

HELPING A GROUP BUILD UP SPIRITUAL CAPITAL

WHAT IS 'SPIRITUAL CAPITAL'?

Spiritual resources and assets built up by a group that gives value, depth and security to that group. Such capital is accrued as members of the group invest selfhood and allow space for the Spirit to build community that is deeply human. Such capital is greater than the sum of the individual personalities and skills of the group members.

Spiritual capital can be 'spent' as well as accrued, through events and resources that the group might offer, either collectively, partially-collectively (ie some, but not all of the group), or individually.

HOW CAN SPIRITUAL CAPITAL BE ACCRUED?

The model outlined here is based on the long-term experience of a Bradford Spiritual Directors Consultation, but the principles could well be transferable to other contexts.

Background to the Bradford Model

Organised by the Spirituality Group of Bradford Diocese, the Consultation is a self-selecting gathering of the people who are engaged in a ministry of spiritual direction. It is open to lay and ordained people of all Christian denominations. An annual event, the Consultation takes place in the comfortable Bradford Diocesan Retreat House, Parcevall Hall, over a midweek 48 hour period (often 4.00 pm Monday to 2.00 pm Wednesday). Numbers are limited to 17 or 18, that being the number of bedrooms available. Each year perhaps two-thirds of the group have been before, and up to one-third is there for the first time. Some members know others well, some slightly, and others not at all. The Consultation was facilitated by the same person for a number of years, but recently has been facilitated by a different person each year. The facilitator is generally not a member of the group, but may be known by some members.

The Process

After a welcoming cuppa and settling into rooms, the first gathering takes the form of an introductory session. No agenda is set. A member of the Spirituality Group briefly welcomes the facilitator, who then invites the participants in turn to say who they are, and where they are from, with at least 30 seconds of silence between each person, for the group to 'receive' each person and hold them in the presence of God. This is an affirming, accepting process, which gives value to each person, and enables the group (or 'gives the group permission') to create a safe space over the next 2 days, where trust, confidentiality, respect and acceptance will be honoured.

After this introductory process, the facilitator invites anyone to say something about what has been going on in his or her life, and/or ministry of spiritual direction over the past year. Some 'ground rules' are offered, which enable the safe space to be built. Anyone *may* speak; no-one *must* speak (but all are encouraged to in this initial gathering); each person may speak only once; what each person offers is not for discussion by the group, whose task is to listen and receive what each member offers; anything said is to be held in confidence within the present group

This part of the process has been handled in a number of different ways, of which 2 are:

- a) Going round the room again, each in turn offers something of their experience, joys, anxieties, pain, activities during the past year.

- b) One by one, as individuals volunteer, the same thing happens. In this way, something said may 'trigger' something for someone else in the group who chooses to follow on.

In each case, the facilitator jots on to a flip chart any broad themes, or salient points raised during this process.

Usually the group then breaks for a drink and evening meal, reconvening in the early evening.

The facilitator invites the group to see if there are any common themes or issues to which it *may* be appropriate to return and give some further time to during the Consultation. In this way the group ‘puts some pins’ in a possible map of how the terrain of the Consultation *may* look, without setting a firm or time-scaled agenda.

The group may choose to take up one of these themes, or a conversation may ensue which goes in a completely unexpected, though relevant direction, or the facilitator may introduce something from the resources he or she has brought, if that seems appropriate. If the latter is the case, the facilitator would not foist this on the group, but would say something like, “I’ve brought X with me (e.g. an exercise, video of a TV programme, audio tape of a radio programme, piece of poetry or art), and I wondered if it might be helpful if we looked at it/listened to it/engaged with it.” The group would, by ‘rough consensus’, indicate whether that, or some alternative should be followed.

In this way, the facilitator is encouraging the group to ‘own’ how the time is spent. This enables each member of the group to contribute with equal value * to everyone else, and to continue to build up gradually, in thin layers (as with papier-mâché), a safe space created by and for trust, reflection and quality relationship.

The effect of this is that any sense of competitiveness is defused, and egos can be expressed in a real way, with vulnerability and straightforward honesty, rather than there being a need for egos to be defended.

Another significant part of the process is silence. Perhaps at the beginning, end or in the midst of a session, the facilitator will suggest that the group simply be quiet for 5, 10, 15 or even 20 minutes. Sometimes this will be to ‘take stock’ of where we have come, what we have been engaging with. Sometimes it will be an opportunity to centre down and re-focus. At other times, it will be a way to move on from a difficult issue that has been painful or dissentious. On yet other occasions, it may be more of a ‘Quaker silence’, in which anyone *may*, but none *must*, say anything that they feel important from what has been so far. Again, no one may speak more than once, no one shall comment on anything said, but simply hear it and honour it, and respect confidentiality utterly.

Thus the facilitator attempts to allow space for reflection, discernment and the ‘mulling’ of words and thoughts with the spice of the Spirit.

Where there is *space* for the Spirit, there is greater awareness of the *presence* of the Spirit.

Where there is space for each other, there is greater awareness of each other, simply for each other’s sake.

Where there is space, there is a greater awareness of oneself, and a greater ability to be ‘in touch with one’s soul’ – the deeper places of one’s life.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE FACILITATOR’S ROLE.

- The facilitator must trust the process, in order to enable the group to do so
- In order to be able to create a ‘safe space’ for the group, the facilitator should:
 - listen well
 - regularly check out the group to ensure common ownership of the process
 - exercise power gently
 - set aside his or her own agenda
 - operate with humour and a light touch
 - recognise that he or she has no authority over the group
 - be affirming
 - allow space for expression and reflection
 - self-prepare prior to the event
 - prepare resources prior to the event
 - be ready to lay aside those resources, or to use them, as appropriate
 - discern the presence of the Spirit, the mood of the group, and the direction of the flow
 - be prepared to ask the challenging catalytic question as appropriate
 - model an accepting, non-judgemental attitude by balancing the challenging and the affirming
 - concentrate at all times
 - recognise that his or her role will be tiring

KEY ELEMENTS OF GROUP MEMBERS' EXPECTATIONS.

It is helpful of people know in advance something of the process that will be used. This is not a 'chalk and talk' presentation, neither is it a case of an 'expert' telling. Rather, the process involves the facilitator enabling the group to develop in response to the Spirit's prompting and o their own individual and collective experience. Each member is therefore a vital part not only of the group, but of the process itself, and a willingness to participate in this way is essential.

WRAPPING UP.

At the end of the Consultation there is an opportunity **review**. Individually, corporately, or 'organisationally' (eg a suggestion to develop support/supervision groups for spiritual directors, or some consideration of some training days or evenings), those present may identify work to be carried out, reordering of priorities, and ways in which to move forward.

** The point about equal value means it is difficult for an 'outsider' to sit in on the group; and any notion of hierarchy may well run counter to the group ethos.*

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