

Higher Education

Building Authentic Intergroup Dialogue on Campus: Living a Commitment to Shared Governance and Career Path Development through the Full Inclusion of *All* Members of the University Community¹

By Christine Clark

Introduction

The University of Maryland's Intergroup Dialogue and Leadership Program (IDLP) is coordinated by the Office of Human Relations Programs (OHRP), an arm of the Office of the President. Because of this organizational location, OHRP has campus-wide scope which has been foundational to its ability to adapt the Intergroup Dialogue Program (IDP) component of its IDLP from a student-focused initiative toward meeting the needs that staff at all levels on campus have expressed for intergroup dialogue.

In responding to this expressed need over the last three years, OHRP has piloted a Black/Latina/o or "Group-Specific" Intergroup Dialogue for housekeeping staff at the university, as well as a Women of Color Story Circle Intergroup Dialogue for administrative assistants on campus.

The Black/Latina/o or Group-Specific Intergroup Dialogue for Non-Exempt Staff

In Group-Specific Intergroup Dialogue, two groups of eight to ten participants each (16 to 20 total), representing two discrete identity groups, are brought together for six two-and-a-half hour sessions (15 contact hours for one credit) to discuss issues and forge relationships between the groups. Typically, two facilitators, one from each of the two identity groups represented in a given Dialogue, co-facilitate.

Group-Specific Intergroup Dialogue has participants from *both* groups that: (a) represent a wide range of perspectives on

the perceived salient "issues" between the two groups; (b) have credibility with their respective larger constituencies; and (c) include, but are not limited to, members of the groups' leaderships.

Further, it has facilitators who possess: (a) extensive content area knowledge about the range of experiences of both groups' members and the issues between them (specific and general); (b) the ability to challenge, as well as support, the thinking of both groups' members, as an insider to one and an outsider to the other; and (c) extensive facilitation experience.

Deviating slightly from what is typical for group-specific intergroup dialogue, in Maryland's Black/Latina/o staff dialogues there are *four* co-facilitators, two Black and two Latina/o. Additionally, two are professional staff members (called Exempt Staff), and two are support staff members (called Non-Exempt Staff) in order to bring both the more "academic" intergroup dialogue facilitation and content area knowledge skills, as well as the more "practical" in-group (i.e., specific to housekeeping staff) facilitation and content-area knowledge skills to these experiences. Finally, because this intergroup dialogue is conducted bilingually, two of the co-facilitators are native Spanish speakers, and two are native English speakers.

Maryland's Black/Latina/o emerged in response to numerous complaints of conflict between members of these two groups at the lowest levels of employment across the university. Scheduling for this dialogue (7-9 a.m.) was challenging because of the shifts housekeeping employees work. Recruiting participants was also difficult because of the pre-existing tensions. Incentives from management (paid attendance

and complimentary refreshments) facilitated recruitment.

Once engaged with each other in the dialogue, cross-group hostility was rather easily eroded through interrogation of the stereotypes that each group held about the other, and establishment of a climate for open communication regarding perceived racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences. Shortly after beginning the dialogue, participants also found common ground based on the identification of their shared family and community values and their shared experiences as low-level, often mutually disenfranchised employees — particularly, their shared experiences of racism expressed, inadvertently and deliberately, by White supervisors and/or faculty, staff, and students who populated their work areas.

Since the inception of this dialogue's pilot, cross-group tensions have been markedly decreased in the work units that have had employees participate. The dialogue is on-going — held annually — and is concluded with a dialogue graduation ceremony which creates high-profile positive peer culture around participation in it. Not surprisingly, new employees express the desire to join in every year.

The Women-of-Color Story Circle Intergroup Dialogue for Non-Exempt Staff

In Story Circle Intergroup Dialogue, smaller, more intimate groups of six to eight participants, meet for 6 two and a half hour sessions (15 contact hours for one credit) to discuss, through the sharing of their autobiographical narratives, how they each conceptualize and experience the group

identity they have in common (which is the focus of a given dialogue).

