

Holding the Space Sessions

I am someone who finds thinking by talking to be particularly helpful. Saying things out loud causes me to think through all kinds of things that I wouldn't have thought of otherwise. This is one reason why I've been interested in finding ways to allow more people to get to see the power of listening more often. I created this script because I've never called on people to do what's called a Clearness Committee (see below) with me because it'd be a two hour process where I'd be the only focus person. I've written this script to adapt that process to one where in one hour 3 to 5 people get to take turns being the focus person.

Script for Holding the Space Sessions

Let's begin by introducing ourselves to each other by going around the circle and saying our names.

We come together to hold the space for each other in a way that provides greater access to our inner resources and wisdom. We will be seeing what's made possible with the help of a structure for interacting. This structure involves taking turns being the focus person, while others ask honest, open questions that can help the focus person find his or her own answers. Questions will be offered in writing to the focus person, so the focus person is the only one doing any speaking.

The following excerpts from Parker Palmer's description of a communal process of discernment called the Clearness Committee give a sense for how we will be holding the space for one another:

Many of us face a dilemma when trying to deal with a personal problem, question, or decision. On the one hand, we know that the issue is ours alone to resolve and that we have the inner resources to resolve it, but access to our own resources is often blocked by layers of inner "stuff"—confusion, habitual thinking, fear, despair. On the other hand, we know that friends might help us uncover our inner resources and find our way, but by exposing our problem to others, we run the risk of being invaded and overwhelmed by their assumptions, judgments, and advice—a common and alienating experience.

Behind the Clearness Committee is a simple but crucial conviction: *each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems.* But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference. The function of the Clearness Committee is not to give advice or “fix” people from the outside in but rather to help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out. Nothing is allowed except real questions, honest and open questions, questions that will help the focus person remove the blocks to his or her inner truth without becoming burdened by the personal agendas of committee members.

This script is available online at: meaningfulaction.org/htss.html

Format for running the session

We will use the following format for running the session. We will each take turns being the focus person. The focus person will first be given 4 minutes for exploring ideas during which everyone else is asked to just listen, without thinking about comments or suggestions you could make or questions you could ask. This initial 4 minutes of deep listening is followed by a period of time for questions.

Guidelines for asking questions

Questions will be offered in writing to the focus person on the pieces of paper provided. You may offer more than one question, and you can offer a question at any time during the question-answering period by placing it on the table in front of the focus person. We encourage the focus person to do whatever is most helpful in choosing when to look at newly offered questions and which questions to answer during the session. Questions can be taken home with the focus person, so they may provide benefit even if they are not answered during the session.

Please make every effort to only ask honest, open questions. A good description of an honest, open question is that the person asking the question could not possibly anticipate the answer to it. Open questions are broad in scope and require responses that are more than just one or two words. An example of an open question is: "What would you say to someone in your shoes?"

Ask questions for the purpose of helping the focus person rather than for satisfying your own curiosity. These questions are usually brief and have no preamble or explanation. A sure sign that a question was not honest and open is if the focus person answers it by saying "Yeah, but..."

Such questioning may sound easy. But many people have trouble framing questions that do not impose what they think on the speaker. This includes questions that are suggestions, advice, or analysis in disguise. Perhaps the most important aspect of our sessions is that we provide a place where there is no danger of having someone else's agenda imposed on you. This rule is simple, but abiding by it is hard work because so much of this goes on all the time. That's what we're used to. But, here we're asking you to try not to do any reassuring, diagnosing, providing any logical arguments, or evaluating, be it positive or negative. It can be very difficult to keep these out of the questions that we ask the focus person. But, by doing so, we can create space for the focus person to work through his or her own agenda.

The focus person always has the right to choose not to answer a question. If you are the focus person, please do not hesitate to exercise this right. You do not need to provide any explanation for why you have chosen not to answer the question.

Please take a moment to look over the sheet of examples of honest, open questions and of questions to avoid. *(Pause to give time for looking over the sheet of examples, which is on the last page of this document.)*

Note that learning to ask honest, open questions is a skill that these sessions can help us develop. So, we are also holding the space for being patient and compassionate with ourselves as we experiment with coming up with honest, open questions. Questions fall on a continuum, and we'll practice leaning as much as possible towards the open and honest end of the continuum with our questions. We'll be looking for ones that Parker Palmer describes as questions that allow us to "hear each other into speech, into deeper and deeper speech."

