Engagement & Self-Organizing in Transformative Networks

Insights & Opportunities - Fall 2019

INTRODUCTION TO THIS RESEARCH

We set out to explore the needs and aspirations of participants in transformative networks — networks working to create or amplify systems-scale social impact.

Our hypothesis was that participants want to take more 'self-organized' actions but may have barriers around peer support or network engagement.

WHO WE TALKED TO

We interviewed 10 people with a range of participation & history across two impact networks. Both networks are US-based and funded by large foundations.

We spoke with participants who were described to us as fitting one or more of the following orientations: **highly engaged, newly engaged, and staff & consultants.**

Interviewees were not selected to be representative of the network demographics.

Interviews were conducted on Zoom & phone calls during the Fall of 2019.

WHO ARE 'WE'?

Ari Sahagún & Rahmin Sarabi conducted the design interviews and drafted this report.

Ari is a movement network ecologist with an MA in organizational communication. She is a network mapper and consultant in both of the networks studied in this report.

Rahmin is a design researcher with a background in product management. His previous work includes food access in under-resourced communities, a locally focused grocery service, and organizational conditions for people to do their best work inside of a high-growth startup.

Special thanks to the support from June Holley and Beth Kanter.

WHAT IS 'SELF-ORGANIZING'?

In contrast to a traditional 'top-down' organization, a network or self-organizing approach aspires to have "many people who see themselves as leaders and are willing to reach out to others [to] … take the initiative to organize exploratory projects."[1]

For this report, **we defined self-organizing behavior as** *creating opportunities for collaborative action* **in service of a network's purpose.**

[1] "Network Weaver Handbook," Page 11, June Holley (2012)

PERSONAS

Based on these interviews, we created 6 draft personas to represent the goals and behaviors of broader sets of hypothesized network participants — so we can design grounded in empathy for & with them.

"Personas are stylized, elaborated, abstractions of typical people seen in a population of interest. On the surface, personas may feel like they describe a unique individual. A persona has needs, deeply felt as they are a reflection of the persona's priorities and ambitions in life. A persona also has aspirations, dreams of what life could be, and attitudes, a reflection of how interaction with people, places, and things should be.**The richness of a persona is critical, as it helps inject the voice of a human-being into a design process.**"

While it may appear that we are speaking about a specific individual, **personas are only inspired by the people we interviewed, often representing <u>an aspect</u> of their relationship to the network** as an idealized abstraction.

In real life, an individual may relate to a handful of personas. As the saying goes, we contain multitudes.

DRAFT PERSONAS: Enablers & motivations to 'self organize' in national networks

ENABLERS [Peer support, Resources, Self Knowledge, Confidence]
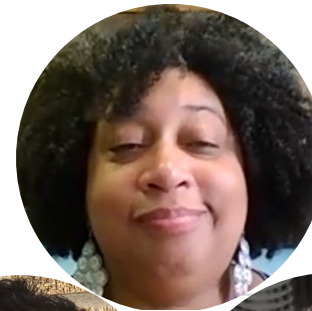
few, weak

many, strong

In Transformation
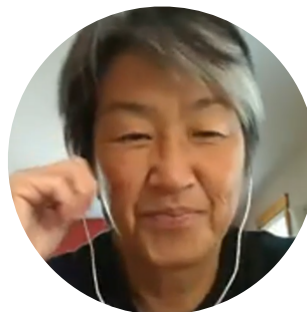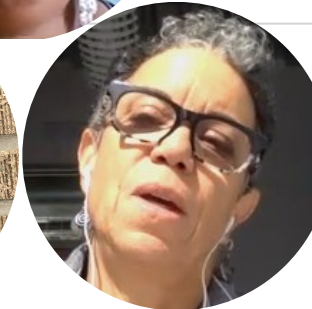Wants to understand & offer their deeper purpose

Hidden Gifts
Knows their purpose, unclear if it fits

Devotee
Eager to engage further, ready for invitations

Place-based Leader
Developing capacity for local networks

Embodied Culture Leader
Lives in network vision & story

Movement Elder
Ability/experience to support & coach

Each persona holds unique gifts in a network ecosystem

MOTIVATION
To self-organize [to create opportunities for collaborative action in the 'national network']

high   low

8

In the previous slide, enablers are represented on the vertical axis while the horizontal axis indicates motivation. Our assessments were qualitative and subjective.

