

## **Mindfulness Practice: Creating Safe Spaces for Inquiry**

We saw in Tom Hurley's description of the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance the creation of space for awakening curiosity in the "other" and allowing new agreements to become possible. We saw, particularly in the ways that polarization and false agreements have led to tragedy, the dangers of collapsing the space for inquiry. In the last decade, we have witnessed an explosion of group methodologies and processes that seek to make visible the "wisdom" that is among us and coming through us. These methodologies include various forms of dialogue; organizational interventions such as Appreciative Inquiry and stakeholder engagement; and avenues through which groups can catalyze new insights, such as those developed by our colleagues Juanita Brown and David Isaacs in the format of the World Café.

Fundamental to all these group methodologies is a response to the need to be understood. Anyone who has worked with children knows how deeply rooted this human impulse is. It goes beyond individual temperament or mood. Being understood is akin to experiencing love, and being mindful of this need for understanding brings our attention automatically to how we impact others. Actions as simple as spending an extra moment greeting others and showing our regard for them create the conditions in which they can feel safe and more open to exploration.

Ultimately, however, it is the value system behind the actions that matters. A physician colleague notes that patients don't care how much you know; they want to know how much you care. In the medical office, caring is what creates safety. His comment captures the spirit behind the practice of making spaces safe for inquiry. When people are in groups, we first want to know we are safe, and our feeling of being safe or unsafe precedes a

mindful that it is important for individuals to feel both unique and part of the group. When this basic need is frustrated, we stop being interested in what the group or collective can do. Sadly, the effect on how the group operates is similar to how the brain operates in instances of autism: Pockets of expertise, even genius, remain, but there is no larger orchestration of the multiple forms of intelligence—physical, cognitive, spiritual, and emotional—that constitute the group as a whole.

When we create safe spaces for inquiry, we are inviting in our whole selves: what we really feel and sense inside ourselves, what truly matters to us, and what we can discover together with others. We are mindful that what creates safety for inquiry are the possibilities of being understood and keeping our dignity intact. We create safety by designing settings where there is opportunity for reflection and curiosity, often as a counterpoint to meetings where deadlines and immediate survival are at stake. In the NASA story, the tragedy was not only in the final moments of forced agreement, but in the whole chain of events that allowed a critical variable to go unresolved.

Creating safe space for inquiry can be counterintuitive. When conflict emerges, our reaction is often to contract and become more isolated. A mindfulness practice can be to notice an inclination in ourselves to become rigid and dogmatic. Instead of acting from a habitual stance of wanting to be right, we can gently redirect our attention to examining our assumptions and inquiring into what is possible with others.

Safety for inquiry is created by listening with respect, even to those with whom we may differ. We can practice this, and notice when this capability within ourselves becomes strained or if our attention wanders. Through this practice, we can become aware that change is not only for the other, but also about how we will need to change as well.

Change is often accompanied by a power shift between

resistance that is natural in groups when familiar patterns are threatened.

An underlying assumption of this mindfulness practice is that we see that things must be fundamentally different, not just incrementally better. It is the vision that Mary Parker Follett described almost a century ago. We recognize that the future is created with others, even those with whom we differ. Paradox is embraced because we begin to see that stopping conflict cannot be a precondition for creating the safe space for dialogue. We need to establish safety amid uncertainty. We do this in part by shifting our attention from difficult personalities to structural impediments and the places where common ground can be found. Together, we can search for opportunities not previously seen.

## **Practices for Creating Safe Spaces for Inquiry**

**Guiding Intent:** Recognizing the need for people to be understood.

*First Self-Observation:* Notice how caring for others in groups makes it possible to deepen exploration and inquiry.

*Personal Practice:* Direct your attention to what makes others distinctive and positive contributors to the group. Look for opportunities to voice these observations out loud in the group or directly to the individual.

*Second Self-Observation:* Notice times when you are inclined to become rigid, judgmental, or dogmatic.

*Personal Practice:* Direct your attention to examining your own expectations and assumptions or to how you feel misunderstood or marginalized. Look for opportunities to articulate differences without polarizing or forcing your

Deep listening is a form of mindfulness that continually returns our attention to a deeper ground of being. Paula Underwood introduced us to a useful tenet of deep listening. It is that the intimacy of listening to one person is coherent with listening to the universe. As you may recall from chapter 2, when Underwood's father asked her if she could hear his friend's "heart," her instinct was to place her ear to the chests of the people she knew. She was learning how to pay attention literally to the beats and rhythms of the heart. As she grew into the role of clan mother, deep listening was a way of listening to others on behalf of the needs, desires, and dreams of a larger community. To know the people's hearts, she had to learn how to listen "between the lines" and even when people were not speaking. "If you want to truly listen to someone else," she told us, "you must empty yourself and let them fill the emptiness. There must be nothing inside you but a great willingness to hear, to listen. . . . It's as if you are nearly starving and someone is offering you food. When you can listen like that, then you can truly hear."

