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KIVA GROUPS:

A RITUAL FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING AND ARRIVING AT DECISION BY CONSENSUS DURING CONFERENCES

Kivas are the sacred meeting places used for ceremonial and ritual purposes among the Hopi and Pueblo Indians. The Kiva Group process was originally extracted from a ritual called The Bone Game* and designed by the author for use with 1500 people at the World Symposium on Humanity in Toronto in 1979. Since then, it has been used during countless counseling and consulting initiatives. It has also been used to provide a sense of stability and support at many large conferences throughout North America including the First International Symposium on Organization Transformation at the University of New Hampshire, July 1983; the Fourth World Wilderness Congress in Estes Park, Colorado, September 1987; the Annual Conference of the Virginia Counselors Association in Richmond, Virginia, November 1992; the annual conference of the American Counseling Association in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1996; and the annual conference for the Association for the Advancement of Psychosynthesis in Stratford, Connecticut in March 2001.

The purpose and process of Kiva Groups will be discussed below. The following article describes how the Kiva Group process can be used at conferences. Participants must familiarize themselves with this material before the gathering. Attendance in all Kiva Group meetings and in the Celebration at the end is essential

INTRODUCTION OF THE PROCESS

Participants break up into 5 person Kiva Groups at the first meeting. The Kiva Group Process provides a simple communication ritual that will be enacted four times during a conference. The process is designed to help participants integrate the information to which they will be exposed, discuss their insights, express their needs, support one another, and develop friendships with several other people in a short period of time. Simplicity, focus and depth are the qualities that characterize this ritual, adapted from the leader's experiences with Native American and Mexican ritual and ceremonial practices.

SIMPLICITY

The Kiva Groups convene for exactly one hour per meeting. The communication ritual, though complex to describe, once understood is quite simple to use. It is a process that allows participants a maximum degree of creativity and freedom of expression while, at the same time, moving the group toward an experience of group or tribal consciousness. The process requires no monitoring from the outside. Once Kiva Groups form, they depend only on group members to develop their individual meaning, purpose and direction. A unique Kiva culture emerges from the collaboration and cooperation of all members.

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FOCUS

The Kiva Group process provides participants with the opportunity to move beneath the stimulation and excitement of a conference, connect to the dynamic core of their experiences, and clarify the personal meaning of the activities in which they take part. The process helps everyone to become centered and present in the moment each time the Kiva Group meets. The process provides a tool for focusing group attention and energy that can be useful, not only during the conference itself, but also back at home with family, colleagues and friends if one choose to do so. Historically, this has been one of the most valuable and enduring values of the process.

DEPTH

The Kiva Group process provides a context in which participants can share the essence of their experiences at the conference with a small but increasingly significant group of people. It creates a 'sacred space' in which they can expose their interests, discoveries and needs in a gradually unfolding way. All participants have an equal opportunity to unmask and reveal themselves in ways that help built a receptive and supportive group energy field. Through mutual sharing, slowly and in depth, specific learnings, common struggles, broader issues and larger patterns emerge, out of which comes a powerful sense of community.

There are two fundamental aspects of the Kiva Group process which must be studied and understood for the process to work: how to use the Power Object, and the fact that all decisions are made on the basis of consensus. Instruction on these points follows below.

POWER OBJECT

It is necessary to create an object with which to focus group attention, and the Power Object serves in this capacity. Native Americans call this object the "talking stick." At the beginning of the first Kiva Group, everyone sits in a circle and places an object of symbolic and personal meaning in front of them. It is important that this object be well considered before and brought to the conference.

1st step. Moving in a clockwise manner, everyone takes a turn describing in detail the value and meaning of their object. For instance, "This is my wallet. I got it from my grandfather before he died. It helps me remember him, and particularly...." or "This is a stone I found in the Scottish Highlands. I was going through a period in my life when....", etc. Everyone takes a turn describing his or her object until all have spoken.

2nd step. Then the objects are passed around the circle, and everyone examines them in detail. Everyone holds, feels, and appreciates each item and considers its meaning to its owner, then passes it on until all objects have been inspected by all Kiva Group members.

3rd step. The final step is to actually select the Power Object. This is done simply by passing the objects around and around again and again. In this cycle, however, if anyone feels an object he is holding is not suitable to be the Power Object, he simply place the object on the ground and thus removes it from further consideration. The rest of the objects circulate until only one remains in circulation. The last remaining object becomes the Power Object.

USE OF THE POWER OBJECT

The use of the Power Object is what gives life and spirit to the Kiva Group process. At the beginning of each meeting, the owner of the Power Object begins the process with a moment of silence and inner attunement, then begins the sharing cycle. Whoever holds the Power Object can share anything he wants in any manner that he feels inspired to use for as long as he has the need to express something. He can, for instance, talk about a meaningful insight, confront another Kiva Group member, sing a song, do a dance, mime or expressive movement,; express appreciation or difficulty; simply hold the Power Object and remain silent for a few moments--whatever--until he is ready to relinquish the group attention and focus and pass the Power Object to the person to the left--always in a clockwise manner.

The person who holds the Power Object has the full attention of all other Kiva Group members. No one can comment, interrupt, or respond in a verbal way to the speaker unless he raises a hand, is recognized by the holder of the Power Object, and is invited to speak. The holder, however, is not obliged to recognize or invite another person to speak while he has the Power Object unless he chooses to do so.