Enablers are attributes that help someone take self organizing action. They include supportive relationships within a network, how much one feels their purpose fits into a network, how confident one is in their ability to lead, and basic resources like time & money.

Motivation includes the intrinsic and extrinsic 'reasons' one has for taking self-organized action in a network. Extrinsic reasons include money, praise, and recognition. Intrinsic reasons include a person's values and sense of purpose.

Movement Elder

Long-standing practitioner that cares most about creating movement-scale social change. Tools & learnings from decades of experiences, but still open and curious. High confidence to take ideas into action. Works to weave networks together. Key desire to level up their impact and share their learnings.

Enablers: Relationships with key leaders, often in paid staff positions, experience leading others, strong sense of belonging, confidence that their purpose & contribution matter

Challenges: Can be unclear how traditional leadership experiences fit into network leadership

Amplify their ability to support/coach the people & projects emerging in the network

Embodied Culture Leader

Attuned to deep vision for the network. Their story-telling energizes & invites people in. A leader on "being" & cultural levels. Takes creative risks with confidence and playfulness. Wants to use their leadership to invite deeper participation to realize the vision.

Enablers: Known as a leader, In relationship with other key leaders, in relationship across the network, often in a paid position in a network, confident their purpose fits in, excitement when sees network engagement of others working, has done lots of personal work to ground in purpose.

Challenges: Bridging vision to actionable strategic plans

Help them bridge from vision to strategy & action that invites network co-creation

Devotee

Has grown through participation in the network & built strong relationships over a few years of engagement. Motivated to help realize its potential for social change. Often a leader in orgs & networks at home. Strong desire to invite peers in. Clear ideas for how their engagement could deepen but may not know how to be heard.

Enablers: Grants/stipends supported deep experiences within network, experience leading others, feels belonging in the network, has relationships with key leaders & strong 1:1 relationships within network.

Challenges: Unclear where to share ideas so they will be heard & can lead to action. Can find big vision inspiring but not clear how to take action and where they can contribute.

Ask where their engagement wants to go next & support wholeheartedly

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Place-based Leader

Heavily involved in networks & orgs at home. Wants to develop leadership capacities to advance their local networks — to 'break down silos' & bring the field together. Sees benefit of bringing peers into national network to have shared worldview & tools. Confident & capable local leaders, but engaged more as a participant in national network today.

Enablers: Clarity of purpose, confidence in their ability to contribute, strong motivation to create impact in their communities, some key relationships in larger network, often have received grants/stipends that have built strong cohort relationships.

Challenges: Lack of access to collaborators/resources for projects. Casual relationship to larger network's purpose. Unsure how to organize in a network way.

Help them develop network leadership capacities they desire in ways that align with the national network

In Transformation

In a space of personal and/or career transformation. Feels belonging in the movement and deeply engaged through local networks. Attends events in national network based on peer recommendations. Not necessarily ready to lead actions, but eager to join and try on different possibilities.

Enablers: Strong local network relationships connect them with national network, experience of transformation in national network commits them to the community, motivation to step into purpose, belief they belong

Challenges: Lack of clarity on purpose, may not know who their "others" are that can support their development

Help them try on different possibilities of what's next through network activities

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Hidden Gifts

Values a network's purpose but cautiously engaged. Unclear to them if their personal purpose fits into the community. Motivated to develop & share their gifts.

Enablers: Often connected through a small number of key relationship where they feel safe sharing their whole person, often engaged with network through tangential skills to their core purpose, relatively clear on their purpose.

Challenges: May not have many strong 1:1 relationships across the network, may have tried to share parts of their core purpose before and found them not received, can be introverted and develop relationships slowly.