Deep listening is a practice of emptying out the noise and rattle that accompanies much of our own thoughts. It is finding a quiet space in our own mind that allows us to "sense" into the other. Underwood compares it to physical hunger, where we become so receptive to the words and associated meanings of others that it feels like a satisfying meal. The psychologist and science journalist Daniel Goleman has a distinct but related way of describing this, as discussed in chapter 7. Mirror neurons have been identified within the architecture of the physical brain that allow us—at least a bit—to sense the intentions and emotions of others. Deep listening is a practice of deepening this natural empathic connection that we have in common with others—seeing, if just for an instant, through the eyes of others.

Deep listening as a mindfulness practice extends listening and sensing to groups and larger collectives. This requires us to first quiet the many voices in our own mind. Monkey mind is the Buddhist term for how our internal thoughts jump from thing to

Deep listening, by contrast, is always in the present moment, allowing thoughts to bind together. Each thought occupies its own space and extends into the next one. In this way, the perspectives of others gain enough space to take on their own significance, yet they remain connected to the larger group field. The more we practice a mindfulness that encompasses the whole, the greater the chance that an underlying order can be perceived.

Deep listening, as Underwood suggested, can be translated into a different kind of presence in groups. Ben Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic, once told Nelson Mandela that he was the “the first leader of Symphonia.” “What is that?” asked Mandela, with a raised eyebrow. Zander explained that the word symphony is a combination of *sym* (“together”) and *phonaē* (“to sound”)—the sounding together of all the voices. “You are,” Zander said, “the first leader of Symphonia, because instead of leading in the traditional way from the top down, you focused on allowing all the voices to be heard.” Mandela thought for a moment and smiled. “I like that.”

As a practice, deep listening can be experienced as a gentle detachment from the commentary in our own mind and a turning to others. In groups, we can do this in the immediacy of the moment by simple acts such as observing the expression on another’s face or even the clothes someone is wearing. We deepen the practice by acting with a purposeful intent to listen to the whole person, which is different from simply hearing the other person speak. Deep listening is a practice that allows us to read between the lines and listen with our heart to the hearts of others.

## ***Practices for Deep Listening***

**Guiding Intent:** To cultivate empathy and understanding in groups. Listening with intent to understand more than what is actually being said.

*Personal Practice:* Direct your attention to what aids calmness. For some, it is attention to breath, taking a moment to breathe deeply and relax the body. For others, it may involve sitting quietly for a few extra moments. Still others take time for a personal inventory, noticing feelings and thoughts arising that signal fear or agitation, or, alternatively, calmness and appreciation. Practice noticing your thoughts and gently inhabiting a more open and calm presence with others.

*Second Self-Observation:* Notice how you feel resonance and connection with others. How does your body respond when you are feeling connected with others? Do you lean forward, physically relax, feel warmth spreading from your heart to the rest of your body? How do your head and heart operate together when you are listening deeply to another? Do you become aware of greater focus and concentration? Do you become more aware of symbol and metaphor? Can you sense what is “between the lines” of what you are hearing?

*Personal Practice:* Direct your attention outward, practicing being nourished by the unique ways people have of expressing themselves. Notice and give voice to what you find surprising, delightful, and unique in what others are saying.

### ***Mindfulness Practice:***

## ***Moving from Individual Experts to Group Expertise***

When we consider the power of collective wisdom as a whole, we begin to see a profound—even evolutionary—transition under way: We are moving from a culture of individualism and individual experts to collective forms of knowing and the expertise of teams and groups. Foreshadowed in the historical documents of democracy, advanced by pioneers such as Mary Parker Follett and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, lived out in indigenous traditions

An individual's finding a community of like-minded people is a first step, but we cannot stop there. This is a critical time in human history for our visions of a better world to be represented in tangible forms. Finding such forms requires tolerance for uncertainty and faith that what is still unknown will reveal itself in positive growth. It is a commitment to constructive engagement that does not come with preconditions. The mindfulness of such a stance invites us to continually learn from our actual circumstances and not be limited by dogmatic ideas or conventional wisdom. Our guide will be our own reflection on experience and an inner intent for finding ways to cooperate with others. Seeking to free our minds of fear, we might recall Einstein's words that we have the power to correct for the "optical delusion" of our separateness.

