Listening Session Toolkit

NHPCO
Leading Person-Centered Care
NHPCO.ORG

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1. Purpose

The purpose of Staff Listening Sessions is to engage with staff to help address critical issues facing the organization; strengthen relationships; and develop creative solutions. One example is the severe workforce stress and burnout; staffing shortages; and high levels of workforce turnover experienced by NHPCO member organizations, all of which impact the ability to deliver the highest quality care. However, it is a powerful tool when used on any challenging issue requiring creative solutions.

2. Goals

The goals of Staff Listening Sessions are to create a way for those closest to the work to: 1) feel that they have been "seen", heard, and understood; 2) know that they are not alone; 3) feel a sense of belonging and connection; 4) co-create approaches to challenging problems; and 5) understand that they have power and are part of solution.

3. Overview

Staff Listening Sessions are gatherings of staff participating in facilitated dialogue that is co-led by a recognized leader from the organization to open and close the session and a neutral, trusted individual to facilitate the dialogue. These sessions can occur either in-person or virtually, and typically run for approximately one hour per session. They are intended to create a "safe space" where staff can feel free to express their feelings, emotions, thoughts, and ideas, as well as hopes and vision for the future, without fear of risk or repercussion. They are designed to assure that the dialogue does not turn into overly negative or emotional "gripe sessions", which rarely serve the goals identified above. **It is critical that organizational leaders resist the urge to respond, clarify, push back, explain, or otherwise interrupt the opportunity for the staff to be heard.**

Staff Listening Sessions have the best chance of succeeding when they are a part of a larger organization strategy to address the issue(s) being discussed. This means that that there are a variety of efforts occurring in the organization to address the issue(s), of which listening sessions are yet another tool in the toolbox, advanced by committed and engaged leadership. Thus, rather than being a stand-alone, "one and done" event with no follow-up, they are most productive when they are aligned and integrated with other activities; and follow up from the session(s) is acted upon as part of the overarching organizational strategy and problem-solving work.

4. Key Planning Considerations

Key planning considerations for Staff Listening Sessions include:

1. Choosing the appropriate senior leader(s) and session facilitator;
2. How many staff members to invite to a session;
3. Which staff members to invite;
4. Where/how to hold a session;
5. How to introduce the concept to staff and appropriately frame the session(s) so that they are viewed positively and engage staff in participating when issuing invitations;
6. How to issue the invitations and what to say to staff that are not yet being invited;
7. Whether to record a session (if virtual);
8. How to assure that the session is not a "one and done" event; and
9. How to communicate with others about the session.

5. Roles and Descriptions

The key roles in Staff Listening Sessions are as follows:

Organizational Leader

It is very helpful to have one (or more) people representing organizational leadership present to kick off the session; to convey to participants that senior leadership cares about and is interested in staff input; and to carry messages back to the rest of the leadership team and the organization. *Again, the role of the organizational leader(s) is NOT to respond to issues raised, clarify, correct, counter, or in any way stop the flow of input from the staff.* While there may be an occasional occurrence in which the leader needs to address factually incorrect information, this should be done only if it is absolutely necessary to correct the misconception. Note that even correcting a misconception may have a dampening effect on the participants willingness to be open and forthcoming. *Thus, it should be done only if critical to address in the moment.* The most effective senior leader(s) to have present at these listening sessions are those that the staff trusts and feels safe speaking openly and honestly in front of, and is/are seen as leaders who are genuinely committed to collaboratively addressing issues. Note that this leader may or may not be the CEO/Executive Director. Having another senior leader in this role attend the session instead of the CEO/Executive Director can create a greater sense of openness to hearing all perspectives and can also communicate to the staff that the CEO/Executive Director has trust in the process and trust in the staff.

