Citizen-Centered Engagement Done Differently

Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities

May 2025

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AGENDA

What Defines Good Engagement?

Case Study Activity

Reflection

Thinking Differently

Impacts

WHAT DEFINES
GOOD ENGAGEMENT?

Good engagement is more than just gathering opinions; it's about creating meaningful, collaborative interactions that lead to real impact. We define good engagement as:

✓ **Inclusive:** Ensures all voices, especially those of vulnerable and marginalized groups, are heard and valued.

✓ **Accessible:** Removes barriers to participation, such as language, location, technology, or timing.

✓ **Collaborative:** Moves beyond consultation to actively involve participants in decision-making and solution design.

✓ **Transparent:** Clearly communicates purpose, process, and outcomes to build trust and accountability.

✓ **Ongoing:** Establishes regular, iterative interactions rather than one-off events.

✓ **Impactful:** Results in tangible changes that reflect community input.

You're here because you care about engaging effectively, and this session will help you explore what truly defines good engagement and how to achieve it.

ACTIVITY

CASE STUDY

There has been an announcement regarding a new initiative to tackle poverty. To inform new policies, Government is looking to you to engage directly with individuals and families experiencing poverty across the province. You have been directed to focus your efforts on one large-scale consultation event.

This engagement effort aims to:
1. Collect feedback from a diverse group of stakeholders, including low-income families, seniors, newcomers, individuals with disabilities, and Indigenous communities.
2. Understand the systemic barriers to escaping poverty.
3. Gather input on proposed policies related to housing, employment, and access to social services.

YOUR TASK

As a group, determine how to best approach this work while incorporating the constraints and considerations described on the back of this card. Identify at least 3 challenges government may face. Prioritize constraints (timeline, budget, geography, representation, etc.) based on their potential impact on the engagement effort.

CONSTRAINTS
& CONSIDERATIONS

CONSTRAINTS

Timeline: There has only been <u>three months allocated</u> to plan, execute, and analyze the consultation.

Budget: Funding for the engagement is limited to <u>$40K</u> and will need to cover travel, accommodations, compensation for participants, technology, interpretation, and outreach.

Scope: The consultation must address <u>all identified topics</u> including housing, healthcare, food security, and childcare.

CONSIDERATIONS

Representation: The government is committed to hearing from all groups but struggles to ensure a balanced representation across regions, age groups, and cultural communities.

Engagement fatigue: Many vulnerable communities have been consulted repeatedly in the past, with little visible change resulting from their input, leading to distrust.

