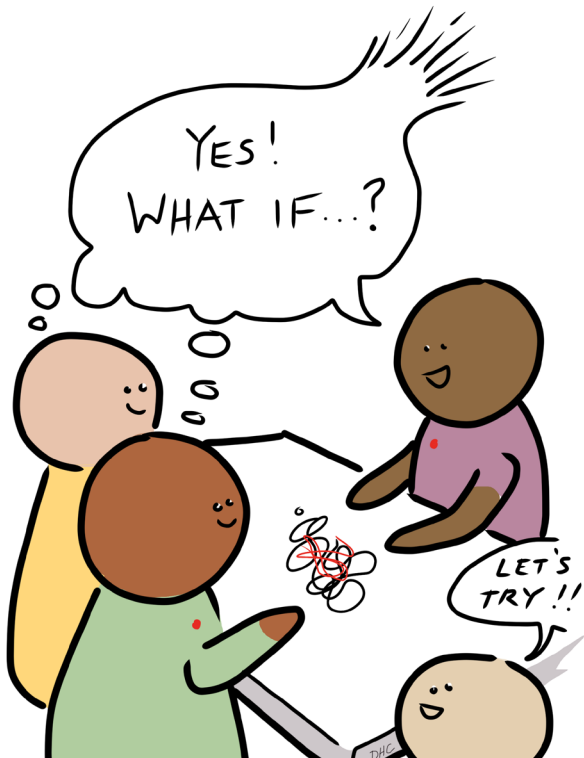
Why?

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

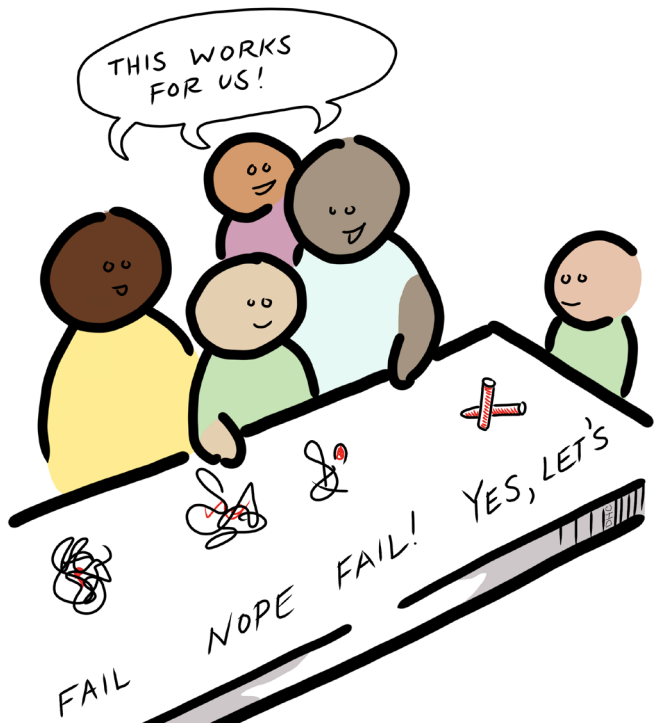
Why?

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

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

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.

LIBERATORY DESIGN MOVE



**Notice &
Set Intentions**

Liberatory Design Move:

Notice and Set Intentions

Why:

Before jumping into teamwork, build awareness about what feels important to everyone on the team. Use the Mindset Cards to name the intentions each person wants to guide their work processes.

Option 1: Individuals Choose Mindsets

- Select 1-3 mindsets that feel important to you as you prepare for the work ahead. Set specific intentions about how you will embody them.
- Share your mindsets and intentions with a partner or the group. Explain why you chose them and potential implications for the work ahead.

Option 2: Team Chooses Mindsets

Together, select 3 mindset cards that help you define how your team wants to work together on an equity challenge. Consider the agreements and conversations needed to embody these in your team work.



