

WAYS OF GROUPING - Honoring Personal Intricacy in Group Formats

Rosa Zubizarreta

There are many ways to "group"... older ways, newer ways... Maybe what would be most helpful is for each of us to think about, "What kind of grouping would be truly helpful *here*, in this particular context? What do I want 'group' to mean? What function would it serve?"

We know that there are many problems with the old ways of 'grouping', and the kinds of 'meetings' they imply, and most of us have plenty of experience with what doesn't work. For example, we know how much energy can be spent, trying to 'decide' on things, and having everyone agree to something, only to have people continue on afterward pretty much as before.

In some ways, this situation is analogous to the old way of attempting to 'help' someone: we know how much energy can be wasted on trying to 'fix' a person, give them advice, etc... At the same time, as Focusers, we know that there are other ways: we know how much better it can be to listen to a person and to help create a supportive context where he or she might allow their own 'next steps' to come... How, then, might our Focusing experiences with individuals apply in a context where several people have come together? How can we be with others in a human grouping in a way that offers enough space for each of us to remain connected with our own felt-sensing?

I believe it is important for each of us to ask ourselves this question and to find our own answers. And, I want to offer here several different formats that I have found helpful in my own experience... both for their own sake, and also for serving as a catalyst for your own explorations. Below are four different 'ways of grouping' that I experience as compatible with a Focusing sensibility. This list is not meant to be a complete one, only an initial offering to stimulate further thinking and conversation.

GROUPING AROUND 'SOMETHING FUZZY IN THE MIDDLE': Coming together around shared interests without "merging"

If we are working with the old models of grouping, one of the surest recipes for disaster is to bring together a group of people around an unclear vision. Each person will have his or her own idea of what 'the group' should be about, and much time can be lost wrangling over the ambiguity...

However, from a Focusing perspective, we can turn this 'recipe for disaster' on its head quite easily. It is perfectly possible to gather together productively around something that is fuzzy... IF our purpose is simply to give each person the listening support they need in order to come up with **his or her own** sense of 'what is in the middle.' I learned this from Robert Lee, when my husband Bruce Nayowith and I assisted

him in preparing for the Focusing International in Costa Rica (for a case study of our work there, see Raelin, 2010, pp 150-154.)

Here is an example: Suppose I am interested in "Focusing and Bicycles." I am not really sure what I mean by "Focusing and Bicycles".... I just know that I love to Focus, and I love to bicycle, and I think it would be great to combine the two somehow. So I put out my interest and end up with a few others who are also interested in "Focusing and Bicycles".

Now, the most important thing here is to avoid the pitfall of assuming that we all mean the same thing by "Focusing and Bicycles." A somewhat more sophisticated yet equally dangerous pitfall is the assumption that once we take the time to figure out what each of us means we will somehow end up in the same general ballpark.

Our work together will be much more productive if we assume the exact opposite instead. Since I'm not sure what I mean exactly by "Focusing and Bicycles", it's *quite likely* that we will each end up with very different takes on the subject and very different projects that we may want to launch. This is so, **especially if** our grouping is successful at listening and supporting each person in it! If I initially assumed that we were "all going to end up in the same place", I might be frustrated by this outcome. If, instead, I understood the purpose of this grouping as an opportunity for each of us to become clearer on what exactly each one of us wants from exploring "Focusing and Bicycles", I will be delighted.

It might help to understand **this first kind of grouping as a 'support group' for individuals clarifying their own projects**. The basic format is to take a good chunk of our time together and divide it equally among us, so each of us has the opportunity to explore our felt-sensing and our thinking in the context of good listening support. In one sense there is no 'leader' to for this kind of grouping, as since each person gets equal time within the group. Nonetheless, a certain kind of leadership is still required. If the grouping is to succeed, it **helps if the host, who is extending the invitation, is very clear about the particular format that is being offered and about the reason for its value**. If not, given the prevalent conditioning in our culture, some participants may bring an expectation that we will *all* end up working on something 'together'.

