

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE TOOL

Use this tool to help make “visible” the good work you and others in the community are already doing. Using this tool will enable you and others to tell stories about your local efforts, which will illuminate the progress that is being made. It will also help you see what you’re achieving together, especially when progress can seem (and feel) slow.

Use the following steps to start making the invisible visible.

STEP 1: ENGAGE PEOPLE ABOUT YOUR EFFORTS

Bring together a group of people who you’re working directly with or those who are working to make a difference in the community. You can do this as part of an existing meeting or schedule a time that works for all those involved to show up and engage. Use the questions below to guide your conversation.

QUESTIONS (AT A GLANCE)

1. What are we trying to achieve in our efforts together?
2. What are we building together?
3. Why is this important to our community?
4. What “wins” are we already seeing?
5. What are some of the ripple effects we’re seeing from our efforts? (These are positive things that are happening as a result of our actions.)
6. What challenges have we faced in doing this work?
7. What are important next steps for us?
8. Again, what are we trying to achieve, and why?

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Use the chart on page 4 to document and track your responses as you move through the questions.

ANNOTATED GUIDE

Use the following annotations to help you understand why the questions are framed and positioned where they are.

QUESTION	ANNOTATION
<p>1. What are we trying to achieve in our efforts together?</p>	<p>It's essential to start with this question because it grounds the conversation in the shared work people are actually doing. This question gets them to "name" what that work is, in concrete, real terms, and in their own language.</p> <p>This question also asks people to put a stake in the ground about their efforts which further establishes their commitment and focus. Over time, they will continually refine, even redefine, their answer to this question.</p>
<p>2. What are we building together?</p>	<p>This question asks people to dig deeper and reflect on what it is they are "creating" together. Here, people name the underlying purpose of their work—often about creating new relationships norms, and ways of talking and working together.</p>
<p>3. Why is this important to our community?</p>	<p>This question gives people the opportunity to talk about the larger context and purpose of their efforts in relationship to the community: <i>how do their actions help the community itself advance and grow? How do their efforts address larger community concerns people have? How will their efforts make a contribution?</i></p> <p>This question also helps people stay aligned to what matters to the community.</p>
<p>4. What "wins" are we already seeing?</p>	<p>This question asks people to recognize and name the "progress" they have been making. Though, we intentionally don't use the word "progress" because we found that people have difficulty interpreting what the word means. This ends up derailing their conversation and turning it into an abstract discussion about definitions. Everyone, however, understands "wins" and people often give examples of both big and small wins, all of which they find fit the question, and ultimately, help them to see what they are producing together.</p>
<p>5. What are some of the ripple effects we're seeing from our efforts? (These are positive things that are happening as a result of our actions.)</p>	<p>This question is critical to ask because many of the efforts that people are undertaking create ripple effects. BUT people tend to not recognize and name these—even value them—unless this is an explicit part of the conversation. At first, some people can have a hard time understanding the exact meaning of this question ("What is a ripple effect?"), but we have found that, in this particular instance, the group can sort through that together. And that this very sorting out process leads them to actually recognize and name more things.</p>

6. What challenges have we faced in doing this work?

This question is positioned where it is because we found that placing it higher up actually distracted people from recognizing and naming what they were learning and producing. Once people could articulate what they are producing and why, then they had an easier time grappling with the challenges of doing the work. Placed here (lower in the order of questions) also turns the question on its head: people's answers become a bit of a celebration! Rather than the question prompting negative thinking, now, people discover that they have faced many challenges and dealt with them. This immediately gives them greater confidence—it helps them to see that they have the capabilities to try new things to deal with whatever challenges lie ahead of them.

7. What are important next steps for us?

This question was once, "What do we need to do to keep making progress?" As noted above, the word "progress" can stop people in their tracks. It's too abstract. However, the phrase, "next steps," is one that everyone can relate to, and it pushes people to create practical actions they can take moving forward.

8. Again, what are we trying to achieve and why?

This question was included as a suggestion from people whom we tested the tool with. They said that the question helped them to return to the purpose of their work. It also helped them recap what they had discussed, give them a sense of possibility and hope, and propel them forward.

