

LIVING COMMUNICATION

A framework for leader-full organizations



“Nothing in our doing or the way we go through life will shift until we can question, and then choose once again, the basic set of beliefs—some call it mental models; we’re calling it context here—that lie behind our actions. ...Implied in this insight is that we can choose a context that better suits who we are now.”

Peter Block, *Community; The Structure of Belonging*, (p. 15)

Context Exercise Instructions:

Let’s start with the end in mind; when you want different results you have to do begin in a different way. Conversational context is not a set of ‘rules’ or ‘agreements’ that never change, instead, it is a loose way to define the components you want conversations to begin with. It is best to consider them fluid and changing, because with the complexity of our world, holding rigid ideas is a detriment.

The best metaphor is from gardening. The most important work in gardening is to prepare the dirt so that it nurtures what you intend to plant. There are different soil requirements for different seeds. To prepare the dirt you need to know exactly what components it currently contains and then you need to take things out, or add things in. Gardeners can spend quite a bit of time to prepare the dirt because they know how much this work affects the end product.

All conversations already grow from the context that each of us bring with us. We have assumptions; about what is possible, about how others will treat us, if we think others will listen or not. We hold values and beliefs that we think others share or that they do not. We have expectations about how we and others are supposed to act in this specific situation. We are normally unconscious of all of these things, yet they are what our conversations grow from.

Here are the objectives of the exercise.

- Reflection: The exercise offers the opportunity for participants to ‘see’ what context they are already bringing to the conversation.
- Relationship building: As individuals share what they are bringing, participants learn more about the others and share in ah-ha moments of; honestly and vulnerability, and witness the courage of others to choose new ways.

- Choice: The group gets to discuss and see a vision for a new possibility, then choose a new way to nurture their conversations.
- Dirt: Creates a statement, or visual piece that is read, or seen at the beginning of each new conversation to 'ground' the discussion.

Step 1:

Step one will take twice as long as the following steps and optimally can take one to two hours. It is worth the time! Use the following set of questions to trigger conversation. Each participant should be offered a felt tip to capture the ideas by drawing or writing on a big piece of paper in the center of the table.

Facilitating this conversation is going to vary depending on the size of group. For 10 or more people break the group up into smaller groups of no more than 6 people. Have each group complete step one, then bring them back together to harvest the main points.

Again, this is not a rigid set of questions. There may be other questions that fit the group you are working with.

- What assumptions do I/we bring to the conversation?
- What affirmations could we use?
- What don't I/we want?
- What values and beliefs do I/we hold?
- What would we like our conversations to 'look' like?
- How will we act towards each other?
- What does it look like when we don't agree?
- What new thinking about expectations will we choose to have?
- Imagine what will be possible when we have a 'new' conversation

Watch for: Participation is key, watch and listen to hear if you need to give space for any participant to contribute to the conversation. This step is not a place to judge or limit entries. Move the conversation back to listening and not commenting.

Step 2:

This step is best done quickly and not to work this step for too long. Most of us are coming from a rigid-linear frame of mind, where 'agreements' are wordsmithed over a long period of time. In our current world we need to be agile and be able to shift when needed.

In your instructions, explain that the group will be choosing the main components, but that these will contain the essence of everything that was discussed. They will symbolize the work

and remind the group of the discussion you just had. In this step you creating a rough draft by identifying the main components.

With a group of under about 10 they can capture the top 5-10 concepts through conversation. Everyone does not have to fully agree to each choice but the components each individual wants included should be. This is the beginning of a new understanding where we learn to accept that differing opinions can coexist. For large groups you may opt to give 5-10 sticky dots to each person so that they can place their dots on the paper next to the components they want to include.

Watch for: The desire to argue over word choices, or get into wordsmithing, or the ‘old’ thinking that everyone has to come to a solid, common agreement. It would be counter-productive and is not necessary for this to work to succeed.

Step 3:

Here is where you can get creative. The group might choose to use a list of words, they may draw a symbol, they may create; a piece of art, a poem, or a set of statements. Again, getting bogged down in details goes against what the exercise teaches. Remind the group that the entire conversation is contained in this final product and that it is a reminder of the whole.

Something that is quick to read, or memorable will be easier to use at each new conversation and allows more room for flexibility. This is not a tool for participants to show others that they are not following ‘the rules’. It is a touch point to use as a reminder of the groups intention to have a new conversation and that everyone is working to change their behaviors and expectations.

Watch for: Realism is important. The group should acknowledge that the best conversation is not one where everyone is in agreement all the time. A great conversation is not one where no voice ever gets raised or no emotion felt. Work to create a final context that acknowledges differences.

“The context that restores community is one of possibility, generosity, and gifts, rather than one of problem solving, fear, and retribution. A new context acknowledges that we have all the capacity, expertise, and resources that an alternative future requires. Communities are human systems given form by conversations that build relatedness.”

Community; The Structure of Belonging, Peter Block (p. 29)