



# Reframing Problems for Social Change

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Greater Good Studio

Housing Matters  
September 29, 2026

## Agenda

|      |                          |
|------|--------------------------|
| 2:30 | Welcome & introductions  |
| 2:45 | Choosing a challenge     |
| 3:00 | Mapping root causes      |
| 3:20 | Writing positive goals   |
| 3:40 | Identifying bright spots |
| 3:55 | Closing reflections      |

# Sara Cantor

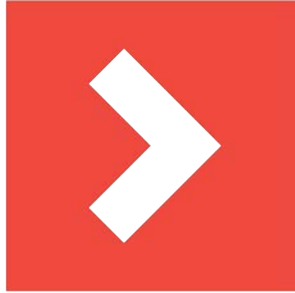
## Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director

- Background in design research and strategy
- Raised in Florida, lives in Chicago
- Pissed-off optimist



## Mission

Greater  
Good  
Studio



Greater Good Studio advances  
**people-centered social change.**

By working alongside people who are impacted by social inequity, we co-design strategies and solutions that challenge the status quo.

## Founding Beliefs



1. The status quo is unacceptable.



2. Lived experience matters.



3. Design is transformative.

# Agreements and Norms

## **Lean into productive discomfort.**

This room is diverse because it brings friction; friction sparks new insights. If we stay comfortable, we'll never move beyond the status quo.

## **Notice power asymmetry.**

Be aware of how you use your privilege. Balance your talking and listening.

## **Abundance is essential.**

By operating from a perspective of abundance, we can dismantle relationships based on scarcity, a tool of oppression.

## **No shame, no blame.**

Remember that everyone is doing the best they can with what they have (even you). Blaming means missing an opportunity for insight.

## **Keep a learning mindset.**

Share what you are learning, not what you already know. Share your truth, but seek equally to understand truths that differ from your own.

## **Respect each other's time.**

Our time together is our most important resource. Be present while you are here, and conscious of how you use your time and others' time.

## Meet your partners

We will get into groups of 4 and introduce ourselves:

- Name/pronouns
- Organization
- Location
- The last time you felt stuck—personally or professionally

You will work with this group throughout the session.



# Choosing a Challenge

Identifying what's at stake

## Writing a challenge

A challenge is a sentence that describes a problem.

- Not a topic
- Not a recommendation
- Not a complex, entrenched, centuries-old system of domination

Your challenge should be important and feel possible to address in your lifetime.



**There are  
not enough  
women in  
leadership.**



Women in  
leadership



Women  
should be  
offered more  
leadership  
opportunities.



Patriarchy



# Example challenges

## EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

**“Less than 1% of units in Illinois are dedicated to reentry housing.”**

**“Our clients don’t advocate for themselves throughout the home-buying process.”**

## INTERNAL CHALLENGES

**“Many of our case managers quit after less than a year.”**

**“We have to constantly justify our program’s existence to senior leadership.”**

## — What's at stake?

Your challenge is more powerful if it includes the stakes.

Ask:

- Why is this a problem?
- Who is this a problem for?
- What is lost as a result?

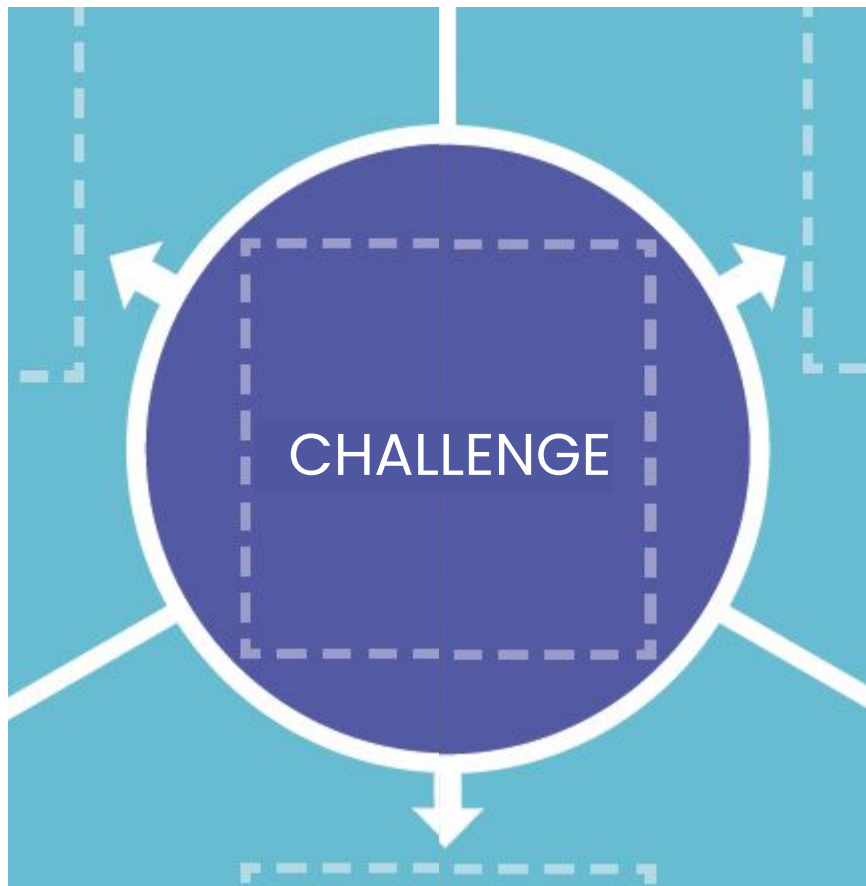
**“There are not enough women in leadership, which means we risk missing vital points of view.”**

