

Realizing Human Rights through Learning

Human Rights City Edmonton Facilitator Program

John Humphrey Centre

“The importance of education is not just practical: a well-educated, enlightened and active mind, able to wander freely and widely, is one of the joys and rewards of human existence.”

- UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

HUMAN RIGHTS DIALOGUES:

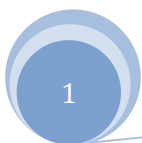
- Are small group discussions involving deliberation and problem solving, in which an issue is examined and connected to relevant human rights documents;
- Are enriched by the members’ knowledge and experience, and integrates expert information and discussion materials;
- Are aided by an impartial facilitator whose job is to manage the discussion;
- Engage participants in a learning process that brings diverse perspectives towards common understandings and goals. One listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement. It involves a real concern for the other people in the dialogue and searches for their strengths as individuals and within their perspectives.
- Work toward collaborative solutions. Two or more sides work together toward common understanding. It involves introspection and reflection and the improvement of ideas and solutions and assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable, sustainable solution.

Human Rights Dialogues are **not** the same as conflict resolution, mediation, focus groups, traditional education with teachers and students, a facilitated meeting with a predetermined outcome, a town meeting or a public hearing.

HUMAN RIGHTS DIALOGUE FACILITATION

THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR:

- Create an atmosphere of trust and respect
- Maintain neutrality
- Help group establish ground rules and keep them
- Help members reflect and digest content of discussions by asking probing questions
- Help members identify areas of agreement and disagreement
- Create opportunities for everyone to participate
- Focus and help clarify the discussion
- Protect individuals and their ideas from attack
- Value wisdom of all
- Hold the bigger picture in mind
- Summarize key points in the discussion and allow adequate time for closing the discussion



KEY SKILLS FOR THE FACILITATOR:

- **Reflection and clarification** – restating the content and feeling of a message to ensure the clarity of the messages and connections to other viewpoints
- **Summarize** – concisely pulling out the main thoughts of the discussion
- **Shift focus** – moving from a speaker or topic to another as needed
- **Use of silence** – allowing time and space for reflection
- **Non-verbal and verbal signals** – combining body and verbal language to communicate in order to encourage or discourage behaviors in a group
- **Neutrality** – ensuring a safe and welcome space for sharing by all participants and allowing them to define and take ownership of the dialogue content and outcomes
- **Participatory** – being committed to democratic principles and creating an atmosphere for democratic deliberation, one in which each participant feels at ease in expressing ideas and responding to those of others
- **Boomerang** – bouncing questions to the facilitator back to the group
- **Positive** – complimenting and maintaining a positive outlook on the group, their input and the process

TRIED AND TRUE GROUND RULES IN FACILITATION:

equality, opportunity, participation, respect, dignity

- Everyone has wisdom
- We need everyone's wisdom for the wisest result
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood
- One person speaks at a time
- Share 'air time'
- Conflict is not personalized - don't label, stereotype, or call people names
- Speak for yourself, not others
- You can change your mind
- Silence = Agreement
- What is said in the group stays here, unless everyone agrees to change that
- Have Fun!!

DEALING WITH CHALLENGES IN FACILITATION:

Most human rights dialogues go smoothly as participants are there voluntarily and have an interest in the program. There are always challenges in any group process. What follows are some of the most common difficulties in groups and some possible ways to deal with them.

Problem: Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.

Possible responses: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact – it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak.

Problem: An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion.

Possible responses: As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing you *must* intervene and set limits. If not, the quiet people will feel less inclined to speak up and you are not hearing the full range of participant views. Coming to a common understanding and going through a process of learning needs to ensure equal participation. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate. Be careful to manage your comments and tone of voice – you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker.

Problem: Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off topic.

Possible responses: Responding to this takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the discussion along but it is not always clear which way it is going. Keep an eye on participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off topic right now, would you like to stay with this or move on to the next question?"

Problem: Someone puts forth information which you know to be false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts that no one present knows the answer.

Possible responses: Ask, "Has anyone heard of conflicting information?" If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. If no one knows the facts, encourage that the discussion move forward.

Problem: Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.

Possible responses: This may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle until everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and isn't coming to grips with the tensions inherent in the issue. Ask probing questions and try to push the thinking deeper. Also, if the group

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appears tired, mix up your approaches and try some different styles of facilitating – break them into smaller groups for brainstorming for example.

Problem: Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue, or one participant gets angry and confronts another.

Possible responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is constructive and leads to learning. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue: it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but personal attacks are not acceptable and violate one's dignity. You will be better able to stop personal attacks if you have established ground rules in advance. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one on one with participants in question.

In the past as well, we have had experience with participants having specific disabilities or barriers to participating verbally or physically in activities. Often if the other participants are not aware of another's limitations, they can become frustrated and impatient with the situation and with the other person who may appear not to be participating. Encourage your participants to share with you prior to the dialogue any challenges they have so that you can mitigate and respond to this in the group dialogue. This can allow for an incredible learning experience when the issue is shared and discussed.

SOURCES ADAPTED IN THIS DOCUMENT:

Study Circles Resource Center (1998). *A Guide for Training Study Circle Facilitators*. Topfield Foundation, Promfet CT.

