

Increasing Microsoft Teams Usage at DESC

*An approach to improving internal
communication*

Karina Patel, Nghi Quan,
Sara Mahoney, and Bryce Latham
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC) is a Seattle non-profit that provides services for people experiencing homelessness, including shelters and supportive housing projects which prioritize the most vulnerable and marginalized clients first.¹ DESC's end goal is to transition clients to mental health treatment and long-term case management, which is aided in part by their low-barrier housing programs which consists of over 1,400 units of supportive housing throughout Seattle. Many of its facilities rely upon a 24/7 shift framework, making regular in-person meetings with staff virtually impossible. The COVID-19 pandemic has since only compounded these obstacles to team communication, broadening the gap between project teams still working onsite and upper management working remotely from home. DESC has already invested in Microsoft Teams to aid in communication, but there has been little guidance provided to staff members on how the application can be used to organize their work and communicate within and between departments. Our solution is a simplified Microsoft Teams handbook designed to help project managers find uses for the different features of Microsoft Teams, outline general guidelines and best practices, and navigate the technology.

THE PROBLEM

DESC is a large nonprofit organization where the main goal is to help those in need, like any organization that grows over time there can be issues needing improvement but the issues get pushed to the side due to lack of resources and this is especially the case with nonprofits that deal with limited resources. DESC framework of 24/7 staffing model with a wide range of teams, departments and projects coupled with varying levels of skill and accessibility to technology that can lead to a situation where internal communication becomes less effective and potentially problematic for the organization. Internal communication was only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, DESC leadership quickly realized the need for virtual platforms of communication. Around April 2020, DESC invested in Microsoft Teams to aid in communication. However, the transition from in person communication to full dependence on Microsoft Teams without prior training resulted in gaps in understanding. Even prior to the pandemic, staff engagement surveys have indicated that staff view communication as an area in which can be improved.

Our interviews with staff from DESC revealed holes in communications from and between departments. One individual pointed out how one shelter was temporarily closed but since they were not notified, they kept sending clients only to have them sent back without reason (E. Anderson, personal communication, May 11, 2021). They also mentioned how they were overwhelmed with emails and upper management requests, which are often left on the backburner when meeting daily facility needs such as intervening in client crises. Another interviewee expressed that staff were potentially missing out on information relating to employees wages and or policies due to email structuring (M. Connell, personal communication, April 26, 2021). Lastly an interviewee shared that if specific information was shared about building incidents when they occurred that the staff would feel more safe rather knowing about an incident and not knowing the aftermath of the incident (R. Knight, personal communication, May 5, 2021).

DESC internal communication can be improved by creating a clear and easy platform which will clear up miscommunication between teams and departments, allow a space for employee to find relevant information pertaining directly to their job and help lessen the burden of project managers through a platform which will enable them to spend less time organizing pertinent emails.

CUSTOMER

We realized early on in our interviewing process that the most critical communication breakdown at DESC happens at the Project Manager level, with Project Managers prioritizing facility tasks at hand over administrative tasks from upper management. By utilizing empathy, we began to understand the perspectives of our mentor Noah, project managers, and frontline staff (see Appendix A). We then identified that project managers are important conduits between upper management and frontline staff, and thus our project has potential to make great impact if we focus on this specific job class. Project Managers face a high volume of tasks required to keep their facilities safe and functioning, with a given day easily complicated by an unforeseen circumstance (or several), making an administrative routine and email maintenance practically impossible (with this email maintenance consisting of reading hundreds of emails per day). However, as the liaisons between upper management and their staff on the ground, Project Managers have to partake in facilitating effective communication on behalf of both their staff and DESC leadership which often falls by the wayside.

Especially with the COVID pandemic ending consistent in-person facility meetings and briefings, typical communication expectations and methods used by DESC Project Managers traditionally were upended and have not yet been replaced. The result of this lack of guidance has been inconsistency among Project Managers with how and when they communicate with their project teams. Project Managers have been provided with minimal insight on how to meet the evolving needs of DESC and its clients, often feeling left out of this conversation entirely, and the expectations of upper management are not always effectively related to Project Managers, let alone to the greater DESC staff. These communication inconsistencies across project teams and departments are unsustainable, and have been cited by upper management as detrimental to DESC employee culture.

OUR SOLUTION

Through our interviews with DESC staff, our group has come up with a solution that will improve communication throughout the organization. However, it is important to note that our journey to our chosen solution was not a straight path. In fact, in the design thinking process, we seriously considered two other solutions and even created full prototypes before ultimately landing on our actual solution. Early on, we realized that there were multiple problems within the overarching communication problem at DESC. First, we considered tackling the problem of project managers needing a better way to sift through emails and organize their tasks. We created a prototype of a Microsoft Form in which upper management could enter tasks and tasks be imported into a spreadsheet which organizes tasks at hand by priority (see Appendix C2). However, it was difficult to code the spreadsheet in a way that accomplishes our needs and color codes based on the due date. Additionally, because upper managers may assign the same task to multiple project managers, this idea would be inefficient and an inconvenience to have to go to each project manager's Microsoft Form to assign tasks. As a result, we began to look for ways to organize tasks within Microsoft Teams and realized that there is an application add-on which allows others to assign tasks to specific employees and groups. We realized that the mini-problems within communication could be addressed with Microsoft suite applications, which DESC already invested in.

