

## Learning activity

# Circle of Trust

**TIME:** 90 mins - 180 min

### **LEARNING AIMS:**

- Gain experience in building a safer space of vulnerability and storytelling
- Enhance skills to have conversations based on stories and emotions
- Develop listening skills and trust of people sharing life challenges, conflicts, emotions and choices
- Improve ability to build meaningful trust-based relationships or shared commitment, responsibility and accountability.
- Enhance storytelling skills
- Ability to connect storytelling with pathways for collective action.

**NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:** Max 15

### **PREPARATION AND MATERIALS:**

Normally, the storytelling group exercise is being facilitated indoors with groups of 8-12 participants. It's an exercise which allows us to build trust, relationships, and community through telling stories and catalysing the power of values and emotions. Above all, it requires the facilitators to hold the space for people to feel safe and free to share their experiences, fears and hopes.

In an in-person setting prepare a nice circle and possibilities to sit on the floor with cushions and blankets. For the first exercise you could give the possibility for people to lay on the floor, providing mats and blankets. It is really important that people feel physically comfortable in the space and can concentrate fully on the group exercise. An encouragement check for surrounding noise and ask participants to switch off their devices. Lighting conditions, air and other elements can also be considered.

For an online-setting it is crucial for people to have their cameras on and have a stable internet connection. Joining via phone is not advisable for this session. Online settings require a different holding from the facilitator and might need a pre-session needs assessment to accommodate the participants.

General recommendations for two facilitators, with one holding the space more verbally and the other being present, observing and (in case) addressing emerging needs of participants.

## **FRAMING:**

This storytelling workshop is based on the Public Narrative approach developed by Marshall Ganz and was developed to bring to life the potential of storytelling in collective work. The exercise allows participants to listen to each other on the basis of the participants' own biographical stories of self, us and now. It is a reflective exercise about personal stories and is held by the facilitator.

Public Facing Framing: Are you often wondering how to seriously make political spaces and structures, but also organizations and movements more diverse, inclusive and participatory? Do you also wonder how to create groups and campaign teams based more on shared concrete values and interests, rather than just divisive opinions or abstract visions? And have you ever asked yourself how political discussions, onboardings of new members, and regular group meetings could address not only the rational side of political facts and figures, but also the emotional side of lived everyday realities and impactful life experiences?

More detailed framing is explained in the descriptions below.

“When we tell our own story, we teach the values that our choices reveal, not abstract principles, but as our lived experience. We reveal the kind of person we are to the extent that we let others identify with us.” Marshall Ganz

“Public Narrative is a leadership practice of translating values into action. It is based on the fact that values are experienced emotionally. As such, they are sources of ends worthy of action and the capacity for action.”

## **FACILITATION:**

### **Step 1: Opening the Collective Space (15 min)**

- Try to get an understanding of all the participants in the »Circle of Trust« . This activity is more suitable for groups that already had their first stage of contact. Otherwise, inform yourself about participant needs before the event.
- Open the session by telling an improvised personal story that gives an impression of why you care about yourself, the group, the world, the space, and the time you share together.

### **Step 2: Getting to know each other (20)**

- Address each person individually and ask them to introduce themselves by saying their first name, explaining what their parents or the persons who raised them do or did for a living, and telling what they dreamt to do with their lives when they were kids. End with yourself!
  - People do not answer to both questions if they don't feel like it

- (What if - Someone introduces themselves with their education, profession or organisational affiliation? Please remind them to only answer the name, parents' profession & childhood dream questions.

### **Step 3: Framing and Instructions (10)**

- »Now, I would like to start a collective storytelling session with you that will last about 60 minutes. I will briefly explain what will happen:
- First, I ask you to close your eyes (online to turn off your video). I will ask questions to all of you. Once I have asked a question, you're all invited to answer it by telling a personal story. But you should not feel pushed to expose yourself, as it's not about your most intimate and private experiences. It's about the stories, challenges and emotions we should feel entitled to tell publicly, but often feel not allowed to. You are also welcome to just listen to the others. No one is forced to tell a story, as it's as much about learning to listen. It's absolutely fine if there are moments of silence in between or if you need time to think about the experiences and values which shaped your life choices. As soon as I asked a question, feel free to start telling your story. Listen to each other carefully. If someone has finished a story, the next person can go ahead.«

