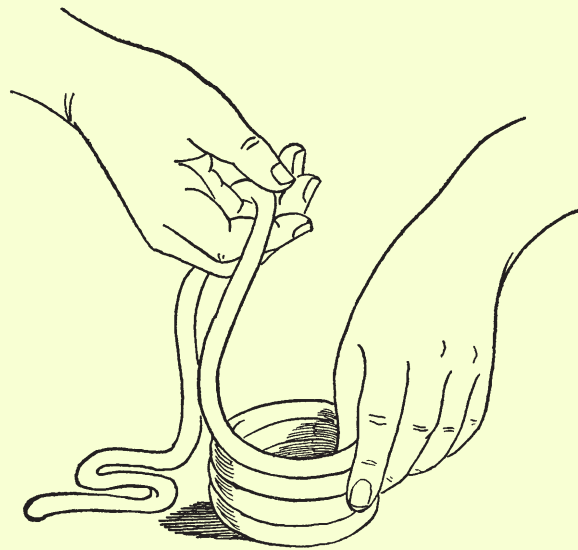


BUILDING CONTAINERS *for* HEALTH EQUITY WORK



Introduction to
Container Building

OVERVIEW

When you think about a container, what comes to mind?

Maybe a bowl, vase, flower pot, suitcase, box, envelope, Tupperware with leftovers.

While these are all very different types of containers, they all have some common elements: they hold things; they have shapes and boundaries that are particular to the things they are designed to hold; they protect and keep together the things they are holding.

As a metaphor, containers for equity work operate similarly — they are the practices and norms that create a space for individuals and groups to be and do together.

The heart of container building for equity work is intentional design that models the ways we want to be in relationship with others towards common goals to achieve equity. We know we won't achieve health and racial equity through replicating dominant norms and systems. To support our equity work we need to create and cultivate space that is counter cultural: spaces that prioritize relationships, trust, and full humanity; spaces that are animated by our collective values and vision of what social justice — including racial, gender, and disability justice — look like in practice.

The intentionality of building containers for equity work is key. We have all been acculturated to living and working in dominant, oppressive systems that are dehumanizing and perpetuate the goals of white supremacy, capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy, ableism, and the like. So we have to be very intentional about how we create environments for ourselves. We must be explicit in learning and unlearning together, and practicing different ways of being that humanize us all and make a place for accountability, feedback, and repair.



WHY SHOULD WE BUILD A CONTAINER FOR HEALTH EQUITY WORK?

A well-curated and held container creates processes and spaces where:

- All group members feel they belong
- Everyone can be themselves in all their beauty and complexity
- Group members have mutual, trusting relationships with others
- The group commits to and practices a shared set of agreements, which help them advance shared aims, and work through interpersonal, team, and organizational conflict that arises in systems change work

We build containers to make the hard work of addressing racism and other systems of oppression in our work, institutions, and relationships a little bit easier. Having explicit processes and practices defined and collectively agreed to by the group will help hold space for conflict, emotions, accountability, and progress. We need to be able to care for each other in this work, and containers support doing that in intentional ways.

In *Emergent Strategy*, [adrienne maree brown](#) says, “what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale.” Containers for equity work allow us to model on a small scale, with teams and groups, what we want to see on a larger scale in our institutions, communities, and society.

Working within containers that center our full humanity, welcome us to be our true, complex, beautiful selves, honor relationships as foundational to all transformation, support trust and accountability, and make space for joy helps us feel and know that these types of spaces are possible.

When we have experienced being in intentional community with others outside of dominant norms and systems, we can extend these practices beyond that container. We can try new ways of being in intentional community with others that are outside of dominant norms and systems, which can help us trust that a different way of being is possible.

We can (and should!) build containers for all collective spaces where we are learning and working together — on staff teams, in workshops, within organizations, with our partners. And while all members of the group have responsibility for shaping and maintaining the container, it is often folks in roles of team leader, facilitator, convener, or organizer who have responsibility for initiating and guiding the process to define the container.