Geography: Many individuals facing poverty live in rural and remote regions and may struggle to travel to a consultation event due to financial barriers, lack of transportation, or physical accessibility issues.
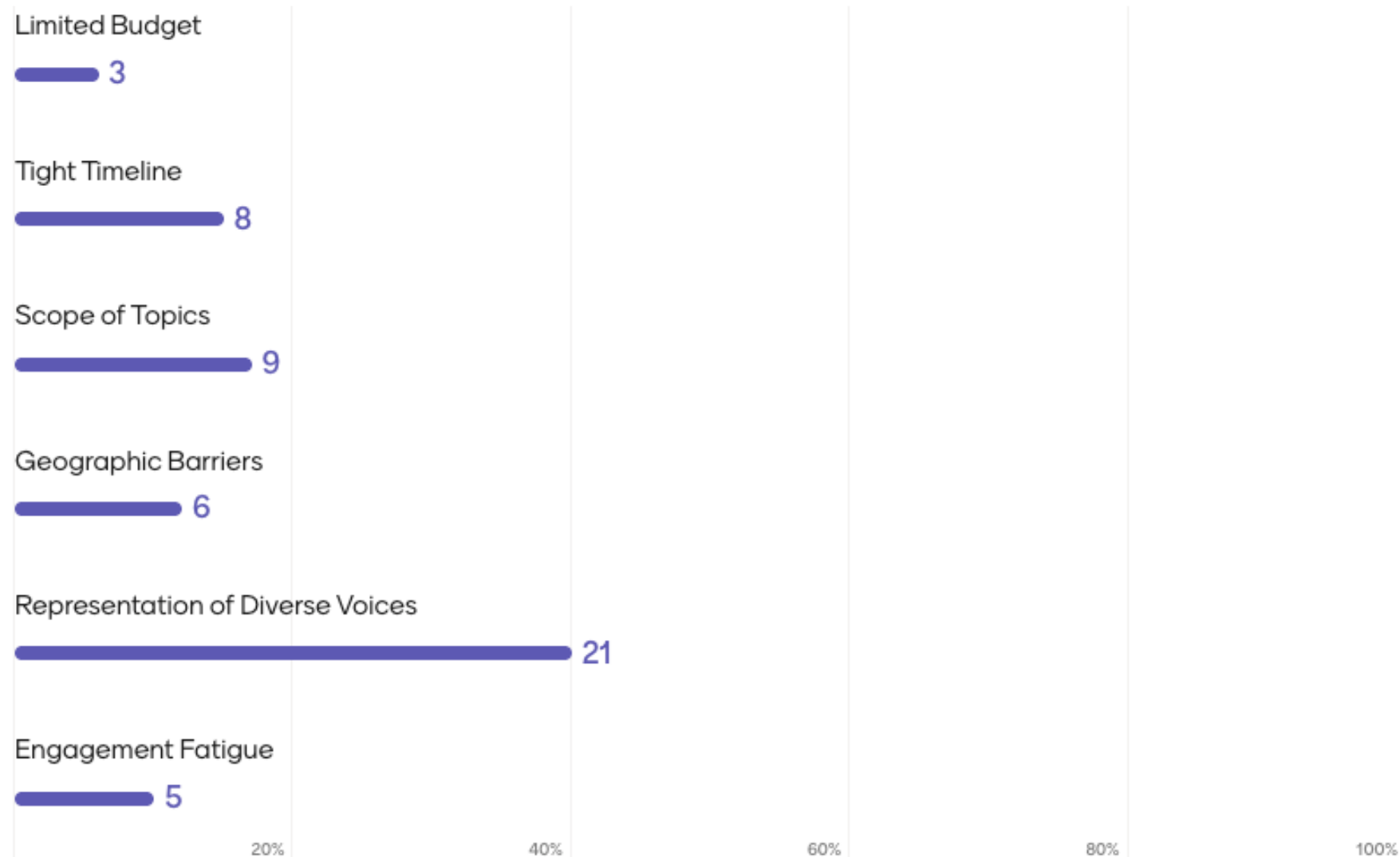
REFLECTION

What do you find to be the biggest challenge in conducting a single large-scale engagement effort with vulnerable populations? 👤 52

Limited Budget
3

Tight Timeline
8

Scope of Topics
9

Geographic Barriers
6

Representation of Diverse Voices
21

Engagement Fatigue
5

20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Which constraint do you feel has the most significant impact on the success of this engagement effort?

👤 54

Budget
7

Timeline
2

Geography
5

Scope
20

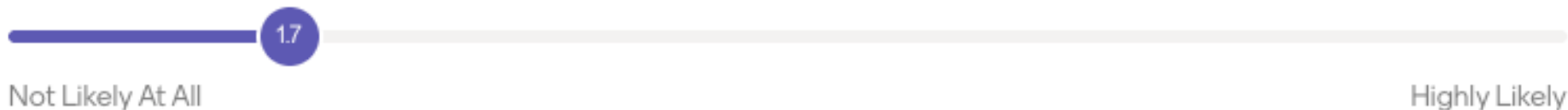Community Trust
34

20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

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How likely is it that a single engagement effort would result in actionable and effective policies? 👤 52

> How likely is it that a single engagement effort would result in actionable and effective policies?

1.7

Not Likely At All   Highly Likely

How important is it to address geographic challenges (e.g., travel barriers) when engaging vulnerable populations? 👤 50

> How important is it to address geographic challenges (e.g., travel barriers) when engaging vulnerable populations?

4.4

Not Important At All   Extremely Important

What is the most significant risk of relying on a single engagement effort for a complex issue like poverty?