Typically, a single facilitator, representing the identity group at focus in a given dialogue, facilitates.

Story Circle Intergroup Dialogue also includes participants from a single group that: (a) represent a wide range of perspectives on the perceived salient “issues” with which the group grapples; (b) have credibility within their larger constituency; and (c) include, but are not limited to, members of the group’s leadership.

Finally, Story Circle Intergroup Dialogue typically has a single facilitator with the following special skills: (a) extensive content area knowledge about the range of experiences of group members and the issues with which they grapple (specific and general); (b) the ability to challenge as well as support the thinking in the group, as an insider to it; and (c) extensive facilitation experience.

Again, deviating slightly from what is typical for story circle intergroup dialogue, in Maryland’s Women-of-Color staff dialogues there are *two* co-facilitators. As before, one is a professional staff member (Exempt Staff) and one is a support-staff member (Non-Exempt Staff), in order to bring both the more “academic” intergroup dialogue facilitation and content area knowledge skills, as well as the more “practical” in-group (i.e., specific to administrative assistant staff) facilitation and content area knowledge skills to these experiences.

The Women-of-Color Story Circle Intergroup Dialogue emerged in response to the stated need of Women of Color in administrative assistant roles themselves to have a place to come together and share their experiences at the university related to both their professional role and function, as well as their racial and gender identities. Their coming together offered them support in what they experience as an often hostile climate. Further, they developed an informal professional network to help each other and their other peers learn how to successfully negotiate that climate by offering each other inspiration and interpersonal motivation, as well as assistance with work-related tasks.

Analyses

While intentionally implied, it has not been expressly stated herein that the realization of authentic intergroup dialogue — oriented toward fostering meaning and

sustained cross-group relationships — *requires* grounding in sociopolitics in a manner that allows for examination of personal *and* institutional shared values. That is, authentic intergroup dialogue must take place in an environment that welcomes the open examination and discussion of what are generally considered issues too tough to confront, both individually and organizationally.

These are issues that remind us that we — as individuals and through our varied social identity groups, organizations, institutions, nation-states, and global experiences — are not as multiculturally evolved as we often like to think. Instead, these issues often painfully reveal to us that we are often still quite actively engaging in discrimination toward those different from ourselves. This is especially the case in contexts where we have access to the formal power that enables us, both inadvertently and deliberately, to convert our individual biases and prejudices into institutionally supported and reproduced systems of oppression, contexts that support our identities as members of traditionally overrepresented social identity groups at the expense of our under-represented counterparts.

At the University of Maryland, “shared governance” and “career path development” are stated university values and priorities. In the Maryland context, shared governance is said to mean that students, faculty, and staff *at all levels* are involved in the processes through which decisions impacting all areas of the university are made. Career path development is the attention given to creating educational and professional enhancement opportunities especially, though not exclusively, for non-exempt staff, opportunities that will enable non-exempt staff to more preparedly contribute to shared governance, in particular by taking advantage of the “intellectual community” associated with employment in a higher education context.

Certainly, to some extent, these values and priorities are realized. But, not surprisingly, members of the non-exempt staff, especially those in positions mirroring those of the staff intergroup dialogue participants, are sorely underrepresented in the shared governance arena and have remained in marginalized employment contexts over twenty-year careers for a number of reasons.

In the effort to address these problems by systematically addressing the reasons most often offered to explain and even rationalize them, a draft “Policy Resolution

on Full Inclusion of All Staff into the University Community”² was recently developed. This resolution sets forth a three-tiered approach through which non-exempt staff may be afforded fuller access to participation in the shared governance and career path development within the university. The first tier is the most flexible and, thus, least directive; the second tier is somewhat less flexible and, therefore, slightly more directive; the third level is least flexible and therefore most regimented in order to ensure the greatest access to participation in shared governance and career path development for the majority of non-exempt staff.