Our next prototype was to adapt the existing Microsoft Teams Champion framework to encourage early adopters of Teams to teach co-workers how to use it and demonstrate how it is applicable in their job (see Appendix C3). We created a framework for recruiting and training Champions at DESC and were planning to find ways to incentivize program participation without compensation. However, when we shared our prototype with DESC project manager Erik Anderson, we realized that it would be extremely difficult to recruit Champions since DESC staff members are already so overwhelmed. In our interview with Erik, he implied that

he did not use Microsoft Teams other than for meetings. We began to realize that many project managers may not use Teams to organize their work and communicate because they simply do not have the resources to figure out what to use it for and there is a lack of clear expectations. We then pivoted to increase literacy, outline expectations, and provide example uses of Microsoft Teams in an effort to increase its use among project managers DESC.

Our solution is to introduce a DESC Microsoft Teams handbook with the goal of showing how Microsoft Teams can be used as an effective tool for improving communication (see Appendix G). Like many companies and organizations, DESC rapidly invested in Microsoft Teams at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. We realized that we could leverage the existing technologies to improve internal communication. The lack of internal communication can be addressed through Microsoft Teams. Although staff members have access to Microsoft Teams, many do not use it because of the lack of guidance, expectations, and resources.

However, we know that when members of an organization adopt Microsoft Teams, they can have great success. For instance, Mercy Housing, an organization that provides affordable housing to more than 45,000 residents across the country, has had success with Microsoft Teams.² Although not all employees were not familiar with Microsoft Teams at the beginning of the pandemic, Mercy Housing hosted training on how to get the most out of Microsoft Teams.¹ Now, most employees at Mercy Housing use Microsoft Teams to connect with colleagues across the organization.¹ The organization's leaders have credited tools such as Microsoft Teams for allowing the organization to continue growing and meeting the needs of more clients, even during a pandemic.¹ At Mercy Housing, Microsoft Teams meetings allowed the organization to hold its first virtual board meeting, bringing together over 20 board members from across the organization.¹ Mercy Housing's example shows us that Microsoft Teams is a powerful tool for remote communication across a large organization when in-person communication is not possible. By adopting Microsoft Teams whole-heartedly, DESC can bridge the communication gap between departments, uplifting the cohesiveness of the organization, boosting staff satisfaction, and continuing to grow in its ability to accomplish its vision to provide housing and health to end homelessness (see Appendix B).

This Microsoft Teams handbook will equip users with a comprehensive understanding of the functions to efficiently update news, assign tasks, meet deadlines and more. This handbook is inclusive to beginners and those unfamiliar with Microsoft Teams. Our main page discusses how to navigate this handbook using hyperlinks to jump to and from section and home icons (indicated in light blue) to return back to the table of contents. The table of content houses eight sections: Basics, Channels, Chat, Calendar, Tasks, Files, Meetings and Additional Resources.

The handbook's color scheme consists of green, black and white. This aligns with DESC's style guide to make the manual consistent with DESC branding, and thus more approachable and welcoming for use by employees. Screenshots fitted into desktop icons provide better visualization into what project managers can expect on their own device and red circles highlight features that may be difficult to see from afar.

Basics: This section briefly introduces Microsoft Teams to the user and how this could improve communication as well as team dynamic. For beginners, desktop and mobile download instructions are available with different sign in methods. In addition, this handbook covers expectations for Project Managers to ensure that it is utilized to the fullest and not sidetracked in the long run. This includes posting

WHY USE TEAMS?

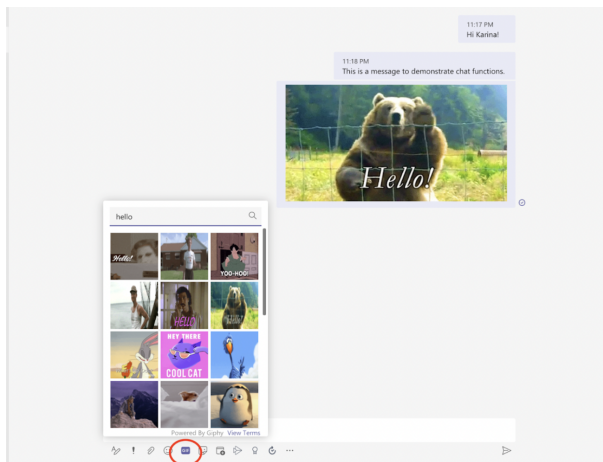
Using the Teams software can simplify your workday and improve project team dynamics by:

- Making regular, all-team meetings possible ([Teams Meetings](#))
- Allowing for immediate communication with upper management ([Teams Chat](#))
- Allowing for instant cross-facility communication ([Teams Chat](#))
- Simplifying task delegation among team members (Teams [Channels](#), [Chat](#), [Calendar](#), [Tasks](#))
- Keeping all important files in a single, shareable location ([Teams Files](#))



updates on “Updates” channel as soon as possible, periodically checking the channels throughout the day, viewing assigned tasks, and etc.

