

“The Unheard Voices in Our Community”

Story / Example

Begin with a story or example such as, “*You pass a lady on the street... she’s overweight, not the best dresser and at times looks a little lost. Does she belong in a half way house? No. Her unheard voice tells you that she was a very successful business woman – she had offices on the east and west coasts, traveled the world like we travel North Carolina – she lost it all to a disease that robs her of her thoughts and drugs that make her fat. She is an intellectual imprisoned in a body not of her own doing*”.

Overview

We are performing this exercise for 2 reasons:

- Our lives are made up of a patchwork of our experiences. Some may be shared with others in the class, but some may not. How do we know of we don’t share, if we don’t step out, if we don’t take a chance. This will help us make some of those connections. Right here. Right now.
- We pass people every day and sometimes we judge them by their cover, how they look, not who they are, because we don’t hear their inner voices. So many people we know or don’t know live lives of quiet desperation. This exercise will help those voices to be heard.

This activity is designed to enable each of you to gain insights into yourself and each other about the unheard voices in our communities – lives shaped by circumstances and events of which we are often unaware. By participating today, you are providing insights which could often take years for others to learn about yourselves. This can be a powerful and emotional exercise and must be treated with respect and care. This exercise can also provide for a profound bonding experience that creates a foundation for deeper relationships and bonding among you all.

I will read a series of statements. If you match a statement, cross the line, walk to the center of the room, turn and make eye contact with those on the other side of the room. Before you walk back to your original spot, take a few seconds to acknowledge who is with you and who is separated from you noting the feelings that come up while performing this exercise.

Guidelines

In this exercise, we will be dealing with sensitive issues. Before we begin, we ask that everyone agree to the following guidelines:

- Honor confidentiality. Anything shared in this room stays within this group.
- Complete silence – no laughing and no side conversations.
- Unconditionally respect yourself and others.
- Everyone has a right to pass – only participate to the level that you feel comfortable. However, we do encourage you to take risks with this exercise because that is the best way for us to learn and grow. If you decide to not identify yourself with a group that is called out, notice any feelings that come up about not identifying yourself. If you are not sure about which group you belong to, decide for yourself where it makes sense for you to go.

Facilitator Note: *Facilitators should be prepared for emotional responses and insights from the class members. As a facilitator, it is important to note that even if no one crosses the line for a particular category, it does not mean that no one in the group actually falls into that category. With that in mind, be careful not to make statements such as “since we have no one in this group with disabilities or impairments” or “why do you think we have no homosexuals in this group”, etc.*

Statements

Facilitator Note: For each of the statements below, say the following: "Please step the center of the room if ... [read statement]." [Pause]. "Notice who's standing with you. Notice who's not." [Pause]. "Notice how you feel." [Pause]. "Come back together again."

1. You are 40 or under.
2. You are over 50.
3. You are a veteran or currently serving in the Armed Forces.
4. Your first language is other than English.
5. You are of multi-heritage and at least one of your parents or grandparents is a person of color.
6. Your descendants came to America voluntarily.

Our community is made up of people of all ages, races, genders and ethnic and religious backgrounds. This is what makes up the richness of the fabric of our lives. Great leaders understand and embrace that richness.

7. You were raised by a single parent or currently are or have been a single parent.
8. You are an adoptive parent or child.

Do you feel that being adopted or adopting a child has added to your life experience? Has it created special challenges?

9. One of your parents, or the people who raised you, were or are working class and did manual labor, pink-collar clerical or service work to make a living.

Why is it that so many of us see people as what they do and not who they are?

10. You were raised in an isolated or farming community.
11. You are the first in your family to receive a college degree.

There is increased responsibility in being the first... increased pressure as well. Has the pressure and responsibility motivated you to excel?

12. You or a close family member has a visible or hidden physical disability or impairment.
13. Serious illness has impacted your life or your immediate family.
14. You have a close family member for whom alcohol and drugs were or are a problem. Stay in the center you actively instigated or participated in an intervention.
15. You have paid the "minimum amount due" on a credit card statement.
16. You have had to wait until the next paycheck to pay a bill.
17. You as an adult or you parents have ever been broke.
18. You have ever gone hungry.

These are difficult life experiences. Do you push yourself harder because of these experiences?

19. Someone in your family, or a close friend, is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.
20. You have worked for a boss younger than you.
21. You were passed over for a promotion by someone less qualified.

How have you dealt with these situations? Do you except, rebel or do you just work around them?

22. You have agreed with a boss and/or team when your intuition told you something was wrong.

Don't we owe it to them to speak up?

23. You have been sexually harassed on the job.

Sexual harassment is most often about power. When did it become OK to use sex as a tool in the workplace?

24. You have been fired or have ever been unemployed, not by choice.

Understand the depth of upheaval that this can create in a person or family. Understand also that we can bounce back.

25. You have worked for minimum wage.

26. You have been abrupt, curt, rude or abusive to a person making minimum wage.

Just because someone is a minimum wage worker does not mean that they are a minimum wage person.

27. You have ever felt discriminated against.

28. You have observed discrimination and didn't speak up.

When did it become ok for us to treat people differently just because their skin is a different color or they come from a different part of OUR world or their ways of worship are different? When did it become a birthright to be better than someone else?

29. You have suffered the consequences from taking a stand.

30. You have spoken up for someone who could not speak for him or herself.

How does it make you feel to have stood up in the face of negative consequences? Does it make you feel stronger to have spoken for someone else?

31. You or a member of your family has ever been labeled mentally ill or crazy.

Aren't we all a little crazy at times?

32. You or a member of your family have ever been incarcerated or been in the juvenile justice system.

Many people have stumbled but have righted their lives. What can we learn from them?

33. You have ever been publicly labeled overweight, whether or not you felt overweight?

34. You have ever been a child.

Feel free to cross the line as I explain this category. Many of us have had no opportunity to be a child. We've been forced to grow up too soon. Circumstances have forced us to be parents to ourselves, our siblings or maybe to some other friend or relative. The environment that we grew up in may have forced us to make real adult decisions at a very early age. What effect does never really being a child have on you, the adult?

35. You are a moral and ethical leader.

Debrief / Discussion / Reflection

Please follow the following guideline during this debrief:

- Actively listen and consider other people's words as gifts.
- Avoid interpreting other people's experiences.
- Give caring feedback – no put downs or hostile analysis.
- Agree to disagree.
- It's ok to express your emotions.
- Take responsibility for your own learning – ask for what you need.

Ask each person to partner up with the person to their left for 5-10 minutes and discuss the following questions:

What feelings came up for you during this exercise?

How did it feel to be part of a minority group?

How did it feel to be part of a majority group?

After the partner discussion time, bring the group back together for reflection and discussion.