When we are able to gather effectively in this kind of grouping, each of us benefits from the opportunity to become clearer about our own projects. If the number of people is small enough, we can each take turns with everyone else listening. In this way, we get to know each other's unfolding projects fairly well. This means that we may often be able to offer resources and connections to one another that may help each of us in taking our own 'next steps forward'. It is also possible that some natural clusters might emerge: at some point, two or three people *might* end up working on something together.

However, if I *expect* that, as a result of this particular grouping, we will all end up working together on the same thing, I may be quite disappointed. There is nothing wrong with wanting to work together with others... however, with group process, it is much more likely to work well when a grouping begins with a clear and specific initial vision.

If I have a clearer vision, I am ready to create a different kind of grouping.

STARTING WITH A CLEAR VISION: ONE WAY TO DO A "SELFISH" GROUPING

Suppose I have a clear sense of a project that I want to create, and I want to ask for help in creating it. Alternatively, here is a slightly different scenario: I have already started working on a project. Others are inspired by the work I am doing, and want to contribute. For a while now I've been doing it "all by myself" but am now considering that it might be possible to receive help and support with the project I am doing.

Now I want to stop and explain that I am really teasing when I call this second kind of grouping a 'selfish grouping' because the kinds of visions and projects that will naturally draw help and support from others tend to be ones that in some way address the well-being of the whole.

At the same time, in order to grow into being, **each particular vision needs at least one person to be its holder, to dedicate him or herself to keeping it alive by staying true to it.** Sometimes, when we find ourselves in that role, we may hesitate to ask others for help, feeling that if we were to do so, we might need to compromise the vision in some way. So the vision *itself* is not at all "selfish", but we may often end up feeling that it would be "selfish" to ask for help with it since we know deep down that we need to safeguard the vision, and we don't want to jeopardize the vision we are developing.

Here, then, is one way that we might welcome the help that our own projects need while safeguarding our role as vision-keeper.

This format consists of three rounds. In round one, **the vision-keeper or project initiator** goes first. He or she **begins by describing the current state of the project, along with any needs for help.** Those who are drawn to the vision and want to support the initiator take turns reflecting back this information and asking clarifying questions as needed. Then the project initiator takes some time to Focus on the project, with listening support from a participant.

During the second round, each of the support persons takes a short thinking/Focusing turn. During their turn, they a) explore what they might want to contribute to the vision-keeper's project and b) note briefly anything that has come up for them personally in the process that might have to do with their own existing or future projects. Support people take turns offering listening support to one another in this round. The vision-keeper is simply 'witnessing' or 'overhearing', yet he or she still needs to be present.

During the third and final round, **the vision-keeper** speaks again. He or she **identifies any offers of help that were shared during the second round that he or she would welcome and find useful.** Any contributions that he or she would not find helpful can be "re-owned" by their originators and folded back into their own work.

The purpose of this format is to create a space for freely requesting help, for freely offering help, and for freely accepting or declining help. This three-round process allows project initiators to receive assistance with their projects while also respecting that each person who is offering support is, at the same time, the actual or potential initiator of their own projects.

I first described this format in an earlier online version of this essay, in 2004. Several years later, I discovered another contemporary hosting format which has some similarities to what I have described above, although it does not use Focusing and includes additional questions. The Pro-Action Café, developed by Ria Baeck and Rainer Leoprechting, is an exciting blend of World Café and Open Space, designed to allow a group to contribute to various members' individual projects. For more info on this, see <http://www.theworldcafecommunity.org/forum/topics/pro-action-cafe>

BUILDING COMMUNITY: OFFERING A "MATRIX SPACE" FOR DIFFERENT KINDS OF GROUPING

A third kind of grouping that is particularly helpful for community-building is a large, open-to-all-comers 'matrix space.' In some ways this is similar to the first format, as there is no expectation of everyone working on a single project. Yet it is also different in that it is **designed for a substantially larger number of people and its purpose is to hold a wider space for networking and for forming many smaller groupings.**

In one form of matrix space, people are invited to participate in a large circle go-round where each person gets a turn to speak briefly. Those who are already involved with specific projects can use the time to celebrate any small (or large!) successes, along with making any requests for help. Those who are interested, but not yet active with any particular project or group, are also welcome. During the circle time, they introduce themselves and speak briefly about their own feelings, motivations, and interests.