Channels: This section notes instances where channels can be beneficial in cross department/team communication, direct messaging to project groups, and managing compartmentalized topics. Viewing channels is easily done by clicking on the left hand side of the screen where users also have the option to post in “new conversation.” Likewise, replying to a conversation would mean clicking “reply.” In the case where a response is not needed, reactions are available to let the users know what their coworker thinks. Furthermore, for important messages, users have the option to pin the comment so that it can be instantaneously navigated to later on. In addition, users can send a “praise” to their coworkers to highlight their accomplishments.



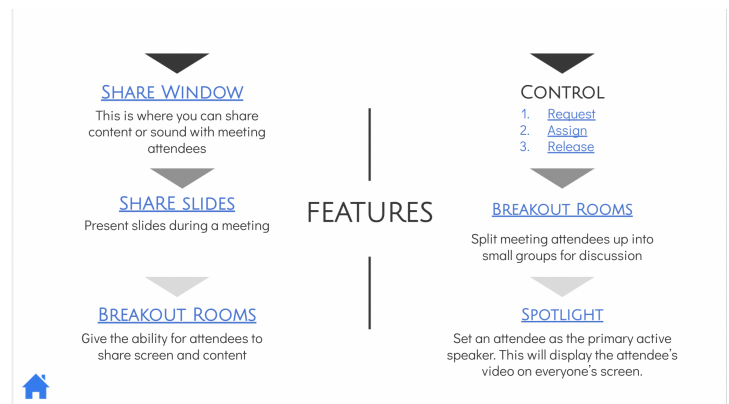
Chats: This feature is most useful for when checking up on a task with coworkers, requesting client information from another department and sending instant messages to anyone at DESC (see left). Due to Microsoft Teams having two-factor authentication log in, it ensures that files shared through chats are safe and secure. Furthermore, like channels, the chat feature allows for pin and unpin to note important messages. It also has the option for custom gifs and emojis to make the user experience fun and interactive.

Calendar: This feature is most useful when scheduling meetings, viewing due dates and assigning tasks. Users can quickly create reminders and events as well as join meetings by hovering over specified meetings.

Tasks: This function is most useful for noting meetings ahead of time, sort staff training hours, and assign subprojects to team members. To best use this feature, users need to download Planner, which is included in the Microsoft 365 package. This is most helpful during collaborations when members delegate tasks and on the receiving end users can revisit all tasks by navigating to “assigned to me.”

Files: File upload, download, and viewing are available in channels and chats.

Meetings: This feature is most beneficial to do team briefings or cross-departmental meetings. One can host meetings using the “meet now” option or schedule ahead of time using the “new meeting” button. During meetings, users can “share window” which shows a live view of the content and sound presented. Users can assign control - giving another individual the permission to facilitate, can manage breakout rooms to small group discussions, and spotlight attendees. Attendees can join meetings in three ways: using a link from an email invitation, using channel access, and/or using calendar redirect.



NEXT STEPS

We estimate that it would take no more than a month for project managers to adopt use of the handbook we created. During this period, the GCIL - DESC Internal Team will have inboxes open for inquiries and technical troubleshooting. Our mentor, Noah Fay, has our contact information. We have communicated with him that he can send over any questions to DESC Internal Team members.

Before our solution is implemented at DESC, it is important that we have a test run to see if there are any areas that need improvement. We have already interviewed two project managers at DESC to gain feedback on our solution. In addition, we have received thorough feedback from Noah which helped us develop our initial prototype. Some of the changes we made include adding an instruction slide for how to navigate the handbook, changing the color of hyperlinks to light blue to enhance user experience, and providing clearer example uses so project managers have a thorough understanding of how Microsoft Teams can transform their work. To best cater to project manager needs, we also sent a prototype of the DESC-specific Microsoft Teams handbook to the 18 DESC project managers for feedback. We used a Google Form to gain feedback on the manual and its utility. Despite follow-up and mentions by Noah in multiple meetings, we are still awaiting responses. Since our project has now ended, we will forward Noah the results from the form so he can incorporate feedback into modifications to our final handbook as he sees fit.

Conducting a randomized controlled trial can allow for a better understanding of the effectiveness of our solution. As the leader of DESC project managers, and the main contact for our project, Noah can take the following steps to test our solution:

1. Noah should outline expectations for Microsoft Teams use to all project managers. Examples of expectations include how often they should log on, and how many meetings they should host.
2. Noah should send a Google Form survey to all project managers asking for feedback on how communication is going at DESC, how comfortable they feel about using Teams, and whether they think Teams is useful (see Appendix F).
3. Noah should send the handbook to half of the project managers, do not send the manual to the other half.
4. After a month, Noah should send the same Google form survey to all project managers.
5. Lastly, Noah should assess whether PMs who had access to the Microsoft Teams handbook reported improved levels of comfort with Teams, overall DESC communication, and utility of Teams.

After incorporating any feedback from project managers, Noah will send the PDF of the handbook to all project managers he oversees and introduce the handbook in a meeting with project managers. Every quarter of the year, Noah will reserve time in a meeting to gather feedback from project managers.