👤 53

Excluding certain groups or regions
11

Gathering incomplete or superficial feedback
31

Losing trust due to perceived lack of follow-through
6

Overlooking systemic issues
5

20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

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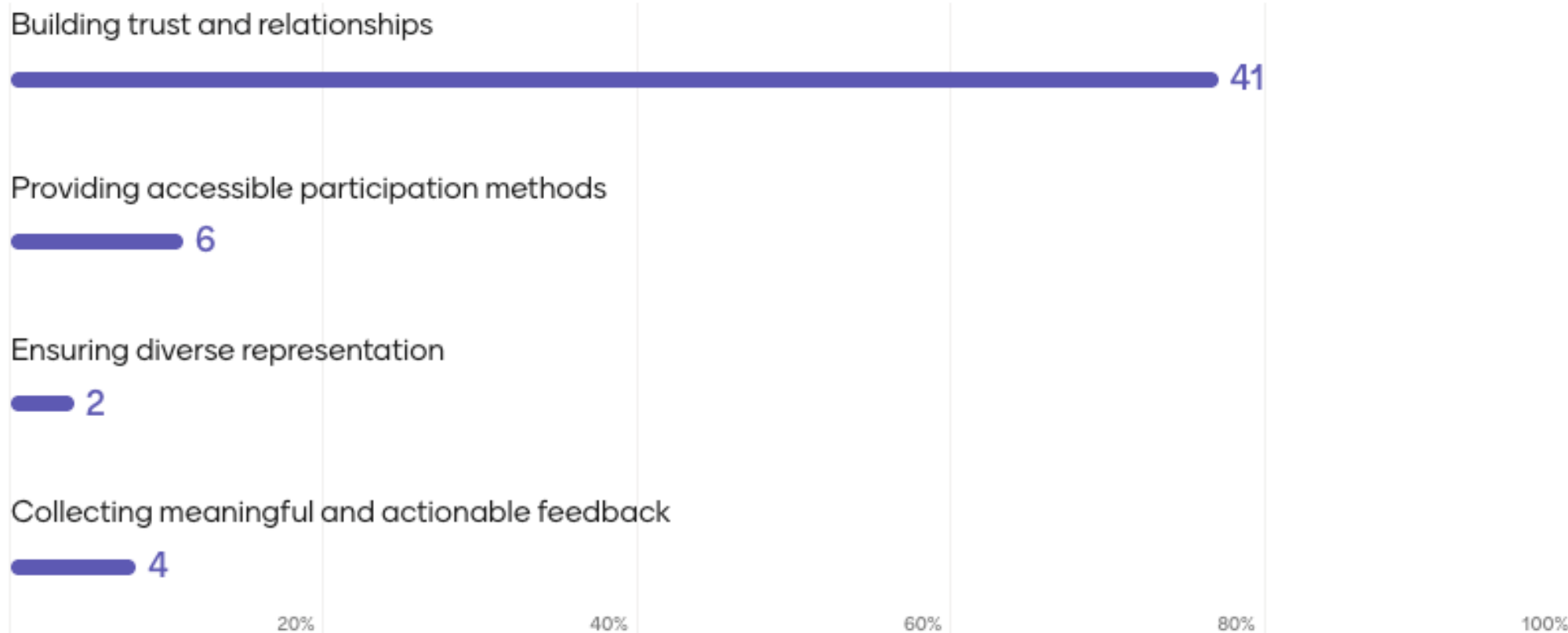# How would engagement fatigue impact participation and feedback quality

> How would engagement fatigue impact participation and feedback quality

No Impact ————————————————————●4.1———————— Significantly Impact

In your opinion, what is the most important factor to consider when engaging vulnerable populations?

👤 53

Building trust and relationships

41

Providing accessible participation methods

6

Ensuring diverse representation

2

Collecting meaningful and actionable feedback

4

20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

13

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What is your key takeaway from this case study exercise?

Building stronger relationships

Reaffirmed

Building trust is absolutely necessary to the success of the engagement process

Great information to take into consideration. Eye opening.

We need to value first voice and provide accessible ways of hearing it.

Improved focus

I felt that this example is not so difficult if you were already very engaged in diverse members of your community and non profit groups.

The topic of Poverty may not be a relevant topic for Municipal engagement.

Know your audience

What are the solutions to these issues???

Reaffirmed some things around developing trust and building relationships. Good communication is always the key!

Inclusive Trustworthy Ongoing

Good reminder to be inclusive with planning

Too much information to process, solutions are not easy

If you want community acceptance, engagement can make it a success for everyone.

We too often rely on single points of contact for a subject. Community consultation cannot be one and done. Approach people were they're at.

Build trust. Slow and steady. Trust takes time.

Do as you promise!