## Choose a challenge

Working in groups, share challenges you are facing, and choose one to focus on for today as a team.

- A sentence that describes a problem
- Can be external or internal
- Don't forget the stakes

Write your challenge on a mini Post-It in the center of your poster.



# Mapping Root Causes

Getting past the symptoms

# What is a Root Cause?

**“The fundamental reason for the occurrence of a problem.”**

— Collins English Dictionary

Root causes are under the surface and the origins from which many problems grow

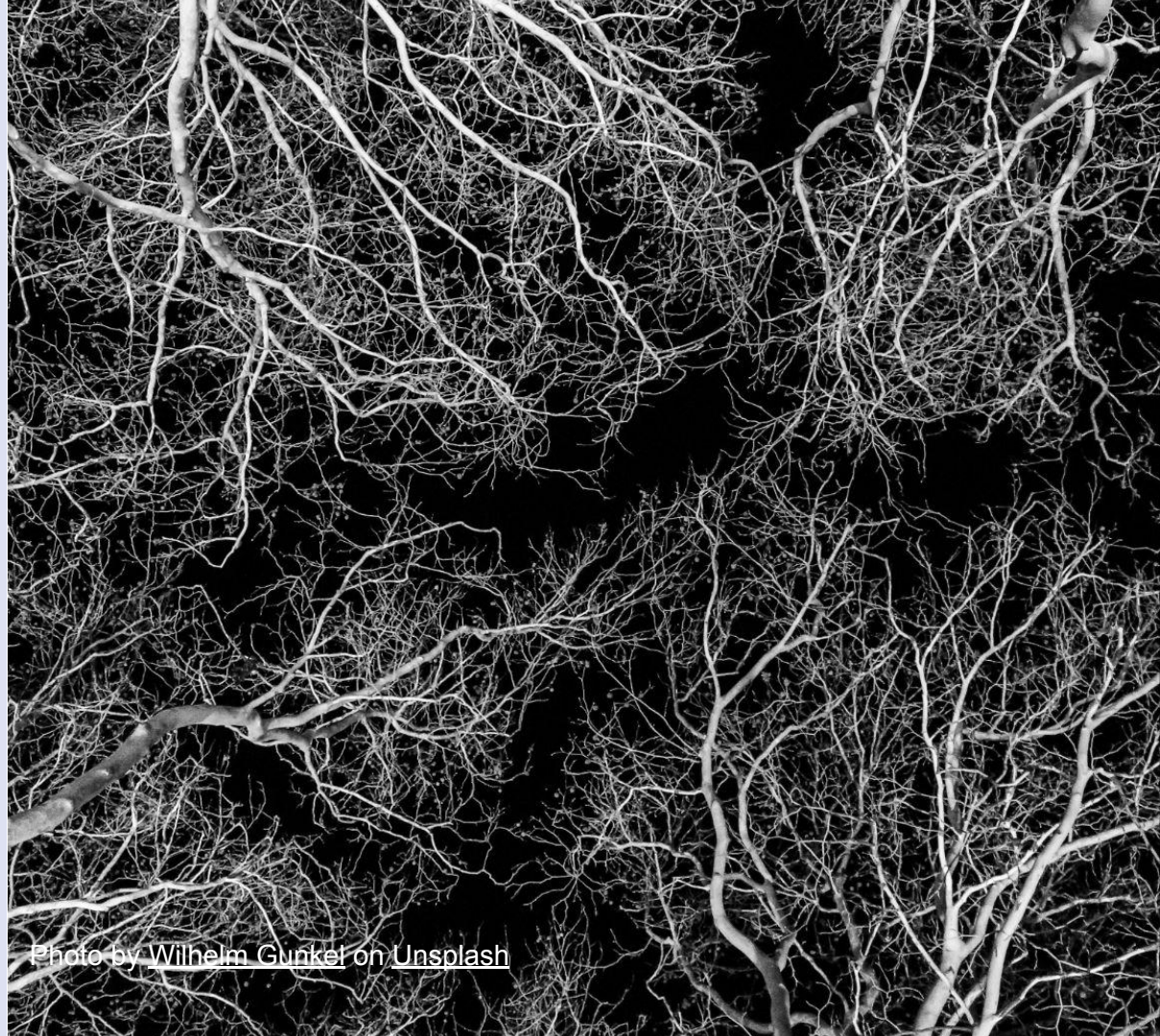


Photo by [Wilhelm Gunkel](#) on [Unsplash](#)

## The power of why

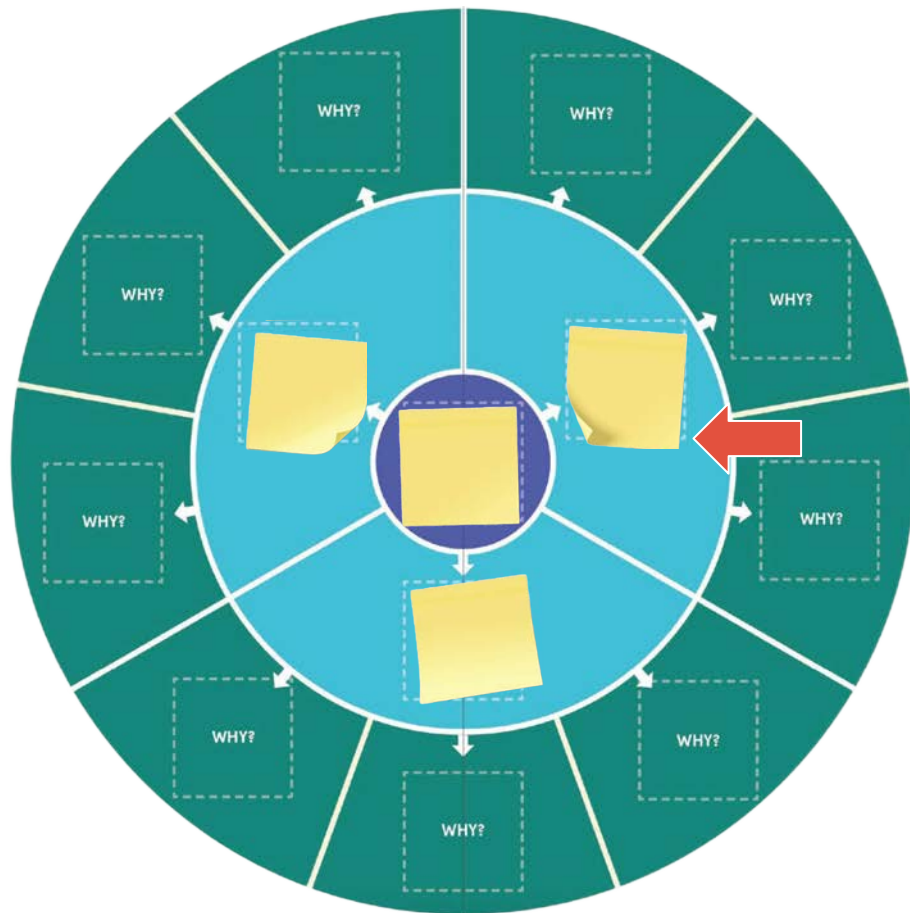
When our challenge is overwhelming, we can take inspiration from a five-year-old and ask, "Why?"



## First-Round Causes

Looking at your challenge, write at least three potential reasons for **why** you think this challenge is happening.

You don't have to be sure; just get all your hypotheses out of your head.