Based on feedback we received from Clement Place project manager Sheila Smith, it would be helpful to provide similar Microsoft Teams resources in a handbook to other DESC staff members such as frontline workers and housing coordinators/counselors. While our project solely focuses on project managers, in the future, Noah can identify an employee to take on the task of adapting the handbook for different levels of employees. The designated employee should make a copy of the Google Slides we created to organize the handbook, adapt guidelines and example uses of the different functions to be more specific to the job description, and add/remove any sections that are irrelevant to the job description.

In the short-term, our solution aims to increase Microsoft Teams usage among DESC project managers, alleviate task burden, create new connections among DESC employees, and allow for a new protocol for efficient communication. In the long-term, our solution aims to create a cohesive organizational culture by

ensuring consistency in approaches and priorities across the organization, providing clarity in how decisions are made, and making sure that employees understand their place within the overall vision of DESC.

CONCLUSION

Our Microsoft Teams handbook is designed to enhance Teams understanding to better assist project managers in leveraging their work and assigning tasks. Not only can project managers benefit from this usage but upper management and frontline workers can utilize this to better contribute to the DESC community. While DESC employees have Microsoft Teams at their disposal, many are so overwhelmed that they have not put in the energy to find resources and learn how to use it on their own. By providing project managers with the information they need to use Microsoft Teams in order to transform the way they organize their tasks and communicate with each other, we are working to improve communication in a very specific segment of the organization. Given our limited resources and time, we have used the past ten weeks to learn about DESC as an organization, identify a specific target audience for improving communication, and put in effort to diligently create a quality handbook that can be used beyond the duration of our project this quarter.

REFERENCES

1. *Housing & Health to End Homelessness in Seattle. Downtown Emergency Service Center.* <https://www.desc.org/>. Published May 14, 2021. Accessed June 2, 2021.
2. *Housing support for the vulnerable during a health crisis: Mercy Housing keeps residents safe at home using Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Customers Stories.* customers.microsoft.com/en-us/story/821979-mercy-housing-nonprofit-teams. Accessed May 27, 2021.