LIBERATORY DESIGN MODES

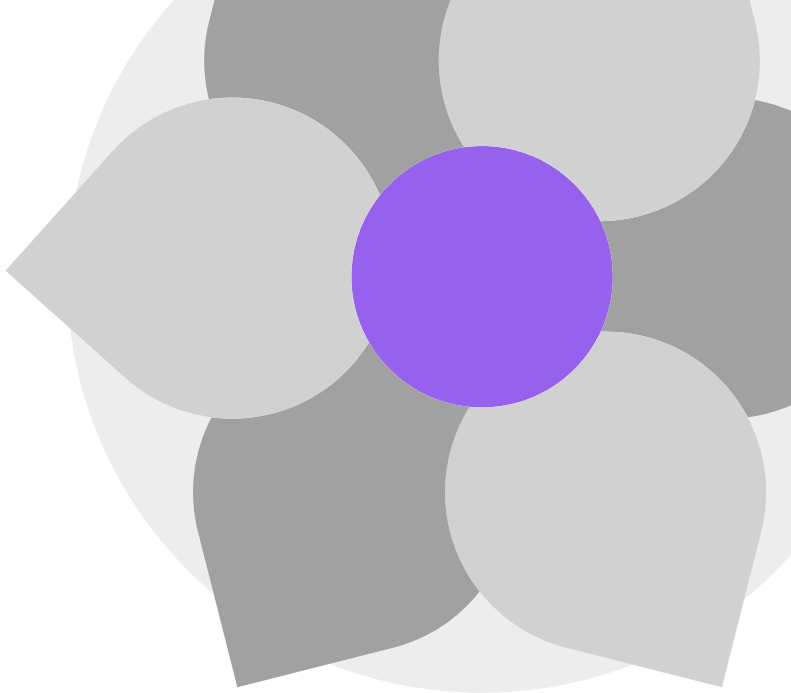
Introduction to the Liberatory Design Modes

The Liberatory Design Mindsets express the spirit of the process and the Liberatory Design Modes provide guidance through the process.

Liberatory Design emerged from the addition of two steps to the design thinking process: Notice and Reflect. These modes help us to pause and interrupt the dominant cultural habits that contribute to inequity. Notice and Reflect are at the heart of Liberatory Design and integral to every step within the process.

Liberatory Design is fluid and emergent. A design process can begin with any mode and move in various directions. As modes, Notice and Reflect represent a set of possible behaviors that refocus our attention and help us maintain our commitment to equity in design processes.

Make these Modes your own: combine and sequence them in whatever ways support your process.



NOTICE

Notice by practicing self-awareness, seeking context about the systems you design within, and exploring the history of oppression in those systems to develop an equity-based identity.

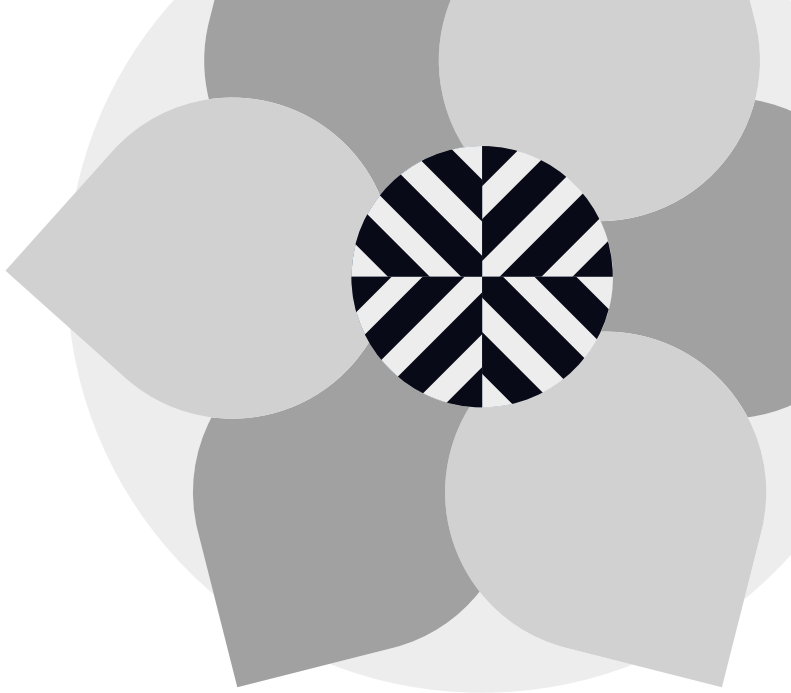
NOTICE

When...

