Stakeholder Interviews

What will you learn?

What the purpose of stakeholder interviews is

What systemic inquiry is and which range of systemic questions exist

How systemic questions are related to the Compass dimensions

A step-by-step approach to conducting stakeholder interviews

What will it help you with?

Understanding the context through inspiring and engaging conversations with stakeholders

When is this factsheet particularly relevant?

In Phase 1 and Phase 3 of the **Dialogic Change Model**

For an in-depth understanding of making collaboration work, please view our open access publication

Kuenkel. P., Kuehn, E., Stucker, D., Williamson, D.F. (2020)

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Leading Transformative Change Collectively
A Practitioner Guide to Realizing the SDGs
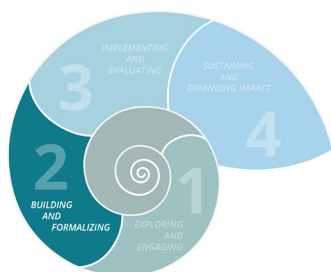
The purpose of Stakeholder interviews

Stakeholder interviews are a crucial element for understanding the context in the Phase 1 of the **Dialogic Change Model**. Exploring the views of different stakeholders is important for planning a collaborative initiative and can immensely contribute to making it successful. Such interviews are part of feasibility studies, stakeholder landscape analysis, and diagnosing stakeholder systems. They need to be conducted in a way that they contribute to the engagement of stakeholders towards shaping a better future collectively.

Stakeholder interviews are inspiring engagement conversations for a planned initiative or feedback conversations for an ongoing initiative that informs strategy with stakeholder views and perspectives. They contribute to building a collaborative spirit for active engagement and – beyond obtaining information from people in different institutions – they need to be conducted as co-creative conversations that craft **stories of possibilities**.

This may not always be easy, particularly, if stakeholders are highly frustrated with a certain situation, have lost the hope that there is any possibility for change, or insist that there is only one way to solve problems. This is why **dialogic competence** is crucially important (see **factsheet 9**) for stakeholder interviews and it is helpful to be familiar with **understanding patterns of conversations** (see **factsheet 8**).

The purpose of stakeholder interviews is:

- To know the perspectives of different stakeholders that are crucial for collaborative change.
- To listen to concerns, anger and frustrations, as well as suggestions, innovative ideas or pathways to solutions.
- To understand patterns of stakeholder perspectives in relation to the Compass dimensions.
- To tap into stakeholders' potential to shape the future differently and get actively involved.
- To create an atmosphere of future possibilities and model a collaborative spirit.
- To connect with people who are potential collaboration partners.
- To begin to create a network by connecting stakeholders with each other.

■ **Phase 1**
EXPLORING AND ENGAGING
Stakeholder interviews help initiators or facilitators to understand different perspectives, but they also help stakeholders to begin to think about how the situation can be changed and how they can get engaged.
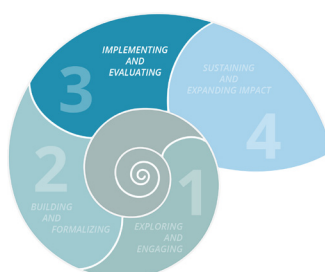
■ **Phase 2**
IMPLEMENTING AND EVALUATING
Stakeholder interviews help facilitators or backbone support to understand how different stakeholders see progress and impediments, what they think can be improved and how they can contribute. This facilitates strategic adjustments and learning mechanisms.

The art of asking questions

Systemic inquiry, the art of asking questions, seeks to widen perspectives and to acknowledge the diversity of views. A set of questions can open the mind to a deeper understanding of the situation. Good questions do not have quick answers, but help stakeholders to think differently, or understand their own situation or the reality around an issue of common concern much better. An attentive inquiry is likely to transform our habitual tendency to listen only to what we already know and overcome our inertia to go beyond conforming our memory's choices to the meaning we made up long ago.

Every human being owns her or his own construction of reality, an inner world informed by experiences, feelings, assessments, and thoughts. Good questions open up new avenues of thinking and display the following features:

• **Systemic inquiry works best with open questions:** these are questions that cannot be answered with yes or no. Instead of solely asking "Do you think this is a problem?" a systemic question would be: "What do you see as most important challenges of the current situation?"

• **Systemic questions are not suggestive or prescriptive;** the interviewer never suggests the direction of an answer, such as: "Do you also think that xyz is a big problem?", and instead asks, for example: "Who do you think xyz would see this as a problem?"

• **Systemic questions take time to answer,** because they elicit a thinking process. This requires patience in the side of the interviewer and no interruption of the thinking process.