## External example

A diagram featuring a central blue circle with a white border. Four white arrows point outwards from the circle towards the corners of the frame. The background is a light blue color with yellow shapes in the corners. A yellow rectangular box is centered within the blue circle, containing the text 'Less than 1% of IL units are dedicated to reentry housing.'

**Less than 1%  
of IL units are  
dedicated to  
reentry  
housing.**

## External example

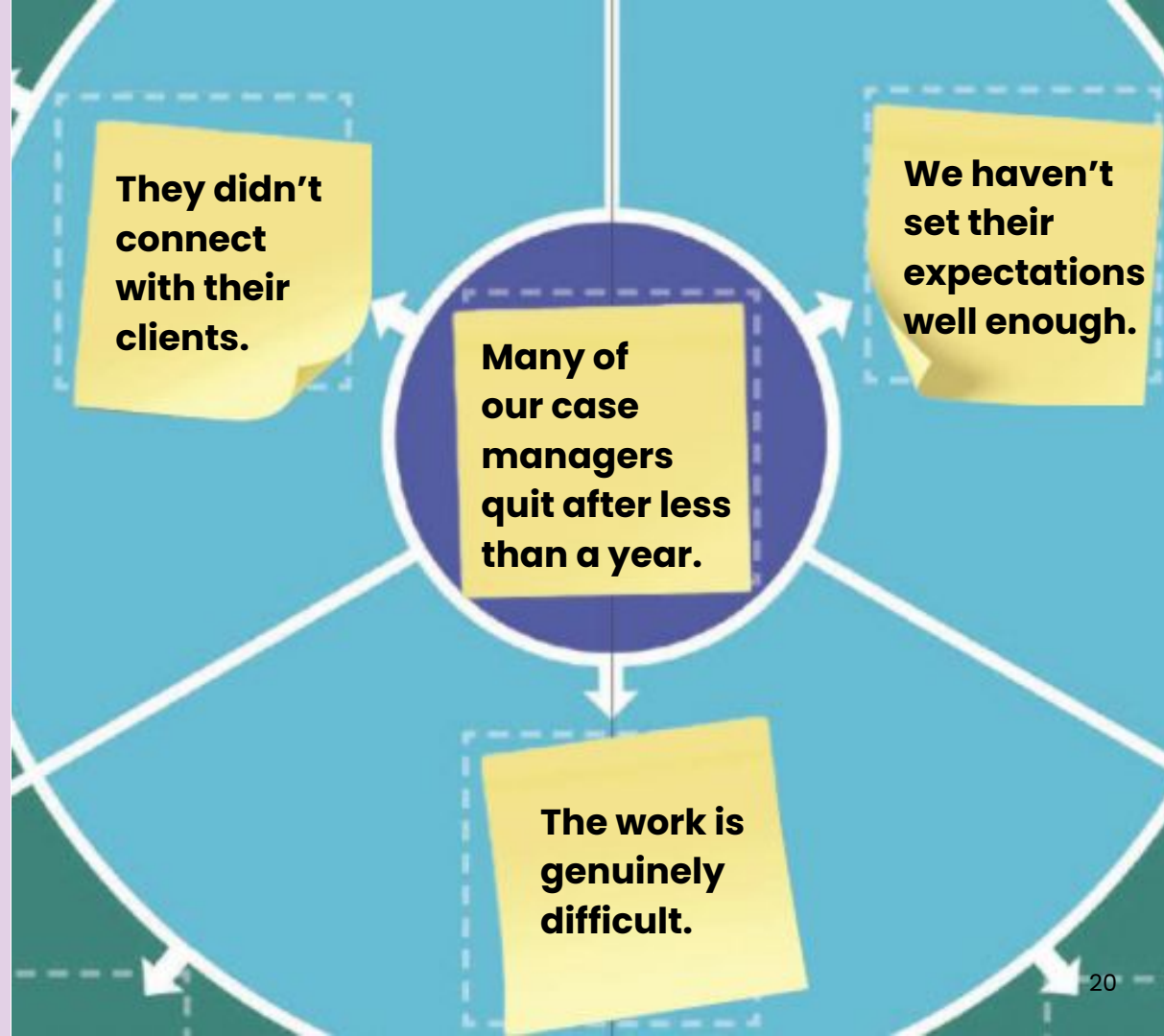


## Internal example



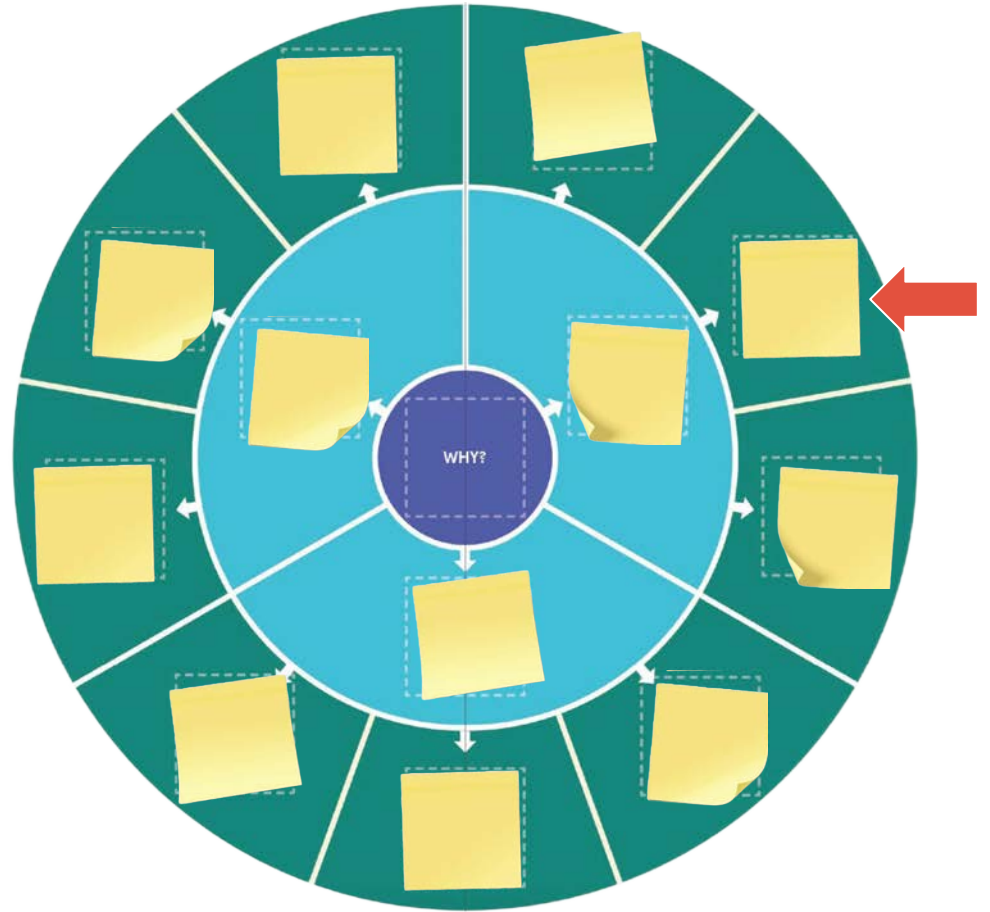
**Many of  
our case  
managers  
quit after less  
than a year.**