Facilitator

A neutral, objective presence in the session whose role it is to: 1) create the conditions in which staff feel comfortable opening up; 2) help move the session along and not get bogged down; 3) balance the input so that all participants feel as if they had an opportunity to contribute; and 4) manage the tone of the session so that it remains authentic and productive. Engaging a skilled facilitator external to the organization can be very effective if there is not an option internally or if the senior leadership team wants to assure that the facilitator is seen as neutral.

Participants

The role of participants is to come willing to fully and actively engage in the session while respecting and abiding by the ground rules.

Note-takers

Note takers are those present only to record notes from the session and assist with the preparation of post-session summaries, but not otherwise participate.

Technicians/Support staff (e.g., tech person if it is a virtual session)

Technical support staff are only necessary for virtual sessions and their job is to assure that the virtual meeting runs smoothly; to troubleshoot any technical issues; and to assist participants with any problems signing on and being able to actively participate using the technology.

6. Profile and Role of an Effective Staff Listening Session Facilitator

The profile of an effective Staff Listening Session facilitator includes:

1. If known to the staff, is someone recognized as trusted and objective
2. If previously unknown to the staff, has a background such that, when introduced, creates trust in their facilitation skills
3. Excellent listening and observational skills
4. Ability to move the session along, especially when a few participants are tending to dominate, without appearing to be rude or abruptly cutting people off
5. Demonstrates empathy, appreciation, and a sensitivity to expressed concerns
6. Capable of keeping the session on time and on track, without creating a sense of stress or urgency
7. Conveys impartiality, authenticity, and concern for the issues at hand
8. Exudes positivity about the potential to build on strengths and address issues

The role of an effective Staff Listening Session facilitator is to:

1. First and foremost, contribute to the creation of a safe space in which participants feel comfortable being open and authentic.
2. Balance the discussion, when necessary, by gently redirecting participation away from those who tend to dominate and drawing out those who need more encouragement to share their perspectives.
3. Deal with any overly detailed or meandering responses through such interventions as:
    a. At the beginning of the facilitated dialogue, again reviewing the ground rules of "share responsibility for including all voices in the conversation" and "be concise to allow all to fully participate" (see Ground Rules below).
    b. Remind the group of the below ground rules, should issues of imbalanced participation arise.
    c. Make statements that redirect to others, such as, "Let's turn to those that we haven't yet heard from".
4. Assist the group to openly express fears, concerns, and issues without allowing the sharing to devolve into a "gripe session", which can leave participants feeling even more stressed and hopeless.
5. De-escalate or redirect if the tone of the sharing turns angry, accusatory, etc., or the ground rules are being violated.
6. Facilitate with the goal of:
    a. Finding clarity
    b. Creating balance in participation
    c. Identifying themes and trends
    d. Building on energy and positive expressions
    e. Leaving people feeling hopeful and glad that they participated

7. Ground Rules

Ground rules are a list of terms that participants agree to follow—and the facilitator agrees to uphold—during a facilitated dialogue or listening session. While they may seem simple or unspoken expected behaviors, clearly articulating a set of ground rules will help ensure a rich and successful sharing of perspectives, concerns, emotions, ideas, and hopes. They help establish expectations for how participants will talk with one another and offer a tool for helping to maintain open lines of communication.

A recommended set of ground rules for a Staff Listening Session is as follows:

- Commit to making this a safe space for honest expression
- Share responsibility for including all voices in the conversation
- Refrain from attributing any comments to a specific individual(s) after the session is over ("What happens in Vegas...")
- Demonstrate respectful engagement—participants may respectfully express a differing opinion—but not criticize the opinions of others
- Speak one at a time
- Offer specifics rather than generalities (e.g., say more than simply "This is good" or "This is bad")
- Be honest but constructive—no "bashing" others
- Be concise to allow others to fully participate
- Limit distractions and avoid multitasking during the session
- Be fully present, listen intently, and share your thoughts

8. Session Format (Virtual vs. In-Person) and Input Capture

In-person Versus Virtual Meeting Format

Listening sessions may be conducted virtually or in-person. As with all meetings, conferences, staff gatherings, etc., there are pros and cons to each format. Individual organizations will choose the format that is appropriate for them, based on their unique needs and local circumstances.

