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The Basic Conversation Method

International Facilitator's Companion

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The Theory

Section One: The Theory

The Basic Conversation Method is a transparent reflection technique developed from the human dynamics of communication and interaction.

At the most basic level communication begins with sensory input . We hear and see. We experience smell and taste. We touch things. In the first instance messages are received as unreflected and meaningless sensations.

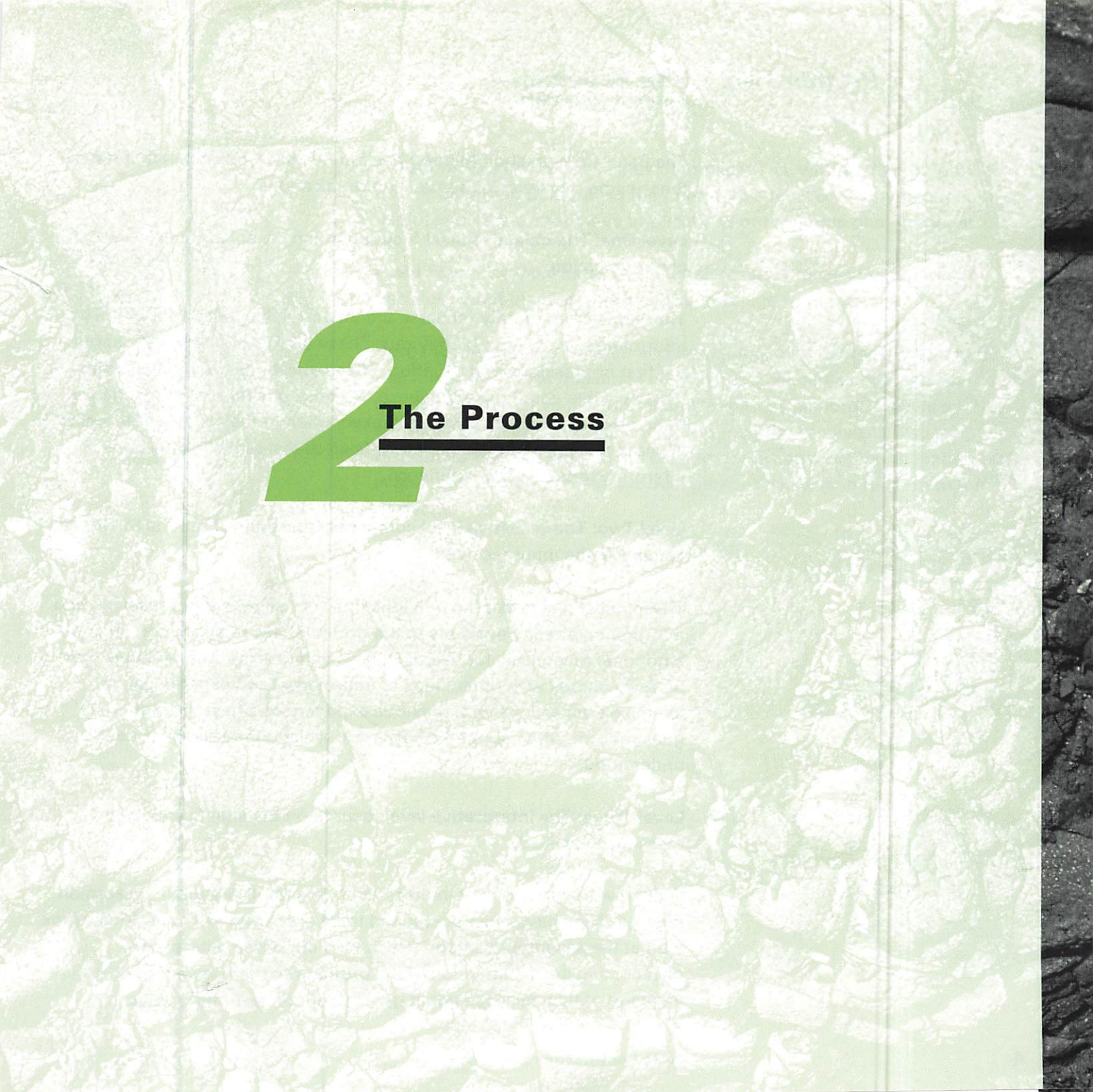
Communication includes existing relationship, which contextualize the sensory input. Messages occur within a given situation. But messages can extend beyond the situation into one's broader life experience. There are emotional connections to messages. Any message connects to the receiver's previous experiences and conditioning. Messages also have relationship with each other. Patterns can be discerned. Parts of messages can be detected. In the second instance, messages have internal relationship and point to relationship external to the particular situation.