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE CHART	
QUESTION	RESPONSE
What are we trying to achieve in our efforts together?	
What are we building together?	
Why is this important to our community?	
What "wins" are we already seeing?	
What are some of the ripple effects we're seeing from our efforts?	
What challenges have we faced in doing this work?	
What are important next steps for us?	
Again, what are we trying to achieve, and why?	

STEP 2: PULL YOUR STORY TOGETHER

Take your responses to the questions from the previous page and format them into a story. You can use the template below to help you craft your story.

OUR UNFOLDING STORY.

We set out to achieve _____ . In doing this work, we feel like we're building together _____ .

This is important for our community because _____ . So far, some of the "wins" we're already seeing include _____ .

And we're even seeing some ripple effects like _____ . Of course, we have faced challenges, such as _____ . Our work isn't done yet. Our next steps are to _____ . Again, this is what we're trying to achieve together: _____ .

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NOTE: Practice telling your story to one another so that you can tell them to others in your community with ease.

STEP 3: IDENTIFY WHO NEEDS TO HEAR THESE STORIES

As you craft your story, you want to actively think about others in the community who you want to share your story with. Use the questions below to guide your thinking.

1. Who else in the community (e.g., other organizations or groups) should hear our story?

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2. How can we tell our story to them?

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NOTE: When you come up with a list, take the next step: reach out and engage with them.

“OUR UNFOLDING STORY IN SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN”

EXAMPLE STORY ONE

We set out to create the kind of community that people want to live in with healthy, safe, and thriving neighborhoods. In doing this work, we feel like we’re building trust and new ways of working together. This is important for our community because people have said they want to move forward but don’t know where to start, so we’re creating a starting point. So far, some of the “wins” we’re already seeing include:

- New relationships and trust being built between people and organizations.
- More participation in meetings.
- New partners showing up and supporting/attending events that they wouldn’t have in the past.
- People sharing vulnerable stories and opening up within the spaces we are creating.
- People having a greater sense of belonging in these spaces.

And we’re even seeing some ripple effects like:

- One leader’s individual commitment of taking daily walks with her neighbor leading to an incredibly impactful 5k event that raised \$17,000 for a local charity.
- Collaboration on job opportunities between Telamon and Tri-County Head Start
- Multiple partners are connecting at the Benton Harbor Farmers Market to bring resources directly to community members where they are already gathering.
- Van Buren Parent Coalition and Tri-County Head Start collaborating on an event to provide resources and immediate assistance to families with young children.

Of course, we have faced challenges, such as partners needing to find time and space to prioritize this effort among competing duties. And some have had to step out of their comfort zone into a more vulnerable space to engage in the process.

Our next steps are to continue scheduling learning sessions and activities that bring us together and bringing the tools we are learning together (like the Making the Invisible Visible tool) into our teams’ working spaces. Again, we’re doing this work to create the kind of community that people want to live in with healthy, safe, and thriving neighborhoods.

This piece was produced by the Southwest Michigan Open Tent Collaborative, facilitated by the United Way of Southwest Michigan.

“BATTER UP”

EXAMPLE STORY TWO

Baaaatter up...Crack! Go go go! Safe! Families cheer. Teammates rally and kids laugh – it’s another day of baseball at Broome Park.

But in the summer of 2000, the kids who wanted to play ball didn’t have many options left in Flint. A budget crisis in city government had frozen money for the baseball leagues. Whaley and Broome, the city’s two best diamonds, badly needed renovations. People assumed the city would handle the problem, but nothing happened.

Then a local group called the Industrial Mutual Association Foundation learned about the crisis and made a choice. It wasn’t easy, but they made real progress. “We felt something had to be done,” said Ron Miller, the IMA’s former director. “So we bootstrapped it. We’ve had no deep pockets, no one to write a big check. It’s truly been a community effort.”

The IMA Foundation created the Greater Flint Area Softball and Baseball Commission with support from area employers and other partners. Through the efforts of these partners, and with the help of volunteers and donations, the leagues got the money they needed and the fields were ready for play this spring.

“This was a perfect role for the IMA to play, as a catalyst. It’s really our strength,” Miller said. “People are coming into the parks again, and that’s outstanding. The kids are learning teamwork and self-discipline, and out of that comes self-respect and all kinds of good things.”

This piece was originally included in “Stories of Self-Trust and Hope,” a publication from The Harwood Institute and the C.S. Mott Foundation.