

## *Bringing Our Heart to Meetings*

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A professor of mine told the story of his meeting with a group of executives to plan to move the company's operations to a new city. A day into the meeting, my professor sensed the plan was coming together a little too easily. There were no arguments, no passionate debate. So he decided to test something. He asked participants to anonymously answer this question: "Are you personally planning to move to the new location?"



Only one said yes.

There is a myth that the most effective people check their emotions at the door when they go into a meeting to plan, evaluate, analyze or decide. They do not. But in organizations we have gotten very good at masking our feelings. This gets us into all kinds of trouble.

Meetings about things that matter to us should not be boring. If they are, it is likely that the strong feelings people have about the subject have gone underground.

Of course we need an objective look at the facts, and rigorous analysis on important decisions. We also need to acknowledge and explore the emotions people have around decisions that matter. Not only because those emotions are, in and of themselves, important data, but also because they will significantly impact what people do with those facts after the meeting is over.

So how do you strip the masks off? How can we get feelings to be openly discussed in meetings where "head talk" is more legitimate than "gut/heart talk." Here are some answers from my own work in leading meetings, which has been deeply influenced by the principles of Dialogue Education.

**Use metaphors.** Metaphors shine a light on how people are really feeling about the issue they are tackling and can be a safe, creative way to get people talking. Ask each person (or pairs) to create a metaphor for the issue they are discussing. (These can be symbols, word pictures, even sculptures).



Let them explain why they chose the metaphor they did. Invite a conversation about how others would interpret that same metaphor. People's emotions around the issue will usually surface.

**Use numbers in a new way.** In Peter Block's compelling *Six Conversations that Matter* seminar, he asks participants this question: "How valuable do you plan for this session to be?" and asks people to rate that on a scale of 1 to 7. The question is ambiguous (by design) and the rating seems almost foolish. How do I honestly put a number on something like that? But as people move into pairs to discuss their ratings, and they start to describe what 4 means to them, or what 7 means, they start talking to each other about how they are honestly feeling about being in this session. Don't ask for the numbers in the larger group. They are unimportant. What was important was the honest dialogue they sparked.

**Uncover feelings before you analyze.** They come out disguised in the analysis otherwise. The ubiquitous SWOT analysis is often a better "mood meter" than an analysis. I have seen groups generate laundry lists of weaknesses and obstacles. The unspoken feeling in the room – fear. Research has shown that our emotions impact not only what information we seek, but also what information we take in. By making our feelings explicit before we start into the analysis, we can pay more attention to how they impact our analyses and our decisions.

**Be curious, NOT helpful.** When people express doubts, worries, and fears, they are giving us a gift of their honesty. Don't try to talk them out of it. In training sessions I have fallen into the helpfulness trap too often. Someone doesn't like the concept I am teaching. When they envision themselves applying it, they feel vulnerable, saying "This won't work in (this culture, this organization, my situation)". I frequently find myself encouraging them by arguing with their feelings. The harder I push against that resistance, the stronger it gets. You won't change their feelings by telling them the reasons they should not feel that way. You don't erase fear by labeling it irrational. A better approach? Ask them to say more about what worries them. Acknowledge the feeling is there, it is real, and it is not yours to fix.



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