Consensus Building

Use this facilitated conversation template to help youth reach consensus regarding a program, project or initiative that they will implement. Use it at the start of a program cycle, or for an isolated event that can accommodate a high level of youth ownership and direction. The final decision and direction rests with the youth involved, but it can be confined by any parameters you set in advance (i.e. budget, time, geography, purpose, outcome, etc.). This activity allows youth to practice their Ways of Doing as they work together to move their project forward. This activity was contributed by Banyan Community.

Why This Matters

- This activity takes youth through the process of navigating relationships with others, their feelings, and an alternative process for getting things done.

- As youth identify their individual rationale, it also provides an opportunity for reflecting on "Ways I Am."

Getting Started

- Time: This activity will take at least 30 minutes depending on the engagement of the group and how quickly you move the discussion along.

- Materials needed: poster paper and markers for each group of 4-6 youth. Sitting in a circle at tables or on the floor is highly preferred.

- This activity can be used for middle and high school youth. The depth of conversation and time it takes to reach consensus will vary based on the age and maturity of youth.

- This activity is most effective with established groups that have a high level of trust.

- This activity follows a brainstorming session where the group identifies a number of options for an activity, service project or program that they will implement.

How To Use It

1) Begin by explaining that youth will be working together to decide the direction of their project. Say something like: "Today you will have a chance to decide what we're going to do for (e.g., our service project). We are going to have a consensus building conversation. Can anyone define consensus? (General agreement; it doesn't mean that every individual has to feel the same way, but the overwhelming majority has to agree). We're going to break into small groups. Be sure to allow each person in the group the opportunity to share their opinion."

2) Divide your group into teams of about 4-6 youth.

   - Create groups that include diverse perspectives and skills. The more representative, inclusive and diverse the groups are, the easier it will be to reach consensus later. If groups are organized by friend groups, gender, culture, or obvious interests, youth might NOT encounter alternative opinions until late in the process.

3) Each group will need to choose someone as their scribe and someone as their spokesperson. The scribe will be responsible for writing down their conversation. The spokesperson will be responsible for speaking on behalf of the group to the larger group.

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4) Ask groups to review the projects recorded in the brainstorming activity, and rank their top three based on what they are most interested in doing.

- Have youth write the reason for their interest in a given project next to their ranking (e.g., I've always wanted to do that. It would help the most people. It would be fun!).

5) Once all groups have had a chance to record their rankings, ask each spokesperson to present their rankings to the class, along with their rationale.

6) After each spokesperson has presented their rankings, ask youth to identify any trends. Discussion questions:

- Did any of you choose the same or similar activity for your top three?

- Did any of you have similar reasons for wanting to do a particular project?

- Based on what others have shared, do any of you feel like changing your rankings?

- Are there ideas that other groups shared that you disagree with, have no interest in doing, or don't understand? (If there are, would anyone from that group like to clarify what you were thinking?).

- Are there any projects that don't seem to have much interest? Cross those out.

- What project seems to have the most interest? (You can offer suggestions based on your observation of the conversation, but try very hard not to usurp their decision.)

  - If the group is able to identify one, ask "Is anyone strongly opposed to this?"

  - If there is no strong opposition, you have arrived at consensus!

  - If there is strong opposition, or there are a couple projects that stand out, you could break back into small groups to rank projects again based on their conversation and a narrower list of options. Then move through some of the discussion questions above until they have identified one project.

- If there is one youth who opposes, make sure they have the opportunity to share their opinion and be sure to ask specific questions to understand their opposition (e.g., How would you change or improve the project?). If further discussion does not convince them, try going back to the original definition of consensus and remind the group that not everyone will agree and that is ok. To ensure the involvement of this youth going forward, consider giving them a leadership role in the project.

Take It Further

Assign some youth as observers in each group. Their role is to watch and record how their group worked together to reach its rankings, and how the larger group worked together to reach consensus. At the end, invite them to share their observations.

- Discussion questions: Did everyone in your group have the opportunity to share their opinions? Were anyone left out? Were there ideas that were received differently in your small group versus the large group? Do you want to give a shout out to anyone in the group? Did you see something in any of your peers that you hadn't seen before (e.g., their voice, strong opinion, leadership)?