The significance of a message is grasped on many levels at once. The message is interpreted within the receiver's world of understanding. The message is understood within a given framework of social structures and relationship. The message has meaning within a specific cultural environment. In the third instance, the message takes its significance from the specific and personal understanding of the receiver.

Communication can be said to be truly received when the receiver has determined what response the message calls for. A decision is made as to what specific action the message implies for the receiver. Priorities are altered to include this message. In the fourth instance, actions are chosen in response to this new input.

The entire process occurs in less than seconds. It continues throughout our waking and sleeping hours.

The Basic Conversation Method is based on this process: sensory input, internal and external relationship, determined meaning and selected actions. It is the sequence of the process that is important. When designing actual conversations the process is most helpfully seen as a continuum rather than a static set of steps. Thus conversations go from the more objective to the more decisional.



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The Process



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Examples

Section Three: Examples

The Educated Person Conversation

- 1 *(Go around the room and ask each person to answer)* What is the name of one person you would call an educated person?
- 2 Still thinking of the person you mentioned in the last question, what are the qualities in that person that makes you say s/he is educated?
(Take notes on these answers)
- 3 What are other qualities of an educated person?
- 4 *(Read the list of qualities to the group)* What are the essential qualities of an educated person we are suggesting with this list?
- 5 Let's say you are given the opportunity to be the trainer of the educated person. Say, 20 young people and yourself are sent to an island. You have everything you need to live. You are assigned to turn these young people into the educated people of the 21st century. What are three specific things that you would do?

An Introductory Conversation

Opening

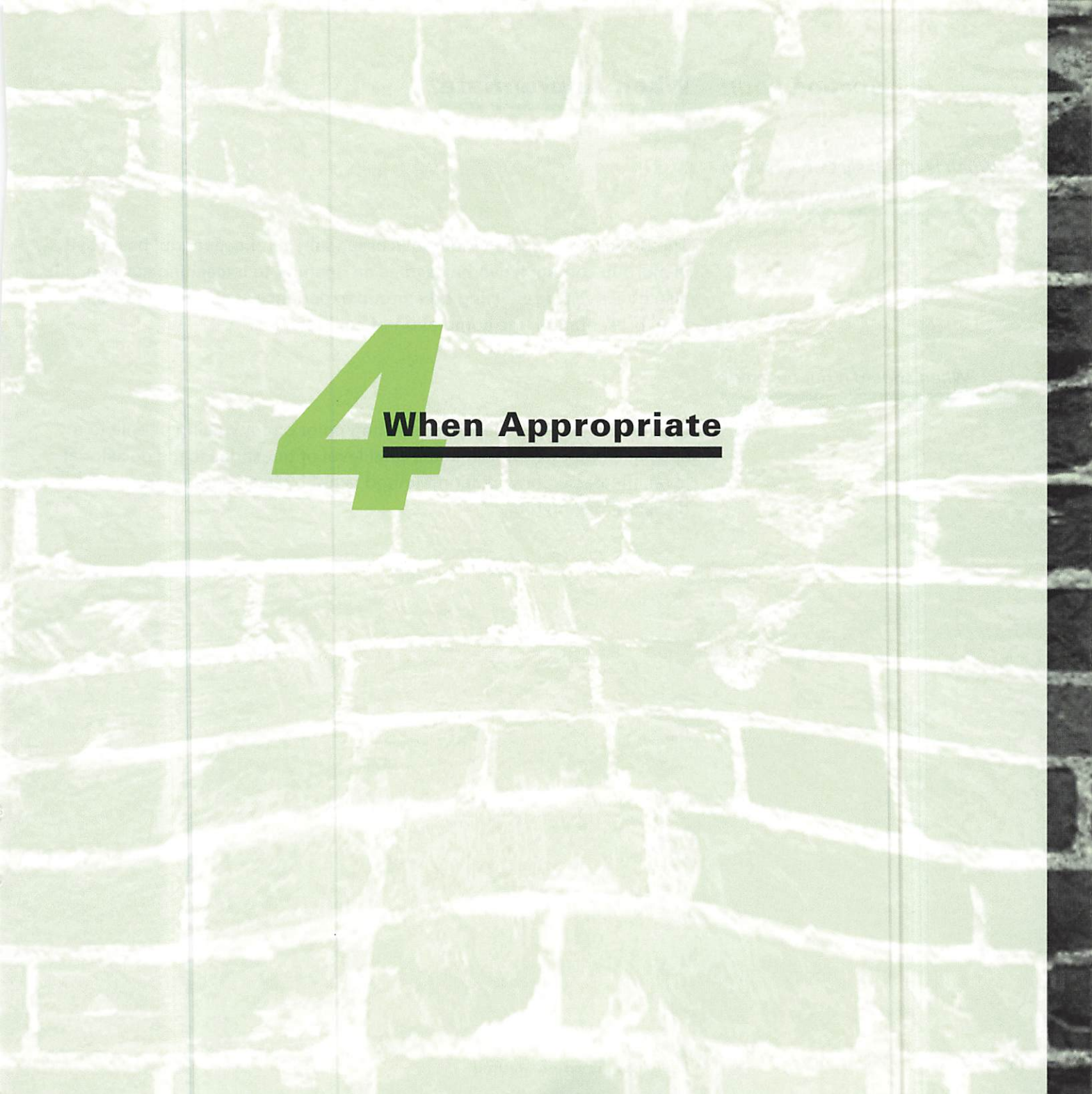
Good morning, my name is I am a member of the staff of Imaginal Training in the Netherlands. In this program we will be spending our time becoming more effective trainers. We will be using a number of tools to do this. One is the structured conversation, or the Basic Conversation Method. We will begin by using this method now. We want you to participate in the course and we want you to watch the way we teach. We will begin by introducing ourselves.