Support with coaching & championing that what their whole self has to offer is welcome
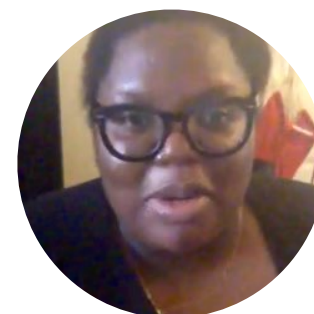
Focus on engaging their motivations

ENABLERS [Peer support, Resources, Self Knowledge, Confidence]
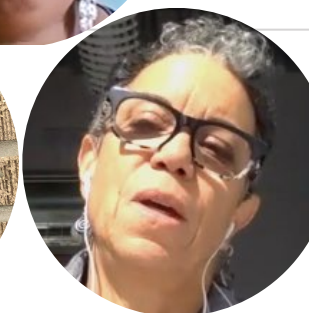
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In Transformation
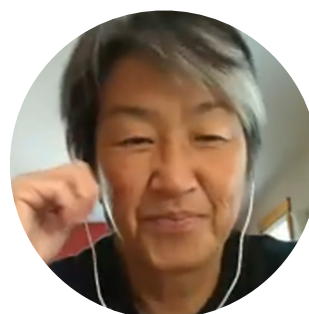Wants to understand & offer their deeper purpose

Hidden Gifts
Knows their purpose, unclear if it fits

Devotee
Eager to engage further, ready for invitations

Place-based Leader
Developing capacity for local networks

Movement Elder
Ability/experience to support & coach

Embodied Culture Leader
Lives in network vision & story

high

MOTIVATION

low

To self-organize [to create opportunities for collaborative action in the 'national network']

16

Evoke their passions & provide opportunities to find peers

ENABLERS
[Peer support, Resources, Self Knowledge, Confidence]

few, weak

many, strong

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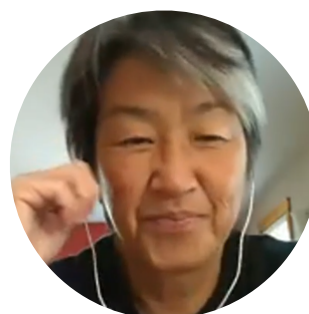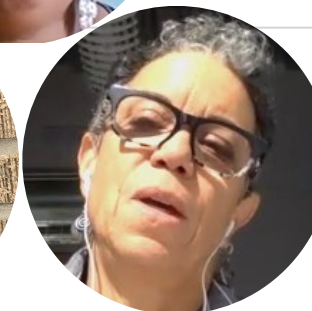Wants to understand & offer their deeper purpose

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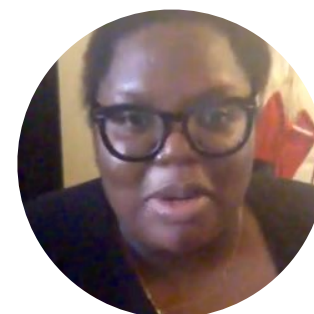
high

low

17

Help them spread their power, tools & activate others

ENABLERS [Peer support, Resources, Self Knowledge, Confidence]

few, weak

many, strong

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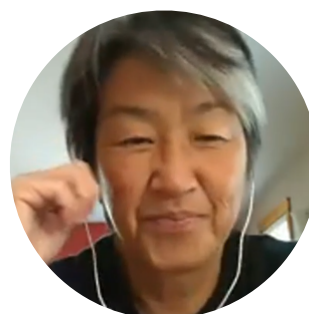Wants to understand & offer their deeper purpose

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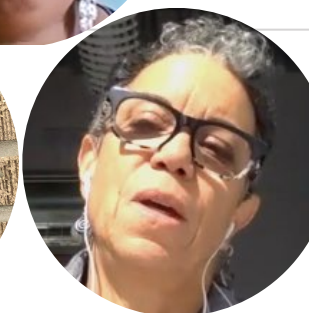Knows their purpose, unclear if it fits

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Across the interviews 9 themes stood out regarding the potential for self-organizing.

We catalogued them as **promoting** and **restraining** forces — dimensions to leverage or hurdles to overcome.

SUMMARY INSIGHTS & OPPPORTUNITIES

PROMOTING

1) 'Finding my others' is the number one desire.

2) People want to try on new roles, skills, and ways of being together.

