

Team Exercise

Walk In My Shoes | Empty Chair



Walk in My Shoes is a structured team development intervention rooted in Gestalt therapy principles, specifically utilizing the *Empty Chair* technique to cultivate organizational empathy and enhance stakeholder understanding. When teams operate with limited awareness of their stakeholders' experiences and

perspectives, organizational blind spots emerge, leading to decreased stakeholder satisfaction, misaligned priorities, and suboptimal collaboration.

This facilitated exercise helps create a structured forum for perspective-taking that enables team members to experientially understand their key stakeholders' viewpoints. By embodying stakeholder perspectives through role representation, teams develop heightened awareness of relational dynamics and stakeholder needs.

The Gestalt principle of "contact and awareness" drives this intervention, emphasizing present-moment experience and authentic dialogue. Rather than intellectual analysis of stakeholder relationships, this approach enables teams to viscerally experience stakeholder perspectives, leading to more genuine empathy and actionable insights.

This intervention provides teams with experiential understanding of their stakeholder ecosystem while fostering the relational awareness necessary for more effective stakeholder engagement and collaborative success.

Implementation:

1. Stakeholder Identification and Role Mapping

Identify key stakeholders whose perspectives significantly impact your team's effectiveness. These may include internal colleagues from other departments, external clients, senior leadership, or community partners. Map these stakeholders based on their influence and interaction frequency with your team.

2. Empty Chair Configuration

Arrange the physical space with one empty chair positioned prominently within the team circle. This chair will represent each stakeholder during their respective dialogue session. The spatial arrangement creates psychological presence and facilitates deeper engagement with stakeholder perspectives.

3. Perspective Embodiment Process

Following Gestalt methodology, team members take turns occupying the empty chair to authentically represent each identified stakeholder. The individual "becomes" the stakeholder, speaking from their viewpoint and addressing the team directly. Focus on these experiential dimensions:

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- **Stakeholder concerns:** What keeps this stakeholder awake at night regarding our team's work
 - **Unmet expectations:** Where our team may be falling short from their perspective
 - **Hidden frustrations:** What this stakeholder wishes they could tell us but hasn't
 - **Success definitions:** How this stakeholder measures our team's effectiveness
 - **Relationship dynamics:** What this stakeholder needs from us to feel supported

4. **Authentic Dialogue Exchange**

After each stakeholder representation, facilitate a direct conversation between the team and the "stakeholder" (still in the chair). Team members ask questions, seek clarification, and respond to the perspective shared. This creates a safe space for difficult conversations that might not occur in actual stakeholder interactions.

5. **Integration and Awareness Building**

Following each stakeholder dialogue, the representing team member returns to the group circle and shares their insights from embodying that perspective. The team collectively processes what emerged, identifying patterns, surprises, and actionable insights for improving stakeholder relationships.

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Outcomes

This exercise helps teams understand their stakeholders in a deeper way than traditional meetings or surveys. By actually stepping into stakeholder roles, team members gain genuine empathy and develop better strategies for working with these important relationships.

The Empty Chair approach reveals hidden relationship patterns and dynamics that teams may not have noticed before. This new awareness leads to more honest and effective stakeholder interactions. Teams finish the exercise with practical ideas for strengthening stakeholder relationships and a clearer picture of how their work affects others in the organization.