

Creating Unmet Desire Surveys

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Purpose

Unmet Desire Surveys help organizational leaders create new collaboration to improve practice and policy.

Why are they useful?

New collaboration between people with diverse forms of expertise can help produce more effective and equitable decision-making. Yet it often does not happen on its own.

Unmet desire surveys can help. They are a tool that organizational leaders can use to gather the information they need to actively foster new collaboration between decision-makers within their organization as well as across sectors, agencies, grantees, and so on. They are especially helpful for situations in which new collaboration is voluntary and potential collaborators may not know each other very well.

How do they work?

First, a key distinction: Collaboration can have two broad goals:

- Informal collaboration: knowledge exchange in which decision-makers remain autonomous
- Formal collaboration: projects with shared ownership, decision-making authority, and accountability.

While calls for new collaboration often focus on formal projects, the informal variety is far less resource-intensive, can be very impactful, and is sometimes all that decision-makers need. In short, both informal and formal collaboration are important and should be actively legitimated.

For either goal, we need to start with fundamentals: Collaboration entails people with diverse forms of expertise, who may be strangers, choosing to form new collaborative relationships – that is, feeling comfortable sharing what they know and aiming to develop an expanded understanding of a challenge they are facing in their work. This is the moment that unmet desire surveys focus on. They aim to surface the reasons why diverse thinkers want to interact as well as the sources of hesitancy they have about doing so. They are built on a core premise: new collaborative relationships that people would value often don't start on their own.

Unmet desire surveys involve posing counterfactual questions to decision-makers about what kinds of new collaboration would be helpful to them (to improve the effectiveness of their work, overcome existing challenges, and so on) and with whom, their view on why such collaborative relationships do not already exist, and what hesitancies they have about interacting.

The information gathered by these surveys then provides strong rationale for organizational leaders to engage in *matchmaking* to actively create the new collaborative relationships that people reveal would be most beneficial to them. This link discusses matchmaking techniques that are helpful: https://www.r4impact.org/sites/default/files/FINAL_PAPER.pdf (especially pages 266-268).

Key background conditions for conducting an unmet desire survey

The ideal timing for an organizational leader to field an unmet desire survey depends upon several background conditions being met:

1) You can state a clear rationale for why an unmet desire survey is needed. Typically this entails a general belief that your organization would benefit from more collaboration. For instance, are you trying to improve the effectiveness of practice or policy? Are you facing a new threat/opportunity/merger/funding opportunity? It also entails a belief that unmet desire exists even if it hasn't been explicitly articulated or measured. Having a general sense of what the need might consist of is important because it affects how you phrase the survey questions.

- *Why is new collaboration needed? What kinds of decision-makers in your organization might have an unmet desire to collaborate?*

2) You can decide which decision-makers to prioritize. Make sure it's people with decision-making authority who are in a position to use knowledge gained through informal collaboration and/or to allocate the resources needed for new formal collaboration. Unmet desire surveys can be continuously fielded with different members of one's organization, as the timing will work for some and not others.

- *Of all the decision-makers that may have unmet desire to collaborate, which ones would you start with?*

3) You have a plan for implementing the survey's results. Perhaps not surprisingly, unmet desire surveys typically uncover unmet desire. The goal is to then meet it. Thus, fielding the survey should be accompanied by a plan for implementing the results, often through matchmaking. Active matchmaking is important for the same reason that the unmet desire survey is needed in the first place: new collaborative relationships often don't start on their own.

- *Do you have the desire, and capacity, to conduct matchmaking to meet unmet desire once you've surfaced it?*

4) You have the right people to field the unmet desire survey and also engage in the subsequent matchmaking. They need to have authority and also perceived credibility (ability and trustworthiness), including among all types of people who might be connected. They also need the personal motivation to do it. Unmet desire surveys are not long, but the results are intended to be highly actionable. Thus, conducting them face-to-face (as opposed to in written form) is preferred so that it's easy to ask follow-up questions and gain detailed information.

