

Building Partnerships with Lived Experience Experts: Shared Leadership and Co-Design

What is Shared Leadership?

Shared leadership happens when agency staff and people with lived experience come together to share power and responsibility in all areas: planning, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. It's about working side by side, from the beginning, to shape how services and systems work.

What is Co-Design?

Co-design means creating solutions together with the people who will be most affected by them, right from the beginning. Instead of making plans first and asking for opinions later, co-design invites individuals, families, and communities to help shape the ideas from the start.

Setting Projects Up for Success

True shared leadership and co-design require that people who have lived experience with systems are the ones actively identifying solutions and envisioning transformed systems. Whenever possible, agencies should center their priorities and collaboratively determine which projects, programs, and initiatives are most needed, most meaningful, and most likely to drive lasting change.

Here are some tips to help Project Leads prepare for a co-design project:

- Define the project's scope and limits clearly before involving people with lived experience. Project leads should hold initial meetings to clarify scope, flexibility, and potential challenges.
- Determine what roles and types of experience are needed for the project team. Align the skills and supports of people in staff roles and ones with lived experience to form the team. Make them clear to all involved.
- Outline all known tasks for lived experience experts: Set realistic time estimates for effective involvement, including meetings and follow-up.
- Ensure that people with lived experience can make early, informed decisions about their involvement. Project leads can facilitate this by hosting initial meetings to introduce the project while inviting questions about participation goals and support available, ensuring transparency about what's flexible and what's not, and forecasting the possible challenges or changes ahead.



Rather than “inviting people to the table”— one that’s already built — co-design and shared leadership involve building the table together, shaping the process, decisions, and outcomes with people most affected at the center.

Strategies for Shared Leadership and Co-Design

Launching Projects

Strategies for successfully launching projects in ways that promote shared leadership and co-design include:

Creating space for connection:

Using ice breakers and check-in questions can go a long way to help team members form relationships.



Defining the team: Share and discuss each team member's role and responsibilities, ensuring everyone understands their part.

Brainstorming project priorities: Whenever possible, create space for open discussions to generate ideas.

Creating working agreements: Discuss and document discussion about how the team will communicate, collaborate, and function.

Assessing technology needs: Determine whether each user can access platforms and assess their comfort level.

Working Together

Shared leadership and co-design require intentional practices to build a collaborative working team that includes:

- **Organizing and Making Sense of Information:** Use strategies such as breaking down tasks, applying organizational tools, ensure information is presented to inform inclusive decision-making.
- **Ongoing Communication and Checking In:** Key strategies include holding regular check-ins, ensuring clear communication channels, and active feedback loops, recognizing contributions, and offering individualized opportunities for practice.
- **Capacity-Building and Skill Development:** Offer guidance, resources, tools, and skill-building opportunities that enable everyone to fully engage with project information and processes, while also growing their capacity for future projects.



Strategies for Closing Projects and Continuing Engagement

- Create space for follow-up with youth and parents who developed the project to share information and gather feedback on progress and current strategies.
- Consider ways to ensure the people impacted by the project or program will play an active role in shaping and improving the work.
- Avoid thinking about the project or meeting as “one and done!” Consider opportunities for longer-term roles that invite sustained involvement from youth and parents.

