

OPTIONS & POSSIBILITIES FOR ONGOING GROUP MAINTENANCE & CLEARING

Some groups (often groups who live together) need one or more regular ways to learn about each other and/or clear tension and unhappiness between people to avoid accumulated upset. There are *many* different formats and approaches that can support these functions, here's a list to consider.

Proactively, even before there's any tension to clear, you can:

- **Actively seek positive interactions.** Find a way to increase your positive interaction, which will preclude accumulating unhappiness. Share meals, go for a walk together, dance party, coffee hour, etc.
- **Create personal "User Manuals:"** Ask each person in your group to fill out a form answering questions such as, "Here are the best ways to contact me," and "If you're unhappy with me, here are suggestions for how to approach me about it." The group keeps all the forms in a centrally accessible location (e.g. library, bathroom, or online drive), so that anyone can reference it when needed. Stuff is going to come up, get ready ahead.
- **Make a commitment regarding venting.** Historically Alpha Farm had a policy on venting as follows: People need safe space, venting is going to happen, that's fine. However, once someone feels heard, both the receiver and venter have a further commitment, which is to be constructive, encourage the venter to take responsibility for next steps, and explore options for how to proceed. Don't just passively let the problem continue or fan the flames.
- **Use the *Group Works* deck for regular activities together,** such as offering each other appreciations, noticing what's working well or not, receiving support for dilemmas, and more.

Formats for Personal Unveiling

1. Milling exercises: Get a group together in one space and walk around, then pause in pairs. The leader offers prompts that are answered by one or both people in each pair depending on the format. Prompts range widely depending on the occasion or theme; here are just a few examples:

- "If i could change one thing about myself, it would be . . ."
- "Something i really love about myself is . . ."
- "One of my pet peeves is . . ."

2. Step In, Step Out: Group stands in a loose circle. A series of prompts are offered asking whether someone identifies with a particular characteristic. When the prompt is shared aloud, everyone whose answer is "yes" for that query takes one step toward the middle of the circle; take a moment to look around together and notice who else stepped in, then step back out so everyone is at the rim again. If prompts are offered by participants rather than by a facilitator, there's a rule that you can only offer a prompt which is true for yourself, rather than exposing others while hanging back.

3. "If you really knew me": People take turns briefly answering this prompt with statements that are largely not known by the group and personal, significant, or just interesting. For example, "If you really knew me you would know i want to change jobs;" "I struggle with a hidden disability;" "I had a fight with my lover this morning;" "I am doubting my faith," etc. After a bunch of people have shared, there may be a cross-talk round where listeners offer responses, such as sharing a similar story about themselves or an empathetic feeling that arose in response to hearing what someone said. No judgments or criticism allowed during cross-talk.

Formats for Interpersonal or Group Sharing & Integration

Way of Council

Classic format for a ritualized sharing circle, drawn from indigenous practices. People take turns speaking to the group without interruption or cross-talk. Participants pick up a "talking stick" or other symbolic object while speaking, and place it back in the center (or pass to the next person if doing a go-round) when complete. The most common guidelines are:

- Speak from the heart—share our experiences, our truth as we understand it in this moment, choosing authenticity over image.
- Listen from the heart—set aside judgment and analysis, center presence, empathy, and being a witness to each other.
- Keep our speaking lean—respect each other and the time available, focus on the essence of what we want to share, leaving out the ‘padding’.
- Be spontaneous—instead of rehearsing while others are sharing, we listen attentively, trusting that the right words will come when it’s our turn.

Clearness Process

Some groups have clearness meetings as part of their membership process. In the early Acorn version, these meetings happened at the end of a visitor period as part of the membership application, then at 6 months, and again at one year as part of the application to move from provisional to full member status. At the clearness event, paired conversations took place between the person whose event it was and every other person present, witnessed by the whole group. In each conversation, both parties answered two questions: "What do i appreciate about you (or what helps me feel connected with you?)" and "What is hard for me with you (or what gets in the way between us)?" Acorn later changed the format to private paired conversations, with a capstone meeting of the whole group after pairs were complete. Simple and powerful.

Feedback Gifting Circle

Similar to a clearness process but lighter, this process offers an opportunity for short private conversations. Everyone gathers in a room together, with enough space to spread out. People take turns being Receiver and Giver of feedback. Receivers each sit in a chair scattered around the room, placing an object on the floor in front of them when available to listen. Givers approach someone who's available, and offer the following statements:

1. "Something I appreciate about you is _____."
2. (Optional) "Something that is (or has been) challenging for me with you is _____."
3. "Something I know about myself is _____."
4. "Thank you for listening."

Receivers simply say thank you, and then the interaction is complete. The process allows for multiple interactions, and participants are encouraged to spend some time in each role. Longer description posted on Kavana's website at www.effectivecollective.net/library/gifting_feedback.

Wheel Pairs (aka Speed Dating): Similar to Milling above but longer, this format enables everyone to pair with each other person for a brief interaction, with content chosen in advance based on the current need. Form two concentric circles of chairs, with the inner circle facing outward and the outer circle facing inward. At the end of each turn, people in one circle all shift one seat to the left, so that each person has a new pair partner to talk with. If you have sufficient time for everyone to pair with everyone, include an "infinity crossover,"—at a certain point in the formation, each participant moves from one circle to the other (otherwise people only pair with half the group). This format can be used with the same prompt repeated until you've answered it with every person, or with a series of prompts, such as short questions or sentence completions.

