CREATIVE LEADERSHIP RESOURCE, PART 3
EQUITY AND CREATIVITY

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Equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging form the bedrock upon which effective organizations are built. Schools, school districts, county offices of education, and other educational organizations necessarily hold space for equity and equity-based practices as they engage in daily practice to provide access and opportunity for all students and close historic opportunity gaps.

What “equity” looks like operationally in the life of an organization necessarily varies given an organization’s unique equity journey and the work that they are focused on around increasing equitable practice. Systems that are engaged in positive movement stress self-reflection, empowerment of diverse voices, and employ strategies that shift both practice and policy in ways that expand access and opportunity.

Creative approaches can be the determining factor in effectively increasing equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging. Creative leadership that includes broad input and empathy-based strategies requires thinking beyond the four corners of traditional approaches. This kind of leadership invites team members to engage their creativity and imagination in order to create the conditions for new solutions to problems to emerge. This brief will explore the intersection of creativity and equity and highlight opportunities to design schools and systems that are inclusive and welcoming to all.
The CREATE model for Designing Creative, Equitable Systems and Schools

The CREATE model is a useful guide for building equity-based environments. The six fundamental components are grounded in creativity and describe the conditions in which equity can thrive.

This model assumes that we are most effective in solving for equity when we allow input and marshal our most creative, connected selves. The CREATE model is a useful guide for building equity-based environments.

Empathy

Empathy is the practice of understanding the feelings, thoughts, and actions of another and is a central tenet of equitable leadership. Cultural humility requires that one understand and honor another’s lived experience. This requires awareness and sets a foundation for deeper equity and connection.

Try this: Engaging in empathy interviews is a powerful strategy for understanding the experience and perspective of an individual that a solution is designed to impact. The most productive empathy interviews are both structured and yet open-ended. They provide a disciplined way to know more fully the needs and pain points that an individual might be experiencing. Often these interviews include an interviewer who has developed a protocol of questions and wonderings and a colleague or colleagues who take notes of both the utterances as well as affect and behaviors of the interviewee. The interview team then makes informed inferences about what they heard which can subsequently inform planning and design. Empathy interviews seek a different kind of input than what are gathered to other strategies such as surveys, which are effective for gaining broader input, though less nuanced and deep.

Creativity

Designing equitable solutions to everyday challenges requires innovation and novel ways of thinking about old problems in new ways. Educational environments that prioritize creativity and creative problem solving through a “tinkering” mindset are best situated to innovate and identify solutions that create more equitable access and opportunity for students and educators alike.

Try this: Arts-based activities can loosen the creative muscles as teams shift from compliance-based to generative mindsets. Opening problem-solving sessions with an arts-based activity, whether visual such as creating a shared image of the desired condition when the focus problem is solved or performative such as engaged in an improvisation or tableau activity are examples of ways to add a bit of creative energy to a team. Extending the creativity into the actual design process through strategies such as open-ended brainstorming, designing and building prototypes, and strategies to generate divergent ideas shift solutions away from the tried and true and create space for innovative or unexplored ideas.

Access

Equitable systems create opportunities for access for all, including historically underserved groups of students, educators, and community members. This can look like equitable access to college-level course sequences, having access to information and traditional decision-making structures, or ensuring that leadership opportunities are extended to those from historically under-represented groups. Ensuring access and full participation in problem-solving and design, as well implementation of solutions, is critical to creating systems that are equitable to ensure a broader sense of belonging and inclusion.

Try this: Conduct an audit of forms of soft and hard access to programs, systems, and information. Take a deep look at the information, relationships, and decision-making power in your school or organization. Who has access and who does not? How equitable is the access? Are historically under-represented groups equally engaged in leadership and decision-making structures? If not, consider conducting an audit of systems alongside empathy interviews that can help determine what the experience of the school or organization is for those with access and without it. Taking an honest look and making key shifts can change the dynamic of a system and have positive impacts on culture and climate.

Reflection

Educators and leaders who reflect on their own practice can gain critical insight into understanding the manner in which their systems operate and how they impact individuals. Self-reflection, as a personal practice or through facilitation, leads individuals to engage in a process of continuous analysis, adjustment, and assessment and cements reflective practice into an educational organization’s culture.

Try this: Teams that prioritize self-reflective practice get better at it over time. Add structured reflection moments throughout a group problem-solving process. These can look like individual opportunities to reflect and jot down some reactions to share later with a small group or they be posed in breakout groups. Such groups may react to a prompt such as “Reflecting on the work that we just completed, what wanderings, questions, or a-ha’s are you experiencing?” These sorts of metacognitive, reflective moments strengthen groups and allow educators and leaders to gain critical insight into their own practice, the manner in which their systems operate, and how they impact individuals.
**Trust**

Trust is one of those tricky things that takes time to establish and can be damaged quickly through a single action. It is a core part of the CREATE model as it represents a critical condition necessary for the other elements of the model to thrive. Transparency and effective communication are necessary for trust to flourish in a school or educational organization.

Try this: Leaders and educators who listen, act on what they hear, demonstrate fairness, extend trust to others, and who avoid inconsistency, false feedback, and hidden agendas create fertile conditions for trust to blossom. In “The Speed of Trust”, Stephen M.R. Covey writes that “The first job of a leader—at work or at home—is to inspire trust. It’s to bring out the best in people by entrusting them with meaningful stewardships, and to create an environment in which high-trust interaction inspires creativity and possibility.”

**Equity**

The CREATE model exists for, and is intended to, foment a culture of creativity in the service of equity. Organizations that are explicit about their core values around equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging and that use these as the yardsticks to measure their success, stay focused and aligned in the work. In the day-to-day life of a school or educational organization hundreds of small and large decisions are made. Have a clear north star that is focused on equity provides guidance, context, and focus to ensure that those decisions move the organization further down the continuum towards greater equity and access.

Try this: Leaders and teams that are consistently engaged in equity work deepen their equitable practice through self-reflection, continual learning, and humble inquiry. Consider beginning team meetings with a few moments of equity sharing, inviting team members to take turns presenting content related to their own equity journey, which might include a book, article, or other resource. These strategies can to deepen the conversation in ways that invite self-reflection and inquiry. Teams can employ an equity self-reflection tool to create a data set for discussion, analysis, and subsequent planning. Finding ways to put equity at the forefront helps ensure that it is the primary yardstick against which progress is measured.

**Some Final Thoughts**

The CREATE model serves as a guide to six key areas for reflection and focus as one leads along a journey of equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging. Each of these areas serves as a potential entry point into work to increase an educational system’s understanding of equity as a lever for increasing effectiveness. It is worthwhile to note that none of these are static points at which one arrives, but rather represent the journey that educational leaders take while building more equitable systems.
Reflections:

- Which of the six components of the CREATE model comes the most naturally to you?
- Reflect with a colleague or small group about the components of the model. How do they look in your organization? Do they look different to different individuals or groups? How can you build capacity in each of the areas?
- Much like meeting norms, try holding these six areas as areas of priority during a problem-solving or training session. Do these lenses shift the focus of the conversation?
- Remember that we are all on a journey to a more equitable, diverse, inclusive, and belonging future. Commit to the conversation and stay engaged, even when it feels messy!

Want to Learn More?

As you build your mastery of empathy and creativity in your leadership practice, the following resources provide some opportunities to dig into some of the concepts presented here in greater depth.