Each person holds the Power Object until he is finished sharing, and the other Kiva members remain respectfully quiet and attentive until that person is done. Then the Power Object moves to the next person. This is not principally an interactive process. It is, rather, a form that allows deep, personal sharing by each member of the Kiva to the rest of the group. By this, all members have the freedom to search for their words, connect to their inner experience, and express themselves to their Kiva members in their own unique way, without interruption. Through this process, all Kiva Group members have the opportunity both to speak from a place of depth and to be heard completely, and the opportunity to practice and learn the delicate art of receptive listening. The Power Object can be passed as often as time allows.

CONSENSUS

All decisions that affect the Kiva are arrived at on the basis of consensus. When anyone wishes to make a proposal which impacts the life of the Kiva, he can do so only when he holds the Power Object. A proposal is made and then a voting process takes place. Each person votes on a proposal by showing a 'thumb up' for yes, a 'thumb down' for no, or a 'palm face up' signifying a neutral position on the proposal. Every Kiva member must either agree with, or not object to, a proposal laid before the group for the proposal to pass. In this way, consensus is achieved.

But, if anyone disagrees with the proposal, or simply wants to comment about it after it has been made, when it is time for the vote he votes with a thumb down. Only the negative voters can speak after a proposal is made. The holder of the Power Object gives only those who vote negatively an opportunity to express the reason(s) for the negative vote, beginning with the first negative voter to the holder's left, and moving around the circle until all negative voters have spoken. When the feedback is complete, the holder can make the same proposal again or amend it to include elements heard from the floor, then calls for a vote again. If the proposal passes, it is adopted and the person who made the proposal continues to hold and use the Power Object, continues to share until done. But, on the second round, if there are still negative votes, the holder must relinquish the Power Object and pass it to the person to his left in the circle.

In this way, all decisions are made on the basis of consensus, and each person in the Kiva has equal power. Open dialogue can occur after such a proposal is made by someone and is accepted by Kiva members, by placing the Power Object in the center of the circle. This signifies that each person has the freedom to speak at will, in a 'free-for-all' manner, with all members sharing the power equally. But at any time, a member may take the Power Object from the center and end the dialogue if he feels the need, and

begin again the process of ritually respecting each holder and ritually passing the Power Object. Finally, it must be stressed that the Kiva Group process can be entered into as formally or as informally as the Kiva Group decides. As long as there is consensus, and everyone's opinion is taken into account, anything is possible!

KIVA GROUP CHALLENGES AND ACTIVITIES

During the first meeting Friday evening, these tasks need to be accomplished include the creation of a Power Object, the choosing of a Kiva name, creating a list of group members, and electing someone to keep summary notes of each meeting. The list of members, notes, and a copy of the final product need to be handed in at the Celebration at the end.

The purpose of the second Kiva Group meeting is to help integrate the experiences that have thus far occurred and provides the opportunity for connection, communication, sharing and support among members of the group. The Power Object should be used in its ritual way to allow everyone the time and space to speak about what is most important to them at that time. Any proposal can be made (to go out to lunch together, to meet in the afternoon at a special place, whatever) and adopted if done by consensus. The challenge of the third Kiva Group meeting is similar to the second meeting.

The last Kiva Group meeting is intended to provide the time and space for members to work together to create something to share at the concluding Celebration: a document, poem, skit or psychodrama which takes at least one minute to enact and which summarizes the experience members have had during the conference. This task proves the value of the process because a number of decisions must be made by consensus in a short period of time. It uses the energy generated through receptive listening and authentic self-disclosure in a creative and productive way and in a way that can be inspiring to others not a part of that particular Kiva.

KIVA GROUP CELEBRATION

This Celebration is the culmination of the conference and is intended to provide an opportunity for closure of it. The Celebration gives everyone a chance not only to share in a focused way some evidence of the value of this process but also to enjoy its effects.

SUMMARY OUTLINE

- 1) Kiva members always sit in a circle.
- 2) Each meeting begins with a short period of silence, deep breathing and relaxation focused by the owner of the Power Object.
- 3) At the 1st Kiva meeting, symbolic objects are shared, the Power Object is chosen, the Kiva name is created, a list of members is generated, and someone is elected to keep notes on each meeting.
- 4) The Power Object always moves in a clockwise manner from person to person which creates a consistent, predictable and powerful vortex of energy within each Kiva.
- 5) The holder of the Power Object has the full, uninterrupted attention of all other Kiva members. Other must be recognized by the holder before they speak but the holder is not obliged to recognize anyone

and can stop the other's sharing at will. The Power Object is not passed on until the holder is ready to do so and has finished the sharing he needs to do.

6) All decisions are made on the basis of consensus, and each person has equal voting power within the Kiva. 'Thumb up' is a yes vote, 'thumb down' means no, and a 'palm face up' means one takes a neutral position on the proposal at hand.

7) Dialogue can occur by placing the Power Object in the center of the circle, assuming such a proposal is made by someone and passes by vote, but at any time any member can take the power if he has a need to end the dialogue and return the process to the ritual form.

8) A program of at least one minute length is shared at the Celebration and the Kiva Group name, description of the Power Object, group members, and meeting notes are turned in to the facilitator for documentation at the end.

CONCLUSION

The Kiva Group process is a creative and stimulating experience freely entered into by interested participants. It should be understood as a small investment of time and energy which pays off with the dividends of trust building, support, the generation of friendship in a short period of time, a meaningful experience of community during the conference and a ritual that can be used in many ways by participants back at home.

* **THE BONE GAME: A RITUAL FOR DEVELOPING PERSONAL POWER AND GROUP (OR TRIBAL) CONSCIOUSNESS.** An ancient, complex, and inspiring Native American ritual that serves as an extraordinary weekend retreat outlined in great detail. Journal of Experiential Education, 13 (1), Spring, 1990.