

IS COMMUNITY MEETING RELEVANT TO THE ACADEMIC SETTING?

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What is a “Community Meeting”?

A Community Meeting is a deliberate, repetitive transition ritual intended to psychologically move people from some activity that they have been doing into a new group psychological space preparing the way for collective thought and action. For all members of any group it provides a predictable bridge that directly and indirectly reinforces community norms. It is *not* a therapy group and for the purposes of the Sanctuary Model it is meant to be brief and meaningful in a way that does not interfere with the logistics of the meeting or the day ahead.

Is Community Meeting Relevant to the Academic Environment?

Beginning a meeting in a structured way is simply doing something that is as ancient as human beings. Gathering in a circle to meet each other eye-to-eye has been the basic structure of human groups for as long as human groups have existed. Circling up, circling the wagons, and the sacred hoop all represent this vital form of interactive connection and interdependence.

Starting with such a ritual may be even more important than it ever has been because of the stressful lives we lead. Few of us would suggest that we have enough time to do everything that we are tasked to do. This sense of never finishing work is stressful and chronic stress is toxic, not just to our individual lives but to our group lives as well. The higher the level of stress, the more our brains and bodies are flooded with powerful chemicals that make us more fearful and more aggressive. This is a very natural response to a threat from a predatory animal, but not such a great response when the threat is to our status and sense of self-worth, not our bodies. It is this kind of stress that we are likely to encounter at work when time is short and workload demands are high. So what can we do? We can deliberately set about creating better workplace environments that help each one of us individually, and all of us as teams, to contain and manage workplace stress. One of the very simple things we can do is start every meeting, and even every day, with a Community Meeting.

Supporting Collective Effort

It’s an interesting fact that although most workplaces in the for-profit and nonprofit worlds are dependent on collective effort, rarely is any attention paid to how a collection of independent individuals becomes a group. To be effective, a group must be capable of thinking and acting together in the service of a shared goal, rather than thinking and acting as separate individuals. We just assume that when it works, it works and when it doesn’t it’s because we don’t have the right combination of individuals. At any point in time, it may be true that the “right” people

aren't in the room. OR the problem may be that we don't have the right process, a process that honors the transition from "me" to "we." That's what makes starting a meeting, any meeting, with some version of a Community Meeting necessary if you want groups of people to pull together in the service of a larger goal.

Group Norms

The regular use of Community Meetings is necessary for the practice of nonviolence and for deep democracy. A Community Meeting is a deliberate, repetitive transition ritual intended to psychologically move people from some activity that they have been doing into a new group psychological space preparing the way for collective thought and action. In the form and content of the meeting, people nonverbally and overtly pressure each other to conform to community norms and expectations. For all members of any group, this provides a predictable bridge that directly and indirectly reinforces community norms. Rules are made and administered by authority figures and are likely to be broken. Norms emerge out of a group, and most people are influenced by group norms.

The Community Meeting gives everyone a voice and offers a safe and nonthreatening environment in which people can begin finding words to express feelings on a regular basis. It conveys to the community that emotional intelligence is important while at the same time recognizing that feelings are "no big deal" because everyone in the community can watch feelings, even distressing feelings, come and go, wax and wane even over the course of a 15-minute meeting. The leveling of hierarchy that is expressed by the equal participation in the process signals to everyone in the community that "we are in this together" and reinforces the *Commitment to Social Responsibility*. At the same time, the importance of relationship always remains in the forefront. Once the skill and safety of the Community Meeting are established, the meeting becomes a natural and spontaneous process that any member of the community can use when trouble is brewing, tension is rising, or an untoward event has occurred. In this way, the Community Meeting becomes an extremely effective tool for creating and sustaining an atmosphere of nonviolence.

The Questions

There are four questions that comprise Community Meeting. The first is the affirmation of identity, "Who are you?" This question may seem superfluous in a group that thinks it knows everyone in the group – and it may be. However, when a group is still in a formative stage, it is very useful for people to identify who they are in case someone in the group is new or only attends occasionally and therefore has not yet absorbed everyone's name.

The second question is *“What are you feeling?”* This is meant to be an expression of one feeling, a snapshot in the moment of a dominant emotional state – not group therapy and not an exploration of one’s entire emotional existence. This question helps the group to understand the nonverbal messages they are receiving from each other – an inevitable part of human transactions. Emotions are contagious and we pick them up from each other in about a hundredth of a second. Nonverbal communication, when misunderstood, easily leads to unnecessary conflict that can interfere with the actual work of the meeting. Getting emotion out in the open, means it is less likely that the feelings of one individual will nonverbally dominate the group process.

The third question is *“What is your goal for this meeting?”* Groups of people may be difficult to manage and people often come to a meeting having just been cognitively focused on other things. Changing our cognitive states is not always easy and the higher the stress levels, the more difficult it may be. Getting everyone focused immediately on goals simply means that as a group, we are more likely to be organized and efficient. It also immediately cues the leader that there may be more discussion than is on the meeting agenda.

The final question is *“Who can you ask for help if you need it?”* This is a very quick way of increasing affiliation in a group and giving each of us a small jolt of oxytocin, the chemical that engenders trust – a key component for working collectively. It also is a way of repeatedly setting a social norm about social responsibility.