These resources are designed with those roles in mind, though anyone can use and apply them in practice.

KEY ELEMENTS

*Containers for equity work need to include explicit practices and norms that support **individuals, relationships, and group processes**. This centering of relationships and humanity is counter-cultural in most work spaces, so give yourself and your colleagues grace and time to build your practices in this area.*

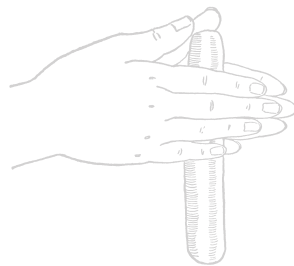


Individuals

It is important for containers to hold space for — by which we mean to celebrate, support, and appreciate — everyone’s full humanity. This means the group and its container need to make all spaces, virtual and in-person, accessible and welcoming to everyone’s abilities and needs. **Each member of the group needs to feel like they belong.** And they need to be able to trust that the container can hold their fullness, including their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

Supporting individuals can look like:

- **Somatics** - Making space for bodies of all abilities to move, breathe, hydrate, settle in ways that are supportive and accessible for each individual. Recognizing that people’s bodies and minds are different and need different things to feel whole, comfortable, and nourished. Encouraging mindfulness to physical sensations, reactions, and emotions, including how we carry racism, trauma, and inequities in our bodies, and what it feels like, physically, to be in a more equitable, relational space.
- **Emotional awareness and regulation** - Naming emotions, and naming supports needed for emotional regulation when folks feel dysregulated and unable to be present in the work and conversation. Acknowledge that we are all emotional beings and everyone will have feelings about the work, relationships, decisions, and other dynamics in and outside of the group.
- **Personal reflection** - Making space in group settings for individual reflection on thoughts, feelings, ideas, and challenges coming up for individuals about the work and conversation.

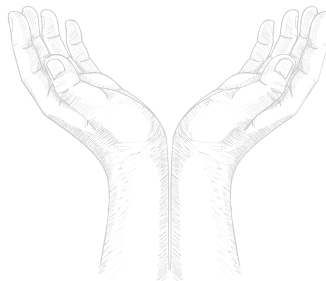


Relationships

It is important for containers to hold space for, nurture, and support relationships among individuals. **Our work is collective** and our relationships are central to our sense of belonging, wellness, and learning. Intentional practice to build relationships supports members of groups to trust each other and to be more comfortable being vulnerable, both of which are necessary for doing effective equity-related work together.

Supporting relationships can look like:

- **Getting to know each other** - Regularly spending time together to get to know each other, in structured and unstructured ways; sharing identities, experiences, skills and hobbies, families and communities, likes and dislikes, as ways to feel connected and closer to others.
- **Appreciations and celebrations** - Developing a culture of appreciation and celebration fosters a sense of belonging, because appreciation shows others that you recognize them — their labor, contributions, growth, and strengths. Celebrations of personal and professional milestones of all kinds (e.g. birthdays, anniversaries, moves, graduations, growth and learning) are a way to bring joy, levity, and care into your group spaces.
- **Small group conversations** - Making space in meetings, workshops, and other spaces for people to be in small group conversations. Smaller groups provide more space for deeper conversations, encourage more people to share, and, often, allow people to share more vulnerably.

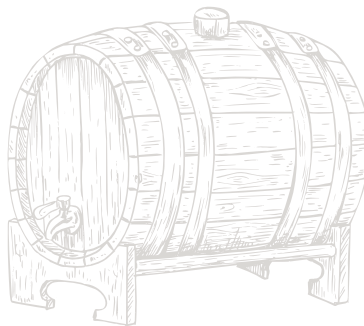


Group Process

It is important for containers to define and hold culture, norms, and processes to guide practice together. These group processes are most effective when collectively designed, agreed to, and upheld. And these **processes should explicitly align with values of equity, belonging, and racial justice**, to help facilitate putting these values into practice.