Questions

- 1 We will go around the room, I would like everyone to answer this first question. What is your name and the name of your home community?
- 2 What name do you like to be called by and what is one thing we should remember about you? (*Go around again*)
- 3 What is your work?
- 4 What is one thing you have learned during the past month?
- 5 What was the hardest thing for you to learn? I don't mean something that was hard to find out about but some skill or ability you had to acquire. (*Get several answers out*)
- 6 What do you want from this program?

Conclusion

We will spend the rest of this program looking at what it means to teach and to learn. Before we do that my colleague will give a presentation.



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When Appropriate

Section Four: When Appropriate

When is the Basic Conversation Method effective?

The Basic Conversation Method is essentially a reflective tool best used in a group setting. It can be used as an opening to a teaching session. It is also effective for reflecting on a group experience such as a field visit, film, presentation, the completion of a project, etc.

When should it not be used?

It is not effective for making a teaching point or convincing people to a specific point of view. While the final level of questions is the decisional level, the Basic Conversation Method is not by itself a good group decision making tool.

The image features a large, bold, green number '5' on the left side. To its right, the text 'How to Develop' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. A thick black horizontal line is positioned directly beneath the text. The entire composition is set against a light green background with a complex, textured pattern of darker green veins and fibers, resembling a microscopic view of a material or a natural stone. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, with a focus on natural textures.

5 **How to Develop**

Section Five: **How to develop a Basic Conversation**

Building a conversation is creating a group event, which includes both content and drama.

The first step is to determine the topic of the conversation. It is always based on the learning objective of the session and level of knowledge, skill or attitude of the participants. The simplest selection of topic is when reflecting on a group experience. The topic is the subject of the experience. If it is a field visit to watch connecting fiber-optic cables then the topic can be *techniques of connecting fiber optic cables* or *safety procedures when connecting fiber optic cables*.

If the conversation is to be the opening of a session then selecting the topic is a bit more difficult. The question to ask is, 'What is the arena with which the participants will struggle in learning the topic of the session?' If the session is about team building the conversation might be about *successful teams participants have been part of*.

The next step is brainstorming, listing questions that might be appropriate for the conversation. List 15 to 20 possible questions about the conversation topic. While listing these questions it is good to ask, 'What are the various issues and concerns as needed?' 'What are the various perspectives in the group?' Put yourself into as many different viewpoints as you can in considering the situation.

The third step is organizing questions into the four Basic Conversation Method levels. Group the questions into Objective, Reflective, Interpretive and Decisional. These levels are relational, not absolute. Check your questions to see whether they are answerable. Avoid closed questions, both those that can be answered only with yes or no, and also those that only have one real answer. Select the best questions for each of the four levels.

The fourth step is creating the drama of the whole event. Think through the *rational objective* or product of the conversation. What do you want the group to think about? Think through the *existential aim* or mood of the conversation. What is the mood of the participants? Do you foresee them being tense, curious, confident or what? Make a plan for the time you want to use for each level of the conversation. Plan how you will get on-stage and off-stage. How will you begin and end? What are your opening and closing words?

The final step is brooding about the needs of the individuals in the conversation group. With your conversation in hand, reflect on the specific concerns and interests of the individuals in the group. Consider what might be blind spots, or points of tension, for the specific group with this conversation. Consider what future directions the group may opt for. Imagine the group around the table, and rehearse your conversation, and the group's responses, in your mind.