You or your team want to practice self-awareness, build system awareness, explore historical context, name power dynamics or rethink aspects of your work. Notice before, during, and after each mode of Liberatory Design. We suggest practicing Notice and Reflect together.

Key Questions to Ask

- Who am I? Who are we collectively in our work together?
- What is my and our team's relationship to opportunity and institutional power? How does it relate to that of the people most impacted by this challenge?
- What realities and constraints do we need to understand and address in our work?



REFLECT

Reflect on team health, design intentions, and the impact our design process is having on us individually, interpersonally, institutionally, and systemically to support continual growth and healing.

REFLECT

When...

You or your team want to practice self-awareness, practice collective sense-making check in with each other and your communities, process conflict, name emotions or rethink aspects of your work. Reflect before, during, and after each mode of Liberatory Design. We suggest practicing Notice and Reflect together.

Key Questions to Ask

- As a team, do our processes feel liberatory? If not, why? What and how should we adjust?
- How might cultural norms be triggering unconscious biases that impede our relationships and work?
- How do our emotional states affect how you show up with your team? In the work?
- How can we share or release distressful emotions so we can move through the Liberatory Design process with health and care for each other?



SEE THE SYSTEM

Seeing the System enables us to identify potential equity challenges, what about the system is producing these, and what we need to learn more about as we engage in empathy work.

SEE THE SYSTEM

When...

- You're starting a design process.
- You want to better understand the context and/or history that impacts the current challenge.
- You've done some empathy work and you're ready to see the system with new eyes.
- You want to make the connection between the smaller challenge you're focused on and the bigger picture.

Key Questions to Ask


- What inequitable patterns of experience and outcomes are playing out in our system? How do we know?
- What structures and system dynamics are contributing to these inequitable patterns?
- What has been emerging in our system relative to these patterns?



EMPATHIZE

Design opportunities to understand the experiences, emotions, and motivations of the person or community you are designing with.

Empathize from a place of love, respect, and curiosity.



EMPATHIZE

When...

- You want to learn more about the people most impacted by, and involved in, the equity challenge.
- You want to seek stories to see deeper than statistics.
- You want to build relational trust to create space for deep listening, intimacy, new perspectives, and genuine learning.

Key Questions to Ask

- Who is closest to the pain? Furthest from power?
- Who is directly or indirectly causing the pain? Who is closest to power?
- How might we learn by building relationships instead of creating transactional experiences?
- How might an individual's or community's experiences affect how I am seen or the level of trust between us?
- How might we maintain the stance of a learner who is not trying to “solve” anything?



DEFINE

Develop a point of view about challenges and needs with the community. Together, look for patterns and insights in stories that reveal the deeper needs of the people closest to the challenge.

DEFINE

When...

- You have qualitative and quantitative data to synthesize as you look for needs and insights.
- The equity challenge is too broad, and you need to narrow it in order to begin.
- You want to see if you're ready to design solutions or need to understand more about the challenge first.

Key Questions to Ask

- What do people in the community identify as their needs and core equity challenges?
- How, and by whom, has a problem been defined in the past? Are we considering the local and historical contexts of the community?
- Is this a challenge we understand well enough to start designing for? Or is it more complex and we need to inquire further?
- To what extent is this challenge within our sphere of influence?
- How might we bring different perspectives together for collaborative sense making?



INQUIRE

Inquire when the way ahead is not clear. Inquire to help you better understand and define the challenge and to provide a clearer direction for your prototyping.

INQUIRE

Inquiry as defined here is about navigating the ambiguity and uncertainty of “not-knowing” by taking “safe to fail” actions. This can reveal important information about the context and equity challenge. It can also help identify a direction for prototyping.

When...

- You want to create the space for collective sense-making, inquiry, and discovery that shifts the power and agency to the stakeholder.
- You need more clarity on a direction to head in to define and co-design malleable solutions in an equity challenge.

Key Questions to Ask

- What do we still need to better understand – about our stakeholders, the system, and what is creating the inequity we are focused on?
- What are available opportunities to try small things that will reveal more?