Appendix A: Empathy Maps

Figure A1: Empathy Map - Project Managers

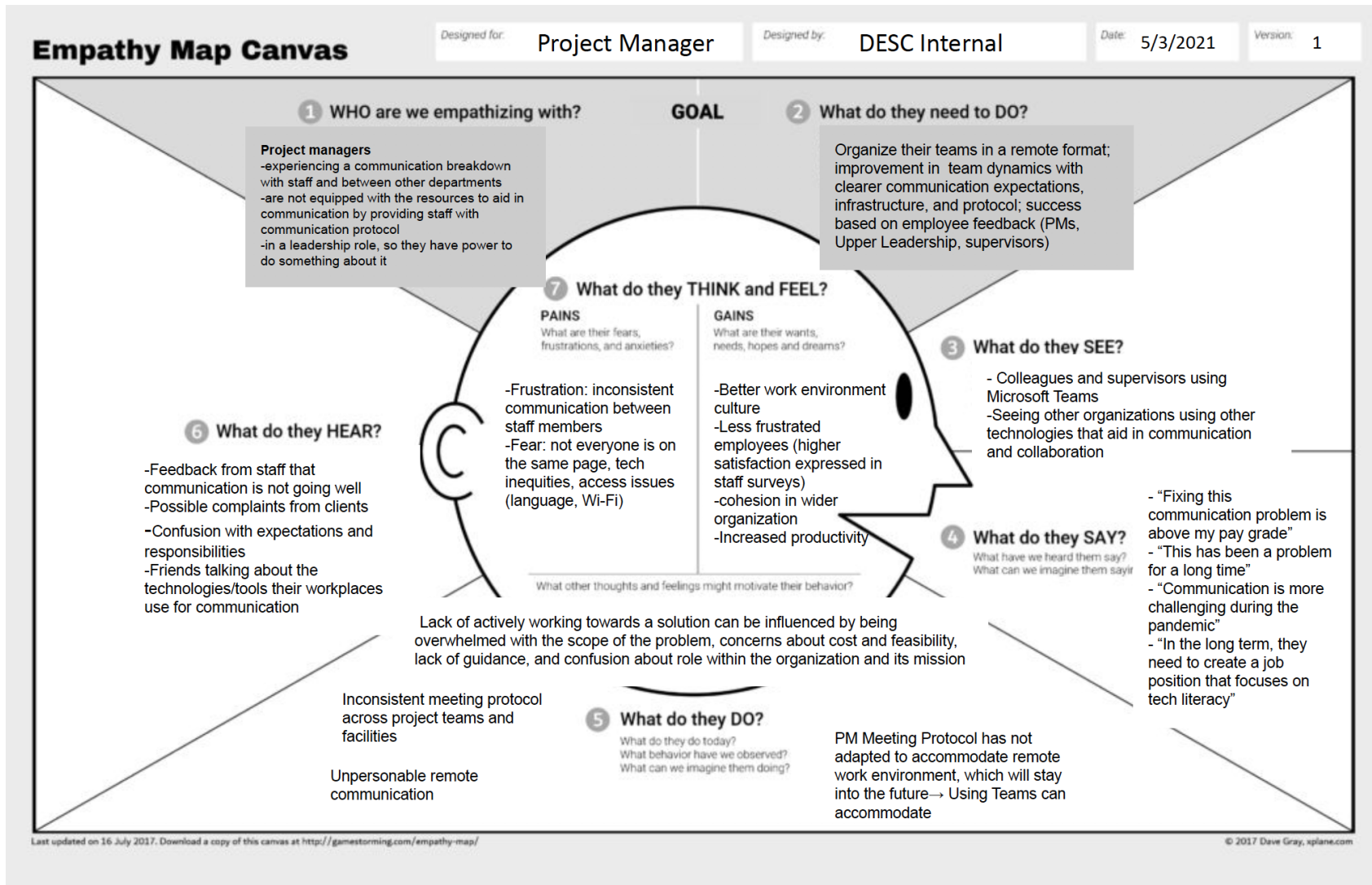