## Internal example



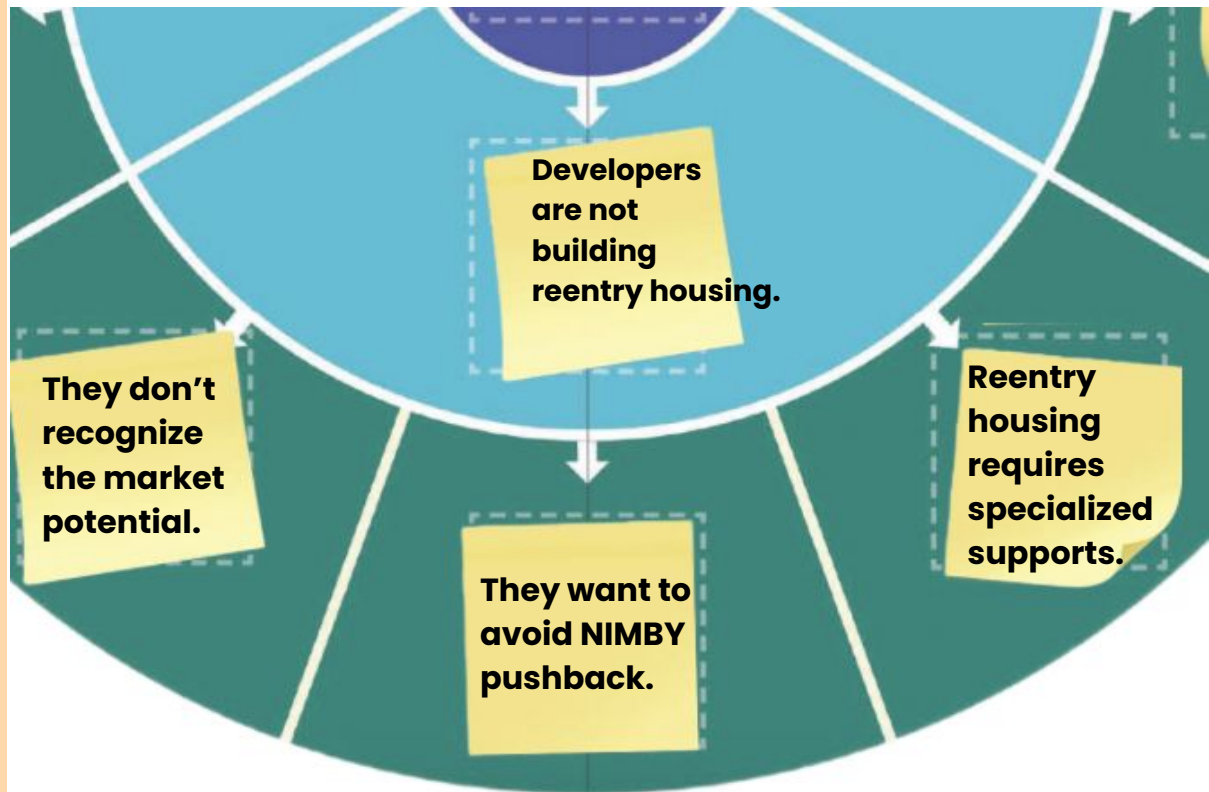
## Second-Round Causes

Then, do it again for each of your first-round causes. For each one, ask: “Why is this happening?”



## External example

“Less than 1% of IL units are dedicated to reentry housing.”



## Internal example

“Many of our case managers quit after less than a year.”

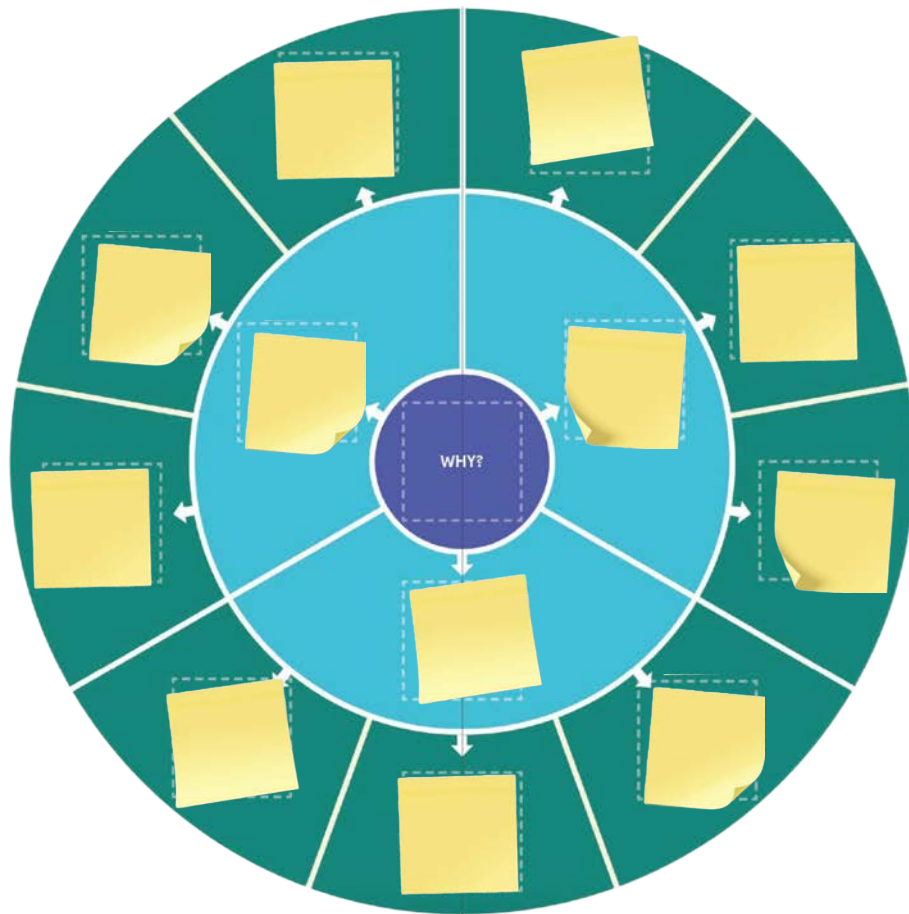


## Fill out your chart

Let's take 15 minutes to fill out as many Causes as we can. Remember there's no right answers, only good hypotheses.

