

COACHING SKILL:

HOW TO INTEGRATE CONCEPTS IN PUBLIC WORK PROJECTS¹

WHAT IS IT?

When groups are engaged in public work, one of the best ways for them to see and learn about the political dimensions of their work is to use the core concepts such as power, politics, self-interests, democracy, public, diversity.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT:

Public Achievement stresses that participants learn and use a particular set of concepts in order to make sense of their experiences in public and political ways. Concepts are not just words and their definitions; they are ideas and ways of thinking. They allow us to engage intellectually the big questions of politics and public life.

Concepts are a defining feature of Public Achievement; they distinguish PA from community service and many forms of service learning. Public Achievement is unique because it focuses on the public and political dimensions of experiential education. It is just activity, nor just talking, but it is action that has been discussed in advance, planned, executed, and evaluated in public and political terms.

HOW TO INTEGRATE CONCEPTS:

Before you start coaching:

It is a good idea to familiarize yourself with the core concepts. A major reason as to why coaches do not use concepts often in their work with teams is that they are not sure of the definitions themselves. It is important to realize that these **concepts are not vocabulary words with correct definitions**. They are contested ideas with multiple definitions to be debated. Another problem with learning concepts is that there are too many to learn at once; start by learning the four which you think are most important for public work, and then learn the rest over time.

In the course of your work:

There are several ways to use concepts in the course of your work:

1. Concepts can help you *plan and strategize* your actions. Possible questions / tips:
 - How is our project public? Who does it impact? How?
 - What are the politics of our project?
 - What is that organization's interest in our project? What power do they have?
 - What power do we have?
 - What might we do to build our power in order to ...?

¹ Developed by Roudy Hildreth, Center for Democracy and Citizenship

2. Concepts can help you *evaluate* your actions; they can help your team think through their action in deeper ways.
 - How did the group do? Were we prepared? In what ways were we accountable?
 - In our negotiations with the administrator, what power did she have? What power did we have? What other sources of power could we tap into to be in a better bargaining position?
 - What is our understanding of the politics of the situation?

3. Concepts allow you to *reflect on and learn* from experiences in different ways. Possible questions / tips:
 - What was it like to negotiate with the administrator? How did she treat you? In what ways did you experience her power (over our project, over us)? What was that like?
 - What was it like to make a public presentation in front of hundreds of students? Did you notice yourself acting differently in public? How did the audience respond? How did that make you feel powerful?
 - What was it like to meet homeless people at the shelter? What did we learn about their lives? Do we look at ourselves differently? In what ways was this an encounter with diversity?

4. Concepts can help you *make sense of group dynamics* / evaluate meetings. You can use the concepts to capture what happened in the group. Possible questions / tips:
 - When there is a discussion / dispute where people have different opinions, you can talk about self-interest or diversity.
 - You can talk about inter-personal issues in terms of public/private, power, equality and respect.
 - You can analyze how you made decisions. How did politics play out? What happens when people's self-interests conflict?
 - When the team is having internal problems, analyze it in terms of power. If applicable; name the power struggle.
 - When people are inappropriately talking about their personal lives, name the public / private distinction. Recognize that personal experiences can motivate us to action.

See exercises Ranking Concepts [insert link], and Concept Poster Project [insert link], Reading Current Events with Concepts [insert link].