Figure A2: Empathy Map - DESC Administration + Upper Management

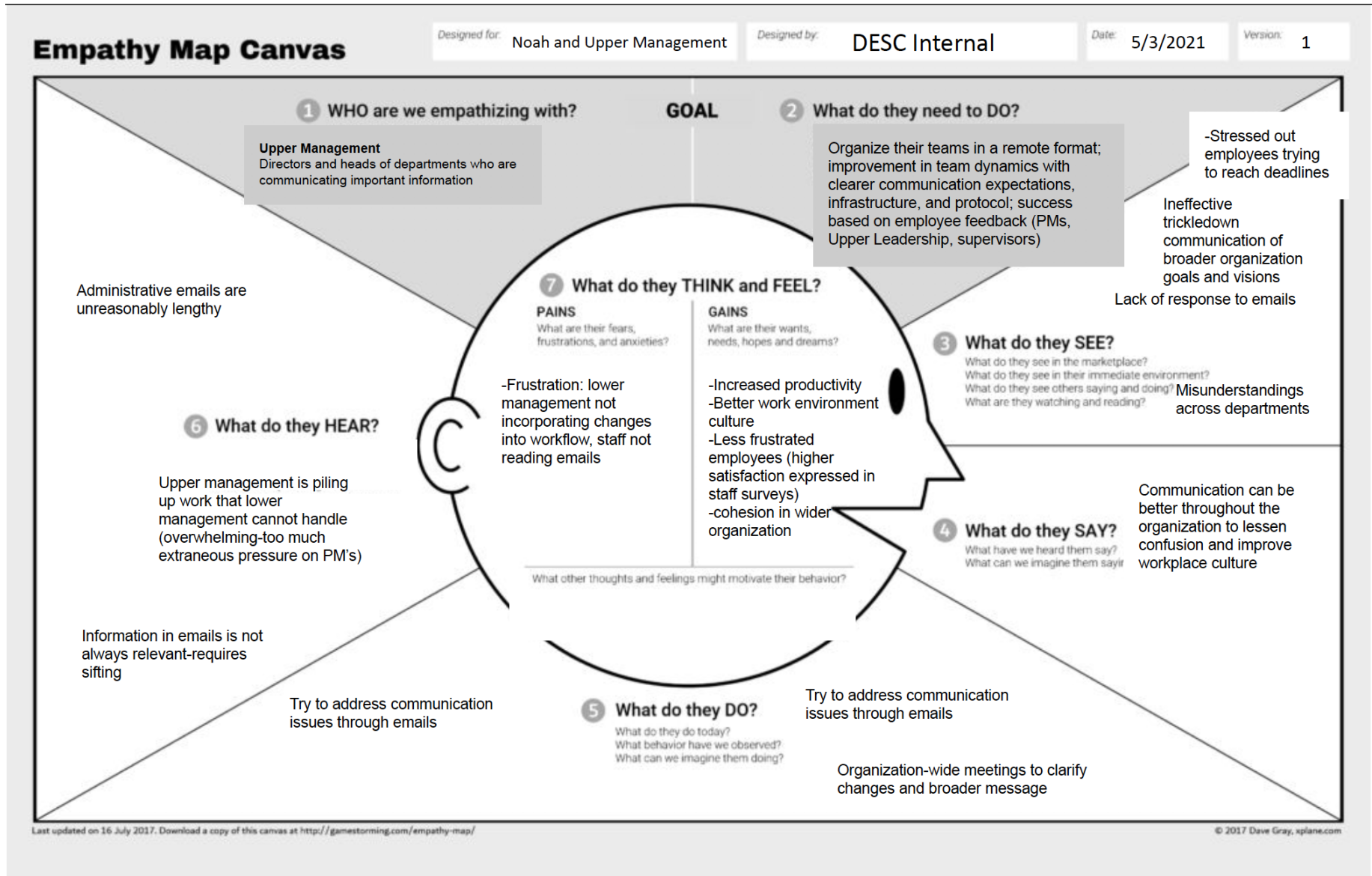
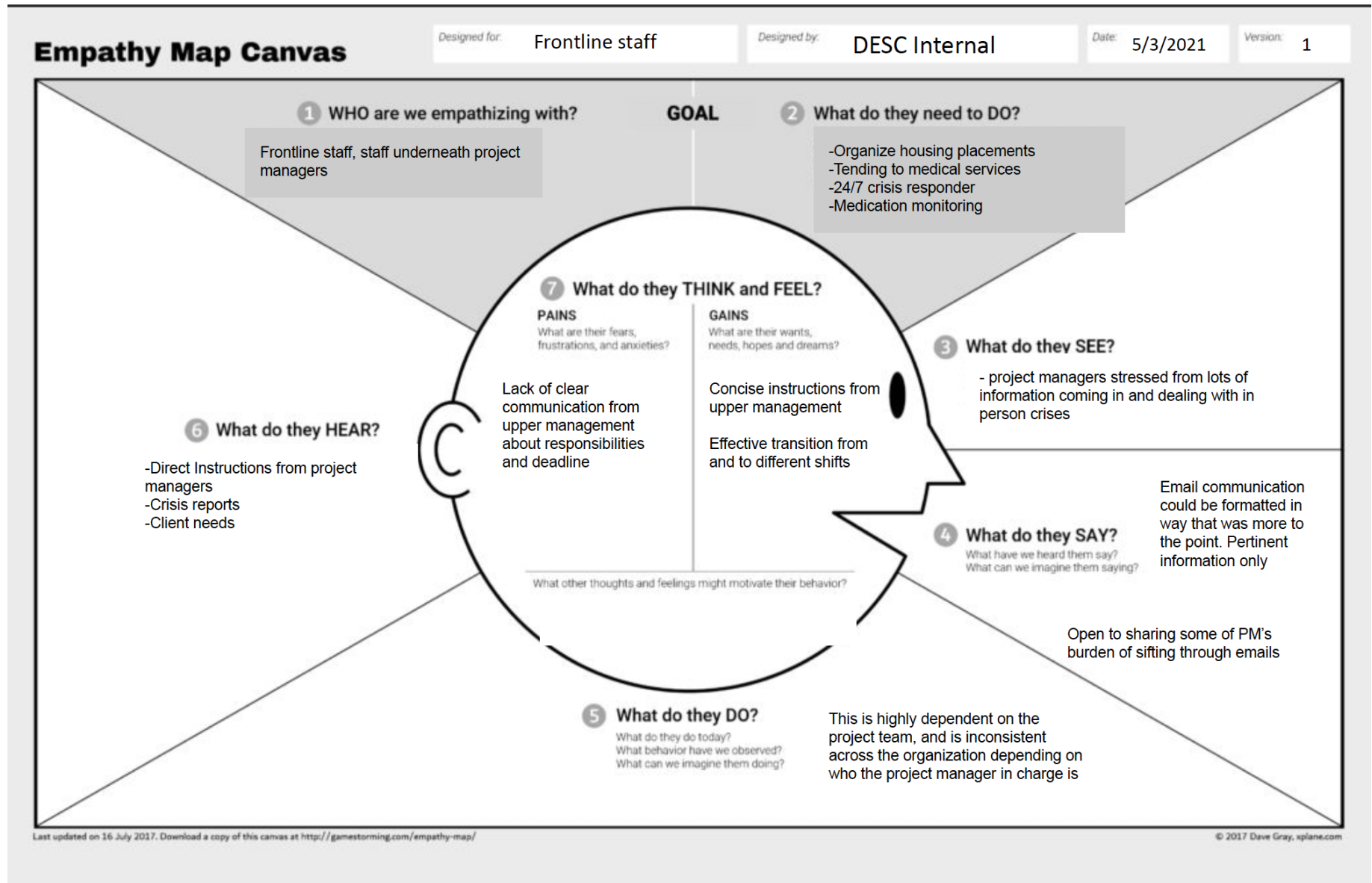


