

# A Small Group Technique for Gatherings

## Conversations That Matter– A Brief Introduction

### INTRODUCTION

The principles in this document are explored in depth in the Book “Community: The Structure of Belonging,” by Peter Block, a renowned organizational and community building consultant who now lives in Cincinnati. Our goal here is to introduce some of the essential concepts. Reading the book “Community” will help make those concepts more robust; however, real understanding comes from long-time use.

### CONVERSATIONS THAT MATTER



The purpose of what we call the A Small Group (ASG) method is to facilitate opportunities to have conversations that matter – that is, conversations in which the participants are listening to understand and speaking authentically about what is important to them.

Listening to understand involves paying attention and being curious — listening without judging. When listening to understand, I do not interpret someone else’s words through my value system. Instead, I set aside my value system and do my very best to understand someone else’s meaning and value system. I replace advice, fixing, and saving with curiosity.

Speaking authentically about what matters is likely to involve an exchange of ideas, opinions, conclusions, and feelings in a way that respects that others may not share any of them. A conversation such as this most likely is going to involve being vulnerable on at least some level.

The conversations can be difficult, but are not typically painful. They are difficult only because they are not usual, not expected.

Conversations that matter encourage individual and communal mindfulness and reflection, and we believe these are both necessary to understand the current reality and to live into a distinct, more desirable future. The conversations themselves are a model for that future, and hold out the hope for:

1. Invitation rather than mandate
2. Possibility rather than problem-solving
3. Commitment rather than barter
4. Ownership rather than blame
5. Authentic dissent versus lip-service
6. Common purpose rather than narrow interests
7. Gifts rather than deficiencies
8. Restoration rather than retribution

### POWERFUL QUESTIONS

A key concept of the ASG conversations is that the use what we call Powerful Questions to initiate the conversations. In the ASG methodology, Powerful Questions have three attributes. They are:

- **Personal**, which encourages participants to talk about those things that have specific meaning to them.
- **Ambiguous**, which means they have no “right” or “wrong” answer. Since participants are the experts of their own lives, any answer to a question is always “right.” In addition, passing is always an accepted option.
- **Anxiety Provoking**, which means the issues raised are important. If you aren’t anxious about the outcome, the conversation doesn’t hold much meaning for you.

# A Small Group Technique for Gatherings

## Conversations That Matter– A Brief Introduction

### BRIEF DESCRIPTIONS OF THE CONVERSATION

The six conversations that comprise the ASG conversation method are described, briefly, below.

#### ONE: THE INVITATION CONVERSATION

Transformation occurs through choice, not mandate. Invitation is the call to create an alternative future. A key question is, “What is the invitation you can make that encourages people to participate and own the relationships, tasks, and process that lead to success?”

#### TWO: THE POSSIBILITY CONVERSATION

The Possibility Conversation focuses on designing the future as opposed to problem solving the past. This is based on an understanding that healthy living systems are focused on the future. The possibility conversation frees people to innovate, challenge the status quo, and create new futures that make a difference.

#### THREE: THE OWNERSHIP CONVERSATION

The Ownership Conversation asks: “Whose organization or task is this?” The conversation begins with the question, “How have I contributed to creating the current reality?” Confusion, blame, and waiting for someone else to change are a defense against ownership and personal power.

#### FOUR: THE DISSENT CONVERSATION

The Dissent Conversation allows for space to say “no.” If “no” is not allowed, then “yes” has no meaning. In this conversation, people express their doubts and reservations, as a way of clarifying their roles, needs, and yearnings within the vision and mission being presented. Only when we understand what people do not want are we able to think about — and bring about — what people do want.

#### FIVE: THE COMMITMENT CONVERSATION

The Commitment Conversation is about individuals making promises to their peers about their contribution to the success of the whole organization. It is centered in two questions:

- What promise am I willing to make to this enterprise with no expectation of a return?
- What price am I willing to pay for the success of the whole effort?

It is a promise for the sake of a larger purpose, not for the sake of personal return

#### SIX: THE GIFTS CONVERSATION

What are the gifts and assets we bring to the enterprise? Rather than focus on our deficiencies and weaknesses, which will most likely not go away, focus on the gifts we bring and capitalize on those. Instead of problematizing people and work, the conversation is about searching for the mystery that brings the highest achievement and success in work organizations. Confront people with their essential core that has the potential to make the difference and change lives for good.