

Tools for tackling difficult issues

Here are some tools that are useful when dealing with difficult issues in the group. The following tools generally benefit from strong facilitation, so do lay down clear rules and don't let discussions get out of hand. Don't feel afraid to stop the process if necessary. If things do get heavy then bear in mind that conflict resolution requires both skill and experience, and shouldn't be done unprepared. It's much better to stop the meeting and seek help from experienced facilitators, such as those at **Activist Mediation Network** – www.activistmediation.org.uk

Controlled dialogue

30 minutes – 1 hour; 3 people per group



This tool is helpful when two people find it difficult to listen to each other and understand each other's concerns. Form a group of three, one observer and two speakers/listeners. There are three phases to this form of dialogue – after a set amount of time or points, the group can go on to the next phase:

1. The listener repeats word for word what the speaker has said. Only then are they allowed to answer.
2. The listener summarises what the speaker has said and then answers.
3. When answering the listener addresses all issues and concerns of the speaker.

The observer makes sure participants stick to the format and helps out if necessary. Particularly in the first and second phase the speaker should concentrate on essential points as listening requires a lot of concentration. You can also use this exercise to practise listening and responding skills in the group.

Sharing withholds

15 – 40 minutes; 5 – 30 people



Withholds are thoughts that we keep to ourselves. They usually have to do with judgements about ourselves, others, or what is happening in the group. For this tool to work there needs to be a climate of generous listening, which may take some time to achieve. It may be helpful if the group commits to putting aside enough time to relax together and do this exercise.

Set up an unstructured round asking people to make statements beginning with: “If I could change one thing in the group it would be...”, “What upsets me about this group is ...”. Do not allow anyone to respond to the withholds or start a discussion. Make sure that everyone has a say – it is highly unlikely that someone is completely happy with a group. At the end of the round, see if any themes have emerged and if anyone wants their issue discussed.

Feelings meeting

30 minutes – 2 hours; 3 – 30 people



Similar to sharing withholds. A meeting which is solely concerned with feelings. Many groups hold regular feelings meetings to catch any

problems early. Participants do not have to deal with decisions and actions. Such meetings allow the group to involve and support

members as whole people and to resolve concerns, problems and conflicts before they become too serious. It helps to use tools such as talking sticks or go-rounds to encourage active listening. Encourage people to use “I...” statements instead of speaking for other people too. Begin by asking people about where they are at in their lives outside the group. This will give

a context for everyone's reactions when you

come on to issues within the group. Listen for what is not being said. Some people and groups find it hard to admit to negative feelings and tiptoe around conflicts. Create a safe enough space so that people feel able to open up.

Reverse role plays

30 minutes – 1 hour; 6 – 30 people

A tool to allow people to understand both sides of a conflict. They can help people entrenched in one position to think more flexibly. They are useful for examining a critical incident that occurs repeatedly or is expected to occur and for developing a definition of acceptable behaviour (e.g. conflicts over power, sexism, ageism etc.).

Set up a situation involving two sides. At an important point in the role play, have everyone freeze. Ask people to take the opposite role and take up the conversation where it left off. The facilitator may have to help people remember what the last lines of the dialogue were. It can help if the facilitator physically moves people to their new positions and says “You are now X, and you are now Y”. Give people a moment to mentally shift to their new identities and resume the role play. Follow the role play with an evaluation.