In-person

1. **If an organization opts for an in-person session:**

    a. If possible, hold the session offsite as another means of expressing commitment to the process and conveying neutrality. If it isn't feasible to hold the session offsite, it is still possible to create the open, welcoming environment needed for success, however;
    b. The seating arrangement in an in-person session is very important. Whenever possible, seat participants in a circle to assure a sense of equal participation, enable them to see one another as they are speaking; and create a sense of coming together.
    c. Position the senior leader and facilitator as part of the circle. If for some reason a circle cannot be created, assure that the senior leader and facilitator remain at eye level with the participants and seated among them, as opposed to creating a hierarchical feeling by standing at the front of a room.
    d. Note-takers may be positioned either in the circle or outside of it and the participants should be aware that they are note-taking for the purposes of identifying themes and summarizing the input (again—no attribution).

Virtual

2. **If an organization opts for a virtual session:**

   a. It is very helpful to have a person familiar with the virtual platform that will be used (e.g., Microsoft Teams; Zoom, etc.) present to assure support for any participants experiencing difficulty in using the system;
   b. During the welcome, a request should be made for people to turn on their cameras. However, making it mandatory or repeatedly requesting or calling out individuals to do so would be detrimental to the goal of creating a safe and welcoming space, especially at the beginning of the session as trust is being built;
   c. Virtual sessions provide a variety of avenues for people to provide input and it is important to make use of as many as possible, including using the hand raising; chat, and direct messaging functions;
   d. For notetaking during virtual sessions, in addition to having designated notetakers in attendance and platform features to assist with gathering input, there is an option to record the session. Recording the session can assure that dialogue is accurately and completely captured. **However, a decision to record the session should be very thoughtfully made.** Depending upon the group of participants the sensitivity of the topic, and other issues, recording a session may negatively impact participation. If a decision is made to record, it is strongly recommended that this be disclosed to participants along with giving them the option to drop off.
   e. If there is the slightest doubt about whether recording will have a dampening effect, one very effective way to involve the participants in the decision whether to record is to run an electronic (and anonymous) poll regarding the participants' comfort level with recording. A poll question is posted electronically on the screen and the participants (only the participants—not the organizational leader, facilitator, note-takers, or support staff) can electronically "vote" whether to permit recording of the session. The results should then be shown to the staff as a display on the screen and if there is anything less than 85% approval for recording, then recording is not recommended.

Input Capture

Notetakers should gather as much verbatim input as possible (without attribution), to allow them to synthesize the input, summarize, and identify themes after the meeting. The input should be shared back with the participants as soon after the meeting as possible. Visual formatting (e.g., word clouds) can be much more effective at communicating the essence of the input than simple lists, even when arranged in priority order.

9. Guidelines for Conducting a Staff Listening Session

Pre-Session Communication

It is recommended that all on the senior leadership team be made aware in advance of the plan to hold a Staff Listening Session, so there is an opportunity to respond to their questions and allay any concerns. Sharing this guide with them may assist in their understanding of why the Session is being conducted. You may also want to consider at some point holding a Listening Session with the leadership team as the participants.

It is also recommended that communication about the session be low-key and—while not kept secret from staff—also not widely announced or showcased. This is to avoid raising concerns among those staff who were not invited and/or creating a sense that only a select group were allowed to meet with leadership.

In addition, in advance of the session, it may be helpful to provide the invited participants with the questions that will be asked. This allows those who are more contemplative and/or deliberate an opportunity to have some time to think about the questions, rather than being asked to respond immediately after hearing a question for the first time. This may also lessen anxiety among the invitees as to what exactly will be asked in the session.