The draft resolution reads as follows:

Opening Statement

Whereas the full inclusion of staff at all levels, but especially those in trades, services, technical and administrative support roles, in Non-Exempt positions, in full and part time and regular and contract contexts, into the university community is identified as an institutional value and priority;

Whereas in the absence of a policy clearly delineating strategies for achieving especially Non-Exempt staff full inclusion, such has not been realized;

Be it resolved that a policy for effectuating the full inclusion of all staff into the university community be established, and, further, that such policy meet the following minimum inclusion parameters:

Tier One

Staff at all levels, in full and part time and regular and contract contexts, be afforded access to and protection under all of the university’s grievance processes;

In roles and/or at times where staff presence is not always required in their job (i.e., where and when there is flexibility in how and when work may get done), staff professional development and service be unlimited on the condition that their performance evaluations continue to “meet expectations.”

If this is not possible then...

Tier Two

In roles and/or at times where staff presence is always required (i.e., where and when there is not flexibility in how and when

work may get done), technology be utilized to increase flexibility:

For example, staff whose roles and functions require their proximity to phones and/or e-mail, as is the case for many administrative assistants, could be equipped with cellular phones and palm pilots so that, through call forwarding and/or remote e-mail access, they could attend a seminar or a committee meeting and still attend to their primary role and function by multi-tasking in the same manner some exempt staff currently do;

This parameter corresponds to many campus directives to utilize technology to accommodate all staff via teleworking to reduce campus and surrounding traffic, suggesting that technology likewise be utilized to facilitate the greater participation of staff within the campus community; inherent in this suggestion is the deeply held belief that full inclusion of staff into the life of the university should be recognized as at least as important as traffic concerns.

If this is not possible then...

Tier Three

All staff be afforded three (3) hours of release time a week, throughout the calendar year, to participate in professional development, campus service, and/or community service relevant to the university; in the event that this time is not used up within a week, staff may bank it over the course of a month and apply it to the aforementioned endeavors in larger blocks so long as their performance in their primary role and function is not compromised;

and,

Non-Exempt staff be afforded six (6) hours of flex time a week, and Exempt staff be afforded six (6) hours of flexibility, during semester and summer session classes, to participate in professional development, campus service, and/or community service relevant to the university in lieu of tuition remission; in the event that this time is not used up within a week, staff may bank it over the course of two weeks and apply it to the aforementioned endeavors in larger blocks so long as their performance in their primary role and function is not compromised;

This parameter corresponds with many current university policies affording staff flex time and/or flexibility commensurate with the practice of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), Total Quality Management (TQM), and other like initiatives;

This parameter also corresponds with many current university policies affording staff six (6) credits tuition remission per semester, three per summer session, which translates into ninety (90) contact hours per semester, forty-five (45) per summer session, or six (6) hours of class time per week during both the semester and summer sessions;

It is important to note here that the educational benefits of the university's employment package are integral to both the university's mission and to what makes higher education such a unique and attractive place to work for many individuals; in light of this, it is crucial that a resolute spirit of support for employees taking advantage of these educational benefits permeate the workplace;

This parameter is responsive to the persistent tension related to the work week increase from thirty-five and a half (35.5) to forty (40) hours for many Non-Exempt staff absenting a corresponding pay increase, offering up a possibility for resolution of this tension;

In roles where staff are assigned equipment (e.g., university vehicles) and/or access privileges (e.g., campus parking passes and/or lot gate keys) for use in the context of their work, this equipment and these privileges be extended to them for use in the context of their release/flex time and/or flexibility for professional development and service;

This parameter is consistent with many universities' facilities' master plans which, for example, encourages the use of state vehicles for intracampus work and work-related (i.e., professional development or service) travel when major arteries are closed to or provide limited access to non-state vehicles;

Staff professional development and service endeavors be considered in the performance evaluation process with respect to the setting and meeting of expectations and merit increases.