3) Many seek support developing self-organizing capacity in their local networks.

4) Intro offerings to invite new people in matter as much as 'advanced' opportunities for the dedicated.

5) Safety to be more of one's whole self creates deep belonging in a network.

RESTRAINING

1) While a network's big vision can inspire, it's too big to act on.

2) People won't share their voice if they don't believe they will be really heard.

3) Lack of clarity on roles & decision-making processes make it intimidating to try new ideas.

4) Without a high-level '10,000 ft' view of what's emerging, it's hard to know where & how to contribute.

1) 'Finding my others' is the number one desire. People want to find peers with a shared worldview to confirm they "aren't crazy" as well as for collaborations, guidance, and support.

"The promise of the network is for people to find each other who are doing similar things or asking similar questions and be able to provide mutual support or build collaborative teams — to amplify the work that we're each doing" -Michaele

"Everybody comes to us as staff.. to find other people who are interested in what they're interested in… to potentially work with. We say, you should really know so and so. Everything funnels in and we try to make connections between people" - Alexis

"I think naturally there's a community of people [in transition like me] - what would it look like for us to hold space for each other?" - Raven

"It would be great to know who else in Louisiana is doing things through RWJF or their partners in health and housing. I would be stoked to reach out to them." -Reva

2) People want to try on new skills, roles, and ways of being together. Safe spaces for exploration and sharing of new gifts are rare opportunities.

"I would love to contribute from more of a healers standpoint… community healing is the practice and way of life I'm crafting so I can leave my 9-5…" - Raven

"By asking people to get into their belly and trust [in this experience], folks left knowing that this is what's missing from our organizing. We could be in a different place if we had a way to be connected to each other rather than setting our analysis to battle every time." - Alexis

"…like me teaching mapping, by teaching I'm learning more and feeling more confident… - MaryAnn

3) Many seek support developing self-organizing capacity in their local networks. They sense new approaches and tools are needed for network leadership and value peers to learn & practice with.

"Everyone's working in their own silo - I'm hoping that through [training] we can [learn how to] break down walls of silos and come together as a community" - Reva

"It was amazing to watch and participate in a real commitment to co-creation and openness and grassroots organizing. I'm impressed this isn't something that's well known." - Michaele

"For me it has been a really intentional strategy to try to ask the right questions… in a way that [other groups in the ecosystem] become invested in an answer, so we come together in a new way - Nan

4) Intro offerings to invite new people in matter as much as 'advanced' opportunities for the dedicated. People already involved in a network want to bring peers in and need accessible entry points to offer them.

"I would love to take a bunch of people through [a 101] where I would be there to do interpretation, create comfort — could bring in folks who don't have experience with movement based stuff so they can step in themselves and expand" - Sarah

"Having another entry point, maybe redoing some of the training stuff that they did [earlier], with a new twist… would be great for colleagues" - MaryAnn

"I would love to see some of my co-conveners hearing the same thing and deciding from that what we want to do… I feel strongly about what I'm learning from you all and it would be really good for us…" - Michaele

"If you (participant in the network) get 40-50 people that want to come, we'll do it.' just a matter of getting the dates on the calendar" - Nan

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5) Safety to be more of one's whole self creates deep belonging in a network. People have many parts of themselves that can feel alone in modern life.

"People [in the regular world] want you to be one thing or another... rational statistics or crazy medicine woman... you can't be both... in the Resonance space I don't have to choose what kind of Indian I am, I can be the fullness of my identity" - Sarah

"I was in a no-profit org, cut off from society ... one desire I had ... was to no longer feel isolated from civilization in a community that was neglected and people bashed." - Bettina

"That 1:1 relationship [in the network] has made me feel like I'm not alone in the way that I think and the way I exist." - Denisha

1) While a network's big vision can inspire, it's too big to act on. People need more manageable 'mid-sized' goals to rally around.

"Can we break down that big looming goal into things that are more attainable and work on projects together?" - MaryAnn

"I don't feel aware of the path - where is Resonance going? … but I feel like where Resonance is going, I'll go." - Raven

"We need to somehow present the work that Resonance is doing… and ask people to rank what they care about… so we can begin to narrow the opportunities for them to participate…" - Nan

"There's small self organizing happening that isn't strategic… what we need is where are the areas we're going to be focusing?" - June

2) People won't share their voices if they don't believe they will be really heard. Without this 'official' listening the possibilities and enthusiasms of network participants lie dormant.

