

## **ARIZONA CIVIC TRAINING – ACT!**

### ***Focused Conversation***

A structured process that helps one plan and facilitate a meaningful exchange of ideas.

"Once a society loses this capacity [to dialogue], all that is left is a cacophony of voices battling it out to see who wins and who loses. There is no capacity to go deeper, to find a deeper meaning that transcends individual views and self-interest. It seems reasonable to ask whether many of our deeper problems in governing ourselves today, the so-called "gridlock" and loss of mutual respect and caring... might not stem from this lost capacity to talk with one another, to think together as part of a larger community"

Peter M. Senge, in "A New View of Institutional Leadership" in Reflections on Leadership

### ***Use to***

- ❑ Guide a group through of process of discovery. The Focused Conversation surfaces diverse opinions and insights regarding any topic or issue.
- ❑ It is a simple process that enables a conversation to flow from surface to depth.
- ❑ The art of orchestrating conversations is useful for consensus- building in small groups, for problem solving, for trouble-shooting, coaching, research, and interpretation of all kinds of data.
- ❑ It can be used to broaden a group's perspectives, to elicit clear ideas and conclusions and to allow the entire group to participate.
- ❑ It is a tool for enabling a group to solicit the wisdom of the collective intelligence of the whole group.
- ❑ It is a tool for teams and groups to provide for meaningful dialogue, to discuss tough issues and to reflect constantly on their experience and learn from it.
- ❑ It is a tool to honor and give voice to feelings or emotional dimensions but help move beyond it to a decision.
- ❑ It provides an opportunity to focus multiple interests on a particular topic or issue.
- ❑ It is a way to explore levels of consensus that may already exist within the group.

### ***Timing***

- ❑ This process can be used in situations where there is controversy, where there is limited information or where information is misunderstood.
- ❑ It is important to include a diverse group of participants, ensuring a wide representation of views.
- ❑ The process can be done with small groups or with larger groups by dividing them into smaller circles and sharing results of the small conversations with the whole group.
- ❑ The time required varies according to the needs of the group. It may be as short as 20 minutes or as long 2 hours. This process is often used in conjunction with other methods to complete a planning event.

### ***Preparation***

After deciding the topic of the conversation, the first step of the process is to write out both the rational and experiential aim to determine the focus, purpose and mood of the conversation. The ***Rational Aim*** is the intent or practical goal of the conversation. It guides the collective thinking process and determines the direction of the conversation. It answers the question, "what do you want the group to know, learn, discover, explore or decide?" The ***Experiential Aim*** is the inner impact of the conversation. It affects the mood of the group and sets the tone of the communication between the participants. It answers the question, "what do you want to have happen to the participants in responding to this topic?"

A facilitator then leads the conversation through a series of questions at four levels:

- ❑ **Objective questions** related to data, facts, external reality, for example “What did you actually see, hear, or read?”
- ❑ **Reflective questions** that evoke immediate personal reactions, internal responses, sometimes emotions or feelings, hidden images and associations with the facts, for example “What was your gut level reaction?” Whenever we encounter an external reality (objective data) we experience an internal response.
- ❑ **Interpretive questions** that draw out the meaning, values, significance, implications, for example “What new insight did you get from this?”
- ❑ **Decisional questions** that bring the conversation to a close, eliciting resolution and enabling the group to make a decision about the future, for example “What do you think we should do?”

The facilitator has prepared the questions in advance and remains neutral throughout the process. He or she does not offer judgment or allow the group to disregard or veto ideas as they are brought forth.

### **Hints**

- ❑ Begin the conversation by asking the first question or the objective level questions around the whole group making sure everyone has a chance to answer.
- ❑ The leader has nothing to teach. There are no right or wrong answers.
- ❑ All questions are open-ended and cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.”
- ❑ In order to ask questions, you have to trust that the group has wisdom. The best conversations confront the group seriously with a topic, but do not reach a pat conclusion.
- ❑ Specific questions get better results. For example, “What points did Jim make?” rather than “What do you remember about Jim’s speech?”
- ❑ Ask for specific illustrations and examples when people answer.
- ❑ To prepare a conversation, decide the intent; then brainstorm questions and put them in the objective/reflective/interpretive/decisional order. When the draft is finished, rehearse it through your head, imaging some answers you might get. This may suggest better ways to ask the questions.

### **Documentation**

Recorders may be used to summarize key points made by each speaker or you may wish to document all the responses to some of the questions. The responses to questions in the interpretive or decisional level may be most helpful.

### **Implementation**

- ❑ Ensure the room is set up so that everyone can hear and see all the other participants.
- ❑ Use quotes and posters on the wall as appropriate for the event. You may also add table décor of three-dimensional objects arranged on a background cloth or colored paper. All of these are used to focus attention, intrigue the imagination, to delight the eye, and to intentionally claim empty space.

### **Variations**

There are many variations in the use of the Focused Conversation Method. The number of people in the group may range from a one-on-one conversation to a very large group. When using this method with a large group, it is helpful to divide the group into smaller groups so that all the participants can hear one another and have ample opportunity to participate by expressing their thoughts and ideas.

**Resources**

- ❑ Staffing
  - The Staff need to be trained in the role as facilitator of the Focused Conversation. It is important that they play a neutral role to ensure maximum participation.
- ❑ Equipment
  - Flip charts may be used to record ideas.
- ❑ Space/Room Set-up:
  - To enable participation, it is helpful to have the room set up with chairs in a circle or chairs and tables arranged in a semi circular design.
- ❑ Budget
  - The expense is staff time to prepare the questions and facilitate the conversation.

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