Best Practices for Group Council

By Theo Talcott

People talking skillfully in large groups requires strategies. Here is a list of ideas and practices from a workshop I led called “Best Practices for Group Council” at the first Transition Town U.S. National Gathering, on July 29th, 2017, in St. Paul, Minnesota.

It is important for citizen groups to have good meetings. One painful meeting can ruin a group and they’ll never meet again! A well-intentioned community without skills can have painful meetings that people gradually stop attending. As an environmentalist and community organizer, I’ve attending thousands of hours of meetings in various groups. Especially thru painful meetings, I’ve come to appreciate the patterns that make meetings work well.

One voice at a time. Generally it’s best if only one person is talking at a time and people respect that. However, it goes hand in hand with people keeping it brief.

Stack. A simple but precious meeting tool for situations when lots of people want to talk. Stack refers to a process for keeping track of who is at the top of the stack to talk next. Some meetings designate a person to “take stack”. The volunteer “Stake-taker” listens and chimes in occasionally “Sally, then Bob, then Rita.” Ideally, a group will hold the stack in their minds and just let people take their turn.

Popcorn the Agenda. A democratic way to set the content of a meeting is to “popcorn the agenda”. Ask participants to make the agenda on the spot and go thru them in order of importance.

Horizontal Democracy. How do we honor each other as equals? Can we talk as friends and citizens on equal footing? The facilitator isn’t the king. The stack-taker isn’t the border guard. We deserve a democratic meeting culture where everybody has equal rights. We need to make the road we’re walking on. We have a right to demand the intersectional justice culture as our M.O. as we meet. Progressive groups can roll with the intersectional justice we seek.

Designate official meeting facilitators. A meeting facilitator has the job of keeping the meeting on track. It’s helpful to formally designate a facilitator because otherwise people don’t feel polite interrupting a rambler because in ‘normal group talk’ nobody would do that. But in an official meeting, we have the right to a good meeting where things get done and the meeting isn’t hijacked by one person. Having a co-facilitator can be helpful to help ‘hold the meeting’ because it distributes the task of keeping the group focused. Ideally, the whole group facilitates and anyone can chime in to prod the group back to focus.

Talk calmly. The meeting’s pace should feel like whole notes, not 1/16th notes. People will feel frantic after hours of listening to 100 words a minute. People should pause after someone finishes for at least one second, to “let it land” and to challenge that frantic need to be heard that wants to jump in on the
1/16th note beat. Resist Mad Rush-ins! Resist talking from a place of needing to be heard. Just shut up and sit there and listen! Sometimes people feel they must talk as fast-as-possible “to save time”. Then they talk for five minutes at a 100 words a minute, a pace only comprehensible to people who speak that language as a first language and don’t have hearing issues.

**Lessons from Occupy Wall Street’s General Assembly.** Freedom is a constant struggle, says Angela Davis. At Occupy, we joked, Freedom is a constant meeting! We learned the necessity of facilitation leadership and the value of a good meeting culture. At the Occupy National Gathering in Philly a year or two after the camps were cleared, people were very reluctant to have a meeting or a “General Assembly” lest they go down the time tunnel/rabbit hole. Occupy had the most beautiful and also difficult meetings of the modern era. Heroic reclaim of an inward-turned “we’ll talk amongst our selves” impulse. But the formlessness of the meetings lead to long, unfocused meetings that drained people.

**Occupy meeting tactics.** Twinkle fingers, temperature check, stack, progressive stack, making a manifesto or declaration or epistle to gather the ideas of a gathering.

**Listening.** LEARNING TO LISTEN! AT STANDING ROCK, I remember an elder speaking over the mic saying “Relatives, you have to learn to listen! Keep your dogs on the leash!” Traditional American education seems to encourage people to talk, make pronouncements and rhetoric, with very little discussion of listening. I don’t ever remember “listening” as a topic of study in my education. The best listeners have a position of great power in a conversation because they hold it together with the invisible center of the conversation. The power to be there and be quiet is a Buddhist skill, cultivated by meditation to tame the mind’s need to be filled. Open observation, allowing for our own response and listening for it, accepting what’s true for us.

