

The Collective Process

THEORY

Hierarchy

The Collective process is a model for decision making that is very different from the hierarchical systems used by most other groups and organizations who are status quo. Because our mandate is to serve all women, The Vancouver Women's Health Collective is dedicated to decisions made through the collective process. Only in this way do we gain clearer insights into the needs of women. Hearing the voices of women is critical.

Decisions made based on hierarchical structures rarely work for women because they are not sensitive to the voice of women. These decisions are still made generally by men and unfortunately man's values and experience differ from women. All too often decisions made based on hierarchical processes reflect a white, male, middle class bias.

Hierarchy operates with the assumption that authority knows best. Decisions that are arrived at by only a few can not reflect the needs of the many.

Collective process is an attempt to make decisions that reflect women's needs in broader and broader ways. These become quality decisions that reflect the needs, desires, principles, and values of women. Because we are an organization that developed with a mandate to help women help themselves, we must be willing to allow ourselves to be informed by the women we intend on serving.

Representation:

As an organization we continually strive for inclusiveness (to include all women from diverse experiences) and representation. The way we do this is to continually ask ourselves who are we serving? Are we serving a narrow interest or are we serving a broad interest?

We can usually answer this question first by asking ourselves who do we represent, who are involved?

As women, what we know and believe is influenced by our experience. Basically, all women are biased by that experience therefore in an organization that strives to serve all women. It is vital to look at who makes up the organization and thereby determine what our bias is.

Representation is vital for a collective organization if it seeks to serve all women. In organizations that tend to be predominantly white, straight and middle class our inherent biases can, in almost invisible ways, further marginalize less empowered groups of women, such as immigrant women, first nations women, women of color, and lesbian women.

LINES OF POWER

It is important to be aware that not everyone has the same amount of power in any given group. With the collective process often information is power. Those of us who have been here a long time have a responsibility to be open to sharing with those who are newer. Also it is sometimes perceived that staff people have more decision making power than volunteers. The Health Collective struggles to address these lines of power through using the collective process, and by opening discussing when lines of power may be presenting problems.

Consensus

Decisions are based on input from the group. All women are encouraged to express their feelings, ideas and opinions; to have a voice within the group. Decisions are worked out so that **everyone** can agree with the final outcome. Decisions will not be finalized without agreement from everyone who participates. If a situation occurs where a woman's ideas are divergent from the group and consensus cannot be reached, she may consider stepping out of the debate in order not to block the decision making process. However, if the women, given that she has had access to all the information, does not feel comfortable with the decision of the group and feels the group decision would adversely effect or jeopardize the operation of the whole organization, then the group must take steps to look at other ways of approaching the issue. Compromise and information sharing and education around issues are essential to the smooth running of a Collective.

PRACTICE

Every meeting utilizes certain tools which help to ensure that the collective process runs smoothly.

An opening round is very important. This enables each person to let the group know how they are feeling before hand in order to avoid emotional conflicts. It makes us all aware of what each of us is bringing to the meeting in the way of emotional baggage or emotional energy or just plain positive vibes.

✧ A rotating chair woman

The chair woman is responsible for facilitating the meeting making sure discussion stays on topic so to prevent meeting from becoming too long and drawn out. She also calls each topic off the agenda in the order the group decides.

✧ A rotating time keeper

At the beginning of the meeting the group decide roughly how much time to dedicate to each agenda item. This helps keep the meeting from running into ridiculous over time.

✧ A rotating minute taker.

Minutes are very important to the collective process. Decisions must be recorded along with any information on what people thought of issues. The actual format of the minutes is a very loose thing and each person will deal with taking minutes in their own unique way. As long as ideas are recorded that's all that matters. Minutes are made available to all collective members and left in the minute book on the information centre desk.

✧ A rotating vibes keeper

The vibes keeper just keeps an eye out for anyone who may be having difficulty speaking up, or just monitors the emotions of the group. If there seems to be unspoken problems or thoughts floating about the room, she can jump in and ask if there is more that needs to be dealt with. Sometimes this happens and then it is a good thing "to do a round" where everyone takes turns speaking openly on the issue at hand. Often when people have strong ideas on an issue they sometimes forget to hear the other people before jumping in. The vibes keeper may then want to monitor those who interrupt in their excitement.

The rotating responsibility is important to a collective group. This gives everyone the opportunity to be responsible, to feel some ownership and it guards against one person monopolizing the meetings. It lends a fresh perspective to each meeting.

Agenda's for the meeting should be pre-posted so everyone knows what will be discussed at the meeting and can prepare for it. Any one can add items to the agenda for discussion. Any one can bring agenda items to the meeting at the last minute and it will be up to the group if they want to discuss new agenda items under "other business" or postpone it until the next meeting. This allows people to decide whether they want to participate in any given meeting based on what's on the agenda. Minutes should be typed up or legibly written and put in mail slots long before the next meeting.

At the end of each meeting the group asks for someone to volunteer to minute take, vibes keep, time keep and chair the next meeting.

Collective meetings have generally been held every second Monday evening of the month. Dates and times of meeting are always decided upon collectively. Committee meetings also run according to collective process.