The Vermont Center of Activity has been piloting a format for doing “fishbowl” protocols that we would like to share. A fishbowl refers to an arrangement where a larger group of participants is broken into an inner and outer circle with the inner circle actively participating in the protocol and the outer providing feedback. The fishbowl can be used with any of the NSRF protocols.

The Partner Fishbowl is a variation of this method that we have found to get all participants to be more active in the protocol, to provide a higher level of safety for the presenter and participants, to be an excellent way to introduce the use of protocols and to be effective for pushing the conversation deeper during protocols.

How does it work? As the name implies, everyone participating in the protocol—presenter, facilitator, and participants—is paired with a partner. Each pair has one member sitting in the inner and one member sitting in the outer circle at any given time; each participant pair decides which of them will start where (though the presenter and the facilitator will necessarily be in the inner circle). During the protocol, the facilitator stops the conversation at certain points and has the partners consult with each other. Pairs can switch circles during these stopping points if they so desire. We have found the partner fishbowl to work well with both beginning groups who are using the protocols for the first time, and for experienced groups hoping to push the conversation deeper.

Partner Fishbowl for Groups New to Protocols

With new groups, the aim of the partner fishbowl is to familiarize the group with the protocol and to allow reflection on how to effectively engage in the protocol. During the protocol, the facilitator, who should be an experienced CFG member, stops the protocol at each major conversation stopping point and asks the presenter and participants, to be an excellent way to introduce the use of protocols and to be effective for pushing the conversation deeper during protocols.

Partner Fishbowl for Experienced Groups

The partner fishbowl is also an effective way to push experienced groups to deepen the conversation. With an experienced group, the facilitator asks the partners to consult with each other about what questions or comments might push the conversation deeper at different points during the protocol. We have found this practice to add significant depth to the ensuing conversation because everyone involved in the protocol is focused and proactive about this goal. The facilitator’s partner should help the facilitator make decisions about how to lead the protocol with an emphasis on getting to the harder questions. The role of the presenter’s partner is critical in experienced groups because pushing the conversation deeper involves a greater risk for the presenter. The presenter gives the partner, through frequent check-ins about comfort level and learnings, the necessary support so that participants can push harder. Another advantage of a partner for the presenter is that it allows the facilitator to concentrate on his/her efforts on deepening the conversation as the presenter’s needs are met by someone else. In my experience as a facilitator, being relieved of the duty of assuring the comfort of the presenter has helped me to lead protocols more effectively.

We hope you will try out this way to structure protocols and we would love to hear about other uses groups find for it.

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Partner Fishbowl was very helpful in their learning about how to participate in a protocol effectively and that the collaboration with a partner reduces the stress of doing protocols.

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When Jennifer decides to publish her work in the study, her dissertation, as part of her plans to enter academia and Karen tries to block Jennifer’s plans. Jennifer is hurt and feels disillusioned by my actions and her hurt led to her being a threat to the publication of my dissertation (p. 74).”

As I read this part of the book, I found myself wondering about the risks that colleagues of color take each time they form professional and personal relationships with white colleagues like me.

However, just when it looks like a legal battle is about to heat up between the two women, Karen apologizes and the collaboration continues. Later, with the help of an interview with Lisa Delphi, both teachers are able to understand the role of their cultural differences in the ways they define conflict and either embrace or avoid it. Here’s a sample of Lisa Delphi’s analysis:

“...and in your case Jennifer…you expect, if somebody has something on their mind, they bring it up...And that was one of the things that I think caused you all some conflict, because you’re expecting if something’s on Karen’s mind, Karen’s gonna say it. (p. 84)”

Here are two other sets of core values that Schwarz describes as a contrast to the Mutual Learning Model that he espouses.

Set One:
1. Everyone participates in defining the purpose.
2. Everyone wins and no one loses.
3. Express your feelings.
4. Suppress your intellectual reasoning.

Underlying assumptions:
- I understand the situation.
- I have pure motives.
- My negative feelings are justified.

Set Two:
1. Act according to what you consider rational.
2. Underlying assumptions:
- I understand the situation.
- I have pure motives.
- My negative feelings are justified.

Because of the Kids...

(continued from page 5)

We hope you will try out this way to structure protocols and we would love to hear about other uses groups find for it.

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