



Ensuring Balance Practice

Mindful Listening & Inquiry without Imposition

A goal of Conscious Social Change is the sustainable wellbeing for all, including quality of life, economic, social, mental, spiritual, physical and material wellbeing, as defined by the person themselves. It is thus critical to ensure the poor, vulnerable, marginalized, and exploited should come first, be centered, and lead the process of defining and achieving wellbeing for themselves. So, just as we each have things that we know to be true, so do those we aim to support. We need to honor their wisdom and expertise on their own issues from their direct lived experience, and seek their collaboration in understanding the issues and designing solutions.

Conscious Social Change trusts one's inner wisdom, uses a direct-experience learning methodology (you learn from your own experience), embraces compassion and respect for others, and believes in the interconnectivity between all people. In Conscious Social Change, when working with a vulnerable population, it is important to facilitate and listen, not lead the discussion. Share helpful methods and tools, but rather than imposing what you think is best, invite and encourage the collective to join you in diagnosing the issues within your communities, setting priorities, choosing goals and deciding ways to evaluate progress towards those goals.

Global Grassroots embraces a participatory development paradigm in our Academy for Conscious Change. We believe strongly that our role is to serve only as a facilitator. We do not impose our values, our social issue priorities or our solutions. Instead, we coach each team in their social issue diagnosis, the crafting of their theory of change, and their organizational development to support their process of informed decision-making. Where helpful, we also share best practices that may be adopted and adapted for use by our venture teams.

In interacting with our participants, we often use a process of deep listening and *Inquiry Without Imposition*, with an overarching goal of catalyzing self-sufficiency. We encourage our participants to diagnose issues with their communities based on their own unique understanding and set their own priorities. We often use participatory evaluation tools in our modules that incorporate more visual and dynamic diagramming or mapping techniques that allow for the engagement of all members of a community, even those who are illiterate. A few of our core tools include problem trees, stakeholder analysis and mapping change. We also seek out the advice of our participants, especially in evaluating our own work, and set up a local advisory council for this purpose. Finally, in working with teams in conducting their own issue study, we offer a framework that supports the importance of developing an understanding of the social issue they are addressing, but allows for flexibility in teams choosing measurements and methods that fit best with their communities.

Mindful Listening to Support Agency and Self-Sufficiency

Listening compassionately is one of the first offerings we can always provide another human being. Sometimes we feel compelled to fix the other and we must recognize it is not always our job to alleviate all of the suffering of those around us, as much as we may try. Sometimes simply being present is enough. And it demonstrates to the other that just being here as they are is also enough.

In listening to individuals who may be seeking your counsel, there are five levels of engagement to consider that can help an individual expand their agency and come to their own conclusion – a more empowering and mindful approach than simply giving your advice outright. I extend my gratitude to Jessica Dibb of the Inspiration Community for her teachings on therapeutic facilitation, which I have adapted for use in a conscious social change model:

1. Mirroring: Repeat back what the person has said word for word – this helps someone feel heard. So if they say, “I feel totally lost right now and I don’t know what to do,” you respond: “So you’re feeling really lost right now and you don’t know what to do?” It may feel strange to you to repeat their exact words, but the other individual will feel heard and will feel encouraged to continue.

2. Furthering Inquiry: If they feel stuck, you can ask, “Is there more?” or “Can you tell me more about that?” Again, this allows the person to feel your presence with them, but does not require you to provide advice or counsel. You can also ask, “How does that make you feel” or “How are you feeling about that right now?” You can also ask how they feel in their body, which can help them slow down and focus on the present.

Among a group, you can inquire in the same way: “Can you elaborate?” “Can you tell me more about that issue?” “What else?” “Why is that the case?” and “How is your community feeling about the nature of this issue?”

3. Inviting Questions: These questions are more targeted and are meant to help the individual move beyond the story and shift to a more constructive problem-solving process to reach their own conclusion. You can ask: “What does it feel like needs to happen now?” “What do you really want?” “What do you feel would help at this moment?” “Have you thought about how to handle the situation?” “Do you have others who can help you think through this?” “What do you know to be true?” Again, you do not have to provide your opinion or a solution. It may be enough that someone has had a chance to speak what they have been keeping inside. Their words may come with emotion that you can be present for without having to do anything specific. Telling people it will be okay is not always the right thing, as it can be patronizing and not acknowledging reality.

In a larger collective, you can ask, “What have you considered might need to happen next?” “What else do you need to know that could help us really understand this challenge?” “What might success look like?” “What do you think your community really needs?” “Why do you think this has happened?” “Where might we go from here?” “Where are you seeing common ground?”

4. Validation and Affirmations: If they answer any of the questions above, you can repeat their response in a form of an affirmation or validation. If they say, “I think I need to step down from the committee.” You can say, “So you feel like you need to step down from the committee.” Or they may say, “I need to know my team respects my contribution.” You can say, “Of course. That is a reasonable expectation. You and your work are valued here.” Again, you are not providing them with advice, but supporting their own capacity to access their own wisdom. Of course, if they say something like, “I just don’t think I’m good enough.” You can counter with “I understand you feel you’re not good enough, but trust me you are good enough. I have seen your capacity to lead others...” or something that can support their connection to their own capacities. Be certain not to just say anything, but to respond with an authentic recognition of who they are and their qualities.

In a community environment, you can honor the impact of the situation, express your acknowledgment of the experiences of all participants, restate the diverging views or common ground, affirm their feelings, and validate what they are discovering by going through this intentional process as a facilitator or fellow stakeholder.

5. Advice: They may simply want your advice. Be certain never to lean with your advice, especially if it is not solicited. In some cases, this may be a giving up of one’s own power to an authority. So, you may need to lean into what is happening to recognize whether they want you to solve the problem for them. You may need to say, “I just don’t feel qualified to know what is best,” or “Only you know what you truly need.” In other cases, someone may be in danger or at risk, and you may feel you can reasonably offer advice that will protect them. (Sometimes withholding advice could be neglectful, such as a domestic violence case. Use presence and mindfulness to know how best to respond in each circumstance.)

In a group, rather than offer advice outright, you can ask people what might be most helpful, or “How can I best support you?” You can propose how you might think about an issue, offering a framework or suggesting a next step, then turn over the analysis and conclusion to the group again: “Here’s how I might look at it,” “Would you like to explore this or that next?” or “One thing I think I could offer is _____ Would that be helpful?” Each time, you are allowing the team or group to make the final call, which supports its agency, ownership, and leadership.

In this form of questioning, the least intrusive form is more supportive of self-empowerment. So, try to stay with the mirroring step above and only move up the ladder to advice as absolutely necessary. Find opportunities to practice this with others in your family, work and community.