

Deep Democracy

Overview

There are a variety of reasons why people in a group may not be saying what they really think. Perhaps it is considered taboo, politically incorrect, or too sensitive, or they may just feel that they will never actually be heard and able to influence the majority view of the group. *Deep Democracy* is a facilitation methodology which is based on the assumption that there is a wisdom in the minority voice and in the diversity of viewpoints, which has value for the whole group. The approach helps to surface and give expression to what is otherwise left unsaid.

Deep Democracy was developed by Myrna Lewis in South Africa with her late husband Greg Lewis based on 15 years of intense work in the private and public sectors. It is closely related to, and draws on, Arnold Mindells' process-orientated psychology and "worldwork", but offers a more structured and accessible set of tools.

Picture an iceberg. Generally, only 10% of the iceberg is above the waterline, while 90% is concealed in the depths of the ocean and not visible. Many psychologists use this as a metaphor for the conscious and unconscious of human beings. Only a part of what drives us is conscious while the bulk of it is unconscious. Similarly, in a group coming together for some purpose, there are aspects that are conscious to the whole group and aspects that are in the *group's unconscious*. The group's unconscious will often be reflected in the one-on-one and small group conversations that happen outside the formal meetings, in hints and jokes, in the excuses people make for being late or not doing what they were supposed to, and in unexpressed emotions and opinions.



Much of our work is comfortably done above the surface in the realm of the *conscious*. But sometimes there are underlying emotional dynamics that continuously block us from moving forward, from solving a problem or coming to a decision. In this situation, Deep Democracy is designed to bring these issues to the surface and facilitate their resolution. The idea is that the group's highest potential and wisdom is hidden in the depths and will be brought out by surfacing what is in the unconscious.

If issues in the group's unconscious have built up over time because of a lack of open communication, the group may have to go through a conflict process to release them. Conflict here is seen not as something to be avoided, but as an opportunity for learning and change. The earlier a conflict is expressed and spoken about in the open, the less painful it will be.

A key aspect of Deep Democracy is that the process focuses on *roles and relationships* rather than on individuals. We normally think of "roles" as social roles, jobs, or positions. In Deep Democracy, a role can be anything expressed by a person, for example, an opinion, idea, emotion, physical sensation, or an archetypal role like the parent/ the child, the teacher/ the

student, the oppressor/ the victim, the helper/ the needy, and so on. A role is usually held by more than one individual, and an individual usually holds more than one role in the group. The most personal is linked to the universal, in that each person actually deep down has the capacity and potential to express any role. S/he has both an individual identity as well as access to the overall pattern and knowledge of the whole.

A system will tend to be healthier if roles are fluid and shared. If one person is alone in a role, it becomes a burden to that person. If roles are too fixed, the organisation or group isn't growing. In Deep Democracy, the role of the facilitator is to help people make the roles more fluid, to become aware of themselves, each other, and their interdependence, and through that to access their wisdom. The facilitator is trying to help the group to "lower the waterline" of their iceberg.

The first four steps

There are five steps to Deep Democracy. The first four make up a unique approach to decision-making and take place "above the waterline":

1. **Don't practice majority democracy.** Traditional majority democracy will take a vote and then move forward with a decision. But the idea that the minority will just go along happily with the majority decision is actually a myth. In Deep Democracy, the decision with a majority vote is not the end point. The minority voice is encouraged to express itself. Don't settle for the vote.
2. **Search for and encourage the "no".** The facilitator needs to make it "safe" for people to express their dissent, and not feel afraid to say "no". The minority view is encouraged and given permission to speak.
3. **Spread the "no".** Once the "no" has been expressed, other participants are asked if they agree with the "no" even if only in part. People are encouraged to express agreement with the "no". This process avoids scapegoating and people being singled out and ostracised for disagreeing.
4. **Access the wisdom of the "no".** When the majority have decided to go in a certain direction, the minority is asked "what do you need to go along with the majority?" This is not a second chance for the minority to say "no". The minority will add wisdom and elaborate on the decision by qualifying it with what they need to come along. This helps the group come to a more conscious decision.

This decision-making process is an unusual attempt to get a decision where the minority actually comes along and buys into a decision. It looks like a consensus but is not exactly the same. In many situations this decision-making process will be enough, if there is not too much baggage or underlying conflict behind the decision. If decisions are taken in this way, the minority will feel heard, the group will be more conscious about why it's doing what it's doing, and conflicts will be settled early before they become painful.

Below the waterline

Sometimes it is not enough to stay above the surface. When resistance to a decision continues, when people keep having the same small arguments, when they start "sounding like a broken record", when they feel unheard, or are being very indirect, there is a need to go "under the waterline", and move into the 5th step of Deep Democracy. This is done through a process whereby the facilitator "turns up the volume" on a conversation. When a participant speaks in a way that is indirect, the facilitator goes in and speaks for that person, amplifying what they are saying, making it more direct and taking out the politeness.

The facilitator in effect becomes an instrument for the group. The participants talk directly to one another, rather than talking at the facilitator. The facilitator is making the message clear and direct, which gives people something to respond to. Ideally, she is not adding meaning, but literally speaking on the participant's behalf. It's like putting an electrical charge on the

words, and looking for a reaction from other participants. Participants are always made aware that they can correct the facilitator if she gets it wrong.

In order to do this amplification, the facilitator needs to apply a set of “metaskills” - attitudes and behaviours with which the facilitation skill or tool is used. The two most important ones are neutrality and compassion. The facilitator needs to not be judging what people are saying as good or bad, and to really support people in the totality of their experience. This can for the facilitator require a lot of “inner” work on her own personal awareness, so that she can come into the group centred and still without her own baggage.