Session Welcome and Opening

1. **The opening is done by the designated senior leader representative and should include:**
    a. A welcome and an expression of thanks for their participation
    b. Background as to why the session is being held and how it is being viewed by the organization (e.g., the description of what led to the session; that this session is one in an ongoing series of conversations that have included people at the bedside as well as those in administrative roles; and that it will provide input into a number of future conversations at your local organization.
    c. An explanation of the aim of the session, which is to:
        i. Provide a venue for members closest to the work to be heard
        ii. Create a shared understanding of the issues and their impact
        iii. Further opportunities for them to be a part of the solution
        iv. Make sure that everyone knows that they are not only not alone—they are part of a community
    d. A description of how the input from this session will be used (i.e., themes and concepts only—no individual attribution)
    e. A reference to the potential for recording the session. Note that recording would be done solely for the purpose of complete and accurate capture of the input and NOT for purposes of sharing the recording or attribution. If taking a poll, set up the two options by saying that the organization would like to put the decision of whether to record in the participants' hands and thus, they will have the ability to vote. Explain electronic polling and indicate:
        i. The first option is to record this session with the caveat and commitment that it will be used for internal notetaking only. The advantage with recording is that nothing will be lost and the themes and concepts from this session will be captured accurately.
        ii. The other option is to not record the session and accept that the notetakers may miss something and that there will be no opportunity to go back and capture.
        iii. Conduct the poll.
2. Ask if there are any questions before you proceed with introduction of the facilitator
3. Respond to any questions from the participants
4. Introduce the session facilitator and provide a brief overview of their role, which includes:
    a. Continue to create a safe space for open expression by all participants
    b. Assure that everyone has a chance to be heard
    c. Make sure the session moves along so that as much sharing as possible happens within the allotted timeframe
    d. Balance the participation
    e. Help to identify themes and trends

Facilitation of Dialogue

1. Facilitator to greet the group and express his/her enthusiasm for being invited to facilitate the session. Briefly express anything additional that would build a bit of rapport with the group.
2. **Explain the process:**
    a. Three/four questions, taken one at a time
    b. Time limit for the responses from the group to each question
    c. Wrap-up and next steps at the end of the session

   d. Review the ground rules and indicate that their continued participation will be taken as an agreement to abide by them
   e. If conducting the session virtually, note that there will be multiple ways to be heard, (speaking up, putting a comment in the Chat, using the "Raise Hand" function, etc.)

3. Note the time limit for the dialogue portion
4. Ask if they have any concerns or questions before beginning

10. Sample Questions to Facilitate Dialogue and Sharing

Below are some sample questions that you may want to consider using during your facilitated dialogue sessions with staff:

1. **Questions designed to elicit information about the issues**

   a. What is it like to work in health care right now? (Noting that we've faced challenges in our work in the past, but what is it like right now?)
   b. What feels most challenging or worries you the most regarding [the issue being discussed]?
   c. What does this mean for you, your patients, and your organization?
   d. How might this affect the work and affect the ability to achieve goals?
   e. What more do we need to know or further explore today?

2. **Questions designed to invite their ideas for solutions/leave them feeling as if there is something they can do to impact the situation:**

   a. What do you think [Organization] needs to start, stop, or continue doing?
   b. What questions do you have for Leadership?
   c. What actions would you like [Organization] to consider doing to help address the issues?
   d. What messages do you most want Leadership to hear?

3. **A closing question, such as asking them what they want to do next**

11. Guidance for Communicating Session Summaries

When communicating Staff Listening Session summaries, it is important to:

1. Share in advance of the session how the summaries will be used to help address the issue(s) being discussed;
2. Assure that the summaries are shared with the participants and that this occurs as soon after the session as possible. Delays may raise concerns among participants or inadvertently communicate that the session was not of real importance to leadership; and
3. As often as possible, reference the input from the summaries as it is being put to use for improvement in the organization; reinforcing the value of having heard staff's voices.