"I don't remember [if my voice has been involved in the planning process]… I think we've been asked what would help us…" - MaryAnn

"Folks tell me that's its great work, but how does it fit? I would love to connect it. Where do I find that support? What's the way to go about it?" - Denisha

"We need more of is opportunities for people to easily tell us that doesn't feel like filling out reflections, surveys" — Alexis

3) Lack of clarity on roles & decision-making processes make it intimidating to try new ideas. It then becomes easier to simply participate in offerings from the network rather than to create offerings oneself.

"I feel like I'm in a holding pattern … if I have ideas or thoughts, kind of stuck there because I'm not sure who to toss that idea to, for feedback or go ahead." - Denisha

"I don't know what's going on behind the scenes... whether there is staff time [to make the things happen I care about]" - MaryAnn

"Because we're trying not to have hierarchy, there have been many times where we've gotten wound up with an equity or equality practice… something that borders on consensus" - Nan

"People don't know what they can do, they don't get what it means to be part of the network.. what they can do with each other as part of this network with our support." - Alexis

4) Without a high-level '10,000 ft' view of what's emerging, it's hard to know where & how to contribute. Even the most connected people in these networks don't have views into activities of interest.

"I really want to know what coalitions we're working with are doing. Really informal. Not evaluation. What are you doing, what are you up to, what are you learning, what's next?" - Nan

"There are a bunch of folks I know I could pull in… if there were opportunities to bring them into" - Sarah

