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[Home](#) > The Way Of Council

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Type of tool:

Activity

Duration:

60-90 min

Topics addressed:

Communication

Group dynamics

Personal development

Council is a sharing method, focused on empathy and active listening. It's a practice of personal storytelling, which it turns out to be very effective especially while working on topics such as personal development and strengthening of group dynamics.

Aim:

In this historical moment we tend to give more and more relevance to the expressive side of communication (how to express ourselves in a clear and efficient way, how to improve our performance, ecc.), while this practice wants to explore the benefits which could be achieved through a work based mainly on the process of listening. The main aim of Council is to create connections within a group of people tied by different kind of relationships (colleagues, families, school classes, working groups, groups of strangers) through the sharing of personal stories, in order to build an inclusive and emotional relationship based on empathy and listening.

Methodology:

Council is versatile in forms and fields that promote visioning, leadership, conscious communication, mentoring and reflection, collective wisdom, decision making, honouring achievement, management and much more. Preparing the ground for decision-making and conflict exploration through council often resolves challenges without the need for 'fixing', creating space for examination of the field of enquiry from many perspectives listening to a bigger picture than one's own part.

Step by step process:

The participants are invited to sit together in a circle, so that all everybody can see and be seen by the rest of the group. The facilitator proceeds to the introduction of the practice which foresees:

- the presentation of the intentions of Council which are: 1. speaking from the heart, 2. listening with the heart; 3. be spontaneous, 4. be lean of expression, 5. confidentiality. These intentions represents for the participants the guidelines of the attitude which should be followed during the session in order to create a safe space in which sharing the stories;
- the presentation of the talking piece(s), of its function and its way of use;
- the clarification in terms of the form and the setting of the session (a Council session is defined by a

time frame which is set up by the facilitator or by the end of the stories, so it can have a variable length);

Once that the facilitator has cleared out the dynamics and made sure that they have been understood by the whole group, the beginning of the process is somehow marked by an opening ceremony, which has the function of inviting the participants to be as present as possible within the Council intentions. Starting from that moment, only those who will be holding the talking piece will be allowed to speak, while the others will be invited to direct on that person all their focus. The facilitator will introduce the prompt of the sharing and open the space to the participants. The choice of the prompt is strictly connected to the aim of the session itself (getting to know each other, sharing, conflict resolution, exploring a specific topic, etc.), to the age and to the composition of the group. The prompts is usually an invitation to share a personal story on a specific topic which is usually introduced by the formula "share a story of...". The participants are invited to speak in first person, focusing as much as possible on their own point of view, their own feelings, sensations and experiences. The simplest and most popular form used for the sharing is the circle one (when the talking piece is passed from person to person clock wise until a full round has been made within the circle), but the practice foresees a number of different ways of implementations which is usually chosen according to the needs of the single session. It's important to highlight that the Council was born to support a free form of expression, so the aim is to create within the group an atmosphere which is free of any kind of judgment, where the participants can feel free to express themselves in the most spontaneous way possible (which includes the possibility to remain in silence, to sing or dance, to choose not to share anything, etc.). Once that the time frame has reached its limit, the facilitator will guide the group to the end of the sharing (which often might include an extra round of "echo", the invitation to repeat a word or a sentence shared by another participant which resonates in you the most, or a simple round of feelings and sensations) and will mark in a clear way the end of the process, as he/she did already for the opening.

Materials and resources:

It's important to have the participants sitting together in a circle, even better if directly on the floor (it could be good to provide pillows or something similar to make the sitting part more comfortable). Within the circle we attribute a center, where a number of objects will be placed, chosen by the facilitator. The objects will function as a talking / listening pieces which will be passed among the people of the group, identifying the persons who will choose to speak and share within the circle.

Outcomes:

Council produces meaningful outcomes in the area of personal development and in terms of strengthening the empathy within a group and the development of one's emotional and communicative competences. Even if Council cannot absolutely be labeled as a therapy process, often it can turn out to be an extremely therapeutic tool, as it can cause very strong and intimate emotional responses, both in those who share and in those who listen. Some of the most frequent outcomes are:

- to learn to be more acquainted with our own and others' emotions;
- to feel part of a community (or a group) stronger and more grounded;
- to practice being spontaneous;
- to learn to listen and better direct our own focus;
- to learn to express ourselves in a more essential and accurate way;
- to be more open;
- to develop our own empathic skills;

Evaluation:

Despite its simplicity, Council is a practice which requires an accurate preparation which cannot be left to chance. The prompt of the session, the form of implementation, the presentation of the intentions, the style of facilitation, the management of the time frame and the group dynamics... there are all elements which needs to be structured carefully according to the aim of the session itself and to the backgroun of the group of participants. It has a huge potential which can be neutralized quite easily if one of those elements is neglected, especially the management of the emotions within the group. The practice is not really suitable for practical discussions, debates, general sharing, voting and large groups (unless the facilitator decides to use specific forms of Council which can facilitate that kind of process). It's important to try to manage the involvement of all the participants, inviting those who would eventually decide to not take part in the activity to still have a role as a witness in order to keep them engaged within the process.

Notes for further use:

As it was already mentioned, Council can be used in different forms according to the specific needs of the group. It's an intuitive and simple tool with a rich background of resources and inputs, which can be deepened in order to find the most suitable version for the personal educational needs. Here there are some useful links:

- *Council In Schools* (<http://councilinschools.org/> [1]);
- *Ojaj Foundation* (<http://ojaifoundation.org/discover-council> [2]);
- *TED Talk "The Power of Listening: An Ancient Practice for Our Future"* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iDMuB6NjNA> [3]).

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Links

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[2] <http://ojaifoundation.org/discover-council>

[3] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iDMuB6NjNA>