

Collective Story Harvest

A quick reference guide to hosting a Collective Story Harvest...

What is a Collective Story Harvest?

A Collective Story Harvest enables us to deeply connect with and learn from the experience in our community, team or organization. A number of stories are shared in small groups and we work with a set of specific themes to harvest each story. Each of the participants either harvests one of the themes or is a witness during the storytelling and then shares back to the storyteller and small group. Finally, we come together to converge our learnings across all the stories.

What are the benefits of a Collective Story Harvest process?

Bringing stories to life through the Collective Story Harvest process is a way of increasing the learning in our workplaces, communities and more. As a storytelling process, it builds our capacity for targeted listening and group learning, tracking many different themes of a story simultaneously. This is an ideal way to surface many insights, innovations, and ah-has that exist beneath the surface of our stories and to take our learning to a deeper level – both for those telling and listening. As a participatory process it creates a strong connection and shared understanding for those involved.

Other groups who have used this process have shared that storytellers spoke of the insight and learning they received from their group. The listeners spoke of the insights gained for their own work and life. There was a deeper level of learning that happened where participants were able to apply the learning directly into their work.



What are the themes?

A theme is like a lens to look at the story through. Each lens gives a different ability to focus our collective learning. To determine the themes, we ask the question “What is it that we most want to learn from the stories?” These themes will be used by listeners (wisdom catchers) to specifically listen for while the storyteller shares their story. Imagine that as you tell your story that one person is listening for the pivotal moments and breakthroughs, and another person is listening for insights on intergenerational collaboration, and another person is listening for elements of leadership. Some people won’t have a specific theme and will just be listening to the whole of the story. By having different people “wisdom catching” these various themes build our capacity for listening and learning from the story is deepened. *Storytellers don’t need to worry about speaking to the themes; the wisdom catchers use the themes.*



What is the Collective Story Harvest good for?

There are many ways to apply collective story harvesting:

- Systemic story harvest for applied learning: A group focuses on one systemic story to harvest the learnings and apply them to its own work. This works equally well for a practice group coming together or a working team hearing a story from another organization or system and then applying the learnings to its own practice.
- Full system team building/strategy session: Harvesting an organization or group’s own story for learning, teambuilding and strategic enhancement. Working with the story in this way brings the group into a collective field of meaning. Vision or mission statements can be enhanced and integrated, strategic plans can be invigorated.
- Many stories/collective learning: Harvesting a variety of stories simultaneously in small groups, then converging the learning across the full group. A variety of stories are selected that offer different aspects to the group. Participants attend and harvest the story that most interests them. Collective meta learning is harvested by the full group.
- Creating a new field of work or practice: Telling the story of the wider context up to now in order to set the scene for the new work or practice field to arise and find its potent focus. The process might also be used for systemic evaluation.
- Taking stock at regular intervals during a project’s life: Good witnessing enables insights about the key pivotal points in a story to surface, as well as helping other emotions to be heard and released. It can also support a story to rise above the personal to reveal insights about the local context it happened in and even the wider systemic context.

Timing

We've found that group harvesting takes time – at least 90 minutes is the minimum time needed. Keeping the storytelling to around 30 minutes is advisable otherwise it is easy for listeners to become overloaded. If you are working with a practice team or your purpose is to create maximum learning around a story, then you may want to work on the interplay between story, harvest and learning for a half day, a day or even longer.

Collective Story Harvest Preparation

1. First check with your storytellers and make them an invitation. Stories respond to invitation and when a heartfelt invitation is present, often a story will come out in a whole new way and offer new learning to those telling it. A group harvest is a gift to those telling and those harvesting, and should be offered as such. For multiple small groups of storytellers, a nice ratio is approximately 1 storyteller for every 10 or so listeners.

It is best to have those directly connected to the story on hand to tell it, and it can be more interesting to hear from more than one person involved in the story. More voices add depth and richness, as well as a variety of points of view. The story does not need to be an often---told one, or polished in any form. In fact, this process can be used to help polish a story and give the storytellers input on how to focus and refine the story to be told to different audiences.