Guidelines for holding the space

These sessions provide us with the opportunity to hold the space for people in a way that develops our capacities to deeply listen. Here is a piece that speaks to that by David Castro on Learning to Listen called Empathy in 8 Minutes about how he experienced doing an exercise where you listen quietly for 8 minutes as someone tells you his or her life story.

When my partner started to tell his story, I wanted to ask a truckload of questions directing the conversation. I wanted to follow up on particular details, ask about things he hadn't mentioned, shortcut certain areas and learn more about others that interested me, like someone fast forwarding through a TV show.

After about three minutes, however, something remarkable happened. That incessant voice in my head began to quiet, and for the first time I began to listen at a deeper level. I observed my partner's body language, soaked in his selected words and stopped trying to control the conversation flow. In the remaining five minutes, I learned something profound about the person speaking. I began to see and understand him for the first time. I was actually listening to him instead of focusing on my bundle of projections about him.

Taking turns

We will take turns being the focus person by going clockwise. Timers will be used to keep track of time, and they will be set to signal the end of each time period:

(For a 60-minute session with 3 people)

Each person will have 17 minutes for their turn. Each turn begins with 4 minutes where we will hold the space with deep listening, followed by a 13 minute time period where we will ask questions.

(For a 60-minute session with 4 people)

Each person will have 13 minutes for their turn. Each turn begins with 4 minutes where we will hold the space with deep listening, followed by a 9 minute time period where we will ask questions.

(For a 60-minute session with 5 people)

Each person will have 10 minutes for their turn. Each turn begins with 4 minutes where we will hold the space with deep listening, followed by a 6 minute time period where we will ask questions.

(If there are more than 5 people, break into smaller groups of 3 or 4 people.)

After you hear the timer signaling the end of the question-answering period, feel free to take up to a minute to wrap up. If necessary, the timekeeper will signal when the extra minute is up by placing the "Time's Up" card on the table in front of the focus person.

While others are taking their turns, our job is to bear silent witness to the self-discovery of others.

For the first 4 minutes, we ask you to listen deeply and to wait until the question-answering period before you start thinking of questions you might ask.

When our session is over, please do not approach one another with unsolicited comments or suggestions. A key point of these sessions is to be a place where we offer the support of listening and questioning without commenting or suggesting.

Guidelines for being the focus person

When you are the focus person, please do not refer to what anyone else has shared. We ask that you do not respond to what others have discussed when it is your turn to be the focus person. This includes giving feedback or advice, making "you" and "we" statements, and mentioning other participants within your turn. Instead, we ask that you keep the focus on yourself.

We encourage you to explore the ideas that you find most helpful to think through aloud and not to worry if this is very different from the topics that others have discussed. What is shared in these sessions is to be kept confidential so that we can give each other the freedom to explore any ideas that we want to.

(Set 2 timers, one to signal the beginning of the question-answering period after 4 minutes have elapsed, and one to signal the end of the turn. Start both timers at the beginning of each person's turn.)

Closing

It is time to end our session.

Because of the importance of respecting each other's boundaries, we would like to remind you not to approach one another outside of our sessions with unsolicited comments or suggestions, and to keep what was shared in this session confidential.

In closing, we would like to thank everyone for your presence at this session. By your participation in this session, we have all benefited from the support you have provided with your deep listening and your honest, open questions.

Guidelines for asking honest, open questions

Note that there are no hard and fast rules for what counts as an honest, open question. Questions fall on a continuum, and we're just asking that you try as much as possible to lean towards the open and honest end of the continuum.

Honest, open questions

A good description of an honest, open question is that the person asking the question could not possibly anticipate the answer to it. These questions are usually brief and have no preamble or explanation. Ask questions for the purpose of helping the focus person rather than for satisfying your own curiosity.

Examples

What did you mean when you said X?

What next steps might you take?

What would you say to someone in your shoes?

How would you summarize this?

Why's that?

What is an example of Y?

Could you say more about Z?

Questions to avoid

Avoid questions that impose what you think on the speaker. This includes questions that include suggestions, advice, or analysis. We're asking you to avoid doing any evaluating, be it positive or negative, reassuring, diagnosing, judging, labeling, moralizing or providing any logical arguments. It can be surprisingly difficult to keep these out of your questions. A sure sign that a question was not honest and open is if the speaker answers it by saying "Yeah, but..."

Examples

You mentioned A, which made me think of B, and so I'd like to ask you about C.

Have you tried Y?

Why don't you Z?

Have you read such-and-such book?

Have you thought about talking to so-and-so about this?

This document is available online at: meaningfulaction.org/htss.html