Closing Statement

Whereas the university's Board of Regents' has an established policy in which all staff participation in the shared governance of the university is clearly delineated;

Whereas university President has conventionally defined the participation of staff at all levels on the Campus Senate, presidential commissions, and myriad university committees as shared governance;

Be it further resolved that, as part and parcel of this policy resolution, a process be developed for the entire university community to: 1) learn how to appreciate the value of flexibility for staff at all levels of employment; and, 2) develop a comprehensive understanding of the theory and practice of shared governance.

A basic assumption for this process must be a campus-wide mandate that staff at all levels be afforded the opportunity to develop intrinsic motivation with respect to their work, versus being externally controlled in it and compelled to do it.

This mandate must be communicated as a charge from senior leadership to supervisors, with a concomitant charge from supervisors to their mid-level managers.

A system of mutual accountability for all staff and their immediate supervisors across the university must accompany the mandate to ensure that the aforementioned minimum inclusion parameters are met.

This policy resolution is offered in the spirit of empowering all staff to get their job done in an autonomous way.

It recognizes that job role and function and professional maturity and responsibility are not as mutually inclusive for all staff as they could be.

It reinforces the university's stated commitment to providing opportunities for career path development for all staff, but especially for Non-Exempt staff.

Finally, it acknowledges that individuals occupying every role and function within the university community occupy myriad roles and functions off-campus (e.g., within their families as parents/guardians to children or as caretakers to elders; within their communities of faith as imams, ministers, or cantors; within civic organizations as coaches, mentors, trainers, tutors, committee chairs, or members of Boards of Directors) in which the knowledge, skills, and abilities employed may far supersede those employed in even the most senior level roles and functions.

This policy resolution affirms the holis-

Higher Education

tic nature of the diverse roles and functions every individual within the university community occupies in the totality of their life. In so doing, it requires that the university community recognize each of its staff members as a mature and responsible adult in the manner in which it organizes and evaluates them in the workplace context.

Conclusion

While both of the intergroup dialogues discussed here have enabled the non-exempt staff participants to develop communities of support in the face of hostility, they have not led to the emergence of non-exempt staff activism. Such activism, like that often associated with students on college campuses, is critical to bringing attention to this issue, and thus bringing about the structural changes needed to effectuate a more multiculturally affirming and empowering workplace climate, especially for those employed at the lowest levels in the university.

Because activism on the part of students is seen as part and parcel of student development in the liberal arts environment, engagement in it poses less of a threat to their status at the university than equivalent activity poses to employees, especially those employed in administrative or technical support, service, and trades positions.³ Clearly, advocacy for these staff by those in more secure positions within the university structure (namely, White male students and tenured faculty) is crucial to the improvement of campus climate for these employees.

As this climate improves, continued development of the staff intergroup dialogue structure could conceivably lead participants to engage in advocacy more securely and confidently, on both their own behalf and that of peers, toward the ongoing development of a multicultural campus and larger community. Advocacy on behalf of and by non-exempt staff to get the proposed draft resolution — or a future iteration of it — approved would be an excellent first step in more fully walking the shared governance and career path development walk. It is toward this end that the ongoing evolution of authentic intergroup dialogue between and among all constituencies at the University of Maryland is dedicated.

Footnotes

¹ Maryland's Intergroup Dialogue Program

is made possible, in part, through the generous support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Unity and Pluralism Grant Program.

² The draft "Policy Resolution on Fall Inclusion of All Staff into the University Community" was developed by the University of Maryland's President's Commission on Women's Issues (PCWI) Sub-Committee on Staff Concerns during the 2001-2002 academic year. To date, this resolution has not been adopted as policy by any governing authority on campus.

³ Which may, in part, explain the recent decision by these employees to unionize. The aforementioned draft resolution — had it been

implemented prior to the emergence of discussions regarding unionization — might have precluded the sense of need that employees have had to move forward with unionization.

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