### **Step 4: Starting the Circle of Trust**

»Ok, is everyone ready to start? Please (A + B) close your eyes or (C) turn off the video. I will ask the first question in a bit.« Questions:

- First question: We now know our first names: I would now like you to tell us the story of how your parents chose your first name.
- Now could you please tell us a story about what it is like to live with your first name?
- ... about the moment when you experienced injustice happening to someone for the first time.
- ... about someone who has protected, saved or influenced you a lot in your life.
- ... when you most recently felt unsafe, alone or powerless.
- ... about a person you are worried about at the moment.
- ... about an experience when you failed to solve a major social problem as part of a bigger collective, organization or movement.
- ... about a community that you feel you belong to and why life is more difficult for you and your community.
- ... in which you and the community you feel you belong to have felt that there are powerful groups in society that prevent you from living a good life.
- ... about a moment when you did not act and regretted it afterwards.
- ... about a person you would be willing to fight for so that they could have a better life.
- Final question: Please tell us a story about a struggle you have been part of and you won.

### **Step 5: Closing**

Thank you very much for sharing your stories. You can open your eyes (or turn on your videos again). Further thoughts on developing your own questions

- Good questions target specific life moments or situations in which oneself or someone else had to make a decision and learned from.
- Good questions have a metaphoric and thus ambivalent character, as they can be interpreted in multiple ways.
- Good questions relate to personal experience, community belonging, or the political and economic system we are part of.
- Good questions relate temporally to emotions of the past, experiences of the present, or events of the future.
- Good questions can either ask about one's own active protagonist role or passive observer role.
- First ask questions about the personal & the past, then about the collective & the present, and in the end about the system & the future.

**Step 6: Debriefing**

Creating an understanding of collective needs and interests.

- Invite the group to (A + B) stand up or (C) to just keep their video on
- Give a break of one minute for everyone to re-adapt to the new setting.
- Ask each participant what they need to personally have a better life and which social circumstances and forces prevent them from having it.
- Ask each participant how they experienced the group exercise in the
  - »Circle of Trust«. How was it? What was beautiful, bad or boring?
  - How did you experience telling or listening to a story?
  - How was it to have no eye-contact?
  - What did you learn about yourself and others?
  - Which story could you especially relate to? Share a moment which moved or inspired you?

**Trainers Advice - Do's and don'ts**

<b>DOs</b>	<b>DON'T</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Be a tender host and allow the group to identify with you</li> <li>● Invite the group to listen deeply and to relate with each other!</li> <li>● Create a safe and brave space for grief, anger, power(lessness), hope, courage &amp; joy!</li> <li>● Listen carefully and adapt questions spontaneously according to the</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Don't promote a political debating club atmosphere!</li> <li>● Don't interrupt the conversation or make the group "think positive", even if it gets emotionally uncomfortable for you!</li> <li>● Don't push the group to self-expose (because there are private and intimate stories that are not meant to be publicly shared)!</li> </ul>

<p>group dynamics throughout the conversation!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Allow the group itself to regulate the emotional ups and downs!</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Don't expect everybody to tell a story, as it's as much about</li><li>• listening (so there's no reason to be intimidated if there is silence)!</li><li>• Don't forget to debrief and reflect!!!</li></ul>
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Our task as facilitators is to make this experience a transformational one for individuals, small groups, and the whole community. For this reason, we have to feel safe ourselves about what we do. Because only then magical things can happen – when people feel safe and free to **create a brave space**.

**SOURCE:**

Developed by Georg Blokus, part of the School of Political Hope and European Alternatives inspired by the Public Narrative framework of Marshall Ganz.

**LEARNING RESOURCES:**

Ganz, M (2021) The Role of Leadership in Cultivating Collective Democratic Voice, The American Prospect, <https://prospect.org/politics/role-of-leadership-cultivating-collective-democratic-voice/>.

Ganz, M (2018) Public Narrative Course, Resistance School at Harvard University, <https://www.resistanceschool.com/course/public-narrative/>.

Ganz, M (2009) Why Stories Matter – The Art and Craft of Social Change, Sojourners Magazine, <https://commonslibrary.org/why-stories-matter-the-art-and-craft-of-social-change/>.