Lastly, choose 1 Cause to focus on. (Inner ring or outer ring)

Pick one that seems like it could have a domino effect on some of the other ones.



# Writing Positive Goals

Reorienting to what's possible

## Writing Positive Goals

Positive Goals are a tool for reorienting ourselves from the negative to the positive, and identifying two key levers for change.

We want

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to

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## Writing Positive Goals

Positive Goals are a tool for reorienting ourselves from the negative to the positive, and identifying two key levers for change.

We want  
(people)  
to  
(new behavior).



## Positive Goals come from Appreciative Inquiry:

Appreciative Inquiry is commonly called an “asset-based” or “strengths-based” approach to systems change because it emphasizes positive idea generation over negative problem identification (the latter is often framed as a “deficit-based” approach). The model utilizes questions and dialogue to help participants uncover existing assets, strengths, advantages, or opportunities in their communities, organizations, or teams, and then collectively work toward developing and implementing strategies for improvement.



*People and groups  
move in the  
direction of **what  
they talk about.***

## Example of Positive Goals in action

We worked with a Chicago Public School who was seeing issues of “rough behavior” at recess, such as kids fighting and getting hurt.



# Writing Positive Goals

*Negative Framing*

We want kids at recess to  
**stop behaving roughly**



# Writing Positive Goals

## *Negative Framing*

We want kids at recess to  
**stop behaving roughly**



## *Positive Framing*

We want kids at recess to  
**engage in peaceful  
activities**



## Writing Positive Goals

Positive Goals have a specific sentence structure to them.

We want  
(people)  
to  
(new behavior).

# Examples

## CHALLENGE

**Developers don't realize the market potential of reentry housing.**



## POSSIBLE POSITIVE GOALS

**We want developers to size the reentry housing market.**



# Examples

## CHALLENGE

**Developers don't realize the market potential of reentry housing.**



## POSSIBLE POSITIVE GOALS

**We want developers to size the reentry housing market.**

**We want lenders to provide incentives that change the math.**



# Examples

## CHALLENGE

**Developers don't realize the market potential of reentry housing.**



## POSSIBLE POSITIVE GOALS

**We want developers to size the reentry housing market.**

**We want lenders to provide incentives that change the math.**

**We want mission-driven reentry providers to learn how to finance, build, and operate housing.**



## Writing Positive Goals

Focus on types of people or groups, not individuals.

Focus on new behaviors, not attitudes:

- How would a new attitude manifest?
- What would it look like?
- Could you take a picture of it?

Get specific!

**We want elementary school principals in our district...**

~~We want Principal Skinner...~~

**...to use more restorative discipline policies.**

~~...to be nicer.~~

# Writing Positive Goals

Write down your root cause: ***Sometimes clients make progress slowly.***

POSITIVE GOALS

Brainstorm positive goals on the post-its below. Positive goals should follow the following format :

We want [a type of person or group] to [do a new behavior]      →      We want **elementary school principals** to **change their discipline policies.**

We want...

Case managers

to...

Recognize all types of progress, big or small

We want...

Program staff

to...

Help clients know what to expect

We want...

Clients

to...

Set and track achievable goals

We want...

Program leaders

to...

Celebrate case managers when their clients

# Identifying Bright Spots

Finding hope in our communities

# Centering Humans

What does it mean to center someone?

Which humans do you routinely center in your work?

Which humans do you rarely center in your work?



# Bright Spots come from Positive Deviance:



Positive Deviance is based on the observation that in every community there are certain individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to the same resources and facing similar or worse challenges. The Positive Deviance approach is an asset-based, problem-solving, and community-driven approach that enables the community to discover these successful behaviors and strategies and develop a plan of action to promote their adoption by all concerned.



*For every social problem, there is someone out there who has **solved it for herself.***

**Bright Spots are  
people who are  
meeting your  
positive goal.**

In the case of the CPS school,  
that was kids who were  
behaving peacefully at  
recess.



# Identifying Bright Spots

Who is currently meeting this goal today? Name an individual or a category of people.

Who is striving to meet this goal today? Name an individual or a category of people.