"Things start getting so complex so fast… information overload… there are no systems where people can find out what's going on, make sense of it with others, act on things, build relationships…" - June
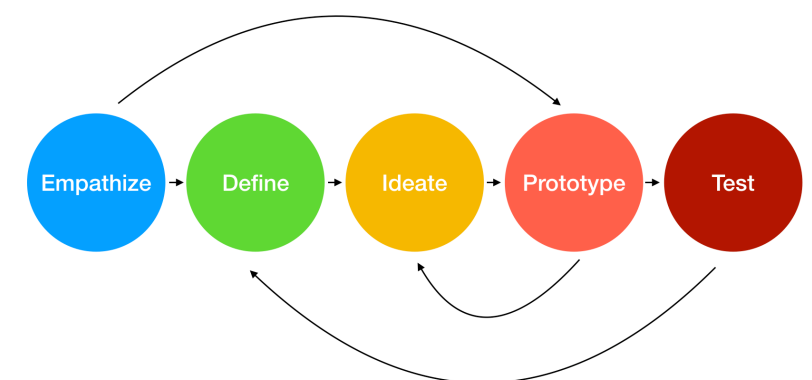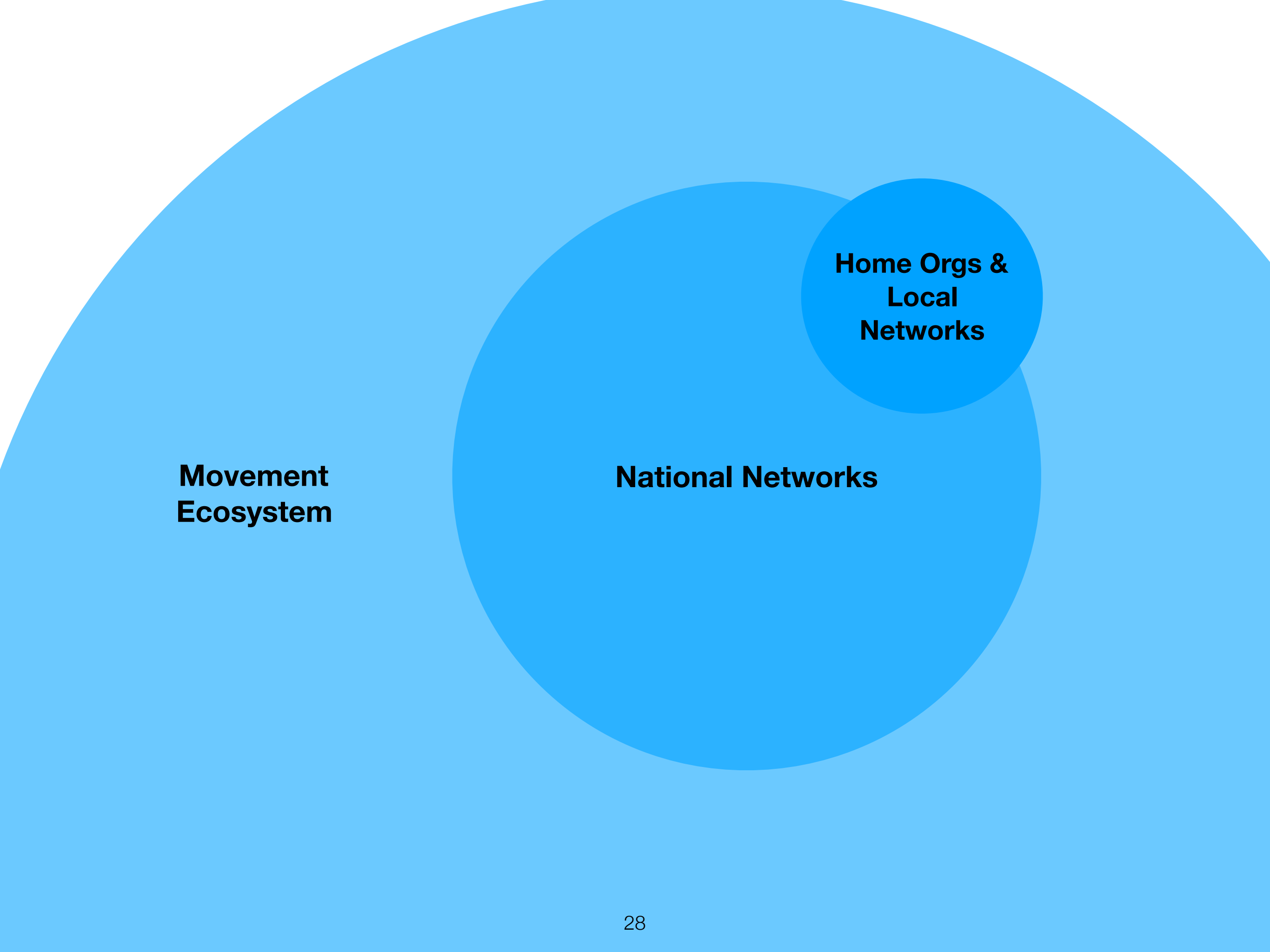
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The implications of this research are broad, ranging from governance, onboarding, strategic planning, internal communication, and engagement strategies.

Design research, such as the interviews and synthesis detailed in this report, is a tool to help designers ground in empathy for the people and systems they are designing for. Self-organizing networks aspire to have all participants designing, creating and leading each other — to be 'leaderful' or 'designerful' in contrast to 'leaderless.'

Our recommended next step is to invite participants across the networks we interviewed to reflect on the findings and identify key opportunities that stand out. Next, they can ideate to explore different creative solutions to prototype and test. From there, we "rinse & repeat," incorporating the feedback and learnings from the prototypes into the next round of creative solutioning.

Empathize → Define → Ideate → Prototype → Test

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APPENDIX

Movement Ecosystem

National Networks

Home Orgs & Local Networks

NETWORK CHARACTERISTICS

The Resonance Network grew out of the Novo Foundation's Movement to End Violence Program.

Somatic and story-based practices are central to the community. Through a mix of in-person retreats/workshops and online calls/courses, the community engages with healing the traumas of past violence and embodying a new worldview of worthiness and belonging.

The community often supports each other with care and holds space for people's individual healing and growth. People commonly reach out to people they've met through the network when going through tough times.

Originally started as an open-ended network focused on its mission, it has recently added an emphasis on engaging in politics and policy.

Staff, leadership and community are primarily women of color. There are 2000+ participants in the network today.

