



# COLLECTIVE STORY HARVESTING

STORY: A KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT TOOL LIKE NO OTHER

## DESCRIPTION AND UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES:

Sharing stories enables us to deeply connect with and learn from the experience in our community, team or organization. By doing this in a structured way we build our capacity for targeted listening and group learning, offer the gift of witnessing the story holders, as well as harvesting the gift of collective sense and meaning-making. Group harvesting is an ideal way to surface the many unspoken assumptions, insights and innovations that exist beneath the surface of our stories and to take learning to a deeper level.

### Collective Story Harvest Process

**Framing & Introduction:** Welcome participants, introduce the process, timing and storytellers (each share a short synopsis of their story). Introduce the harvesting arcs and the role of the witness and invite participants to choose one or the other. As each storyteller shares their story, it is harvested by participants through a number of specific 'arcs' or lenses. These are chosen in advance according to the purpose of the overall inquiry, and the kinds of things the group wants to learn.

**Storytelling:** Storytellers share the story and the group harvest. It is best to have those directly connected to the story on hand to tell it, and it can be more interesting to hear from more than one person involved in the story. More voices add depth and richness, as well as a variety of points of view. The story does not need to be an often-told one, or polished in any form. In fact, this process can be used to help polish a story and give the storytellers input on how to focus and refine the story to be told to different audiences.

**Collective harvest:** Ask each of the harvesters to report in on what they heard. Take at least as long for this as for the storytelling. Invite the witness(es) to reflect back to the storyteller too.

**Response from the tellers:** The storyteller then reflects on what they learned about themselves and their story as a result of being mirrored in this way. *What were the gifts to you from this group harvest? What are you taking away from this session?*

**Collective harvest:** If time permits, come back into the full group to share learning (*This collective harvest can be done well using a World Café*). Ask participants to form groups according to the harvesting arc or role they played, e.g. people who harvested "Pivotal Points" sit together, Witnesses sit together, etc. , Invite the group to explore a meta harvest question, e.g. *"What are the conditions needed for Organisational Learning to be practised successfully in our context?"* Groups then debrief what they have harvested from each story in the context of the full group question.

**Closing the session:** Thank the storytellers and the harvesters. Invite any final remarks and next steps; *what will happen to the harvest now that it has been heard? What are the next steps for the group?*



## What is the Collective Story Harvest good for?

There are many ways to apply collective story harvesting:

**Systemic story harvest for applied learning:** A group focuses on one systemic story to harvest the learning and apply them to its own work. This works equally well for a practice group coming together or a working team hearing a story from another organisation or system and then applying the learning to its own practice.

**Full system team building/strategy session:** Harvesting an organisation or group's own story for learning, teambuilding and strategic enhancement. Working with the story in this way brings the group into a collective field of meaning. Vision or mission statements can be enhanced and integrated, strategic plans can be invigorated.

**Many stories/collective learning:** Harvesting a variety of stories simultaneously in small groups, then converging the learning across the full group. A variety of stories are selected that offer different aspects to the group. Participants attend and harvest the story that most interests them. Collective meta learning is harvested by the full group.

**Creating a new field of work or practice:** Telling the story of the wider context up to now in order to set the scene for the new work or practice field to arise and find its potent focus. The process might also be used for systemic evaluation.

**Taking stock at regular intervals during a project's life:** Good witnessing enables insights about the key pivotal points in a story to surface, as well as helping other emotions to be heard and released. It can also support a story to rise above the personal to reveal insights about the local context it happened in and even the wider systemic context.

## Strengths of this process include:

- It can deal with complex realities and bring simplicity as well as surface understanding and learning from complexity.
- It is a harvesting of current reality – how we got to where we are now?
- It creates a rich learning field.
- It creates a strong connection and shared understanding between those involved in the process.
- It is a gift to the storytellers and others, with lots of resonant learning happening.
- It is a simple, but powerful tool that can be used regularly to take stock, capture learning and refocus the field.