• **Systemic inquiry seeks to really understand the interviewee,** hence asking for clarifications is part of it. For example: "Have I understood you, that you would not see this as a problem?"

• **Questions that refer to facts and figures are avoided,** if possible, because such questions only extract information that should be easily available, and the interviewee simply 'downloads' the information. This is boring and only serves the information needs of the interviewee. Facts and figures should as much as possible be obtained before the interview.

The range of systemic questions

Systemic inquiry questions that take the Compass dimensions into account help to elicit the inner world and reality perception of the interviewee. They make perspectives and interpretations more transparent, both for the inquiring person as well as for the stakeholder interviewed. Initiators, researchers and dialogic facilitators need to become versatile with the range of systemic questions and practice to apply them in stakeholder interviews.

Contextual questions

These questions address the context in which a certain problem or concern exists, an event has happened or a facilitation request has been placed. They serve to map the ambient reality within which the stakeholder acts.

Examples

• How is this issue related to certain trends and developments?
• Which aspect influence the current situation?
• What effects will a certain action or non-action have?
• Which stakeholders can influence change?

Differentiation questions

These questions seek out distinction, diversity and difference. Sometimes people present an undifferentiated picture of a situation. Asking for a scale assessment, percentages or classifications show small differences that often carry important information.

Examples

- Who is interested in the change, who is not?
- Which 3 most important key aspects have created the problem?
- How important is change for you (or xyz) on a scale between 0 and 10?
- How do you assess the percentage of people supporting the change?
- What is the most important leverage point to make change happen?

Hypothetical questions

Systems under stress often prevent themselves from thinking in terms of options or creative possibilities. Hypothetical questions unearth previously unconsidered possibilities as well as interdependencies within the system.

Examples

- If you had all power in your hands, how would you approach the challenges?
- If you were x, y, z, what would you do in this situation?
- How would things be in 10 years' time if nothing changed?
- Assuming the obstacles could be moved out of the way, what would happen?
- Imagine you had all the resources you need, what would you do?

Future questions

People often tend to dwell in the past, focusing on problems and failed solutions. These questions open up the space for future possibilities, new thoughts, creative ideas and different scenario. They examine what the best possible situation would look like, investigate which strategies are being tried out and which experiences are useful for the future.

Examples

- If you could create an ideal future, how would it look like?
- How could you build collaborative relationships with x or y ?
- Which strategies that have worked in the path, can be used to create the future?
- What is going to be a significant influence on your future actions?
- Imagine the time was 10 years ahead and you looked backwards: how did you successfully solve the problem/overcome the present situation?

Relational questions

These questions help to shift perspectives on a certain subject or problem. They enable people to think from others' points of view. In that way, they serve to unveil issues of relationships, which are often not easily expressed. They can only be placed if a certain degree of trust has already been developed.

Examples

- What would x say, if she knew, what you are planning to do?
- How would y describe the situation?
- What does x think about y?
- How does x think about the project, problem, the challenge, etc.?
- What would x do if he/she were in your position?
- What are others thinking about you?
- What are others saying about the change initiative?

Operational questions

These questions sharpen the perception of the actual processes and procedures, or, more simply, try to find out what has happened. They are directed at factual information (beyond what can be obtained before an interview).

Examples

- What would raise your (or other's) interest in changing the situation?
- How are you working with x?
- How does the information get from x to y?
- How are plans and roadmaps developed?
- How is the decision-making process organized?
- What has happened and what will happen next?
- What has been achieved so far?

Evaluation questions

These questions focus on the inner world of the interviewee, the attributes which he/she applies to events, experiences or circumstances, causes and consequences.

Examples

- How would you explain this?
- How important is a or x for you?
- Which emphasis would you place on x?
- What meaning/significance has this for you?
- What do you think about a or x?
- What would you consider progress?
- What do you think has developed very well, what is not going so well?

Systemic questions in relation to Compass dimensions

Asking good questions and creating inspiring conversations can make a big difference in building enlivening **collaboration ecosystem** that will eventually deliver change together. The Compass dimensions serve as a guide to draft an interview questionnaire that ensure all relevant areas are covered.

Stakeholder interviews that become inspiring conversations follow a flow: they usually start with the context (**wholeness**), move to understanding the institution and processes (**engagement**), touch on people and their specific interpretation of the situation (**humanity**), then move to creative ideas about the future (**innovation**), explore how the future can be approached (**future possibilities**) and finally investigate how this could be done together with other stakeholders (**collective Intelligence**). This general flow needs to be adjusted to the specific situation, and the questions need to be tailored to the person or people who will be interviewed.