ZEGG Forum

ZEGG is a German acronym translated as "Center for Experimental Cultural Design;" it's the name of an intentional community (and there's a related community called Tamera). To deal with ongoing issues, they created a new form and have since taught it to others around the world. 2-3 facilitators collaboratively run each session. A participant who's ready to share comes in the middle of the group circle and expresses something that's currently up for them, which is then worked with creatively by the facilitation team. It's a bit theatrical at times, and everyone is silent except for the person sharing and the facilitators. When a turn is complete, the facilitators may invite "mirrors," that is, other participants to come up one at a time and briefly offer some response that brings out another aspect of what was shared. Unlike most other items included here, Forum requires training and practice to implement.

More Classical Transparency Tools

"I have a story about you": In this exercise participants are encouraged to tell stories they have about other members, based on assumptions or extrapolations. Accuracy is not required! For example, "I have a story that because you come across kind of fiercely at times, you probably feel soft and tender underneath and that the fierceness is a form of self-protection." Responses are prioritized as follows:

1. "What is true about your story that i had not said before is ____"
2. "Maybe the reason you have this story is because of this piece of my history that you are perhaps unaware of."
3. "I have a strong emotional response to this story because ____"
4. (As non-defensively as possible) "This is why i think your story might not be true ____"

Withholds: The term "withhold" refers to a feeling or upset that has not yet been disclosed with the person who it's about, typically due to fear of a bad response. Some groups set aside time specifically to bring out withholds, sharing them in a cluster as a form of relational housecleaning. Because these can be hard to hear, there should be consent first—if it's not the right time then wait. The person sharing the withhold talks about their distrust or judgement, rather than venting from an angry place. The other person listens and says "thank you," perhaps offering reflective listening and/or some kind of validation. If you disagree with what they said or want to correct their understanding, that only happens with consent as well, and/or is often put off till later.

Hot Seat: Whoever is in the "hot seat" for a turn answers questions posed by the circle for a fixed period of time (usually 5-15 min). Questions are designed to be helpful and invite the focus person to be self-revealing or gain deeper insights. The person in the hot seat should try to help the group see them more clearly, be transparent. The people asking the questions should not hide from difficult topics, but their questions should come from a place of caring for the person, rather than attacking them, though it is OK to be critical if this will help the person see themselves more clearly and reveal self-destructive patterns.

Blind Spots: This can be done as part of a hot seat exercise or by itself. With consent, people are given an explicit opportunity to share things they think a member of the group is not seeing about themselves. People hearing about their blind spots are encouraged to start off responding by saying, "What feels true about what you said is ..." rather than responding defensively or contradicting the suggested blind spot.

Note re Transparency tools, thanks to Paxus Calta for permission to reuse materials. For more information on several of the tools listed above, see <https://paxus.wordpress.com/2013/08/02/transparency-tools/>.

Optional Add-ons

Reflective Listening: Option to potentially add to several activities listed above, such as Withholds, Blind Spots, or Way of Council. Reflective listening means offering back a paraphrase of what was just shared. It doesn't require using the same words, rather the emphasis is on accurately focusing on the core of what was shared. A good reflection is "clean" (includes only what the other person said, not your own analysis, judgment, or response), succinct, and includes an emotional acknowledgement if feelings or tone were shared.

Cross-Talk Round: Optional addition to activities above. Take some time to offer responses to what was shared, being mindful to keep the responses supportive; or, if you're sharing a hard feeling, to "own" it, e.g. "When i heard you say that, i felt angry and defensive, and i think i will need some time to sit with my feelings before i'm ready to engage and sort it out." Other suggestions for cross-talk include:

- Focus on responding to things that were just shared with the group, rather than bringing in new topics
- Be concise and as specific as possible
- Talk more about your feelings and less about what you think
- Use sentences starting with "I" rather than "You...."
- If you are hurt or angry about something said, start your cross-talk by asking if the other person involved is ready and willing to hear your feelings.

More Possibilities

Cocounseling: Peer support framework for sharing deep emotions and healing personal issues. Unlike most forms of psychotherapy, it works with oppressive social dynamics as well as personal material. Lots more info available among varied lineages of practice.

NVC Practice Groups: Nonviolent Communication (aka Compassionate Communication) is a format and way of being for sharing and receiving upsets. The standard formula is to share what one observed, one's emotional response to it, the underlying needs seeking to be addressed, and any request for what happens next or in the future. NVC groups help their members learn to do this specifically and with skill and care.

Circle of Trust: "A circle of trust has no agenda except to help people listen to their own souls and discern their own truths... Its singular purpose is to support the inner journey of each person in the group, to make each soul feel safe enough to show up and speak its truth, to help each person listen to his or her own inner teacher. In a circle of trust we are governed by a simple rule: "No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight." The relationships in such a group are not pushy but patient; they are not confrontational but compassionate; they are filled not with expectations and demands but with abiding faith in the reality of the inner teacher and in each person's capacity to learn from it." (From *A Hidden Wholeness* by Parker Palmer. See www.couragerenewal.org for more information.)

Book Groups: Sometimes discussing a shared text offers a pathway to building more trust together. It doesn't have to be long, sometimes a poem will do.