Sometimes, a matrix space might be followed by a period of time during which various smaller groupings can meet. If that is not possible, we can offer the opportunity for people to gather, at least briefly, in self-selected smaller groupings in order to exchange contact information and set a time to meet later.

Participants in a matrix space enjoy the opportunity to hear about what is happening, celebrate small steps that have been taken, make and respond to requests for help, and introduce themselves to the community. This kind of grouping, though not

particularly complicated, offers great value. Even so, it still requires that the person extending the initial invitation be clear about the format and purpose of this kind of 'coming together'.

One of the reasons I am emphasizing the importance of clarity in the original invitation is the unfortunate tendency for people to attempt to 'hijack' groupings that do not have a clear intention and purpose. Sometimes people find it easier to attempt to influence an already existing grouping rather than putting out their own invitation to gather. Unfortunately, this hijacking of the matrix space's open purpose into a more limited purpose destroys the possibility of its 'giving birth' to any number of small groupings.

Long-time Focusing people may see some parallels between my description of a "matrix space", and Glaser and Gendlin's description of the original Chicago Changes group (1973). Subsequent Changes groups appear to have become spaces primarily oriented around learning and practicing Focusing, yet the original Changes model had a strong emphasis on being a space where many smaller sub-groups, each with their own projects, were invited to form.

I personally have never had the opportunity to-experience the original Chicago Changes group, yet my own experience of "matrix space" took place after September 11, 2001, in Sonoma County, California where a number of people sought a place to gather, support one another, and give birth to various and sundry initiatives in response to the needs of the time. In later conversations with Gene Gendlin, we were both struck by the parallels between the format of that generative activist space, and the original Changes group format. Many readers may also be familiar with Open Space Technology (Owen, 1992) or with Peer Conferencing (Segar, 2010.) We can see these as exemplary contemporary approaches to creating other variants of "matrix space".

LONGER-TERM GROUPINGS: "THIS OR SOMETHING BETTER"

Once a number of people have been working together for a while, the need for a different kind of grouping format will often become apparent. For example, people who have been working on a project may have particular insights arising from their proximity to the work they are doing. At the same time, they may be encountering some difficulties in communicating with the founders/vision-holders.

For their part, the original vision-holders still hold a unique and highly important perspective with regard to the project. At the same time, they might begin to sense some ways in which they may be unintentionally contributing to holding the project back. This kind of situation is quite understandable and frequently encountered, though this does not make it less painful.

We already know from Focusing that it often helps to have another person in the role of "listener" for the process *within a person* to unfold. This is especially the case when we are encountering a difficult situation, or if we are wanting to access a deeper level of creativity.

Similarly, when we are working in a long-term grouping, it can often be helpful to have an 'outside' person take on the role of the listener. His or her ability to embody multi-partiality – the ability to empathize with all sides – allows the process *within* the grouping to better unfold. The broader perspectives and wider framing of an outside listener also provide a fresh 'safe space' for whatever diversity or possible paradoxes may be occurring. Hence, what had previously been experienced as conflict gets unstuck and is seen freshly as a life-giving gift.

From a Focusing perspective, we can understand the purpose of an external space-holder as allowing the life in each 'part' to be fully heard so that *it* can offer its gift to the larger whole. The non-directive facilitator or 'designated listener' is someone who is, to some degree, 'outside' of the immediate system so that each person in the system can be free to voice the fullness and intricacy of their own particular place within the whole.

