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Using Discussion Methods to Inspire Diversity: Harnessing Social & Cultural Capital

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Using Discussion Methods to Inspire Diversity: Harnessing Social & Cultural Capital

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Abstract: *How can you better harness the powerful social capital that exists within diverse individuals, families, businesses, and schools to make positive impacts in your community? What could you add to your next meeting—a Chamber strategic planning session, an employee wellness program, a non-profit board development—to better connect participants with valuable (and sometimes hidden) resources that often go untapped? This article describes a guided-discussion process in which participants (communities, volunteers, clients, students, non-profits, business alliances, etc.) discover strength, richness, and value within their collective narratives. It allows exploration of topics in diversity, social capital and community action.*

Introduction

In recent years, local governments, communities, neighborhoods, organizations, schools, and private businesses have made strides in the area of diversity and

inclusion (Cunningham, 2009; Robinson & Meikle-Yaw, 2007; Bensimon, 2004; Duster, 1992). Some of the early non-discrimination and equal opportunity actions were driven largely by quotas (Hasnas, 2002; Lundberg, 1991). Today, however, it is well documented that harnessing social and cultural capital can create networks that encourage inherent value and underlying talents to emerge in an organization (Bristol & Tisdell, 2010; Musoba & Baez, 2009; Putnam, 2000). By giving voice to varying experiences, histories, ethnicities, colors, incomes, appreciations, and perspectives, conversational tones change. New ideas and discussions surface. In brief, a diversity of worldviews, ideas, and beliefs can enrich conversations and have a positive impact on overall organizational and personal wellbeing.

But how do you inspire people to include diversity in discussion? Many organizations have asked group members to participate in role-play scenarios. This may seem out of the ordinary or uncomfortable for some (Pratt & Bowman, 2008), but great insight often results when people give identity a voice (Ponessa, 1999) or play the role of "other." Feelings, attitudes, and perspectives often surface. But if you have already used that technique, *how else* might you help a group reach a deeper level of engagement and include diverse perspectives?

This article describes a process for using discussion as a model that can deeply engage participants in the topic of diversity and inclusion. Unlike standard discussion exercises, this process evokes deep feelings and narrative tellings by using excerpts from a recent, critically acclaimed book written by a Pulitzer winning journalist. It also narrows the definition of discussion, positing it as a deliberate process for engaging participants.

The main objectives of using this process are that participants will:

1. Experience a technique that encourages action to make a positive impact;
2. Consider the power of stories—personal narratives—and how these can positively affect community; and
3. Better identify and understand change that may be occurring in their job, community and their own life.

The overarching goal is for participants to gain understandings of differences through hearing the histories of others, which can lead to positive action.

Discussion Defined

To gain depth in the process, the leader should begin by clarifying the definition of discussion. True discussion is not simply a question-and-answer session during a presentation, nor is it a conversation (casual or formal), nor a deliberation. Last, it is not a debate.

Brookfield and Preskill (2006), Stein (2010), and Frederick (1981) say discussion is to help reach an informed understanding, to enhance self-awareness and self-critique, to foster appreciation of diversity, and to catalyze action. This process follows their outline to achieve these purposes.

Below is a scripted narrative that a discussion leader may use to deepen the next purposed meeting or conversation on how diversity may improve an organization.

The Discussion Process Script

Climate Setting, Goals, and Ground Rules

"This is an open discussion. We're seeking to understand and find common ground. There is no right or wrong. We're here because we want to participate and help a community (broadly defined) succeed. But how can we best do that? I believe the answer lies in understanding each other more clearly. Through understanding, we can achieve greater impact. One method of increasing understanding is through discussion."

Introductions

"Let's first do some quick introductions. Please state your name, where you're from, and something people might not know from looking at you."

Objective

"Today, we will have an unstructured discussion together so that we might jointly discover—concurrently construct—a greater understanding that can (and hopefully will) lead to positive action. Our overall goal is using the power of our collective diversity to improve a situation. Let's begin by reading a brief excerpt."

Book Introduction

"Isabel Wilkerson's 2010 book, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, gives personal accounts of what life was like for many African-Americans who left the South between the 1920s and 1970s in search of 'warmth from some other sun.' Wilkerson interviewed more than 1,200 people and

documented accounts of their struggles. Here's a quote that might prompt personal introspection and get the conversation started."

"Perhaps the most significant measure of the Great Migration was the act of leaving itself, regardless of the individual outcome. Despite the private disappointments and triumphs of any individual migrant, the Migration, in some ways, was its own point. The achievement was in making the decision to be free and acting on that decision, wherever that journey led them" (Wilkerson, 2010, p. 535).

"Listen to that last sentence again: 'The achievement was in making the decision to be free and acting on that decision, wherever that journey led them.'"

"I believe we are ALL in need of 'making a decision to be free.' Our neighborhoods need freedom from _____. (Fill in the blank: crime, gentrification, food poverty, etc.) Our schools need freedom from _____. And I personally need freedom from _____. (Fill in the blank with an honest, perhaps humorous, statement about yourself.)

Key Question

"Who has an example of something that they've seen in their (neighborhood, volunteer association, church, school, etc.) that needs to change? Who has felt something tugging at their heart that they know needs attention?"

(Let the conversation begin. Use generous silence as a method to allow participants time to think before they speak. This is not a normal, rapid-fire discussion.)

Wrap-up / Summarize

"We have talked about a lot of things. What might we do now? What element of diversity could you add to your next meeting to better connect participants with valuable (and sometimes hidden) resources that often go untapped? How can we help citizens find 'warmth from other suns?' What are your thoughts on where we go from here?"

Implications for Extension Work

Leaving. Perhaps Wilkerson's treatise on leaving is metaphoric for educators in Extension. Perhaps reassessing the traditional approach to clientele could help Extension leave some long-standing programs—the sacred cows—and give much needed consideration to "other" so that it could be more effective in a culturally

diverse society (Schauber, 2001).

This discussion process can help do that. It can be used to harness valuable social and community capital that can lead to inspired action in communities across the land.

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