The movement from individual experts to group expertise is a way of recognizing that "we" can be more effective than any one "I" in the room. This is not because groups always make sound judgments—our book raises severe cautions about how foolishness and its tragic consequences arise in groups—but because getting things done requires many people synchronized together. Similarly, there are many examples of one individual getting it right when the larger group gets it wrong. This is our point—if the group cannot recognize the wisdom within its own sphere, contained even in the dissenting member, it will be vulnerable as a whole group. We saw this lesson in the stories of unsanitary practices at Vienna General Hospital and of NASA's inability to listen to warnings of its spaceships' potential defects, as well as in countless examples since, from the Iraq invasion to global warming to the collapse of major financial institutions.

Collective wisdom requires groups to constantly experiment with ways of synthesizing diverse information, listening for dissent, and understanding what is beneath the passions of the moment. Leadership is needed to nourish the mind and spirit in order for agreements and directed action to be expressions of the group

one mind and Jerry Sternin discovered for himself in the rural lands of Vietnam, a discovery that gave birth to his elaboration of the concept of positive deviance.

The shift from individual experts to group expertise requires continual awareness of our tendency to fall back on habitual behaviors, particularly a false reliance on hierarchy for solutions and unconscious habits of dominance over others. Seeking collective wisdom in groups is an invitation for transparency of operations, involving such things as real-time data, group huddles, and opportunities for both individual and team reflection. In groups, the benefit of mindfulness is that greater attention is paid to what is actually happening. The immediate effect is the opportunity for mitigating errors that arise spontaneously and redirecting energies toward new behaviors and positive outcomes. We keep in mind that people in positions of hierarchical authority are always coming and going. Manuals and policies are forever changing. What is most useful is the cultivation of a group's know-how to achieve excellence. This means empowering people closest to the work and keeping all members of the group conscious of their alignment with higher purpose.

Shifting our reliance from individual experts to group expertise builds resilience. Groups need to continue functioning despite setbacks. No improvements can be sustained if a group is dependent on everything going right from the beginning or on any one individual. A group's ability to develop resilience allows it to feel safe enough to see what is not going right and to improvise as needed. This builds confidence that failures do not need to become permanent and that successes are not dependent on factors outside the group's control. We might be reminded of the spontaneous behavior that Lauren Artress described on the labyrinth in response to the stranger who crumpled to the floor weeping. We are not immune to unforeseen developments that may appear as obstacles, but groups have the capacity to overcome them and contribute to a better outcome.



**Guiding Intent:** To learn how to pay attention to connectedness and interdependence in groups and larger collectives.

*First Self-Observation:* Notice how you pay attention to the collective. Are you aware primarily of individual efforts, or of relationships, partnerships, and teams that work together on behalf of common goals?

*Personal Practice:* Direct your attention to what aids success in groups. For some, this may mean reminding people of what has already been accomplished; for others it may mean focusing attention on an underlying purpose that joins people together. Practice noticing how groups achieve a better understanding of their situation or build a collective will to accomplish their goals. Remember that every group is unique, so the avenues for development will be particular to each group and each situation.

*Second Self-Observation:* Notice your own answers to the question, what expertise is necessary for groups to be successful? In a group setting, pay attention to who contributes technical expertise, who holds the group together during times of stress, who maintains the vision, who provides structure. How is interdependence necessary to achieve the best results?

*Personal Practice:* Direct your energy to learning what is required for a successful outcome. From a stance of curiosity, discuss with as many people as possible what they do and how it is connected to a larger outcome.

## ***Mindfulness Practice: Asking Essential Questions***

The most practical form of mindfulness is embodied in the questions that focus our attention on what matters most. Questions stimulate the imagination, which is our most profound defense against habitual thinking and normative pressures. The

**What is alive here and now?** This is a question for practicing seeing into one's own mind and, by extension, seeing into the collective mind of the group. How am I feeling? What feels alive in my own body, or conversely, what feels numb or disconnected? In analogous fashion, notice the environment in which you come together in groups—the physical setting and arrangement of space, emotional tone, and initial encounters of group members. Do people seem excited, invigorated, uncertain, reflective, distracted, anticipatory? Are people asked 188 The Power of Collective Wisdom to share some of their thoughts and feelings? Do they feel that their experience and knowledge are seen and welcomed? What interactions shift the tone or energy of a room? These are the kinds of observations about oneself and others that relate to what is happening in the moment, and they are part of the recognition that groups are continually changing, transforming, and remaking themselves.

**What is the context for encounter?** Looking at context in its simplest form is having an alert awareness to three-dimensional space and paying attention to our physical and emotional environments. How we face each other in a circle or across a long boardroom table matters. How we allow the outside world in or stay shut up in windowless rooms matters. Noticing context is an interactive process involving relationships of people and natural elements.