This external person could be a professional – the equivalent of a Focusing-Oriented therapist, yet for a group rather than for a single person. However, just as we often find it helpful to have lay Focusing partners, so too we can have lay "designated listeners" who have the skills and training to hold space effectively for groupings. Dynamic Facilitation is one Focusing-friendly approach for this, accessible to both professional and lay facilitators (Zubizarreta, 2014, 2013, 2006.) Like Focusing, it does require some training. Yet also like Focusing, it primarily works with the dynamics of presence, emergence, and naturally-occurring shifts.

In a situation where people have been working together for a while, having an "outside listener" does not alter the role of the vision-holders nor of the people serving in a support capacity. The process simply creates a space where everyone is able to safely 'overhear' one another. This structure, in turn, creates the possibility of life-forward shifts in each person with regard to the shared situation, by creating the opportunity for each person to experience the situation more fully.

In this context, the vision-keepers can experience the freedom of 'this or something better' with regard to their role as guardians of the vision. By participating in a facilitated process, they are inviting the possibility of a deepening or an expansion, but only if it rings true to their felt sense of the original vision.

Of course, there are also associated risks: if this kind of openness is created for a while, and then abruptly shut down, it can be very damaging to the morale of a group. On the other hand, when this kind of process is engaged in over time, it can help create a shift where each of the participants begin to "own" more of the vision, and thus the role of leadership becomes more distributed and more fluid.

WHAT NEXT?

Each of the four examples described above shares a common element: the importance of protecting each person's connection to their own process of felt-sensing and meaning-making. At the same time, each particular format responds to a different kind of situation: from creating a container where each person can clarify his or her own vision and projects within a similar field... to obtaining help and support from others to move forward with a specific project... to creating a forum where many kinds of groupings can develop... to supporting life-forward movement within a long-term collaboration or organization.

From the practice of Focusing, we know how rich and meaningful our own personal experiencing can be. Likewise, any 'meeting' of two or more humans has the inherent capacity to be an extraordinary coming together, full of unique possibilities and creativity... when we are able to design and enter into the kinds of spaces that allow for the fullness of such a 'meeting' to take place.

Human beings are such an extraordinary unfolding...and so much remains to be explored in the interpersonal and group realms! I look forward to the gifts that your own experiencing will offer to this on-going conversation.

Many thanks to Bruce Nayowith, Bala Jaison, and Paula Nowick for their skillful help in editing this article.

Rosa Zubizarreta has a background in education and education reform, organization development, and social work. A certified Focusing professional and Dynamic Facilitation trainer, she practices various forms of emergent group process.

REFERENCES.

Glaser, K. & Gendlin,, E.T. (1973). Changes. *Communities*, no. 2, 30-36. Louisa, VA: Community Publications Cooperative. From http://www.focusing.org/gendlin/docs/gol_2224.html

Owen, H. (1992). *Open space technology: A user's guide*. Potomac, Maryland: Abbott Publishing.

Raelin, J. A. (2010). *The leaderful fieldbook: Strategies and activities for developing leadership in everyone*. Boston: Davies-Black.

Segar, A. (2010). *Conferences that work: Creating events that people love*.

Booklocker.com

World Café Online Community. (2014) page on Pro Action Café, at
<http://www.theworldcafecommunity.org/forum/topics/pro-action-cafe>

Zubizarreta, R. (2014). *From conflict to creative collaboration: A user's guide to dynamic facilitation*. Minneapolis, MN: Two Harbors Press.

Zubizarreta, R. (2013). Co-creative dialogue for meeting practical challenges: New approaches. *OD Practitioner*, 45:1, 47-53.

Zubizarreta, R. (2006). Practical dialogue: Emergent approaches for effective collaboration. In *Creating a culture of collaboration: The international association of facilitators handbook*, ed. S. P. Schuman, 256-278. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Wiley.