12. Sample "Run of Show" Template and Script

Sample Run of Show Template (for Virtual Show – to be adapted, if in-person)

Time	What	Who (Insert Names)
3:30–3:55 pm (25 minutes)	**Early Log in/ System Check:** ☐ Turn off other applications (i.e., Teams, Outlook, cell phones) ☐ Double check speaker names first/last name, backgrounds, camera height ☐ Rehearse Remarks, Slide sharing	Senior Leader Facilitator Note-takers Tech/Support Staff
3:55–4:00 pm (5 minutes)	**Opening slide showing on screen**	Support Staff
4:00–4:05 pm (5 minutes)	**Session Opens**: ▮ Welcome (set tone, basic instruction) ▮ Poll #1 Recording – Yes or No ▮ Cover run-of-show ▮ Post questions/comments in the chat ▮ Intro Facilitator	Senior Leader Tech/Support Staff
4:05–4:10 (5 minutes)	**Session Begins:** ▮ Review Ground Rules ▮ Begin with Questions	Facilitator Support Staff puts ground rules into chat
4:10–4:30 (20 minutes)	**1. Questions designed to elicit information about the issues:** ▮ What is it like to work in health care right now? (Noting that we've faced challenges in our work in the past, but what is it like right now?) ▮ What feels most challenging or worries you the most regarding _____ [the issue being discussed]? ▮ What does this mean for you, your patients, and your organization? ▮ How might this affect your/our work and your/our ability to achieve your/our goals? ▮ What more do we need to know or further explore today?	Facilitator Senior Leader monitoring & commenting on chat
4:30–4:50 (20 minutes)	**2. Questions designed to invite their ideas for solutions/leave them feeling as if there is something they can do to impact the situation:** ▮ What do you think [Organization] needs to start, stop, or continue doing? ▮ What questions do you have for Leadership? ▮ What actions would you like [Organization] to consider doing to help address the issues? ▮ What messages do you most want Leadership to hear?	Facilitator Senior Leader monitoring & commenting on chat
4:50–5:00 (10 minutes)	**Wrap up comments:** ▮ Final thoughts from participants ▮ Thank participants ▮ Thank the facilitator ▮ Next steps	Senior Leader
5:00	**-END-**	

Sample Script *(For Virtual Session—to be modified if it is an in-person session)*

Senior Leader: Hi, everyone, and welcome to the [Organization] Staff Listening Session. Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in this session, which is designed to:

- Provide an opportunity for those of you closest to the work to be heard;
- Create a shared understanding of the issues we are facing and their impact;
- Engage with each other in co-creating solutions; and
- Assure that you know that you are not alone—but rather are part of a community.

We want and need your candid feedback and insights today. We will only share themes and concepts from this call – *there will be no individual attributions*. In fact, we want you to decide if we record this session for note taking purposes—or not. In today's virtual world and the world of Zoom it seems like everything is automatically recorded. So, we debated and decided that it would be best to hear from you and let you decide.

Support Staff Launch Poll *(Only if Virtual Session)*

- The first option is to record this session with the caveat and commitment that it will be used for internal notetaking only. The advantage with recording is that nothing will be lost and the themes and concepts from this session will be captured accurately.
- The other option is to not record the session and accept that the notetakers may miss something and that there will be no opportunity to go back and capture.

Please vote now so that we will know how to proceed. Thank you!

Senior Leader determines how to proceed based on the results of the poll *(it is recommended that if fewer than 85% want to proceed with recording, that it not be done)*.

Just a few logistical items before we begin. We want this to be conversational. Please feel free to raise your hand or jump in with a comment. Your line may be muted so look now for the unmute button. You can also write in the chat which we monitor for questions and comments.

Now, I would like to introduce you to [Name], our facilitator for today. [Provide brief intro to facilitator, if not known to the group, taking care to reference any relevant experience in facilitation or collaborative efforts.]

Welcome [Facilitator]!

Facilitator

Facilitator: [Offer brief remarks designed to acquaint them with you as the facilitator and begin building trust. Start the session by reminding them that you'll be asking some questions and that they may respond by using the "raise hand" function or by chat. Then proceed with introducing the ground rules.]