Figure A3: Empathy Map - DESC Frontline Staff

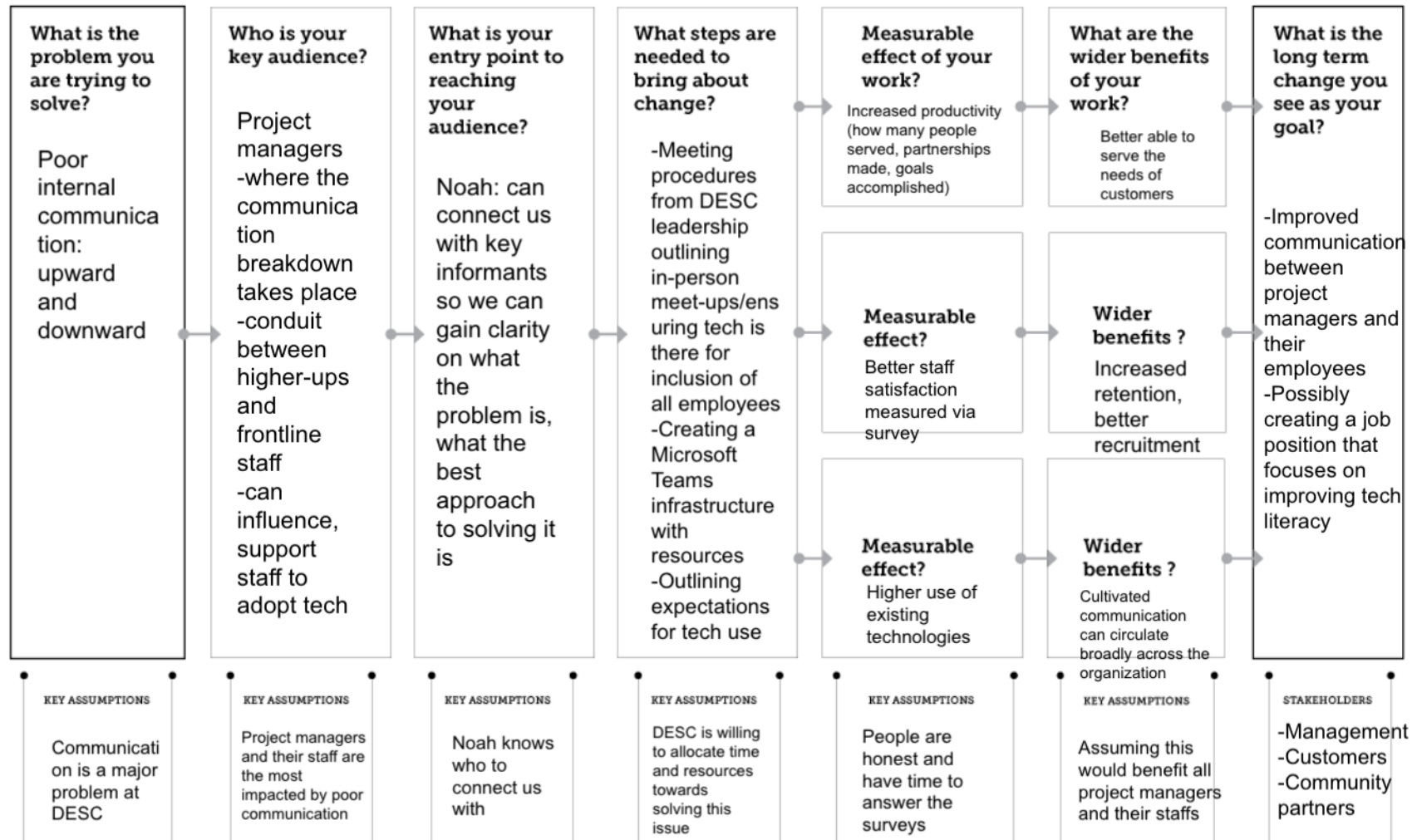


Appendix B: Theory of Change Model



I want to clarify my priorities
by defining my goals and the path to reach them

THEORY OF CHANGE



Appendix C: Solutions considered

Appendix C1: Ideas and considerations

Solutions			
#	Possible solution	Advantages	Disadvantages
1	Boosting Tech Literacy	compiling all microsoft tech support document into one place, along with visuals so it is easier for people to navigate and come to meetings	Need access to a prototype Teams. UW account doesn't allow and personal account requires payment
2	Strategy Report		Not sure if there is a person to actually initiate it
3	Seasonal updates	Every department stays updated on what each other are doing. This makes it easier if multiple departments are working with a client.	Needs a person to contact every department every season or year - not sure if this is sustainable
4	Microsoft Teams Infrastructures	channels for communication so that everyone is on the same page. Also a place to upload files	Difficulty creating prototype because of lack of access to our own Teams using UW account
5	Directory	Outlining departmental responsibilities, leaders for the team	Difficult to coordinate
6	Shorten email briefing	This is a big concern people had so tackling this would mean better and more cohesive communication.	Difficult to control what staff members do and how they communicate through email.
7	Champion Program	Recruit people who are willing to be Champions for the program. They must be proactive and use Teams regularly.	People implementing and using this after this class ends. People are already so overwhelmed

