
Module / Tool

Strategic Empathy

What It Is

We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Letters and Papers from Prison

Strategic Empathy is a means for putting yourself in the shoes of key stakeholders and decision makers.

As employed in a SWAT Team for Peace exercise, it is a three-step process. Step one is to identify the different decision makers. Step two is to use multi-voting or some other tool to focus on the most important players (although over the course of the SWAT Team lifecycle you may want to apply it to *all* of them), and step three is to start by using your team’s intuition and GroupGenius to generate some initial hypotheses regarding their interests and motivations that you will subsequently confirm with data, interviews, etc.

What to Use It For

- To develop an understanding of the interests behind various positions that players in a conflict may have staked out publicly.
- To develop the empathy necessary to deal with protagonists as human beings rather than cartoonish adversaries.
- As a first step in writing **Victory Speeches**.

How It Works

- Step 1. **Brainstorm** a lengthy list of the most powerful or influential protagonists.
- Step 2. Use **Multi-voting** to narrow down the list for the purpose of the DesignSprint but create documentation of the entire list for later use.
- Step 3. Allocate the protagonists among the different working teams so they can focus on a few protagonists to understand more deeply.
- Step 4. Ask teams to identify the following for each protagonist:
 - a. What does he/she want or need? What is the relative priority of the different needs?
 - b. What can he/she live with?
 - c. What else do we need to know about where he/she is coming from?
- Step 5. If time permits – for example, if this is not a module in a design session but a tool to be used in a longer exercise – use the questions from Step 4

to guide your collection of as much background information on each protagonist as possible.

Step 6. Step into the role of **being the protagonist** and answer the Step 4 questions in the **first person**.

Step 6. Insist that the teams report out **in the first person**, that is, in the voice of the protagonist him/herself.

Example

The following exercise was used by a group of international diplomats and peace workers as part of a three-day DesignSprint held in June of 2019 aimed at minimizing violence and civilian casualties in Syria.

Set Up

To begin the exercise, three double-panel WorkWalls were arranged with one of the following headings on each one:

- Within Syria
- Regional Players
- Outside Region/Global Players

Participants swarmed the board and brainstormed the individuals and groups who could make decisions *tomorrow* to contribute to ending the violence in Syria.

Each participant was given 5 small Post-it Notes on an index card and was instructed to use **Multi-voting** to identify the most important players. The facilitator tallied the votes and identified the top ten.

The group of 14 was then divided into two teams, “Team 1” and “Team A”. The facilitator flipped a coin and the winning team identified one of the ten key players to focus on. The other team made their choice of a player to focus on and the two teams rotated choices until each team had three players with which to apply **Strategic Empathy**. The results were

Team 1	Team A
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assad /Syrian Regime Government* ▪ Russia ▪ Iran 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Turkey ▪ Kurds ▪ Syrian Civil Society

* Our first exercise in Strategic Empathy was to refrain from using the pejorative term “regime” to refer to the government of Syria.

**Team Assignment: Go to the Balcony
Strategic Empathy**

*Whatever someone tells you is true; they are reporting their **experience** of reality.*

–DesignSprint Axiom

Introduction

Your aim is to *assume the role* of each of the players you have selected. Answer the questions below for each one and

Process

1. For each of the three parties to this conflict, give 3 to 5 answers for each of the following questions:
 - What do you want or need?
 - What can you live with?
 - What else do we need to know about where you are coming from?
2. Be prepared to share your insights *in the first person*, that is, as if you were speaking as this person or entity.

You have approximately 60 minutes to complete this work. At the end of that time, you will give voice to each one of the parties.

Timing

Initial brainstorming of the parties to the conflict – 30 minutes

Review of the WorkWalls to ensure the lists are complete – 20 minutes

Multi-voting and tallying the votes – 10 minutes

Groups select who to work on – 10 minutes

Reports/Presentations – 7 minutes per player, including Q & A.

Keep in Mind

- Be sure to give groups plenty of time to identify specific individuals involved in the conflict on which to focus. Even though this first exercise in **Strategic Empathy** drives to focus and “eliminating options,” the lists will be important later in the DesignSprint and throughout the life of the SWAT Team as an important initial scan of the key players on which to build as your information grows.
- Reporting in the first person as if the reporter were “channeling” this protagonist is an important element to actually establishing empathy for this player.