

A Group Reflection Technique: The Council Process



We trace the origins of our “Council Process” to classical Greek culture, the peoples of the plains and southwestern deserts, and the League of the Iroquois, which had a powerful influence on the beginnings of our present democratic governmental system. In recent years, Council is again being used in settings as diverse as intentional communities, schools, families, and the business world as a way to explore possibilities and reflect on council members’ experiences and differences, without the pressure for agreement or consensus.

In the Youth Volunteer Corps of Corvallis, Oregon, we use Councils to enhance the team experience, to facilitate reflection, and to foster a critical sense of belonging. It cuts through “appearances,” promotes participation and problem-solving, and teaches conflict-resolution skills by creating a safe container for the conflict.

As we sit together on the ground (those who are uncomfortable on the ground should be invited to sit in a chair) and pass the talking stick, the team reflects on their experience. (The “stick” does not have to be a stick. It can be any object chosen by the team: a rock, drawing, gem, volleyball, anything that has special meaning.) Passing the talking stick encourages deep listening. It nurtures tolerance, patience, empathy, and appreciation for individual differences.

Most groups adopt a few rules to support the process, such as speak briefly, from the heart, no put-downs, no cross-talk, and the right to pass without speaking.

At the beginning of Council, the leader invites the members to dedicate the Council. They can dedicate to a person, a human quality or experience such as “perseverance” or “love,” or to an animal, tree, or place.

Council can have a theme: tell a story about a time when you said good-bye. Or, it can be about the project the team just finished, the satisfactions and frustrations of it, or any conflicts it brought up within or between members.

And be sure to think with the members about the issue of confidentiality. Remember: this is a powerful educational tool. Don’t be in a hurry.