Some insights that can support your storytellers in their preparation:

- Think back to the great stories you've heard – they have a beginning, middle and an end and usually have a challenge at the core of them with the key element of overcoming or grappling with the challenge. The key criteria is that the story must have a breakthrough point or learning within it, although it does not need to be a success story. It also means that your story doesn't have to be totally completed, rather, what is most important, is that we can learn from your story.
- To prepare as a storyteller, set some time aside to do a little bit of writing. Think of your story topic and make some notes along these lines: here's who I am, here's who is involved, here is the challenge that faced me, here's what



happened, where and when, here's where we are now. This is your real story you are telling – not one with made-up characters. *If there are more than one of you involved in telling this story please work together prior to the session to decide how you will tell your story as a pair.*

- You are welcome to bring your story notes to support you as you tell your story, but don't read your notes. This isn't a formal or rehearsed presentation (no PowerPoint!) – you are sitting around the campfire with your peers telling them your story. This preparation work simply helps you craft your thoughts into a story that we can listen and learn from.

2. Next, decide on the themes you would like to harvest. Ideally this could be agreed with the story holders and the listeners, depending on where they want to focus their learning. Take as much time as you need to discuss exactly what you want to get out of this process and what will happen to the harvest afterwards. You'll need at least one person harvesting each theme you've chosen and more than one can harvest the same theme simultaneously. Here are some examples:

- Narrative: The thread of the story – people, events, stages. You might also harvest facts, emotions and values that are part of the story, etc.
- Process: What interventions, processes, applications, discoveries happened?
- Pivotal moments & breakthroughs: What are the pivotal moments or breakthrough moments in this story? What can we learn from them?
- Leadership: What is the thread of leadership in this story? Where do you notice new forms or practices of leadership?
- Synchronicity & Magic: What happened during this story that pointed to synchronicity and the magic in the middle?
- Specific theme: Harvest the story using a specific theme, like collaborative leadership, the art of participation, intergenerational communication etc, and see what it tells you
- Principles: What principles of working can be gleaned from this story? What did we learn about participatory practices? What principles of complex living systems were reflected in this work?
- Questions: What questions arise for me from this story that I can take forward to my work, family or community?



- Relationships: working collaboratively and effectively as and with partners: What can we learn from this story about the importance and tending of relationships and how we can work effectively as partners or step into partnership?
- Overcoming barriers: What barriers were encountered in this story and what can we learn from them?

The Collective Story Harvest Process

- **Framing and introduction of the process** (15 to 20 minutes): The whole group is together and the host introduces the process. Each storyteller can give a very brief synopsis (1 to 2 minutes maximum) so the participants can choose which story they want to join and listen.
- **Small group storytelling** (30 minutes): After the introduction the participants move to small circles of chairs where about ten or so participants will join a storyteller. A host invites the group to go around the circle to briefly introduce themselves, and then will invite volunteers to be the wisdom catchers for the various themes (they will hand out a sheet with the arc questions and space for them to take notes e.g. flip chart or other paper). *If more than one person volunteers to listen to a theme that is okay.* Next, the storyteller introduces themselves and tells their story for around 20 minutes.
- **Small group harvesting** (30 – 50 minutes): After the storyteller is finished telling their story, the host will invite the wisdom catchers to share back what they heard related to their theme. Example: the person listening for pivotal moments and breakthroughs will share a few key moments they heard in the story that were a pivotal moment or breakthrough, etc. The host will also ask those who weren't listening for a theme of any key insights they are taking away from hearing the story. Lastly the storyteller will be invited to share what gifts or key insights they are taking away from sharing the story. This sharing-back portion will take about 30 to 50 minutes.



It's nice to take a break at this point in the process e.g. 20 minutes.