Supporting group processes can look like:

- **Naming values, defining norms** - Identifying shared values among group members, and exploring how these show up in practice as guides for decisions, actions, ideas. Values can serve as the basis of naming explicit norms for the group, or ways of being together that also support collective accountability among group members.
- **Explicit decision-making** - Collectively agreeing to how the group will make decisions about their work and process. Practicing transparency in communicating how decisions are made within the group, and how decisions are made outside of the group that impact their work.
- **Accountability practices** - Making explicit the ways in which the group will support each other, and the collective, to be accountable to their norms, goals, and relationships; having specific processes for giving and receiving feedback, addressing interpersonal harm, and contributing to the goals and actions of the group.



OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR BUILDING CONTAINERS

Facilitation

In addition to these key elements, effective facilitation is crucial for creating and maintaining your container.

At its most fundamental, facilitation helps make it easier for a group to do its work together. Facilitators are not the experts, teachers, or decision-makers — they are the people in a role to guide a group and create space and processes for that group to share ideas, navigate conflict or challenge, and come to agreements together.

It is important that the facilitator truly believes in the value of containers, conceptually and in practice, and knows how to use the elements of the container to effectively lean into conflict, address power dynamics, center humanity, and support group work and agreements.

Understanding Power

Power is present in all of our spaces and relationships. In our containers for equity work, we have to understand the power dynamics within a group — how power shows up and is exercised along multiple dimensions, including identity and social position, institutional role or position, expertise/experience, and others. The elements of containers need to be designed and practiced in ways that make power explicit, and model ways of mitigating power imbalances and building collective power for the group.

Accessibility

US society is an ableist society. Our dominant culture values certain people and certain bodies based on what ableism deems to be desirable physical, mental, and social abilities. And our institutions, practices, and spaces are shaped by these dominant ableist values — often either excluding disabled people completely or holding people’s disabilities as deficits that require accommodations in order to access and fully participate in spaces, rather than designing spaces that are fully inclusive and accessible to all.

Our equity work, and the containers we build and maintain to hold this work, need to explicitly counter this dominant ableist culture through intentionally building a culture of access and belonging for all people, bodies, and abilities. This will require shifting from centering able-bodied norms and needs and providing minimum accommodations when someone requests them to designing spaces for everyone from the start. Access should be a guiding principle, not an afterthought.

Building a culture of access is central to disability justice practice. It should also be expansive and intersectional, in recognition of varied access needs across identities and experiences. A culture of access centers and designs space for bodies of all abilities, races, genders, and other physical and socialized experiences.



Accessibility

What might access look like in practice? As a start...

- Bring in voices and experiences of disabled people to the space via videos, articles, music, art, and other media to help deepen the group's understanding and practice
- Practice offering invitations, rather than giving instructions, for ways people can participate in the space and work together — nothing is mandatory, participation is by consent, and everyone knows their bodies and needs best
- As a default, offer multiple ways for people to participate, and share and receive information — for example, offer both written and verbal invitations
- Regularly use language such as “as you are able” and “what feels comfortable to you” in your facilitation and invitations for participation
- Incorporate “access check-ins” as a regular practice where everyone can share access needs they have in that moment, and then take the time as a group to address these needs



PRINCIPLES OF CONTAINER BUILDING

For our containers to effectively support equity work and operate counter to dominant cultures, we have to be clear about the values and principles that animate the elements of our containers. These principles should align with how we want to be in the world and in relationship with others.

The following principles are ones we find foundational to building containers for equity work. We encourage you to identify others that feel important to you and your work!

