Pushback Circles

Impact: The goal of this activity is for youth to practice the integration of their head and heart when being challenged by outside forces. The activity is structured so that youth can prepare for an interaction that they know will be hard or renegotiate an interaction that has already happened that they want to go back to.

Risk: High

Duration: 60 minutes

Materials needed: Easel pad, blurbs below

Directions:

- **Check In**
- **Explain** to the group that this exercise is to help participants deal with resistance and push back when they enter into conversations about oppression within their different communities.
- **Explain** to the youth that this is one of those moments when it is OK to stop and listen to the voices in your head.
- **Explain** roles:
  - **Person A:** person who is getting the pushback (person who shares their story). Before engaging in this activity this person should assess the level of risk and whether they are in the window or not. Person A may pause during conversation with Person B to take in input from Person C and Person D.
  - **Person B:** person who plays the one who exhibits the resistance and pushes back. In some cases the students may know who the person is if this story is coming from a school or other community setting. Please remind the students not to use names. Person B should sit directly in front of Person A.
  - **Person C (the Window Coach):** person whose responsibility it is to keep person A “in the window”. They sit to the right of Person A facing them, with their back to person B so they can see the face, hands etc of person A. Person C also acts as a "transition coach" and helps Person A engage and disengage if they start to become emotionally disregulated or if it feels like there is nothing else to be gained from the interaction. They should be offering quiet words of
encouragement and checking in with Person A consistently. This is not a passive role, if person C is just sitting, watching person A, it is OK for the facilitator to stop the interaction and coach them. The sole function of Person C is to emotionally support Person A. Person C should feel like they can talk over person B. That person does not exist in their mind.

**Person D (Language Coach):** person who is "language coach" is there to help Person A with small pieces of language to move the conversation forward. They should not be providing whole sentences, rather a few words for how to reframe or redirect the dialogue. They should be seated to the left and facing Person A with their back to Person B. Again, they can speak over person B. Examples might be “how about giving a personal example?” or, “Get away from the data”.

- **Set Up Room**
  - Recruit roles A through D
  The rest of the group should be seated in a tight circle surrounding Person A, B and C. They should take mental notes about what part of the dialogue worked and what didn’t work and feel free to bring these observations up during the debrief.

- **Debrief:** After each pushback session debrief with all the participants. Make sure that each person who had a “role” speaks about what it was like for them to be in that role; what was hard and what worked? Ask the audience to weigh in as well. This is also a time when people can give additional suggestions about what could have been said.

- **Closure:** Wrap up with closing remarks and remind group to engage in self care.

- **Speak Out**

**Facilitator’s Notes:**

- Make note of how the conversation starts. Is person A already high in the window when they begin to engage or are they regulated?
- An excellent reframing question from “The Color of Fear” movie: when Person A is being denied their experience and Person B will not move to their heart: “I have a question
for you. What would it personally mean for you if what I’m saying is true?” Or, “Can you consider that I may know more about my reality than you do?”

- Here are a couple of other questions one can raise: “I feel like we are going back and forth on this. Can you tell me a little bit about where your resistance to this is coming from?” or “Can you help me understand why this issue isn’t directly related to racism?”

- Sometimes the intervention or “moment” during the pushback is when person A is able to realize they can stop and end the conversation. This is particularly true for POC handling pushback from Whites. Whites will ask for an explanation or defense from a POC and the POC may say, “I don’t want to answer that for you” or “Google it” or “you should find a White person to talk to about that”.

- Other strategies to remind person A and coaches about: Personal stories and feelings can’t be refuted! Make sure the person in role B knows why you have skin in this game. It is ok to say that something is hurtful or offensive. Propose racial justice and equity; telling someone that they are racist will never move things in a productive direction (although in some cases it may have to be said). Ask person in role B to share where they are coming from, why they are having such a hard time with this, what it is about their experience that makes this so hard, etc.

“You’ve never been and you’ve never had the human dignity of being held accountable in this way before, and therefore you’ve never really been fully human in some ways.”

Abigail Ortiz
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