My sense is that we need to retreat from a solve-all approach on social issues and encourage first person voices.

Life does not begin and end in Halifax, sessions need to be held through the province

Similar experiences engaging communities in a meaningful way for all municipalities Budget is not as restrictive as maybe it was thought

The fact we all thought the same way on many issues. If we think this way , as a group, the solutions can't be far away!!

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THINKING DIFFERENTLY

THE PROBLEM WITH OUR CURRENT APPROACH

Typical government tactics include focus groups, mass surveys, and interviews. While these methods have their merit, they're not without challenges:

- They lack flexibility

- Time constraints don't match the speed of trust

- Inclusion is limited and marginalized voices are often missed

- Participants lack visibility into the long-term impact of engagements

We need to think **differently** about how we engage to avoid these common pitfalls.

HUMAN-CENTRED APPROACHES

Human-centred design is flexible, iterative, and focused on understanding user needs and empowering participants
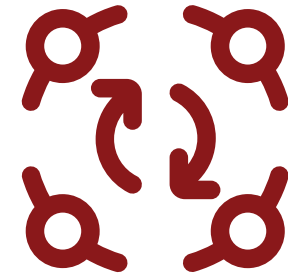
Empathy
Deep understanding of diverse perspectives
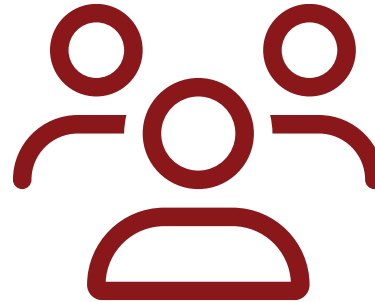
Collaboration
Co-creating solutions with those most impacted

Iteration
Testing, refining, and reporting back

HUMAN-CENTERED
DESIGN APPROACHES

Empathy

Deep understanding of diverse perspectives.

We start with empathy because it is the foundation of effective engagement and meaningful solutions. It helps us:

- ✓ **Build trust:** People are more likely to engage and share openly when they feel understood and valued.
- ✓ **Uncover hidden needs**: Empathy helps us identify pain points and desires that traditional methods might overlook, especially for vulnerable groups.
- ✓ **Design with purpose**: Grounding engagement in real human experiences ensures that the solutions we create are relevant, impactful, and equitable.

Empathy shifts the focus from "What do we think they need?" to "What do they truly need?"—making it a critical first step in any human-centered process.

HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN APPROACHES

Collaborate
Co-creating solutions with those impacted

We prioritize collaboration and co-creation because they ensure solutions are representative and effective. By working directly with those impacted, we:

- ✓ **Foster ownership**: People are more invested in outcomes they help create.

- ✓ **Tap into diverse perspectives**: Bringing in varied experiences leads to richer, inclusive ideas.

- ✓ **Break down power dynamics**: Ensures all voices shape the process, not just decision-makers.

Collaboration shifts the mindset from "We're designing for them" to "We're designing with them," making it a cornerstone of equitable and effective engagement.

HUMAN-CENTERED
DESIGN APPROACHES

Iteration
Testing and refining based on feedback.

We emphasize iteration because it ensures solutions evolve to meet real needs effectively. By engaging regularly and refining based on feedback, we can:

✓ **Adapt to change:** Iteration allows us to respond to new insights or shifting circumstances.

✓ **Improve outcomes:** Testing and refining ideas ensures they are practical and impactful.

✓ **Build trust:** Ongoing engagement demonstrates a commitment to listening and improving.

Iteration shifts the focus from "getting it perfect the first time" to "continuously improving," leading to solutions that truly work for everyone.

BUILDING GOOD ENGAGEMENTS

We need to move beyond traditional methods and embrace approaches that prioritize smaller, iterative, and community-driven interactions.

We need to shift our thinking, and move towards:

- Smaller, iterative focus groups over time.

- Community ambassadors to engage hard-to-reach populations.

- Mobile-friendly, multilingual surveys.

- Alternative methods of engagement that work for diverse groups

- Shift from "consultation" to "co-design."

IMPACTS

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A disability support program sought to redesign their recreational and vocational program offering.

Engagement Methods:

1. Activity-based engagements
2. 1-on-1 Interviews
3. Surveys
4. Community group sessions
5. Virtual workshops

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An employment program wanted to identify why workshops had poor attendance and design a solution.

