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HOLDING SPACE

Some principles of facilitating group dialogue

There are many ways of structuring public meetings and conversations. Some have brand names—Open Space, World Café, The Art of Hosting, etc. Others have evolved from a particular individual's or organization's experience. It makes sense to draw from whatever sources you wish to find techniques—formats, exercises, prompts, etc.—that fit the needs of a particular gathering.

But in my experience, technique is not as important as understanding and practicing core principles that cultivate openness, equity, inclusion, transparency, and honest dialogue. Here are some I've found to be especially important.

BE TRANSPARENT. Be transparent about why and how you are meeting, including aims, approaches, outcomes, and what you will do with the information people share.

- **Public meetings are the clearest examples.** Remember that not all community meetings are created with the highest intentions: some public conversations extract information without giving back; some try to make people feel they've had their say but actually no one is listening. People may feel suspicious based on past experience. Let them know you will treat their contributions with respect, practicing reciprocity.
- **Whether the meeting is a public dialogue or internal organizational session, it's important to clarify what you are going for:** is the goal consensus, a majority decision, or simply sharing a diversity of viewpoints?
- **I like to do this with a written agenda, provided well in advance,** in which each item is specified in three ways: **Issue** (what's on the table in a sentence or two); **Discussion** (what type of discussion is needed—brainstorm, critique, close analysis, reflection, etc.); and **Action Needed** (what outcome is desired: a decision, advice, referring the item to a working group with a specific task and deadline, etc.?).

BE CLEAR. Articulate the working agreements, principles, and ground rules that support your dialogue.

- **Say so if it's important for a particular meeting to have time limits, for instance, or if a core aim is for everyone to have equal opportunity** to speak and listen. People may come into a meeting with very different operating assumptions. Unless you clarify those that are guiding the dialogue, they may work at cross-purposes.

Here are some working agreements I like to use:

ASK FOR WHATEVER YOU NEED

There are no stupid questions; everyone is free to ask for information, clarification, consideration whenever needed. Everyone is free to ask for help when needed.

MAKE ROOM FOR EVERYONE

Make sure everyone is able to contribute by being mindful of how much space you are taking and by inviting others to share their perspectives.

Avoid interrupting: allow each person to speak and wait until you are recognized to take your turn.

KEEP TO AGREED-UPON TIMEFRAMES

Arrive on time and stay for the entire meeting. If the agenda includes time allocations for specific items and it's necessary to extend the time for a particular session, ask permission from the group.

RESPECT PERSPECTIVES

All agree to do our best to see issues from multiple perspectives rather than holding fixed positions. All agree to value all input, treating everyone with equal respect.

HOLD VISION

While we work with many specific details, we agree to stay in touch with our vision and do our best to keep the big picture also in mind.

COMMUNICATE DIRECTLY

If issues arise between us in the course of the meeting, we agree to communicate directly or use the power of the group to constructively raise and resolve them.

RESPECT CONFIDENTIALITY

To maintain a culture of safety and openness for our work together, none of us will share beyond this meeting sensitive personal information that was disclosed or quote each other's contributions to such discussions directly by name or other identifier without express prior permission.

AVOID DISRUPTION

Restrict use of cellphones, computers, tablets and other devices that allow texting or email to breaks in the meeting unless asked to look something up.

SPEAK MINDFULLY

Avoid actions or speech that discriminate against or insult any group on account of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, orientation, ability, or other characteristics. Use the terminology people request to characterize them.

Feel free to use or adapt these as you like, including inserting additional points if you wish.

PRACTICE EQUITY. Treat all participants equally, regardless of how you feel about them or the points they make.

- ***I like to think of facilitation as a kind of spiritual practice*** in which the facilitator's goal is to support each person in bringing his or her best self and deepest truth into the dialogue. If a group includes someone you greatly respect and someone you find off-the-wall—or someone you'd like to please and someone most people tend to dismiss—this can be a challenge, but it is a worthy one.

ENSURE ACCESSIBILITY. Find questions, topics, or prompts that help all to feel their contributions are valuable and valued.

- ***It's easy for people to feel intimidated if expert knowledge is required*** to take part in a discussion. How can you get to the heart of the matter with maximum inclusion, using plain language and straightforward questions?
- ***If you are dealing with complex topics likely to require knowledge of jargon or familiarity with background material, be sure to supply the information far enough in advance*** for people to review it. Two weeks before is better than one week; one week is better than one day.

PREPARE. Make sure everyone who has a role in guiding or supporting the dialogue is adequately trained and aligned with the operating principles.

- ***If you need small group facilitators for parts of a large meeting, be sure to chose people carefully.*** Pick those who really care what others think and feel, who know how to listen and how to maintain a welcoming stance. It may be tempting to assume that someone will be a good facilitator because that person runs a lot of meetings in the workplace. But workplace politics don't always produce the most even-handed group leaders. Choose people who are willing to learn and to follow the working agreements and guidelines.
- ***The best training for facilitators is to take part in a version of the process*** some time before the public event, learning by doing. Hold a practice dialogue, pausing whenever necessary to explore alternative ways to handle whatever arises.

EMPHASIZE PROCESS. Focus on process as much as (or more than) content.

- ***It's essential to receive each contribution to a discussion equitably,*** helping every person to express what they want to say, and acknowledging each person equally with thanks.
- ***If you disagree with what is being said, take note, but don't dwell on that.*** If you're focused on your own thoughts and feelings, you won't be able to take in other people's contributions. Focus on helping multiple viewpoints to be fully expressed.
- ***Beyond keeping to basic working agreements about respectful speech (e.g., of course you need to call people on insulting each other, using racist or sexist language, etc.), the facilitator generally doesn't need to express an opinion***

about what is being said. Invite the group to respond; trust that they will bring out what needs to be said. If an obvious issue is being neglected or avoided, bring it up as a question, a prompt designed to invite response.

SUPPORT EVERYONE. Summarize, restate, and assist evenhandedly.

- ***Moving a dialogue along means steering around verbal traffic jams*** where a few speakers repeat their points, feeling that if people only understood, they'd agree. Navigating that requires speakers to feel truly heard, which is best accomplished by the facilitator mirroring the essence of what they are saying before asking the group for new points.
- ***Try to use the guideline of summarizing or restating what someone has said such that the speaker would find no reason to feel misunderstood or slighted.*** Put yourself in the speaker's place and assist as you would want to be assisted.

SHOW UP FULLY. Make your own contributions when they are needed.

- ***If you're aware that a key viewpoint is not being expressed, it's fine to say so, usually in the form of a question,*** e.g., "What about X? That gets brought up a lot when this topic is on the table." Asking questions is an important role for a facilitator, because questions open the way for everyone to participate fully and all viewpoints to be expressed.
- ***If you're asked to express your opinion, be honest and calm.*** You can say you're worried about specific implications of a particular decision; that you're inclined to agree with a particular opinion, but you're also aware of the validity of other perspectives; that you're unsure, seeing issues with both perspectives; or that you have a whole new idea to introduce and wonder how people might respond, etc. You want to avoid inadvertently making people feel dissed by saying that X is right and Y is wrong.

At their best, group dialogues are opportunities to practice real democracy, treating each other with the caring and respect that ought to mark all social relations. I like to think of these occasions as opportunities to share a foretaste of a truly equitable, inclusive, and collaborative society. At the end of a good public dialogue, everyone feels uplifted—including the facilitators! That feels like a worthy goal to me.