PRINCIPLE

WAYS THE PRINCIPLES CAN SHOW UP IN PRACTICE

CENTER EVERYONE'S FULL HUMANITY

- Build a culture of access so group members can show up as they are and still participate fully
- Make space for individual and collective care
- Make space for taking risks, making mistakes, and learning
- Share identities – race, ethnicity, gender, cultural, and others – and make space for and honor everyone's multitudes
- As the facilitator, bring yourself into the space as well, modeling and participating in practices, and sharing of self

**MAKE THE
IMPLICIT,
EXPLICIT**

- Name assumptions – about root causes of inequities; about problems and solutions; about process and decision-making – so you can be aware of them and use that awareness to shift or clarify decisions
- Be transparent in communications and decision making, providing context and rationales for decisions and actions
- Define and name collectively group norms and accountability processes
- Check out loud for agreements and understandings

**INTEGRATE
HEAD AND
HEART**

- Get to know each other; bring in relationship building practices to all group spaces, and dedicate time to this
- Use tools that support naming physical sensations, emotions and emotional regulation to bring more awareness to embodied experiences and how individuals are showing up in the space
- Ask group members to reflect on their feelings, as well as their thoughts, about the content and process of your work
- Model facilitation that makes space for heart-centered practices, and is able to pivot, as needed, to attend to heart, body, and emotional needs
- Establish group norms that allow for spaciousness, relationships, and checking in and out of meetings as additional opportunities to connect and support each other
- Identify and integrate practices for community care as folks process, heal, and gain access to new awarenesses

**MAKE
SPACE FOR
JOY**

- Start meetings, workshops, and other group spaces with music
- Regularly share celebrations, appreciations, and successes with each other; cheer each other on!
- Bring in humor and laughter to group spaces; play games
- Spend time together outside of work mode

**BE EMERGENT,
FLEXIBLE**

- Co-create agendas and be flexible in facilitation to balance current needs of the group, with the goals of the work
- Build in time throughout your group work for sharing lessons learned and integrating new knowledge and experiences
- Find opportunities for individuals and the collective to be creative in the work. Bring in visual arts, music, dance, and other creative expressions into your group spaces



RESOURCES FOR CONTAINER BUILDING

Before implementing any new practices, it is important to assess your current culture and process for equity work. This reflection will help you identify strengths that you can continue to lean into and deepen in your work, as well as areas that need more attention to grow.

As you are reflecting on your current culture and process, you can start to learn about and identify specific heart-centered practices to ground your container building work.

Below is a link to our second container building resource that can support you in identifying ways to center the heart in your work and relationships. We recommend continuing your container building journey here.

- [Integrating the Head and the Heart - Practices for Centering Heart in your Work](#)

Other resources to further your learning:

- [Heart-Centered Practice: Embodying a Racial Justice Framework](#), blog by Lili Farhang
- [Racial Justice and Power-Sharing: The Heart of Leading Systems Change](#), book chapter by Lili Farhang and Solange Gould in *Leading Systems Change in Public Health: A Field Guide for Practitioners*

Disability Justice resources:

- #AccessIsLove: <https://www.disabilityintersectionalitysummit.com/access-is-love/>
- Sins Invalid: <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/>

FACILITATION GUIDE: **REFLECTING ON YOUR CURRENT CULTURE AND PROCESS**

What:

Facilitated reflection exercise, with worksheet (pgs 19-22), and conversation to begin building your container for equity work.

Why:

This facilitated reflection exercise and conversation will help you and your team gain a better understanding of your current culture and processes: how they align with your stated values and goals and how they help or hinder building relationships, navigating conflict, and advancing collective work. This activity will help you identify what you want to build on and what you want to change as you create an intentional container for your group's equity work.

Who:

You should have this conversation with the team or group with whom you want to build a more intentional container to support your work and relationships together. This could be your staff team, an equity committee or workgroup, an external partnership or collaboration, a coalition, or another group you work with to advance health and racial equity.