If the discussion becomes polarised through the amplification, the group may decide to actually go into a conflict. This is always made as a very conscious agreement, and participants are told to remember that the purpose of the conflict is growth and about remaining in relationship. It is not about winning a battle. In a Deep Democracy conflict, all participants agree to express themselves fully and to *own their own side* completely. This is different from many other forms of conflict resolution where participants are encouraged to focus on trying to understand the *other* side or point of view first.

During the conflict, the participants are explicitly requested not to express defensiveness, but must take turns getting everything off their chest. When a conflict starts to be resolved, you generally find that the different sides start saying the same thing. They become more silent and contemplative. At this point, each participant is requested to share at least one personal learning – a grain of truth that they have received from the conflict. The wisdom from these grains of truth is taken back to the initial issue the group was trying to resolve.

Applications

Deep Democracy is a relatively young process, but is spreading quite rapidly. In South Africa it has been used in corporate settings as well as in schools, with hiv/AIDS counsellors, and in youth groups. Myrna Lewis is currently training Deep Democracy facilitators from a number of countries including the UK, the US, Denmark, Israel, France, Ireland, and Canada.

The key strength of Deep Democracy is in recognising the important role that emotional dynamics can play and in incorporating wisdom into decision-making. Deep Democracy is most useful in situations where: things are unsaid and needing to be brought into the open; people are stuck in roles and conflict may be arising; there is a diversity of views in a group, and different sides to an issue need to be considered; power differences are affecting people’s freedom to act; there is a need to gain the buy-in of a minority; and/or, people are being labeled by others.

Case Example – Immigration in Denmark and the Topic of Honour

Immigration is currently one of the most politicised problems in Denmark. As an issue, it is having an impact on how elections fall out, and not a day goes by when it is not covered in the news. In particular, there is an emphasis on the conflict between the Muslim culture of many immigrants and the mainstream Danish culture.

In May 2005, a group of 20 people gathered in Copenhagen, Denmark to learn about Deep Democracy. About a quarter of the group were non-Danish residents, while the rest were Danish citizens, half of whom were ethnically Danish and the other half second-generation immigrants or of mixed ethnicity. The group was asked by the facilitator to make a decision together on what they would like to talk about. Two participants self-selected to facilitate the decision-making process. One of them started by immediately saying he wanted to speak about the issue of “honour”. He was working with youth of an immigrant background and found that they often justify violence with an excuse that someone has breached their honour. He wanted to understand what that was about and how to deal with it to stop the violence.

Participants “cycled” around wanting or not wanting to discuss this topic. One person, a non-Dane, said that the issue of honour was entirely irrelevant to him in his work. Another person suggested that the group should rather discuss immigration issues, seemingly unaware that the honour question was at the very heart of immigration issues. It was the moment when someone personalised the issue, sharing that he had felt a breach of honour in relation to another participant, the group decided to go into a facilitated conflict.

Through the conflict, some participants gained awareness of their own racism and privilege while others became aware that they had been in a victimhood mentality and not taking responsibility. It turned out that some of the immigrant participants felt that the Danes had left honour behind generations ago and didn’t understand why honour was important in Muslim cultures. Part of what was striking about this process is that Danish culture has in the past been, and seen itself as, very generous towards immigrants. The space in which immigrants could be allowed to criticise Danish culture, and speak openly about their concerns is never created partly because this would be seen as ungrateful.

Following the conflict where both sides had been allowed to speak their mind, each participant owned a “grain of truth”. The following day, there was a deep understanding towards each other in the group, and a sense of joint endeavour and desire to collaborate around working to improve the cultural clashes in the broader society. As one participant reflected afterwards, *“Immigration is such a burning issue for us in Europe and this was the first time I experienced an honest and open conversation about the issue where everything that needed to be said was said and we were all stronger for it.”*

Commentary

Deep Democracy is obviously quite an unusual process. We are used to trying to avoid or contain conflict, polarisation, and disagreement. Instead Deep Democracy invites it in, and at times even provokes it. The result, when this process works at its best, is a lively openness and transparency and a very powerful strengthening of relationships and collaboration. Participants may go through a process where a large part of the time is spent in discussion that is antagonistic and polarising, and yet feel afterwards as if they have experienced a deep heartfelt and empathetic dialogue.

It’s important to recognise that when Deep Democracy encourages conflict, it is based on an assumption that conflict is already present and actually inevitable. But sadly, conflict is often contained until it is too late to do anything about it or for it to be resolved peacefully. The idea here is to try to bring it on as early as possible so that it will be less painful and explosive and more generative and transformational. This is done by helping people to express themselves honestly to each other through the facilitation tools of the five steps.

In our view, it’s vital to have a well-trained and experienced facilitator when working with Deep Democracy, especially in groups where the stakes are high. This is probably the tool in this collection which takes the most in-depth training to be able to facilitate, and it is never mastered completely. Even with a good facilitator, Deep Democracy is usually at first a frustrating experience for participants. This is part of the experience, but it just makes it all the more important that the facilitator is confident and clear on what they are doing and why.

The value of Deep Democracy in relation to dialogue facilitation is as much the philosophy and assumptions behind it as the specific tools. There are some simple tips from Deep Democracy thinking which are useful for any group dialogue process. In particular, we find the idea of “spreading the no” and not letting participants get stuck in a role very useful. Rather than following the tendency of answering criticism and singling people out in a group, invite the critical voice in by asking if anyone else shares that viewpoint. When there is dissent to the direction in which a group is going, ask “what would it take for you to come along?”

Resources

<http://www.deep-democracy.net>