

# Helping a group deal with uncomfortable subjects

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Sometimes we need to talk about difficult or controversial subjects. Lecturing does not permit learners to share their reactions, but even small group discussions can be awkward or embarrassing. But it is vital to allow concerns to surface. Not talking about uncomfortable or controversial subjects simply keeps them secret and they become a barrier to new learning. So here are a few ways to surface true feelings while providing safety to all learners.

## **Anonymous Answers**

Distribute index cards or small sheets of paper; make sure they are all alike so no one can identify one from the others. Now, pose a difficult question, such as: If you could change one thing about the system we use now, what would it be? What do you think is the least successful activity we run? Why do you think this problem has surfaced now? Ask everyone to respond silently by writing responses on the index cards or sheets of paper. Collect all the papers in a big hat or bag, shake them up, and redistribute them, letting each participant pick one out. This means everyone is holding someone's response, but everything is anonymous (if someone happens to pick their own paper by accident, all they have to do is not tell!). Now go around and ask each person to read the response on the paper they just picked. Record the responses. You will quickly realize that patterns emerge. I have done this exercise often and invariably it turns out that negative opinions are shared by others. Individuals think only they feel this way and so do not speak up; discovering that their opinion is valid permits real discussion to begin. Conversely, if someone is "sure" they speak for the majority, this exercise may show that more people have an alternate viewpoint.

## **Crayons and Art**

Another way to tackle difficult subjects is to stop using words. Give everyone a piece of paper and let each person choose two or three crayon colors from new boxes on each table. (Believe me, people regress to childhood delight when they examine all those lovely crayons!) Ask each participant to draw something that conveys what each person thinks about a subject. This is not an art contest and no one is judged on how they draw! Stick figures are just fine. Allow five minutes to create the image and then ask everyone to explain what they drew and why. I have used this exercise several times to make a group aware that they do not all "see" their organization in the same way, and therefore their ideas for future planning are not in synch. So I instruct them to "draw a picture of how YOU see this organization something that represents it to you in imagery." As everyone shares their drawings, the lack of consensus becomes clear: a shaggy dog straining on a leash; a kite flying high in the sky but people struggling to keep it from flying away; a storm cloud with lightning; smiling stick figures holding hands in front of a burning building; a Christmas tree with presents. Some elements are positive, some not. There are also common denominators, and

those lead the way to greater agreement on what everyone wants the organization to look like as it moves forward.

## **Representative Debate**

When an issue has two or more clear sides or directions that might be taken, break into subgroups by chance (not by who believes what). Each group is tasked with generating a list of arguments or discussion points to make their case. Even if someone feels the exact opposite, it's still possible to articulate that the other side might say. Each buzz group then selects a representative spokesperson who will come to the front of the room and face a representative of the opposing view. Both use their groups' list of points to argue their side. If you have a large group, still only allow two people to debate at a time; stop them after a few minutes and replace them with another two representatives who pick up where the discussion left off, and so on.

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. ([www.energizeinc.com](http://www.energizeinc.com)), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the Tip of the Month for April 2015.