What you'll need:

- Quiet, private space for individual and group reflections. virtual or in-person
- A place to take notes and record reflections
 - For individuals - the worksheet, below, or a journal or notebook for individual reflections
 - For the group - a shared notes document (can use the individual reflection worksheet, above, as a template), a jamboard (if working virtually), or chart paper (if in-person) for capturing group reflections
 - For everyone - use a voice recorder or voice-to-text software to help capture notes in the digital worksheet



INSTRUCTIONS

Before you bring people together for this reflection exercise and conversation, communicate with the group what to expect and how to come prepared, including:

- The purpose of the space - to reflect and share together on current process and culture; and to build a shared understanding of group members' experiences with current process, so that you can work together to create a more intentional equity container for the group.
- What kind of environment will best support this conversation - if in person, find a space that is comfortable and private for the group to gather. If virtual, ask group members to find a place, as they are able, to reflect and share openly. And state explicitly how the space will support access needs for everyone in the group.
- What they'll need - the worksheet, below, or a journal, paper, or other space to write, draw, or record their individual reflections.
- What to do to prepare - read the Introduction to Container Building, above, and review the reflection questions on the worksheet, below.

You are starting to build the container for your conversation together!

Depending on how much time you have and how you want to structure the conversation, below are some options for facilitating this conversation:

OPTION A: IF YOU ONLY HAVE AN HOUR...

- 1)** Ask participants to complete their reflections prior to the meeting, so you can spend all of the group time in conversation.
- 2)** When you convene, play music as folks enter and settle. Open the space with time for folks to check-in and share how they are doing, how they are entering the space. And then remind folks of the purpose of the conversation, and share that difference of opinion is welcome and the group will not be making any decisions today. This is an open space for reflection and conversation. Ask if there are any questions or needs before turning to the questions. (10 minutes)
- 3)** Move people into small groups — no more than 4 people to a group — to share their reflections on the group’s current culture and process. Ask groups to discuss what is working and what they would like to be different about the group’s culture and process. (20 minutes)

Note: The groups will not have time to discuss each question, or each element, consideration, or principle individually; rather, the groups should share general reflections on the group’s culture and process, grounded in their specific reflections on elements, considerations, and principles.
- 4)** Return to the large group for sharing and reflection. (25 minutes)
 - Ask small groups to share highlights and learnings from their conversations. Track responses in a jamboard or on chart paper.
 - After each group has shared highlights from their conversations, probe more specifically about the principles. Ask how the principles of equity containers are reflected in the group’s culture and process, and how they could be more explicit.
- 5)** Close the meeting by sharing appreciations for participants and their reflections, and name any next steps for continuing the conversation and/or building an intentional container for your equity work. (5 minutes)

OPTION B: IF YOU HAVE 90 MINUTES...

- 1)** Ask participants to read the Intro to Container Building resource and look at the reflection questions prior to the meeting.
- 2)** When you convene, play music as folks enter and settle. Open the space with time for folks to check-in and share how they are doing, how they are entering the space. And then remind folks of the purpose of the conversation, and share that difference of opinion is welcome and the group will not be making any decisions today. This is an open space for reflection and conversation. Ask if there are any questions or needs before turning to the questions. (10 minutes)
- 3)** Give participants a few minutes for individual reflection on the “Self Reflection Questions” from the worksheet. Play quiet instrumental music while folks are writing. Ask folks to share what feels supportive and what they would like to be different in a jamboard or on chart paper. (5 minutes)

Self Reflection Questions:

- How do you feel being part of this group?
 - What feels supportive to you?
 - What would you like to be different to feel like you can show up even more authentically and fully with this group?
- 4)** Bring everyone back to the full group and move the conversation to focus on the key elements of containers. Give time for individual reflection on the questions for the five key elements of containers. Play quiet instrumental music as people write. (5 minutes)
 - 5)** Then move people into small groups — no more than 4 people to a group — to share their reflections on how the group’s current culture and process reflect these key elements. Ask groups to discuss what is working and what they would like to be different about the group’s culture and process. (15 minutes)

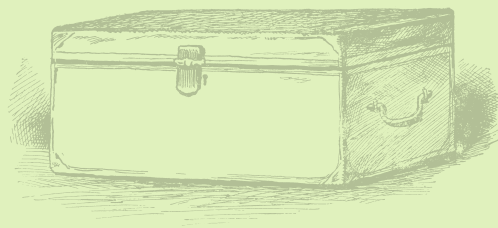
Note: The groups will not have time to discuss each question, or each element, in detail; rather, the groups should share general reflections on the group’s culture and process, grounded in their specific reflections on the key elements.