In a broader sense, looking at context involves awareness of a group's or organization's culture. It draws our attention to the unique circumstances of the group and how power is negotiated. Differences in power may be attributed to institutional hierarchy, seniority, prior experience, or professional certification, but regardless of the reasons, groups can better access a way of knowing collectively by softening the edges of power differentials. We honor the wisdom emerging among us when we acknowledge each other's contribution, rather than confirming each other's relative position in the group.

fact that power differentials exist, we can bring attention to where expertise exists and shift from traditional ways of having power over others to ways of having power with them.

**What is already working?** This is a question that inspires hope and possibilities in groups, and of all the questions, it is the one that can most often be voiced out loud. The question is the basis for appreciative forms of inquiry where we seek what is already functional and positive. It is the counterintuitive response to focusing on what is missing and broken by expanding and encompassing more of what is working and valued.

The question of wanting to know what is already working was clearly demonstrated in our story about positive deviance, when Jerry Sternin gathered together data on children's growth by age and weight and asked who among the village had healthy, nourished children. The answer inspired an immediate visit to these families and the beginning of a strategy that worked for that village and eventually many others. The question is not about finding external best practices, but about learning how to replicate positive outcomes in each particular circumstance. We are seeking to know what is working now that can be built on. (For a greater discussion of this question, see *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, by Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom.<sup>3</sup>)

**What is being kept to the side?** This is the question that allows us to be vigilant about the emergence of foolishness in groups. We discussed how folly often arises from unexamined assumptions that take on the qualities of truth, and how divergence is often directed into polarities or hidden under the veil of a false unity. The greatest obstacle to collective wisdom emerging is when one person or subgroup speaks on behalf of the whole and cannot be challenged. Sometimes the best collective decisions come forward only after an airing of differences and a recognition that those differences are still unresolved. Yet, we can still find what common ground exists in

When we ask ourselves what is being kept to the side, we are opening an inner eye to that which may not want to be seen. It is sometimes painful and disorienting. Yet practicing this question opens us up to new insights about how the group operates. We begin to see that we are different from each other and how clever the group can be in keeping some of those differences contained, marginalized, or explicitly shut down.

The question reminds us that we need to be constantly mindful of what is not said or shared. Our construct of community, for example, can include unstated elements of exclusion; shared intention may not be valued by individual group members; and our history of bias involving class, color, and notions of intelligence may be ignored to our collective detriment. Asking questions about what is not being discussed can feel like opening Pandora's box, but it can also be liberating when done in a way that is respectful of people and situations rather than as a means for feeling superior to others.

**What is wanting to happen?** This question allows us to peek around the corner of group process. By being still and observing all that is arising, we can see patterns of collective behavior and group aspirations. It is not a neutral activity, however, like some social scientist merely observing for purposes of study. We hold in our mind an intention for relationships that foster growth and the possibility of fairness, equity, and insight. Our eyes, ears, and physical body are now attuned to the collective and an image of what may be emergent, waiting to be born under the right circumstances. Margaret Mead noted, "Our humanity rests upon a series of learned behaviors, woven together into patterns that are infinitely fragile and never directly inherited." Through this question of what is wanting to happen, we are learning how to enter into the very weaving of our collective future. We are learning how to be a constructive part of cocreation. (For a greater discussion of this question, see *Theory U*, by C. Otto Scharmer.<sup>4</sup>)

*First Self-Observation:* In group situations, notice how you pay attention to the immediacy of the moment. Are you aware of the physical environment and the people you are with? Are you alert to how people look physically, the nature of their interactions, and the tone of the gathering? Are you open to what is arising in the moment, even if it is at times disturbing?

*Personal Practice:* Direct your attention to a group's ability to deal with the reality of its immediate situation. Practice gently bringing the group's attention to what is most likely on people's minds or weighs on them emotionally. For example, one of our colleagues told us a story of a meeting where a man had a heart attack and was taken away by ambulance. After he was gone, the meeting continued without any mention of what had just happened. Group members simply did not know the appropriate response to such a disturbing and fearful experience. Be alert that we do not all see the need to confront our immediate situation, and some of us find solace in denial. Consider yourself always a beginner, with a beginner's sensitivity, in helping to bring attention to what may be outside the group's awareness or is felt to be foreign or disturbing.

*Second Self-Observation:* Notice your personal response to the question of what is already working in the group. Often, we don't feel we are being "real" unless we are pointing to a problem or being critical of what has still not been accomplished.

*Personal Practice:* Direct your attention to what is already working in the group and practice talking about it openly with others. From a stance of appreciation, it is easier to face new challenges with past successes in mind. Keep in mind Jerry Sternin's advice that much of the conventional