Dimension	Possible questions	Aspect	Possible questions
Wholeness Context understanding, embeddedness in wider system, collaboration between different initiatives, mutual support between stakeholders, contribution of different stakeholders, etc.	**Contextual questions:** Which innovative approaches already exist to solve the issue? Who is already actively working on new approaches?	Contextuality	**Contextual question:** Which stakeholders have a good understanding of the situation? Who would be able to make change happen? Which aspect influence the current situation?
		Mutual Support	**Contextual question:** With which stakeholders do you have good working relationships? **Hypothetical question:** Assuming you would get all the support you need, what would change
		Contribution	**Future question:** What is or will be your (your institution's) contribution to improving the issue? **Operational question:** What have you been doing so far regarding the issue? Who is responsible for what?
Engagement Structures for collaboration, stakeholder engagement, participation, networks, task forces, steering structures, working groups, etc.	**Contextual question:** Who are the most important stakeholders that need to engage? **Procedural question:** Who is steering the process of change?	Process Quality	**Operational question:** How often do meetings between stakeholders take place? How have plans and roadmaps been developed and by who? How is the decision-making process organized?
		Connectivity	**Relational questions:** Which institutions already work together to improve the situation? **Future question:** Who needs to work together to make change happen?
		Collective Action	**Contextual question:** What effects will a certain action or non-action have? **Hypothetical question:** What would happen, if all stakeholders would jointly drive the change? **Differentiation question:** How do you assess the percentage of people supporting the change? What is the most important leverage point to make change happen?
Humanity Relationships, power differences, neglected stakeholders, conflicts, disputes, cohesion, mutual understanding, etc.	**Contextual question:** Who agrees with you that change needs to happen? **Differentiation question:** Which stakeholders are affected most by the current situation?	Mindfulness	**Evaluation question:** Which emphasis would you place on x? What would you consider progress? **Contextual question:** Which stakeholders see the challenges?
		Balance	**Contextual question:** Which stakeholders are interested, but have little influence? Which stakeholders can block change?
		Empathy	**Relational question:** How does x (or other stakeholders) think about the project, problem, the challenge, etc.?

Dimension	Possible questions	Aspect	Possible questions
Innovation Innovative approaches, prototypes, new ideas, knowledge management, learning exchanges, best practices, benchmarks, etc.	**Contextual questions:** Which innovative approaches already exist to solve the issue? Who is already actively working on new approaches?	Creativity	**Future question:** Imagine the time was 10 years ahead and you looked backwards: how did you successfully solve the problem/overcome the present situation?
		Excellence	**Contextual question:** Which stakeholders have the most expertise regarding the issue? **Future question:** Which strategies that have worked in the path, can be used to create the future?
		Agility	**Hypothetical question:** Assuming the obstacles could be moved out of the way, what would happen? How would a worst-case scenario look like?
Future possibilities Narratives for change, goal setting, inspiring goals, plans, roadmaps, delivery, accountability	**Future question:** How would a future situation look like that all stakeholders would want to see happening? **Differentiation question:** On a scale between 0 and 10 – how far do you think is a situation away from improvement?	Future Orientation	**Contextual questions:** Which stakeholders or institutions are interested in actively improving the situation? Who would share the vision for change? **Future question:** If you could create an ideal future, how would it look like?
		Empowerment	**Hypothetical question:** If you had all the power to determine the direction, what would you do? How would things be in 10 years' time if nothing changed? **Contextual question:** Who is powerful enough to make a difference? What would be ways of giving weaker stakeholders a voice? Which stakeholders can influence change?
		Decisiveness	**Operational questions:** Which roadmaps or plans exist to drive change? Which stakeholders actively implement plans? How would people notice that the situation has changed? **Hypothetical question:** Imagine you had all the resources you need, what would you do?
Collective intelligence Dialogues, consultations, exchange platforms, coordination, mutual learning mechanisms, level of diversity.	**Operational question:** How and when do stakeholder-meetings take place to discuss the issue? **Hypothetical questions:** What would change. If x,y,z came together on a regular base?	Dialogic Quality	**Relational question:** Who is talking to whom about how the issue could be approached? **Operational question:** What were the outcomes of the last meeting taking place between stakeholders?
		Diversity	**Differentiation question:** Who is interested in the change, who is not? Who is missing as collaboration partner? **Contextual question:** Who has the expertise to solve this issue?
		Iterative Learning	**Evaluation question:** What do you think has developed very well, what is not going so well? **Operational question:** How do stakeholders get together to evaluate progress? What has been achieved so far?