Engagement Methods:

1. 1-on-1 Interviews
2. Surveys
3. Virtual focus groups

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An income assistance program was redesigning their intake experience and wanted to validate it with diverse user groups.

Engagement Methods:

1. Usability testing
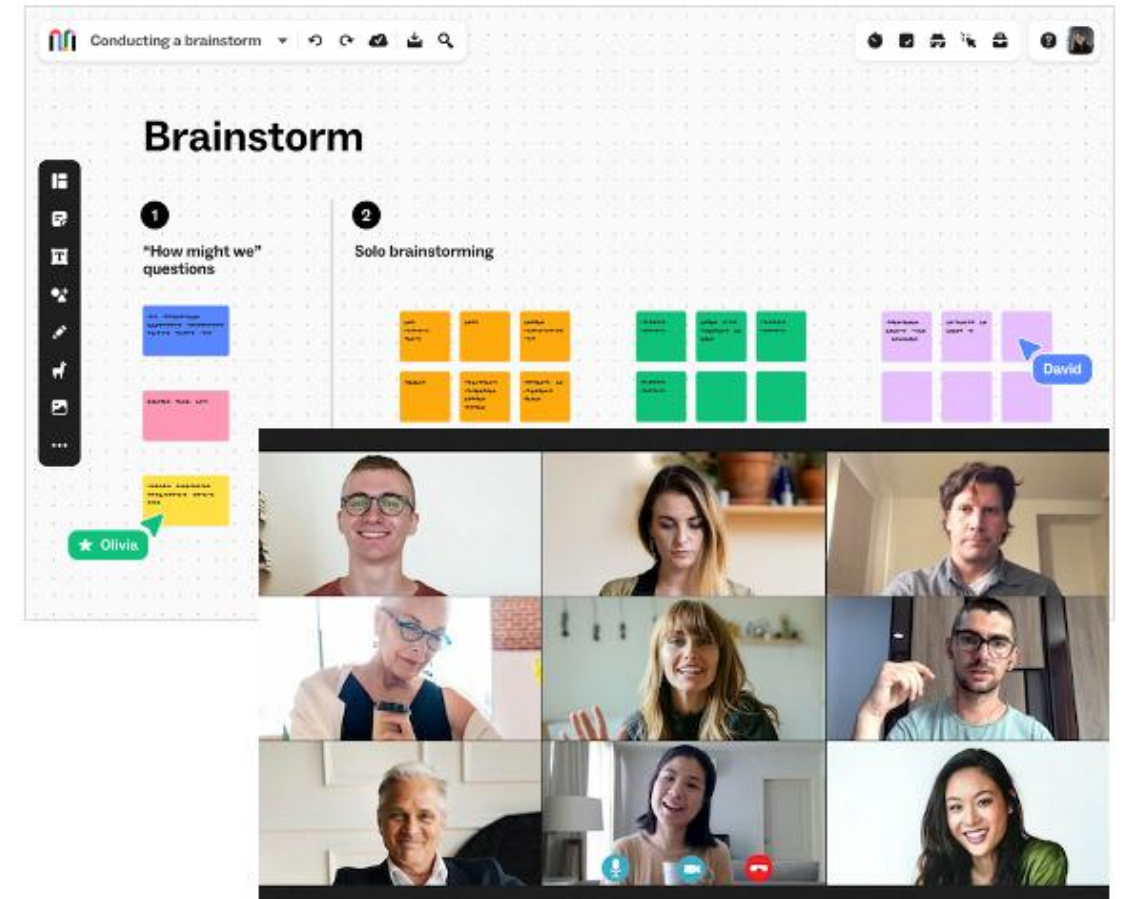2. Design surveys
3. 1-on-1 Interviews

EXAMPLE | CHILDCARE

An early years and childcare program wanted to engage diverse groups on the design of a new provincially-focused approach to childcare.

Engagement Methods:

1. Virtual focus groups
2. Surveys
3. Interviews
4. Peer discussions
5. Diary studies

FINAL THOUGHTS

Inclusive engagement creates lasting solutions that reflect the needs and desires of the people we serve and creates a foundation for meaningful change.

Let's Connect

Email: marcia.macadam@davispier.ca

LinkedIn:

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