Ground rules for the session:

- No attribution—comments are not to be attributed to anyone (including other attendees). We want this to be a safe space to openly share.
- Respectful engagement—participants may respectfully express disagreement—but not criticize the opinions of others; please speak one at a time.
- Accept each person's truth as true for them—it should be accepted and not judged. We are not attempting to agree or reach consensus.
- We want to all to have the opportunity to share, so please be concise.

State that if they continue participating in the session, it will be taken as agreement to abide by the ground rules.

Ask if there are any concerns or questions at this point, and if so, address any questions.

Proceed with asking the first set of questions [Note the 40-minute total time limit – 20 minutes for first set and another 20 minutes for the second set. Keep the conversation going and intervene when necessary to balance participation, assure respectful engagement, stay on time, and assure that all voices are heard.]

Facilitator: I'd like to start by asking you:

- What is it like to work in health care right now? (Noting that we've faced challenges in our work in the past, but what is it like right now?)
- What feels most challenging or worries you the most regarding [the issue being discussed]?
- What does this mean for you, your patients, and your organization?
- How might this affect your/our work and your/our ability to achieve your/our goals?
- What more do we need to know or further explore today?

Facilitator: Now, for the next 20 minutes, I'd like to explore your thoughts on the way forward. (Again, keep the conversation going and intervene when necessary to balance participation, assure respectful engagement, stay on time, and assure that all voices are heard.):

- What do you think your/our organization needs to start, stop, or continue doing?
- What questions do you have for Leadership?
- What actions would you like [Organization] to consider doing to help address the issues?
- What messages do you most want Leadership to hear?

Express appreciation for their participation and turn the session back over to the Senior Leader for the closing.

Senior Leader

Thank you so very much for the candid conversation and your willingness to share your perspectives and ideas. We sincerely appreciate your time, your insights, and your commitment to the critically important work that we do. As a reminder, we will only share **themes and concepts** from this session – there will be no individual attributions. The conversation today will help guide additional conversations within [Organization] and help us formulate solutions. Please note that this is not the last opportunity for you to share your ideas and perspectives. I'd like to thank [Facilitator] for guiding us through this important session today. Are there any final thoughts before we wrap today? Thank you again for your participation and willingness to be a co-creator of solutions here at [Organization].

13. Recommendations for Post-Session Follow-Up

Recommendations for post-session follow-up include:

1. Communicate back to the organization that a conversation was held with some staff members, cite the themes that arose, and share the plan for follow-up;
2. *Act on the input* and communicate openly and frequently with staff about efforts and progress;
3. Continue to involve the participants in problem solving and improvement efforts. This might include forming staff task forces to further explore the issues and develop solutions; developing and testing interventions in collaboration with staff; connecting with other NHPCO member organizations who have made progress on similar issues in order to learn from them, etc.;

4. Conduct an evaluation of the session(s), asking participants for their assessment of the value, and soliciting their input about what went well in addition to ideas for improvement.

14. NHPCO-Related Resources

NHPCO Related Resources include (log-in required to access):

Survey of Team Attitudes and Relationships (STAR)

Job satisfaction is linked to staff morale, productivity, and turnover, as well as quality of patient care. Assessment of staff job satisfaction provides important feedback that leaders can use to make needed changes in organizational culture, processes, and improvement to the work environment. STAR can be used by hospice and palliative care leaders to "take the temperature" of their workforce in order create the best possible work environment. Participation in STAR provides valuable information to you and to NHPCO who will incorporate your data into a national-level STAR report that all providers can use to determine workforce trends.

Measures of Excellence

The Measures of Excellence (MOE) is a quarterly data collection tool and dashboard that are important components of the Quality Connections program. The MOE tracks operational and clinical data to inform high quality care.

Hospice Quality Resources

MyNHPCO Professional Communities

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