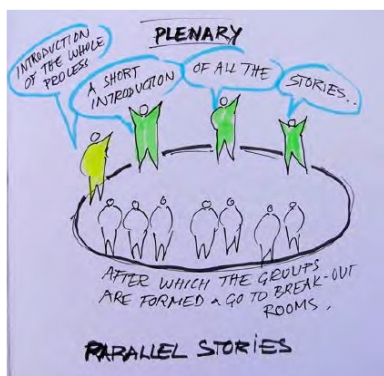
- **Convergence and harvesting** (45 to 60 minutes): The whole group comes back together to discover what we've learned across all the stories and harvest the wisdom. Invite participants to gather into "like" groups — the storytellers will sit together, the wisdom catchers gather in their theme groups (e.g. everyone who is listening for Synchronicity & Magic sits together, everyone who was listening for Relationships sits together, etc. Invite the groups to discuss what they discovered through the lens of their theme as it relates to the broader purpose of the Collective Story Harvest, and capture a 'meta harvest' to share back with the whole group. *You can use a World Café format for this convergence and harvesting process.*



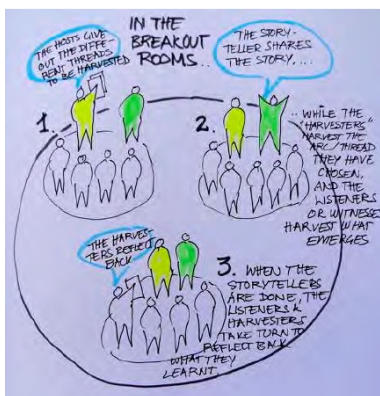
- **Closing the session** (5 to 10 minutes): Thank you to the storytellers and the harvesters. Any final remarks about what will happen to the harvest now that it has been heard.

Illustrating the Process

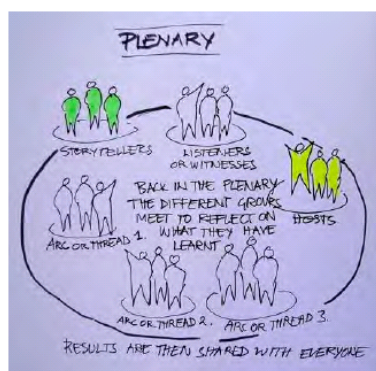
The beginning...



Storytellers break out into their smaller groups...



Coming back together as a large group...



Materials and Set-up

Begin with the whole group together, with access to small circles of chairs for each storyteller in breakout spaces. You may need some small tables for those harvesting onto flipcharts, or they may be fine harvesting onto the floor or using paper colour coded by theme with the theme question printed on them. You'll need plenty of pens, coloured pens and other art supplies may also be helpful.

It's nice to partner each storyteller with a host to support the small group process; brief the hosts in advance and introduce them to their storytellers before the process begins. Provide a written briefing sheet for the storytelling & hosting team. There will always be someone who doesn't hear the instructions or needs to refer to them again. This makes it simple and easy.

You may want to have recording equipment on hand if you'd like to video the story and the results. It's also helpful to photograph graphic harvest.



How Collective Story Harvesting Can Work with Other Participatory Methodologies

Collective Story Harvesting is an ideal partner for other methodologies and can lead directly into:

- A **World Café** taking questions surfaced during the process deeper and creating an on---going community conversation.
- An **Open Space Technology** session where participants can inquire into applying the learning directly into their projects or practice.
- **Circle** work focused on deepening community, working on issues or questions that have arisen or integrating what has been learned.
- An **Appreciative Inquiry** focusing on appreciative topics that have arisen out of the story harvest to shift challenges and open possibilities.
- Further **illuminating the founding story** or **shaping the future story** of the system. Additional **storytelling/storysharing** by participants to personally link to the story harvested or the story field that is being created.
- **Collecting additional stories** to illuminate learning points or **disseminating the harvested story** more widely to the stakeholders.
- Developing **strategy, powerful questions, principles, values, the value proposition**, etc.
- As a frame for **additional teambuilding, cross---functional and cross--- organizational work** or **creating new fields of practice**.