We do NOT need to add people who are actively opposed to this positive goal.

**POSITIVE GOAL:** *We want our case managers to help clients know what to expect.*

## MEETING THE POSITIVE GOAL

Denise does a  
great job  
setting clients'  
expectations

## STRIVING TOWARD POSITIVE GOAL

Ronald wants  
his clients to  
understand  
wait times

# Identifying Bright Spots

Using the worksheet, name people and groups that are either meeting or striving to meet your positive goal.

ACTIVITY 3  
**Identifying Bright Spots**

Write down your positive goal: *We want Senior Leadership to establish a culture of 'think before we act'*

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**MEETING THE POSITIVE GOAL**  
Below name individuals or a type of person who are currently meeting your positive goal.

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  |  |
|  |  |

**STRIVING TOWARD THE POSITIVE GOAL**  
Below name individuals or a type of person who are currently striving to meet your positive goal.

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  |  |
|  |  |

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## How we learn from Bright Spots and Others:

BRIGHT SPOTS:  
MEETING THE POSITIVE GOAL

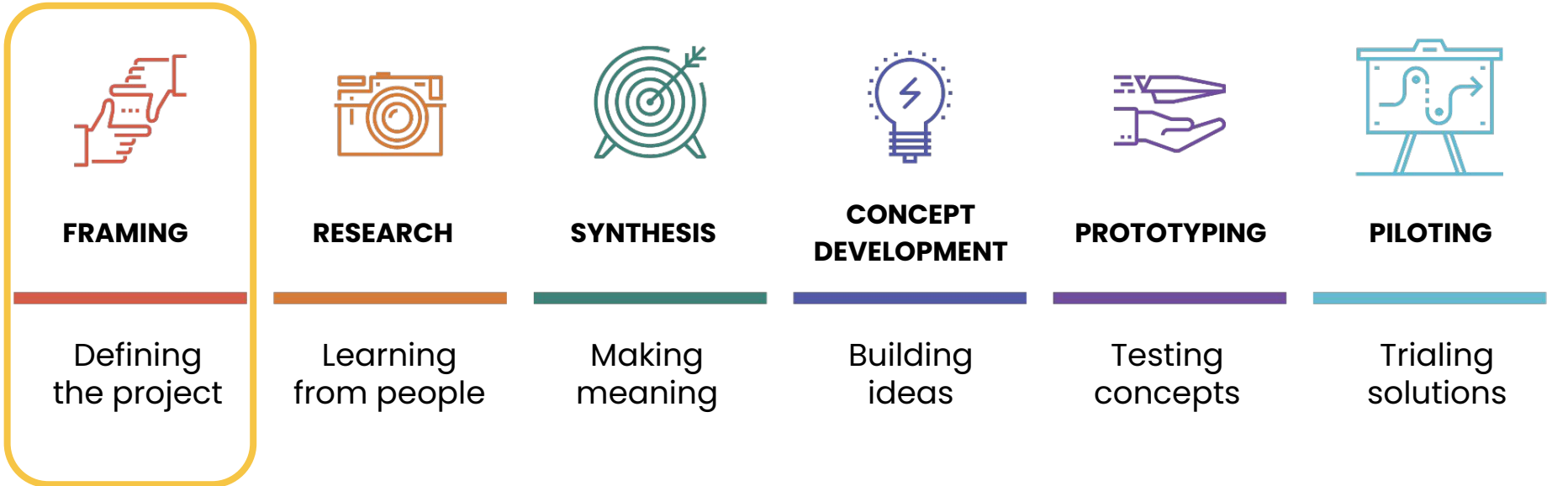
**From this group, you can learn about how and why they are able to meet it, despite similar resources.**

OTHERS:  
STRIVING TOWARD THE POSITIVE GOAL

**From this group, you can learn about why they are striving toward the goal, and what barriers exist.**



# The Human-Centered Design Process



# Reflections

What are you taking away?

## Before we wrap up, an invitation:

Champaign sits on the homelands of the Peoria, Kaskaskia, Kickapoo, Myaamia, and Očhéthi Šakówinj peoples. I'm a visitor here, and you may be too.

Next time you step outside, take a moment to appreciate the land and water. It was stewarded by those nations, and remains home for the Native people still here today.

If you're moved to do more than appreciate, you can take concrete action by supporting Native students. A good local option is the **Native American House** at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.



Donate to Native  
American House!

# Thank You!

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