How utilities can achieve equity through community-centered design: Going beyond human-centered design

By Lisa Markus
January 25, 2023

How utilities can achieve equity through community-centered design: Going beyond human-centered design

The *Harvard Business Review* blog post What Is Human-Centered Design? defines human-centered design as "a problem-solving technique that puts real people at the center of the development process, enabling you to create products and services that resonate and are tailored to your audience's needs." It seems natural that we'd want to apply human-centered design to solve the affordability challenges of low- and moderate-income (LMI) customers and facilitate the equitable transition to a clean energy future.

While it's appropriate to focus on real people and solve their needs, using it as the sole approach to improving equity exposes more of our unconscious bias and takes us off the path of solving intersectional problems. It's similar to the Western medicine approach of treating the symptom but not curing the cause. Utilities can do better—we have to do better. In this blog post, we'll explore the concept of *community-centered design* and how it can help us improve equity in the energy industry.

Ready to shift to a community-centered design mindset?

If you need guidance on how to make sure your programs and operations are equitable for all, fill out this short form to start a conversation about your needs and how we can help.

The problems with human-centered design

Human-centered design is focused on observing one human at a time, collecting those individual observations, and coming up with a solution. But that approach has at least two potential problems when it comes to equity:

- Individual observations can be clouded by unconscious bias
- The audience is often from a communal culture, but the observer defaults to individualism

Individual observations can be clouded by unconscious bias

The utility sector, like many others, struggles with an unconscious bias. Recognizing and managing that bias is the basis of most diversity, equity, and inclusion training. But this doesn't always appear to be fully factored into human-centered design, where individual observations seem to be equally valid. This is especially relevant for utilities, which are tasked with designing programs that help a wide group of diverse customers facing various energy affordability and access challenges. Learn more about unconscious bias and the equity iceberg in our post The equity iceberg: What you need to know about serving the underserved.

Seventy percent of Americans have a monocultural world lens. They operate in minimization, interpreting the actions of others through their own value system, expectations, and norms.

Seventy percent of Americans have a monocultural world lens. They operate in minimization, interpreting the actions of others through their own value system, expectations, and norms. It's like viewing the world through rose-colored glasses and assuming everyone else's glasses have that same tint. We explored this statistic and how the concept affects the ways utilities support their customers in our blog post How building intercultural competency drives equitable decision-making.

Human-centered design assumes that everyone is equal in their observations—that everyone can do the same things and that what they're observing can lead to developing the right solution. What's closer to the truth is that individual bias needs to be factored into the equation and, in the case of equity, interculturally competency leads to equitable decision-making. It's a competency that many in the industry don't know about, underestimate, or haven't spent much measuring or building.

The audience is often from a communal culture, but the observer defaults to individualism

Minimization is rooted in individualism, while ethnic minority cultures are often communal. According to the Difference Between article Difference Between Communal and Individualistic Cultures, "In individualist cultures, the focus is more on the individual, but in communal cultures, the focus is on the community or groups of individuals over a single person." See **figure 1** for a comparison of the values at play between the observer and the observed that often lead to misunderstanding, misinterpretation, unintended consequences, and solutions that don't address root problems.

Figure 1: Comparison of individualism and communal culture

When looking at individualistic cultures versus communal cultures, we see that where one is competitive and focused on independence, the other is collaborative and focused on the success of the larger group.

Focus	Individualism	Communal culture
Goal	Independence	Success of the tribe, family, or community

© E Source

Focus	Individualism	Communal culture
Sayings	• Pull yourself up by your bootstraps • If it's to be, it's up to me • If at first you don't succeed, try, try again	• Many hands make light work • Lifting as we climb • Power to the people • We shall overcome
Development	Becoming the best individual creates a better society	Building the best society makes you a better individual
Resources	Work to get a bigger piece of the pie	Work to widen the pie so everyone gets a bigger slice
Decision-making	Make the best decision for yourself now	Make decisions considering the impact to the seventh generation
Mode	Competitive	Collaborative
Reward	Individual success, freedom, and material possessions	Healthy and thriving tribe, family, or community

© E Source

With the above in mind, we should note that anyone can ascribe to either belief system. The problem arises when you think everyone thinks as you do. Those ascribing to individualism see the challenge of inequity as something that individuals experiencing it are responsible for and have less understanding of the systematic problems that caused it and keep it in place today. Instead of addressing the root cause of the inequity, solutions end up making things equal, assuming everyone has the same shot at success. When considering customers with equity in mind, utilities need to consider people who have been left behind. By definition, individualism hasn't worked for them because the system often discriminates against them.

Shifting to community-centered design

Instead of human-centered design, utilities should favor the lens of community-centered design and aim to improve equity on a community basis instead of equipping the individual to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

Instead of human-centered design, utilities should favor the lens of community-centered design and aim to improve equity on a community basis.

Human-centered design has led to myriad band-aid solutions that often fail to address LMI needs and perpetuate generational poverty. Not being able to pay a utility bill and mounting arrearages under an individualist lens is considered an acute problem requiring a shot of financial aid so the individual can get back on their feet. In reality, LMI populations have intersectional needs that must be addressed simultaneously to make progress.

It's incredibly beneficial to utilities to increase energy security and help all communities in their service area to become more sustainable. Doing so would help build trust with LMI communities, meet regulatory requirements for carbon emissions, and possibly increase the likelihood that a larger part of the customer base would buy products and services beyond energy. Here are three ways to get started on the journey.

Focus on the problem, not the program

This is the first and scariest step. Utility culture is used to regulatory oversight, strict delineation of responsibility, and defined perimeters of performance. In other words, don't stray out of your lane. But that's exactly what's necessary to move equity forward. Instead of focusing on the ways we can redesign or create an energy efficiency program that's more equitable, look at it from a different perspective. For example, how do we create energy security in an LMI community?

Shift from silos to stakeholders

Tackling a problem truly takes a village. And the way that utilities are structured works against getting the right cognitive mix and lived experience around the table to understand and work toward developing meaningful solutions. Working in a silo limits ideas and can hamper progress. What would happen if, instead, we brought together cross-functional internal teams with community representatives and community action network partners to welcome honest assessments and new opportunities?

Stakeholders may include experts in issues that impact LMI communities, including:

- Healthcare
- Education
- Energy insecurity
- Employment
- Affordable housing
- Small businesses

Think outside the box for diverse solutions

One program or benefit directed at one person at one point in time doesn't constitute a solution. Individualists might say "we can bring the horse to water, but we can't make it drink" while community culture wouldn't give up so easily. Complex problems require diverse solutions. In other words, utilities can't do it all, but they have incredible influence and resources that they can bring to the right organizations to ladder solutions.

If you'd like to move toward a community-centered design and need a bit of guidance, we can help you build a clean energy future that's inclusive of your entire service area so that no one is left behind. Contact us today to start the conversation with our consulting team.

© 2008 - 2026 E Source Companies LLC. All rights reserved.
Distribution outside subscribing organizations limited by license.