NETWORK CHARACTERISTICS

The Well-being and Equity Bridging Network (WEB) emerged out of Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)'s mission to building a culture of health.

Many participants are alumni from RWJF leadership development programs. The community includes many people with backgrounds at the intersection of academia and community field work.
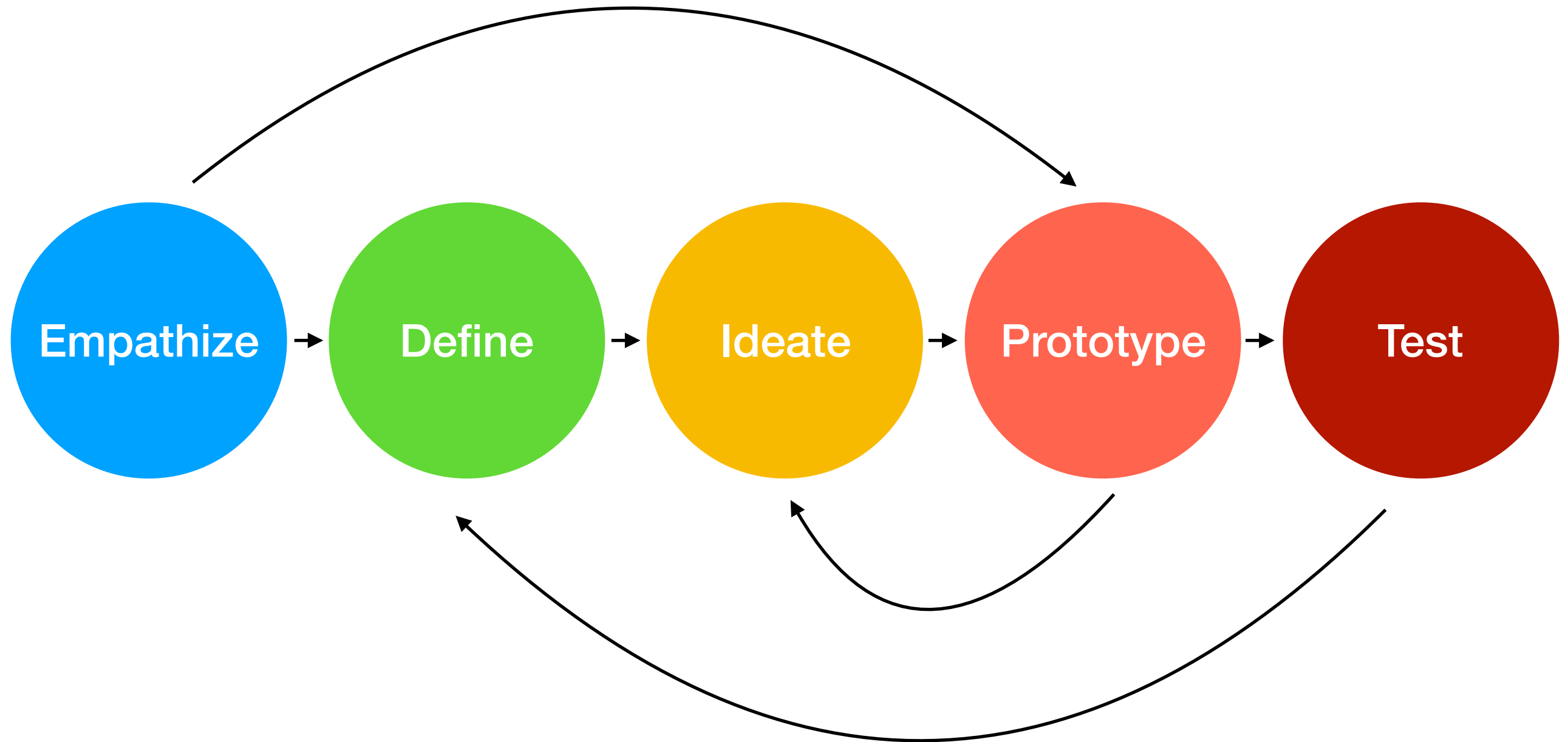
Leadership Learning Community (LLC), a group of consultants, are engaging as staff/leadership in the Fall of 2019 to help catalyze the network. Their intention to transition leadership to the community over time.