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Worksheets

Basic Conversation Objectives Worksheet

Topic	Write the topic of the conversation in the most concrete form possible.
Rational Objective	Write the product of the conversation, answering the question: What do I want the group to reflect on?
Existential Aim	Write the mood you want the group to be in during the conversation.
Brainstorm Questions	
1	One - List 15 to 20 questions without being concerned with their levels or appropriateness.
2	Two - Mark on this list which questions are Objective, Reflective, Interpretive and Decisional.
3	Three - Select the best questions for the purposes of reaching your Rational Objective and Existential Aim.
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Basic Conversation Objectives Worksheet

Topic	<i>One - In this box, write the name of the topic.</i>	
Steps	Question	Time
Opening, Context, Story	<i>Six - In this box, write the introduction the group will need. Make sure you have defined whatever terms may be new to them, that the question and procedures are clear and that they understand WHY they are doing these steps.</i>	<i>In this box, put how much time will be spent on the introduction</i>
Objective	<i>Two - In this box, write the selected objective level questions.</i>	<i>In this box, put how much time will be spent on objective questions.</i>
Reflective	<i>Three - In this box, write the selected reflective level questions.</i>	<i>In this box, put how much time will be spent on reflective questions.</i>
Interpretive	<i>Four - In this box, write the selected interpretive level questions.</i>	<i>In this box, put how much time will be spent on interpretive questions.</i>
Decisional	<i>Five - In this box write the selected decisional level questions.</i>	<i>In this box, put how much time will be spent on decisional questions.</i>
Conclusion	<i>Seven - Finally, consider the way in which to let the group appreciate their work. This could be giving their information an overall title, or talking about the process of the conversation, a one sentence personal reflection on the topic - whatever seems suitable.</i>	<i>In this box, put how much time will be spent on the conclusion.</i>

Basic Conversation Objectives Worksheet

Topic	
Rational Objective	
Existential Aim	
Brainstorm Questions	
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Basic Conversation Objectives Worksheet

Topic		
Steps	Question	Time
Opening, Context, Story		
Objective		
Reflective		
Interpretive		
Decisional		
Conclusion		



Tips for Developing and Using

Section Seven: Tips for Developing and Using

The number of questions depends on the time allocated for the conversation, size of the group, whether or not translation is used, the responsiveness of the group and the learning objectives of the session. There can be as few as four questions and as many as 20 or even 25. More questions can be asked from a smaller group, eight to ten participants. More participants require fewer questions. Normally six to ten questions are asked in a 20 to 30 minute conversation with groups of 20 to 25 people.

If possible, everyone should answer at least some of the objective level questions. As the conversation moves through levels fewer and fewer people will answer although not the same few. In principle everyone should be answering in their own mind even if they are not saying their answers.

The different levels of the conversation have different rhythms. At the objective level questions and answers should be quick. The pace should be rapid and kept moving. The one exception to this might be when people are introducing themselves for the first time. The rhythm and pace slow down as the levels move through reflective to decisional. By the decisional level one or two thought through answers are normally enough.

The Basic Conversation Method is characterized by a very disciplined style of group leadership. The conversation leader seeks to engage every person in the group. One can go around the room on the first question to let every member hear his own voice at least once. The leader sets and maintains the rules of the conversation process. The key rule is simply that a conversation is intended to honor all responses. The conversation method focuses on people's opinions, on their understanding of what the theme of the conversation means.

The conversation leader is out to explore all of the views available in the group. There are no right answers, only views that other group members might support. There are no wrong answers, only views that other group members might disagree with. In order to do a conversation, the leader needs to maintain content that rightly relates to opinions, never content that is factual except at the objective level. The function of the conversation is to explore and decide about many perspectives.

The leader is personally involved in the conversation process. The leader is not a detached 'teacher', but also someone concerned with the new perspectives that the conversation has to offer. The conversation leader has discerned the life issues that are at stake here, not just the superficial information involved. The leader is attentive to the unfolding new answers that develop in the process of the group reflection. The leader is just as involved in the conversation as the learner.

At the same time the leader is personally detached from the group's content. The conversation leader is responsible for the process. The conversation leader is not involved in the conversation content. Decisions are the responsibility of the group. The leader is responsible for enabling the group - insisting if necessary - to make a decision about the content.

8

References

Section Eight: References

Winning through Participation: Meeting the Challenge of Corporate Change with the 'Technology of Participation' by Laura Spencer

Methods for Active Participation: Experiences in Rural Development from East and Central Africa by Terry D. Bergdall

'Transferring the Skills to Develop and Sustain a Participative Culture',
a Master's Thesis by Marilyn R. Oyler

Notes