- 6)** Return to the large group for sharing and reflection. Ask small groups to share highlights and learnings from their conversations. Track responses in a jamboard or on chart paper. (15 minutes)
- 7)** Transition the conversation to focus on the principles of equity containers, and repeat steps 4-6, above, with the questions related to the 5 principles. (35 minutes)
 - a. Individual reflection on the questions (5 minutes)
 - b. Small groups discussing these reflections (15 minutes)
 - c. Large group sharing out highlights and learnings (15 minutes)
- 8)** Close the meeting by sharing appreciations for participants and their reflections, and name any next steps for continuing the conversation and/or building an intentional container for your equity work. (5 minutes)

OPTION C: IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME FOR ONGOING CONVERSATIONS...

The more time you have to reflect and share as a group, the deeper and more specific you will be able to go in understanding what is working and what you can do differently to build and strengthen your group's container for equity work.

If you have time and interest to have these reflection conversations over multiple meetings, you can use the steps Option B and split them among two meetings — one focused on the key elements and one focused on the principles. This will also allow you to give folks more time in small groups and more time as a full group hearing reflections, sharing ideas, and building connections.



WORKSHEET:

REFLECTING ON YOUR CURRENT CULTURE AND PROCESS

The following questions will help you reflect on how well your current culture and processes align with the key elements of containers — supporting individuals, relationships, and group processes — and reflect the core principles of containers for equity work. Use this worksheet to jot down your own reflections.

Elements	Questions	Reflections
Supporting Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does your group support individual members to bring their full selves to your spaces and work? • What practices might help you bring your full self to this space and work? 	
Nurturing Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you build and deepen relationships among group members? • What practices might help you build and deepen relationships with others in your group? 	
Defining Group Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What works well about your group's processes? • What would you like to be different? • What could be more defined or practiced to support the group to work, learn, and be together? • What norms would you like to see your group adopt that would help everyone to show up as their full selves? 	

Other Considerations	Questions	Reflections
Facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What works well about your group’s facilitation? • What would you like to be different? • How could the facilitation better support attending to all elements of the container? • How could your group’s facilitation better support the access needs of group members? 	
Understanding Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is power exercised and shared among group members? • Does the group talk about and have a shared understanding of power, both within and outside of the group? • How are decisions made and implemented by and within the group? • What practices might help you build a more explicit understanding of power within the group? • What practices might help you build a more explicit understanding of power within the group? 	

<p>Accessibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are ways your group makes space for everyone to be able to participate fully? • How does your group attend to the access needs of all group members? • What more could you do in this area? 	
<p>Principles</p>	<p>Questions</p>	<p>Reflections</p>
<p>Center everyone's full humanity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you promote belonging for all group members? • What are some practices you use that honor everyone's full humanity? • What more could you do in this area? 	
<p>Integrate head and heart</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are ways that your group makes space for feelings and emotions? • How, if at all, does your group normalize that feelings and emotions are part of the work, process, and being human? • What more could you do in this area? 	

<p>Make the implicit, explicit</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are ways your group makes the implicit, explicit? • What could you be more explicit about? 	
<p>Make space for joy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you make space for joy and pleasure? • What more could you do in this area? 	
<p>Be emergent, flexible</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does your group practice being emergent and flexible? • What more could you do in this area? 	

Self Reflection

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel being part of this group? • What feels supportive to you? • What would you like to be different to feel like you can show up even more authentically and fully with this group? 	
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Acknowledgments

We are forever grateful to the many people who have influenced HIP's approach, philosophy, and commitment to container building and head-and-heart integration.

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About Human Impact Partners

Human Impact Partners transforms the field of public health to center equity and builds collective power with social justice movements. For more information about this resource, or to inquire about HIP's Capacity Building services, please contact cbinfo@humanimpact.org.

To learn more about container building, view our additional resource, Building Containers for Health Equity Work: Integrating the Head and the Heart.