Grants from the RWJF have enabled many participants to pursue lines of inquiry and build capacity towards creating well-being outcomes in their community. The network engages through a mix of in-person multi-day gatherings and online video-calls. A pool of facilitators are also available as a resource for projects that advance equity and well-being.
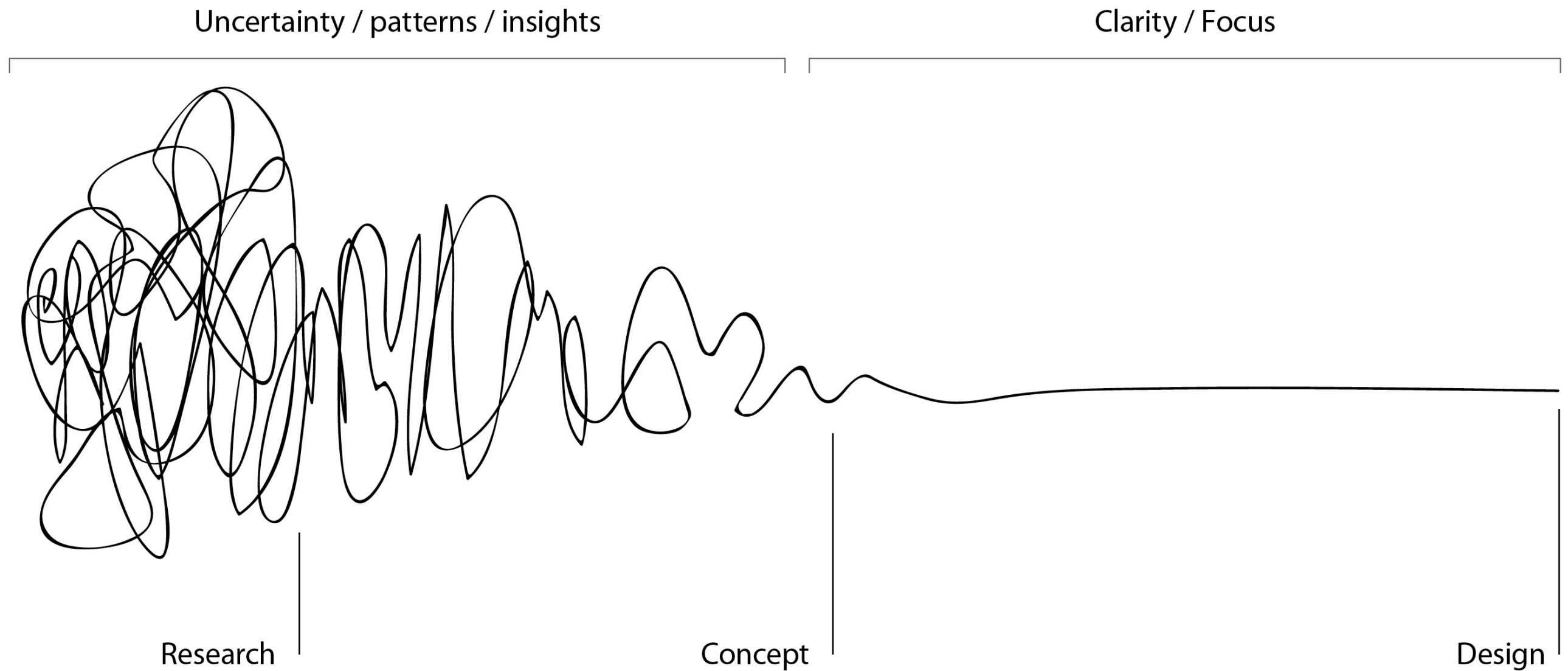
THE '5 STEPS' OF DESIGN THINKING

Empathize → Define → Ideate → Prototype → Test

Empathize → Define → Ideate → Prototype → Test

BUT REALLY, MORE LIKE

Uncertainty / patterns / insights

Clarity / Focus

Research

Concept

Design

THIS REPORT

Empathize → Define → Ideate → Prototype → Test