**Renounce interrupting and talking over each other.** A recent widely-reported study of the Supreme Court shows women are interrupted more often even when they sit on the Supreme Court! Lawyers are instructed to stop talking when a justice speaks and not to interrupt the justices. Even so, conservative male lawyers habitually interrupt female justices. Liberal women interrupt the least in these studies. Conservatives interrupt liberals twice as much. [http://www.scotusblog.com/2017/04/legal-scholarship-highlight-justice-interrupted-gender-ideology-seniority-supreme-court/](http://www.scotusblog.com/2017/04/legal-scholarship-highlight-justice-interrupted-gender-ideology-seniority-supreme-court/)

**Creating a Feminist Space**

Men are schooled and trained to rush the center, fill the space, do the talking and verbally joust. If you put your average group of North American humans in a group, the older white men will do most of the talking, decide what to do, and the women/POC/LGBT people will be outside the circle and struggle to be heard, much like the US Congress and American life in general. A good facilitator will strive to create horizontal democracy in the group by recognizing that these oppressive dynamics exist and responding by making space for quieter voices. We acknowledge oppression exists and try to respond ahead.
**Timekeepers.** It’s a good idea to keep one eye on the clock and have a clear idea how long the meeting is expected to last. The Timekeeper can chime in “OK, we have half-an-hour left, what’s left to talk about?” This helps keep people from spending too much time on one topic to the detriment of the rest of the agenda.

**Encourage shy voices.** Making sure everybody gets a chance to talk and the quiet shy voices are drawn out. This may mean stopping the confident talkers from jumping in first by saying “Can we hear from somebody who hasn’t spoken already.” That’s a powerful phrase, one of many that facilitators can use to guide the conversation.

**Rolling Starts and/or One at a Time.** Different cultures have different patterns of language. Mediterranean cultures have more of an ‘open-starting’ process where people start talking before the other person has stopped. Northern Europeans have more a binary on-off I-stop-then-you-start approach. One isn’t better than the other. In general, the rolling start is more democratic, less hierarchical, and lets voices in, promotes a pleasant chatter and agreeable bubbling like friends at a table at a bar. However, talking over one another often causes people to raise their voices and the escalation of volume. In some situations, it creates a culture of argument. Some people can’t help it and are habituated to rowdy over-talking until it’s just escalates into a shouting match. This is especially true of drunk people talking politics.

**Renounce Impulsive Interrupting.** Habitual unexamined impulsive interrupting causes people to rises voices which can feel like argument and create conflict. During a meeting, people should really refrain from jumping in on top of others, especially in the style of talking in your car, riffing style.

**Moment of silence.** After everybody’s arrived and seated, take a minute to join together in Noble Silence to settle the minds and unite in the consciousness of shared awareness. This creates a stable mental space to do talking in. It also formally shifts gears from everyday talking habits into a more subdued, careful meeting style.

**One breath/one minute rule.** Group conversations seem to flow best when people keep it short. Say your truth, your part, your line and then stop. Ideally, people should keep their offerings to about a minute and not roll off into a monologue because it saps the collective intelligence and attention. It’s a powerful discipline to clarify our thoughts and compress it into one breath, like haiku’s form of three lines and one breath.

**Potlucks.** Gathering people over food is the most powerful way to make a positive meeting. No matter how much got done, afterwards we can share a feast.

**Talking Stick.** Using an item to designate who is talking is a good practice, especially with kids. Also, we can agree to “pass an imaginary talking stick” and then shift into a one-at-a-time mode where we all “take stack.”
**Speak up!** Hearing loss is normal. We want an intergenerational movement that respects the elders enough to include them in the conversation. Age-ism is real, a largely unexamined cultural habit that disempowers a big chunk of the population. So, if you are talking in a group and taking up the air time, please talk loud enough so everybody can hear you. This usually means talking louder than you normally would. Sometimes the meeting’s location will have very challenging acoustics that eat up the sound and then people have to talk even louder. People often feel talk in a shy, humble way that elders can’t hear. A good facilitator should challenge a group to speak up at the beginning and try to make sure everybody can hear as the meeting proceeds.

**General meeting form.** Open with moment of silence, go around and learn names/where from, 30 seconds each person. Make a few agreements on process, popcorn an agenda, talk, meet for an hour, decide stuff to take away, have the potluck dinner, go home. Repeat, repeat, victory!