Appendix C2: Microsoft Forms Prototype link

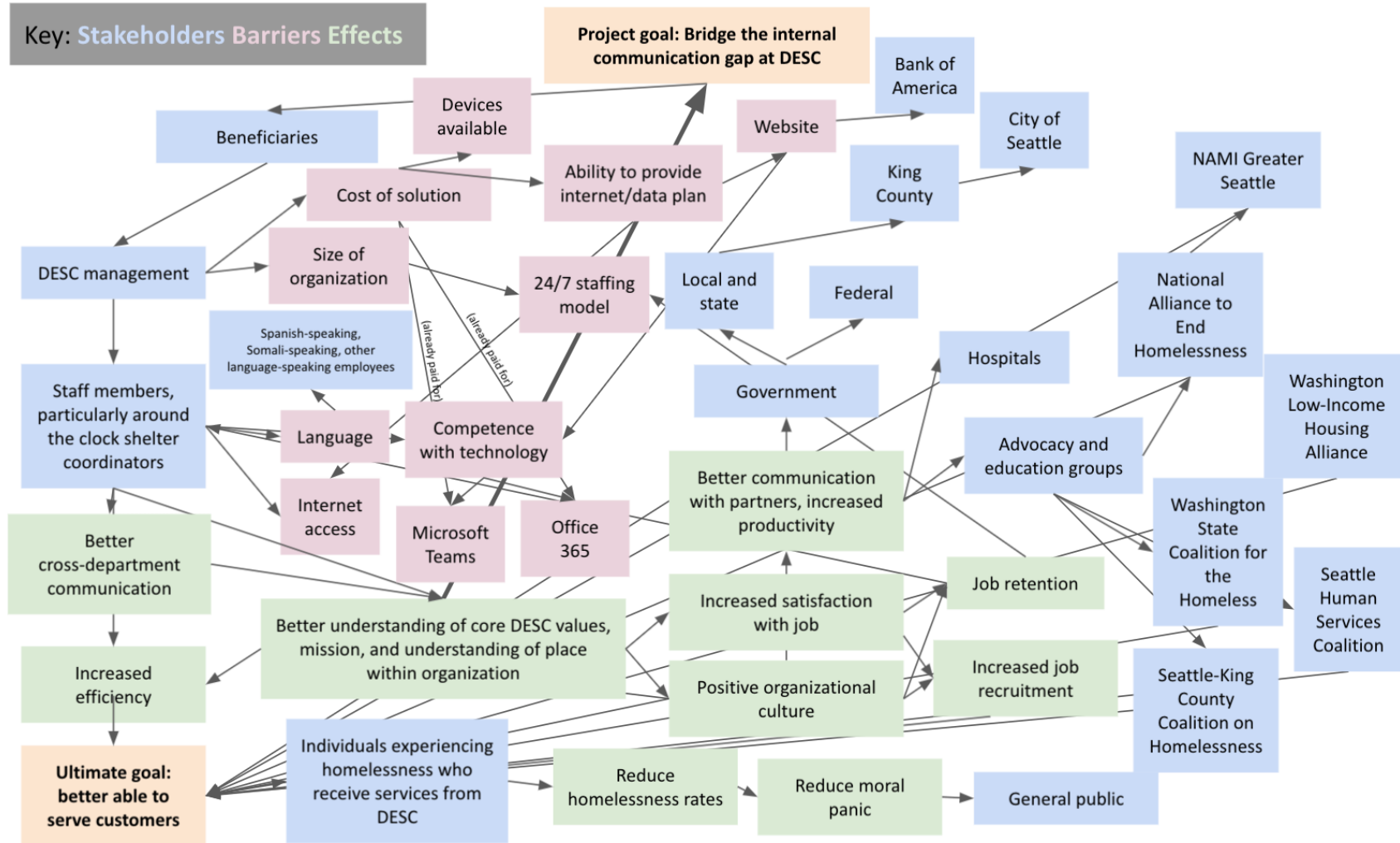
https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=W9229i_wGkSZoBYqxQYLOhMYrwxOT2ZGqZlclXSQB2VURVFEMTRQRF FIRVRBSTJINzdTVVXUktVQi4u

Appendix C3: Microsoft Champions Prototype link

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/18akXw0kkOXELtRjfU2RZ9APILniJKG1yRhENeR2o-PI/edit?usp=sharing>

Appendix D: Systems Map

Key: Stakeholders Barriers Effects



Appendix E: Story in Seven Sentences

Once upon a time there was a Director of Housing named Noah at an organization called DESC. Everyday, Noah received feedback from project managers and other staff members indicating that there has been a breakdown in communication within and between different departments since the COVID-19 pandemic has made regular, in-person meetings impossible and Microsoft Teams has been rolled out without any formal training or guidance. Until one day, Noah met with GCIL: Seattle student consultants who created a project manager handbook outlining Microsoft Teams expectations, uses, and instructions for relevant functions. And because of this, Noah had a meeting with project managers introducing the handbook and sent them a copy for their reference. And because of this, project managers referred to the Microsoft Teams handbook in order to identify how Microsoft Teams can be used to organize their work efficiently and communicate within and across locations. Until finally, the majority of project managers at DESC felt comfortable using Microsoft Teams features that enhanced their ability to organize their work, communicate with others, and find their place within the larger DESC mission. And ever since that day, the employees Noah oversees provide positive feedback about job satisfaction and communication in staff engagement surveys, most DESC project managers and upper-level managers use Microsoft Teams, and DESC is able to serve more customers every year.

Appendix F: Satisfaction Survey

1. How comfortable do you feel using Teams?
2. How is communication in your department going?
3. How satisfied do you feel with the overall DESC organizational culture?
4. How has Microsoft Teams alleviated your task burden?
 - a. [Rank 1 (not much) - 5 (very much)]
5. What function of Microsoft Teams did you use most often?
6. What function of Microsoft Teams do you use least often?
7. What do you think can be added to improve your Microsoft Teams experience?

Appendix G: Link to our Microsoft Teams handbook

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/19oNX4KwZ8AaDsvNNvYIMKRMBNnVXSMSwomTeiZQhI30/edit?usp=sharing>