

GROUP NORMS: BUILDING AN INTENTIONAL CONTAINER

Based on learning from a variety of teachers, formal and informal, over many years.

Creating an intentional “container” is not a prelude to equity work, but an essential step in the process.

Every group develops “norms” – ways to behave, communicate, and get work done. Norms are always present, but often not spoken or negotiated. When they arise by default, they tend to reflect the dominant culture. Take time to develop norms that support authentic relationship building and dialogue, mutual learning, collective analysis and visioning, and strategic action for personal, organizational, and social transformation.

These suggested norms can help us practice systems thinking, radical empathy, and “**confident humility**” – the self-awareness that we all have wisdom and other gifts to contribute, and we always will have more to learn. With both confidence and humility, we can approach each challenge, including conflicts and failures, with courage and as an opportunity for creativity and positive change.

Note that these norms reflect various cultural perspectives – some that will seem familiar, and some that will seem foreign. We believe that, collectively, they can deepen our confident humility and open a pathway for equity and justice.

1. **Speak your truth** – To transform inequitable systems, we have to be able to see and make sense of them. By sharing our stories, experiences, and thoughts that come from living within those systems, we can expose patterns, history, and context as well as opportunities for change. Speaking from the “I” position helps build agency and accountability, rather than detaching from one’s perspective (“you”) or universalizing it (“we”). Co-create a safer space for everyone to speak their truth and develop a robust collective analysis by respecting different forms of expression, honoring boundaries, and maintaining confidentiality. Step up and practice asserting if you tend to be reserved or quiet. Step back and practice listening if you tend to be talkative.
2. **Lean into discomfort and lean into each other** – By design, confronting power relations and structures will challenge dominant culture norms. Discomfort signals that you are being challenged and perhaps even growing from the experience. Support each other to reflect on discomfort with a spirit of inquiry and wonder, in order to reach new awareness and meaning individually as well as collectively. The process can be useful and meaningful only with everyone’s full participation. Support each other to participate fully.

WE ARE NOT SEPARATE

~ Leonard Peltier

*We are not separate beings,
you and I.
We are different strands
of the same Being.*

*You are me and I am you
and we are they and they are us.*

*This is how we’re meant to be
each of us one,
each of us all.*

*You reach out across the
void of Otherness to me
and you touch your own soul!*



3. **Commit to non-closure** – Engaging in sustainable systems change requires both urgency and patience. Even while you gain clarity, make decisions, take informed actions, and make progress, there always will be deeper questions to address, feedback to integrate, adaptations to make, and more to learn and do. Non-closure does not mean non-action, but rather persistent analysis and action in the face of evolving needs and opportunities. Stay engaged in the process of working and learning together for the long haul.

4. **Embrace paradox** – Either-or thinking can stymie dialogue, learning, and change. All of us, individually and collectively, embody paradox – identities, beliefs, and experiences that seem to contradict each other. Listen to your intuition and creativity, as well as to your critical thinking, to make sense of and hold ideas that are complex and appear contradictory. Welcome this in each other.

5. **Focus on learning and responsibility, not perfection** – Change does not happen through a linear, discrete process of moving from “not knowing” to “knowing.” Instead, periods of deep and intentional inquiry will lead to breakthroughs of discovery...that set the stage for deeper inquiry and further discovery...and so on. Mistakes and failures will occur along the way. But if we focus on learning and growing, being accountable to each other for the impact of our actions, and staying in relationship – we can make progress in our change efforts. This contrasts with the dominant culture’s obsession with “perfection,” which is unrealistic, unachievable, and even undesirable. It distracts us from engaging in the lifelong work of making sustainable social change. Practice makes progress, not perfect. “Perfect” truly can be the enemy of the good.

PARADOX

~ Gunilla Norris from *Sharing Silence*

*It is a paradox that we encounter so much internal noise
when we first try to sit in silence.*

It is a paradox that experiencing pain releases pain.

*It is a paradox that keeping still can lead us
so fully into life and being.*

*Our minds do not like paradoxes. We want things
to be clear, so we can maintain our illusions of safety.
Certainty breeds tremendous smugness.*

*We each possess a deeper level of being, however,
which loves paradox. It knows that summer is already
growing like a seed in the depth of winter. It knows
that the moment we are born, we begin to die. It knows
that all of life shimmers, in shades of becoming –
that shadow and light are always together,
the visible mingled with the invisible.*

*When we sit in stillness we are profoundly active.
Keeping silent, we can hear the roar of existence.
Through our willingness to be the one we are,
we become one with everything.*

*All of you are perfect just as you are,
and you could use a little improvement.*

~ Zen Master Suzuki Roshi