

Collective Visioning

Exercise 4

The goal of this exercise is to build trust and create community through storytelling and active listening.

Stepping Stones

I have used this exercise for many years as it has been powerful and life changing for many people, although it's probably the simplest exercise I have ever used.

To begin, ask people to get centered, and explain to them the guidelines for being an active listener:

- Active listening to other's stories is as important as telling our own stories. Being heard is critical to building trust. When one person is telling a story, the job of others is to listen actively, to try to understand, and to reflect on what they're hearing. It is usually not ok to interrupt.
 - Listen with your ears, of course, but also with your eyes and your hearts.
 - Give all of your attention to the person speaking, showing you are listening with eye contact and body language *e.g. nodding when appropriate).
 - Do not interrupt, but listen for understanding. If you have a question, wait until the person is done with the story. Sometimes, in the context of the story, your question will get answered.
 - Don't make judgements or jump to conclusions. Listen with acceptance and openness.
 - Use silence effectively. It is easy to jump in or ask a question when someone stops talking. Unless the speaker has indicated that they are finished, let the silence be there. Give the person telling the story time to pull their thoughts together. The person may be struggling with words or feelings of telling something painful or difficult. In interrupt can stop the story from revealing itself.

Ask people to tell a story about three to five (depending on time) of the stepping-stones of their lives that brought them to where they are today. This exercise almost always requires ten minutes per person, and some people take longer. Each story is such a powerful expression of self that it's hard to cut people short. I suggest dividing the group into smaller circles if you have more people than can speak for ten minutes each within the time available. You can ring a gentle bell at the end of nine minutes to signal each person to finish up.

This exercise should be done in a very open-ended way, allowing people to take their stories where they want, or if the group is focused on a particular issue, the stories can relate to that issue. In that case, you could ask, "What are the five stepping-stones in your life that brought you into the current work you do for education (or whatever issue you are focusing on)?"

It is critical to allow enough time – at least two minutes per stepping stone – for people to tell their stories. Each person needs six to ten minutes, so if you have a group of twenty, for instance, this exercise would take about three and a half hours. People can get tired of listening this long and lose focus, so you need to build in breaks but if you have an agenda, taking up to four hours for this exercise means you might not be able to get to everything else. However, you can ask for fewer stepping-stones. You can even ask, "What one life experience brought you to the work you do for change today?"

The other option, which I prefer, is to get folks into smaller groups. Although not everyone gets to hear each other's stories, there is so much power in allowing everyone to tell their story in depth and be heard that it's a more empowering experience overall.