

Nov 18th, Four Freedoms workshop: Becoming the Change We Want to See

I. The initial invitation

Becoming the Change We Want to See

How are we creating a culture of democracy within our activist organizations and movements? For example, how are we dealing constructively with internal conflicts? How are we ensuring participants have a voice on important issues, without getting bogged down in the swamp of total consensus on every single decision? How are we balancing the power that comes from having clear roles, with the wisdom that comes from widespread input and participation?

In this participatory workshop, we'll be drawing out the group's wisdom on these topics with a facilitated process that supports deep listening and shared exploration. Our work will take place on two levels. On one level, we will be focusing on content: our responses to the above questions. And at the same time, we'll also be experiencing a process for exploring differences in a creative way. In the concluding portion of the workshop, we'll reflect on what we have been learning from both the content and the process of our conversation together.

II. What we did during the workshop itself:

- A. We began by inviting participants to consider examples from their own life experience, of groups working well together. We also invited examples of challenges, and of breakthroughs -- situations that began as a challenge and ended with success. All of these experiences hold great potential for learning, especially when we explore them together as a group.*
- B. After participants took a few minutes to jot down some notes on the individual stories they wanted to share, we began a facilitated large-group conversation. During the conversation, we took notes on chart paper.*
- C. Toward the end of the conversation, we invited participants to co-create a summary of the main topics we had explored.*
- D. This was followed by a debrief of the experience, and an invitation to leave written feedback.*
- E. After the workshop, we typed up all of the chart paper notes and sent them to participants.*

III. Where we ended up (co-created group summary of our conversation)

*A Major Challenge: **Oppression gets passed down in groups***

*One Way Forward: **Establishing trust with one another that we will be heard, by engaging in meaningful processes.***

We explored the value of pausing,
the value of real listening,
the value of empathizing –

all useful for establishing trust.

We explored the value of planning ahead for meetings,
and being clear about why a meeting is being called,
including its function and goals;

the importance of clear and EXPLICIT goals...
The value of having some structure, and some designated facilitators;

"We all want to be heard, but that doesn't easily happen."

There is real damage that can be done when we meet...
If we are not careful, we can replicate or re-enact hidden agendas,
find ourselves engaging in power dynamics.

IV. "How We Got There": the harvest from the chart papers

A. Examples of group work that went well

1) Organizing team for a meditation group

- a) A meditation group that holds designated 'care-taking meetings' for the organizers and all interested members, using deep listening, care and compassion as part of their meeting process.
- b) Every month's meeting is a new opportunity to practice.
- c) We practice going into ourselves – understanding our own triggers, breathe and pause before speaking.
- d) Letting go of need to be in charge, reveals the joy of collaboration.

2) A pot-pourri of positive group experiences

- a) Positive experiences with larger groups that use dyads & triads for people to hear one another.
- b) Experience with large group events that use small-group dialogue formats, like World Café.
- c) Workshops in Constellations work.
- d) Music Improv circles example of space where every voice is heard.

3) An experience of deep listening in a group

- a) Example of a positive experience in a group, that showed the value of really understanding where someone is coming from..
- b) Someone took the time to engage with another person, with compassion and identification.
- c) They were recognizing themselves in the other person, and identifying with them based on their own past experience.
- d) This led to greater understanding and a more positive outcome.

- e) In this group, there were some meetings that went well, due to having a respected person in the role of facilitator.
- f) Yet other meetings, w/o facilitator, did not always go so well.

B. Examples of group situations that did **not** work so well:

1) A challenging example of hidden agendas

- a) In one situation, was no opportunity for participants to voice their own goals. In addition, there was lack of clarity about group goal.
- b) There was a lack of listening, & a powerful personality dominated.

- c) Discussion was not welcome, & decision had already been made.
- d) Participants' deep concerns were not heard until the only solution for some was to leave the group.
- e) Other participants caved into the dominant person's view, yet expressed their disagreement privately afterward.
- f) When group does not work well, sometimes b/c hidden agenda.

2) *Do participants always need to decide?*

- a) In this situation, the organizer wanted to facilitate a shared decision, yet the space was used primarily for venting. Participants did not want to take on making a group decision about where to donate funds.
- b) Some of us are uncertain about when to engage participants in decision-making, especially when they are expressing a preference to leave that to the organizers.