A Step-by-Step approach to conducting stakeholder interviews

Stakeholder interviews are usually carried out by people who are in an external position in relation to the situation that needs to change. They can be experts in the issue at hand, but need to be neutral towards the stakeholder. Understanding stakeholders' perspectives, leveraging their expertise and engaging them into a collaborative initiative requires the following steps:

Step #1:

Prepare the stakeholder interview / **Understand the world of the interviewee**

Step #2:

understand the world of the interviewee / B**e a guest in somebody else's world**

Step #3:

Join worlds / **Connect with the person and create the base for a good conversation**

Step #4:

Get to the issue / **Understand perspectives**

Step #5:

Craft stories of possibility / **Create resonance for engagement**

Step #6:

Ensure transparency / **Explain the next steps**

Step #1: Prepare the stakeholder interview / Understand the world of the interviewee

Preparing a stakeholder interview requires prior desk research about the issue and the expertise of the stakeholder or institution that you wish to interview. You may not be an expert in the field, but the more you know about the issue, the stakeholders involved, and about what has happened in the past, the better.

Don't waste people's time: go prepared into a stakeholder interview.

Most importantly, carefully prepare an interview guide: a list of questions that you will ask. The list should not be too long and include questions that refer to all Compass dimensions. Get inspired by the previous section, take questions from the list or create your own questions. As a rough guide: between 6 and 12 questions are the maximum for an interview guide. All other questions will come once you are in a conversation. Keep the range of systemic questions in your mind and let them come during the conversation. The content of your interview guide will, of course, be determined by the issue, for which you would like to interview the person.

If you intend to interview a number of stakeholders, it is important that you create an interview guide with the **same** questions to all interviews, or at least, questions around similar issues. This way you get a better picture of the situation. In the flow of the conversation, of course, you will ask more detailed question that will differ from stakeholder to stakeholder.

Step #2: Arrange time and space to meet / Be a guest in somebody else's world

The way you make contact with the people you intent to interview is crucially important. Making contact is the first step into building a relationship that acknowledges perspectives and expertise. Choose your wording carefully, do not write long emails, because busy people do not have time to read them, declare your intention and show your interest in the expertise of the person or institution.

Adjust your arrangement of time and meeting place to the culture and circumstances that you need to know beforehand. Some people might only have time for a 20 min. interview, others would want you to visit them for at least an hour. Similarly, choose online (telephonic) or offline carefully according to what would help you get into an inspiring conversation.

Step #3: Join worlds / Connect with the person and create the base for a good conversation

Think about how to start the interview and remember you preparatory work: what is particularly interesting for the person? What is he expertise she or he has?

The first few minutes are reserved for **joining the worlds**: a few minutes small talk, a short check-in, an appreciative remark, a reference to something that happened, a remark about the weather, the mentioning of similar interests, etc. Remember, it is **humanity** that counts in the beginning of a conversation. Acknowledge the person as a person as much as their expertise. Show interest in their world. Understand culture: the way you join the worlds needs to be adjusted to protocol, customs and geographical culture.

Step #4: Get to the issue / Understand perspectives

Depending on the culture, getting to the issue can move fast or take time. In any case, always ask for permission and explain what you would like to do – asking a number of questions that you have prepared.

In stakeholder systems where there is a lot of tension, or conflicts, start with an easy questions such as: How do you see the current situation regarding x,y,z? Be prepared to listen to complaints and concerns first, even if this may take time.

Then start with your questions and imagine that – with your questions – you accompany the stakeholder through the system, watching it from their perspective.

During the first one-third of the interview move from questions regarding context (**wholeness**), to understanding the institution and processes (**engagement**), to the interpretation of the situation (**humanity**).

Step #5: Craft stories of possibility /
Create resonance for engagement

In the second one-third of the interview shift gears and try to enliven creative ideas about the future (**innovation**), and explore how the future can be approached (**future possibilities**).

In the third one-third of the interview investigate how this could be done together with other stakeholders (**collective Intelligence**).

Consult people's expertise for the issue by asking for recommendations about what should happen or what you should do, or who else you need to talk to. This is an important way to raise people's interest and keep them engaged.

Step #6: Ensure transparency /
Explain the next steps

Close the interview not only by acknowledging the time you have taken and the information you have received, but also be transparent about what is happening with the information, if and how you would get back to people, if they would receive a report, be part of a de-briefing or get information how things will proceed from here. Close with a light check-out.

Office Europe
Kurfürstenstrasse 1
14467 Potsdam
Germany
Phone: +49 331 5816 5960
germany@collectiveleadership.com

Office South Africa
11 Abelia Street, Mont Claire
7785 Cape Town
South Africa
Phone: +27 83 772 0958
southafrica@collectiveleadership.com

compass-tool.net | collectiveleadership.com