

Creating a Platform for Openness and Doubt

Part of our task as consultants is to create opportunities for all voices and points of view to be heard. The redistribution of power and accountability happens when honest, confronting conversations take place in public settings. Providing the physical and psychological space for this shift to happen is the first step in transforming a culture and implementing a change.

The key conversation that needs to go public is about people's doubts and reservations. Until we can speak truthfully in public about our doubts, reservations, and past disappointments, we are unable to invest in a different future. The success of an implementation strategy will depend on the quality of the conversation that begins it. The more public the setting, the more powerful the impact.

The Theory

People can trust a system only when they see it can handle conflict and skepticism and not become punishing or collapse. An important task for the consultant is to give permission for the expression of negative feelings and to see that they are responded to in a respectful way. Designing time for public doubts and concern is the way faith in an institution is restored.

The Practice

Any Question Will Do. Break people into teams of six to eight people and ask them to share with each other their doubts or reservations about whatever is the focus of the meeting. A colleague of mine, the late Kathie Dannemiller, one of the inventors of high-interaction methods of working with large groups, liked to ask people what excites them and what scares them. She also used two other questions: "What did you hear?" and "What is your reaction?"

Some other questions for getting things started:

What doubts and reservations do you have about what is on the table? Discuss the personal impact the change has on me/us Find some way of talking about how individuals feel about what is being proposed. Not how they evaluate it, but what feelings it generates. The intent is to surface doubts and reservations without reinforcing the helplessness.

Discuss possibilities. Postpone discussion of action plans as long as possible. It is ironic that the rush to decide what to do is often a defense against real change. Change is the experience of changing our thinking first, actions second. If we rush to action, we stop learning and make tomorrow a reenactment of yesterday. The rush to lists and planning can be an indirect way of saying no to the deeper intent of implementation.

Discuss ownership. What part we have played in creating the situation? Owning our contribution to the problem gives hope: If we helped cause it, we can fix it. It triggers guilt for a while, but beyond that is our freedom.

Ask Each Group to Report. Do not require agreement or consensus within the teams. We want a wide range of reactions. The main purpose is to support open dialogue, not to decide anything. There is no need for the leaders or consultant to do anything more than listen, maybe clear up questions of fact, and support the expression of doubt.

No Solutions Allowed. This is a time for listening and speaking. Postpone action and recommendations. If we make decisions before there is connection, dialogue, and some commitment, the decisions that we do make will be corrupted by the isolation, caution, and distrust that exist at the beginning of the efforts.

The Point

The way we react to doubt, cynicism, even anger, tells the world whether we want negative feelings spoken or not. Our response becomes either an invitation or refusal for the next discussion. In fact, the stronger the negative reaction, the more acknowledgement is required. Many of the skills of dealing with resistance outlined in the book are appropriate here.

Freedom of speech and freedom of assembly do not become real except in moments of conflict and disagreement. The fact that the most alienated people in the organization are given a platform to speak does more to build commitment from those watching the conversation than any compelling presentation or financial incentive program ever can.