- *Who within your organization can/should conduct the unmet desire survey?*

The Questionnaire Itself

Unmet Desire Surveys involve posing a few short questions to decision-makers:

- Question 1 (Why collaborate?): Is there information about other programs/organizations/past experiences that would help improve the effectiveness of your work? What kinds of people have that information and would be helpful to connect with?
- Question 2 (Collaboration goals): Would you be looking for informal collaboration (oriented toward knowledge exchange) and/or formal collaboration (oriented toward projects with shared ownership, decision-making authority, and accountability)?
- Question 3 (Hesitations): What hesitations (perhaps due to prior experiences, lack of explicit permission, stereotypes, and so on) do you have about interacting with them? What hesitations do you think they might have about interacting with you?
- Question 4 (Anything else): Why do you think these connections don't already exist?

Questions 1 and 2 tap into substantive goals. Question 3 taps into relationality – how people want others to relate to them, and whether they perceive that they can successfully relate to others. Question 4 provides space for respondents to identify other barriers to new collaborative relationships, including lack of resources/time/organizational incentives/opportunity, uncertainty about why they should be interested, and so on.

What makes Unmet Desire Surveys powerful, but also challenging to conduct, is that these counter-factual questions are unusual and may be difficult to answer in the abstract. Thus, organizational leaders who field them will want to tailor the wording of each question so that it matches the context and also provides actionable results. That is, the results from these questions should be useful for identifying the kinds of people who would make good matches and also the best way of facilitating those matches anew (i.e., when the survey reveals hesitations, then that suggests the kind of information that must be conveyed to new collaborators in order to allay fears and resolve uncertainty).

Examples

Examples for Question 1 (with Question 2 as natural follow-up)

DECISION-MAKERS	POSSIBLE QUESTION 1 WORDING
AmeriCorps program leaders are facing program evaluation challenges	“Are there challenges related to conducting program evaluation that you’re facing in which it would be helpful to speak with a researcher?”
Local policymakers are facing myriad policy challenges	“Are there policy challenges you’re facing in which you would like to be in touch with researchers who work at colleges and universities in your region?”
Climate organizers are looking to cultivate more committed volunteers	“We know that many organizers are seeing an influx of new volunteers and feeling like their volunteer base isn’t strong enough. Are you in those shoes, and would it be helpful to engage with a researcher to learn about the latest techniques for generating volunteer commitment and how you can apply them?”
Agency staff in the federal government	“How does the success of your program relate to what is happening elsewhere? Is there information about other programs within the government and/or outside organizations that would help improve the effectiveness of your work? What kinds of people from these other agencies/organizations would be helpful to connect with?”
Neuroscientists deciding what research topics to pursue	“Would you be interested in interacting with disease advocacy groups – organizations that aim to influence government or policymaking regarding a particular disease – to talk about how neuroscience research may be relevant to their mission?”

Example for Question 3

The list of response options should capture the sources of hesitancy that decision-makers may have. Note that these sources of hesitancy may be common even if they are not always made explicit in day-to-day interactions. Here’s one example:

Here is list of possible concerns policymakers may have when interacting with university researchers. Which of the following might you have when interacting with university researchers?

- They may not have domain-specific expertise*
- They may not have trustworthy information*
- They may not have practical information*
- They may not value my knowledge and experience as a policymaker*
- They may lecture me*
- They may use unfamiliar language*
- They may push a political agenda*
- They may just criticize everything I do*

Example for Question 4

Include a list of response options that makes sense for your specific context. Here is one example:

Why do you think you don't already collaborate with [people mentioned earlier]? Here are some possibilities:

- I hadn't really thought to in the past*
- I haven't needed to in the past because I have resources through my job to get what I need*
- I haven't had time*
- I don't know how to find the right person/No one has offered to make the connection*
- Perhaps something else?*

Given the background conditions you identified earlier, how might you pose these questions to decision-makers in your organization?

- Question 1 (Why collaborate?):

- Question 2 (Collaboration goals):

- Question 3 (Hesitations):

- Question 4 (Anything else?):