IMAGINE

Creating the time to brainstorm and imagine “what if?!” can unlock and unleash the creative courage that will lead to innovative approaches and solutions to equity challenges.

IMAGINE

When...

- You're ready to brainstorm as many ideas as possible to address the problem.
- You're stuck and need a jolt of fresh ideas to help you get beyond conventional approaches.
- You want to revisit an issue that emerged in another phase of the design process.

Key Questions to Ask

- Have we invited multiple perspectives and created an environment that encourages everyone to share ideas without fear of judgment?
- Are we making our brainstorming process accessible to everyone? Did we choose methods that allow all people to contribute according to their strengths: visually, verbally, physically?
- Are we giving ourselves permission to consider ideas that may not feel possible in order to move past status quo solutions?



PROTOTYPE

Build rough versions of what you're working on to test key ideas. Designing for equity requires creative experimentation.

PROTOTYPE

When...

- You're ready to turn your ideas into tangible and testable approaches to your equity challenge.
- You need deeper empathy and want to learn more about the people and community you're designing with.

Key Questions to Ask

- How might we build a prototype that invites community interaction and collaboration?
- What will this prototype help us learn about the situation, system, and problem?
- What are we trying to learn about what we have designed and how are we trying to learn it?
- Do we think that our design work supports the co-creation of equity and liberation in the world?



TRY

Gather authentic feedback about prototypes to check your assumptions and intentions. Feedback is a gift used to improve whatever is being designed and ensure that the design is attuned to stated equity goals.

TRY

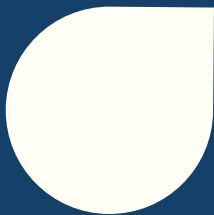
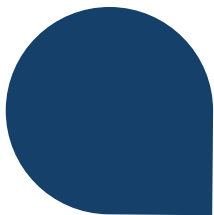
When...

- Your team has articulated what it wants to learn about a prototype.
- You're early in your process, you've crafted a rough prototype and you want to see if your design is headed in the right direction.
- You want to see what emerges as a result of your prototype.

Key Questions to Ask

- How do we engage the people who are giving us feedback in the process of adapting the prototype?
- How are we creating the conditions to try our prototype so that it is safe-to-fail and learn (meaning not at risk of creating harm)?
- What new understandings have been revealed about the equity design challenge and opportunities to interrupt inequity?
- How are success and failure being communicated to stakeholders, especially those most impacted by the design effort?

LIBERATORY DESIGN MOVE



**Choosing Where
to Go Next**

Liberatory Design Move:

Choosing Where to Go Next

Why:

The Liberatory Design process does not have to be practiced sequentially or in a complete cycle. Team and project needs will determine which steps to take next.

When:

- If you are starting a new project, completing a design cycle in sequence might be most useful.
- If your work on a project is ongoing, a specific mode or set of modes may best serve you.

How:

- With your team or alone, lay out the Mode cards and reflect on where you are in your work.
- Identify where you are stuck or what areas need improvement.
- Reflect on the key questions on each mode card to inspire new ideas and to help you identify where to go next.

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!

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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Thank you for honoring Liberatory Design's roots, and we can't wait to see what you do with it!

THE EVOLUTION OF LIBERATORY DESIGN



The terms Equity Designer and Design Ally were coined by Antionette Carroll of Creative Reaction Lab.

The Evolution of Liberatory Design



2016



2021

Originally based on the 5 hexagons of design thinking, the latest visual representation of Liberatory Design is inspired by a flower with petals that converge in the center. The flower exists among others within an ecosystem, and the practitioners of Liberatory Design create connections through pollination.

In this graphic, the Notice and Reflect modes are placed at the centers of the flower– we encourage you to return to this center each time you pivot to a new mode. We also want to emphasize the graphic's non-linearity; the petals can be visited in any order to support your unique context.

An Invitation

We want to hear from you!

The Liberatory Design approach and card deck are works in progress. We'd love to hear your feedback! How do you use it? What works for you? What do you wish was different? Any new ideas?

Find us at
#liberatorydesign
www.liberatorydesign.com

Thank you,
Tania, Victor, David, Tom and Susie





LIBERATORY DESIGN