

COACHING STRATEGIES:

HOW TO BE ATTENTIVE TO GROUP DYNAMICS¹

WHAT IS IT?

Group dynamics are the ways in which a group interacts and works together.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

- Attention to group dynamics is an essential component of democratic practice. Group dynamics often distract and possibly derail groups of young people as they try to take democratic action.
- Coaches need to learn how to pay attention to individual members of their team and the team as a whole group. This does not necessarily come naturally to all coaches. You can learn to recognize how the team works together, the rhythm of their work, different learning styles, and particular interactions between team members and the overall group.
- Coaches can reflect on group dynamics in terms of democratic principles such as:
 - Respect for each individual*
 - Equality*
 - Freedom to be oneself and to express one's own ideas*
 - Democratic decision-making*
 - Shared authority and power*
- Most importantly, when coaches are attentive to group dynamics they listen better to individual members, resolve conflict when it occurs, and work with members to make meaning of their experience and relationships with other team members.

WHEN IS THIS USEFUL?

All the time. It is important to be attentive to group dynamics before problems arise.

CORE CONCEPTS: democracy, politics, power, self-interests, diversity, accountability

SKILLS: teamwork, deliberation, negotiation, evaluation

¹ Developed by Margaret Post and Roudy Hildreth, Center for Democracy and Citizenship

EXERCISE FOR YOU TO DO: “DESCRIBE YOUR GROUP”

Take 15-20 minutes to write down a description of your group (or you can describe it verbally with other coaches). Questions to consider:

- Describe the dynamics of your group
- Describe your team members
- Describe memorable moments (good and bad)
- Describe “we kick butt!” days
- Describe “we suck!” days
- What does dialogue look like in your group?
- How do race/class/gender come up explicitly in your meetings?

DIFFERENT WAYS OF BEING ATTENTIVE WHILE COACHING

Ultimately, you want to be attentive to individual members, your group as a whole, and yourself. But to start, try being attentive to individual team members and then build from there.

Team members as individuals:

- What do you know about each individual team member?
- What is their individual learning style?
- How do they interact with particular individuals and the group as a whole?
- When and how is this particular team member engaged? When is this particular team member disengaged?

Group (as a group):

- How do they work as a group?
- What are the different ways the group interacts?
- What is the rhythm of their work (do they need shorter activities, time to process, etc).
- Are there any personality conflicts?
- How does the group tend to make decisions?

Self:

- What are your own expectations for the group?
- What is your interest in this issue? How does your level of interest impact your coaching?
- How do your own life-experiences in schools affect how you work with young people?
- How do you know you are listening to your team members?

HOW DO YOU DO IT?

Being attentive to group dynamics is something that is done “in the moment,” often simultaneously with other activities. Thus it is important to be attentive to group dynamics so you can problem-solve group dynamics issues.

In early meetings:

- develop group norms/agreement/guidelines
- do “get to know you” activities
- Use stories (verbally or through art and in writing) for team members to talk about themselves, their neighborhood, family, and why issue is important to them. Make sure that you also relate your own stories.

Throughout the year:

- Working together as a team through team building activities
- Take a break, hang out with your team.
- Let the team know something about you.
- Evaluate with your team how they worked together after each meeting
- Evaluate on your own how you think the team worked together, Questions to ponder:
 - Who talks the most in your group?
 - Are some members silenced because others talk too much?
 - Does everyone have an equal voice?
 - Does someone do most of the work?
 - What are possible reasons why there is conflict in your group?