

Intergroup and Intercultural Dialogue – An International Learning Exchange Thursday, July 9, 2009

Notes

As a prelude to examining the means of inter-cultural and inter-group engagement, this group began with exercises to open conversation about how we think about and define culture and identity. We also examined the factors that influence the choices we make about what aspects of culture and identity we identify with and choose to speak of to perceived “others”.

The ways people in the group defined culture included:

- Ethnic/country of origin
- Regional (Where we were raised)
- Suburban/Rural
- Pace of Life – (i.e. ‘I’m very east coast”)
- Shared experience – woman, age, member of justice community, motherhood, privilege & power.
- Language
- Race & Identity
- Religion
- Age

When people reflected on **what was going on in their minds as they were deciding what to say** to one another about their own culture/identities, they said:

- I found it difficult to describe myself;
- Thinking about how I would be perceived, what I want to put out and hold back
- Different levels of who I am (work, etc)
- Wanted to say “my work” because this is a work-related event
- Do I talk about who I am or what I do?

The choices people made about what to say included:

- Spoke of my culture; where I was born

- I talked about where I was from
- I said where my family was from
- I talked about family; about being a mother
- Work is my passion; so that's what I said

The group then discussed **what makes it possible to speak across a divide** about one's culture and identity. The ensuing conversation mixed individual behaviors with examples of program activities that have been successful.

- Listening to 'go deep'
- Curious about where people would start the conversation
- Racial Reconciliation
- Story circles; levels the field
- Burlington, VT; racial tensions addressed with cultural celebrations
- Arts & Celebration and Food as a way of bring the community together
- Tribal, State, Federal Officials, Indigenous Peoples, Different Tribes (rural/urban) meeting together
- Creating a shared "Values system" and understanding of "levels of oppression"

The strengths or advantages of these approaches:

- Equalization (changing physical set-up of a room leads to a more level field)
- Contributions are recorded; put on a screen; very important to Native Americans to show authentic statements.
- Strong outreach/invite
- Relationships
- Citizen-led (not just govt)
- Shared passion, broad outreach

Challenges that must be met in order for inter-group/inter-cultural dialogue to be successful included:

- Mis-communication due to cultural insensitivity or misunderstanding
- Inaccurate, unchecked perceptions and assumptions

- Fear of the process
- Language/translation (availability & cost)
- Being your true self not just politically correct
- Insensitivity to the context, history and concerns of the other group/s

Suggestions/Ideas/Recommendations for people who want to initiate dialogue:

- Look for right opportunity: is the situation/context “ripe” for dialogue?
- Create a compelling invitation
- Have a passion for people and relationships
- Understand and articulate where this initiative fits in to the larger context
- Clear purpose and articulation of same
- Start with opportunity for people to self identify
- Don’ t just talk, but take action
- Language of dialogue can be intimidating; translate into every day speech
- Have a shared vision/goal of where you’re going; have everyone involved
- Who is /is not at the table – you need to know this
- Practice active listening
- Willingness to change/adapt as the group changes
- The “people” are the experts should be allowed to contribute
- Understand there is more than one way to see/view democracy and participatory exercises
- Find ways to create a collective consciousness about how to do this work
- People in the field must show responsibility and accountability for each other.
- Include students/young people in the planning process for these types of meetings (specific feedback re: TDI)

Nuggets from the Exchange Leaders (Lars, Bob, Gwen)

- Have a vision of where you want to go

- Can't assume that people will come to a room and begin – need to make sure there is a starting point
- Know who is at/and not at the table
- Have various points of entry at the table (to be inclusive)
- Facilitator skills are key
- Deal with power imbalance up front
- Honor each other's space at the table
-

Learning Exchange Summary Outline

Main Ideas

- Intergroup and Intercultural dialogue is essential to creating conditions for action to take place

Action Strategies

- Broad, inclusive outreach strategies are necessary for action

Emerging Partnerships

?

Priorities for the Field

(see suggestions/ideas/recommendations)

