

Toolbox

Methods for collaboration, teamwork and facilitation

Collective Story Harvesting



What is Collective Story Harvesting?

Collective Story Harvesting is a storytelling process that enables us to deeply connect with and learn from the experience in our community, team or organization. It builds our capacity for targeted listening, group learning and therein for collective meaning making. Collective Story Harvesting takes learning to a deeper level as it surfaces insights that exist beneath the surface of our stories.

How to prepare?

1. **Invite** storytellers and stories.
2. **Ensure enough time:** the whole process takes at least 90 minutes.
3. **Size the groups:** There can be six up to 20 persons in a story group. If you happen to have more participants build several story groups with a storyteller each.
4. **Select the stories carefully:** they should be relevant for the purpose, context and system for which they are being used. A story line should offer sufficient complexity, depth and length. The story must be about a breakthrough or a learning experience, but does not necessarily have to be successful.
5. **Select your storyteller:** Stories respond to invitations. When an invitation is expressed from the heart, stories often show up in a completely new form and give the story editor new insights. Collective Story Harvesting is a gift to the storytellers and the audience. It should also be offered as a gift.
6. **Plan the harvest/collection:** consider what you want to harvest and what you want to do with it. Select those aspects or questions that best serve these contexts (output and use).
7. You will end up with several **filters ("perspectives")**, through which your listeners will attentively listen to the story. Ensure that there is at least one person for each filter. Here are a few examples of filters:
 - **Red thread:** what is the red thread of the story? Persons, events, scenes, dates, emotions and values that are part of this story should be recorded.
 - **Processes:** which interventions, steps and measures influenced the course of the story?
 - **Turning points:** when did a breakthrough take place / where do you see a turning point in the story? What do we learn from this?
 - **Parallels:** what can we learn from the story for our own system and for other contexts?
 - **Environment:** how have the system and environment changed in the story? Can you describe the system with a metaphor?
 - What **challenges** did the protagonist face and how did he/she overcome them?

A brief implementation guide:

In the run-up:

Choose appropriate stories, invite the storytellers and ask them to prepare themselves (see above). For each story a host (or facilitator) is needed. Make the couples from storyteller and host in advance, so that they already know each other.

Introduction and framing in plenary (15-20 minutes):

Welcome of the participants, introduction into context and procedure. Invite the storytellers to briefly tell us what their story is about. Ask participants to gather around the story of their interest. If the distribution is fairly balanced, the host can take over the group and guide it to the designated room.

Telling the story (30 minutes):

The respective host welcomes, explains the process and introduces the different points of filters under which the story is to be harvested. It doesn't have to take every person's point of view. Simple listening can be just as valuable. The storyteller is invited to start and the participants listen and harvest. A clear time structure for the narration is very important (e.g. enter a signal if there is only 5 min narration time left).

Harvest in small groups (30-50 minutes):

The host opens the round for questions of understanding. Afterwards, each harvester tells his or her glimpses. Finally, the storyteller once again has the word: "which gifts / insights have you received from the group? What are you taking with you?" The host concludes, thanks the participants, informs about what happens with the harvest and how it continues. Depending on the setting, a meta harvest can be carried out in the plenary session. It is especially exciting when the people who have had the same role, i. e. the hosts with the hosts, the storytellers with the storytellers, those who have harvested the turning points with those who have harvested the turning points, etc., interact with each other.

Whom does Collective Story Harvesting serve?

The method is ideal on the one hand to learn where we are in a project, and on the other hand to tell a story in such a way that it can be told to another audience: free of unnecessary details, crisp, powerful and following a recurrent theme.

The storyteller:

For the storyteller the harvest reveals aspects of the story that have not been seen or noticed before. Often an experience is so complex and quickly finished, that - with the inner perspective - the storyteller can't see what has been going on here. It can help to clarify what the storyteller has not realised himself/herself.

The listener:

What applies to narration also applies to listening. It is a skill that we learn and train with constant practice. Listening is the counterpart to telling. The story arises from the tension between narrator and listener. Harvesting stories together provides the rare opportunity to focus on listening, giving feedback and strengthening the community that is working on the project.

The community:

Harvesting from stories of projects or change processes is a valuable contribution to the community, especially if the stories also mention which obstacles had to be overcome in order to reach the goal. Sharing stories from practice is one of the most effective ways to communicate and integrate principles and practices.

The listening can help identify the protagonists resources and see what support he/she has received and what obstacles he/she has overcome. Sometimes a story provides insights into the larger context in which the story takes

SOURCES

The Collective Story Harvesting method comes from the [Art of Hosting's methodology kit](#). It goes back to Mary Alice Arthur, Monica Nissén and Toke Paludan Møller. Art of hosting is the artistry of facilitating good conversations and using this art as a management tool. It involves the individual person as well as the system, builds on personal experience, dialogue, moderation and creates innovative solutions for complex challenges. There is a worldwide community of Art of Hosting practitioners. In Switzerland there are regular 3-day trainings in Geneva (English/French) and Rorschacherberg (German/English). More information about Art of Hosting can be found at:

- <http://participatoryleadership.eu/>
- www.artofhosting.ch
- www.artofhosting.org