3) *Mixed messages*

- a) Some of us had disheartening experience in volunteer group, where people at first were energized by being invited to offer input, yet afterward were not given the opportunity to follow up.
- b) People were asked to participate at first, and then were not respected. This led to disillusionment and frustration.

C) *An example of dealing successfully with a challenging situation*

- 1) A work group that includes people with different professional status has a pattern where nurses and other lower-status professionals are often not heard.
- 2) The language and terms used in this group vary depending on the speaker's level of privilege in the hierarchy.
- 3) In preparation for an important decision, nurses held a pre-meeting to strategize.
- 4) Then they asked a few men to represent their perspective at the upcoming larger meeting, in order to be better heard.
- 5) This strategy was effective. Afterward, nurses intentionally disclosed their strategy to larger organization.
- 6) Many were shocked; what kind of organization are we, that people would need to do this, in order to be heard?
- 7) A larger question about the cost of sacrificing internal diversity, for the strength of having a unified voice.

- 8) While effective, this strategy is also problematic -doesn't do justice to differences and nuances of individual experiences.
- 9) Yet had individual nurses expressed their differences, the 'opposition' could have co-opted that.
- 10) When there is power struggle, we may have differences among us. Yet if we are not unified, we will not succeed in our position.
- 11) How might less-privileged group get together, express diversity among themselves, yet still be united towards larger group?

D. Insights from our conversation

- 1) There's a big difference between real listening or just sitting & waiting for your turn to speak.
- 2) We all want to be heard, but does not easily happen on its own.
- 3) People can fall behind and not be on the same page.
- 4) Worth slowing things down, to have everyone on the same page.
- 5) Often there' competition to be heard, people are quick to respond.
- 6) The value of having a designated person in the role of facilitator; otherwise the listening often does not happen.
- 7) Van Jones speaks about the value of engaging in respectful dialogue: "hearing diversity, leads to unity".
- 8) When we are not being "missionaries" we are more open to hearing diverse views.

V. Group debrief toward the end of the workshop

- 1) Some of us had an initial concern coming in, that the structure of the conversation would be too rigid.
- 2) Some of us found the summaries of what was said (*the reflecting back by the facilitator*) to be very helpful.
- 3) Some of us loved the opportunity to hear examples from everyone, about what worked and what didn't work.
- 4) Some would love to spend more time on a concrete case-study.
- 5) Some of us feel discouraged about what it takes for groups to work well together, even when members are on 'the same side'... let alone the challenge of working with those 'on the other side'!

VI. Written Feedback

What worked well: hearing my concerns about democratic meetings echoed in the group / Respect for participants / Synthesizing comments / Facilitator coordination / Thoughtful & open facilitators / Participant engagement: good group size / Well organized, good planning / Had a reasonable agenda for the time slot / Everyone given time to speak, tell her or his experience.

Take-aways: tools to use / hope / good lists / many thoughts and questions about how I might participate more effectively in our democracy / commitment to listen more deeply / greater interest in different approaches to investigate further

Wanted differently: have facilitators introduce themselves more at start of meeting / statement of purpose (yet missed beginning of meeting) / broader applications / more time for an example of an actual role-play

Anything else: Thank you / I am grateful for your work / What more opportunities for this work, is there in our communities?

VII. What we wrote to participants afterward, that we sent along with the harvest:

How can we create a new culture of democracy, within our activist organizations and movements? *That is the overarching question we explored together. For many of us, it's not enough to be upset with existing power structures and hope we'll be able to do it better, when it is our turn to hold power. Instead, we want to be already practicing **now**, the kinds of communication and organization that are examples of a new culture.*

And so we began by inviting all of us to consider examples from our own life experience, of groups working well together. We also invited examples of challenges, and of breakthroughs -- situations that began as a challenge and ended with success. All of these experiences hold great potential for learning, especially when we explore them together as a group.

In the preceding pages is the harvest from our workshop, beginning with the group summary that we co-created toward the end of the workshop.

That is followed by all of the contributions that got us there, lightly sorted into clusters for meaning and readability. Finally, we included the notes from the debrief as well as from the written feedback forms.

A big thank you from us, to all of you, for your active and engaged participation in this group learning experience!

*more info on our work at www.diaprxaxis.com
and www.livingthechangeberkshires.com*