

Guidelines for Transformative Conversations

Conversations can be “just talk,” but when they are well constructed they can be a force for personal, social, and spiritual transformation. There are many ways that practitioners have found to structure transformative conversations and each has advantages in particular circumstances. These techniques include *Circles*, *Open Space Technology*, *World Café*, and *Appreciative Inquiry*.

While each is somewhat different and has benefits in different contexts, they all have certain qualities in common that, when present, ensure very positive outcomes. When these three qualities are held in tension, something new arises in a fourth dimension.

Passion: All the persons in the room are clear about the issue being addressed and are passionate about it. A conversation has passion when it is about something that everyone in the conversation believes is important, that is;

- **Focused:** it is about something very specific.
- **Urgent:** it is about something that must be dealt with now.
- **Blocked:** it is about a problem that can't be solved because of barriers that don't seem to budge.

Complexity: Each understands that the issue is more complex than they can solve on their own and thus they need the perspective of others. The problem itself is something arising out of multiple interdependent variables and about which there are many perspectives which derive from:

- **History:** each person comes with a different set of experiences.
- **Meaning:** these experiences suggest different ways of making meaning.
- **Need:** each may identify differing qualities that are missing which any solution will need to construct.

Inclusion: Structure of the conversation ensures that all voices are heard and can influence outcomes. Everyone is fully and equally included in the conversation, specifically

- **Audience:** Each person is listened to by everyone else.
- **Voice:** Each person gets a chance to speak.
- **Agency:** Everyone's perspective has an equal opportunity to impact any conclusion or outcome.

Having a well-structured conversation invites positive outcomes but is itself dependent upon those in the conversation coming with a set of abilities that we can learn and enhance through practice. The more each has these abilities the better the outcome is likely to be for all the participants in the conversation.

Articulation: As a participant in the conversation I will have a chance to express my own thoughts and experiences. In order to do this I must;

- **Self-knowledge:** Know my experience/perspective with clarity,
- **Language skills:** Know words and syntax to describe my perspective such that there is a high likelihood that others will understand my meaning,
- **Safety:** Feel safe to speak clearly and honestly letting others know me.

Inspiration: While I will have a chance to speak, I will also want to hear what others have to say. I want to “breathe in” what they are expressing. To do this well I must;

- **Hear what others say:** I will have to be able to concentrate on their words more than prepare what I want to say next.
- **Understand what others mean:** I will have to be able to translate from their words into my own way of making meaning such that it relates to my experience enough that it makes sense to me.
- **Hear my resistance and anxiety:** Because others have a different perspective on things that are very important to me I will become anxious and resist what they are saying. I will find that resistance and soothe myself enough that I can truly hear the other.

Transformation: This conversation is about more than passing time or getting to know someone. This is about addressing a problem that matters to me. For this reason I have to be willing to change what I do. I open myself to transformation when I;

- **Observe my own attachment to ideas and assumptions:** If I am to participate in this transformation I will have to identify the places where I am hanging on to what has been.
- **Become vulnerable and let go of how I have been:** Having seen what I cling to I have to relax my grasp. This is a form of repentance.
- **See a New Way of Being:** Get clear about what it is that I/we need and envision a way of being that brings this quality into being.