



THE ART OF CONVENING™

Authentic Engagement in Meetings, Gatherings, and Conversations

COUNCIL PROCESS

A dynamic process for generating the wisdom
of a group of people

We offer our wisdom for the sake of a shared common future

Council Process (CP) is an efficient method for tapping into the collective wisdom of any group from 4-24. If you are seeking a direct honest response to any question or request, use the Council Process method for genuine 360-degree assessment of any situation.

The Purpose

Often, we seek insightful and “straight-shooting” responses from our colleagues or friends that get to the *heart of the matter* in solving personal or professional dilemmas. Under normal circumstances, tough questions may be hard to ask, let alone to elicit a straight, uncensored response. The purpose of Council Process is to move through these blocks and harvest the collective wisdom inherent in the assembled.

Getting Started

Start with a group of friends or colleagues whose opinions you consistently respect. Explain that they have been invited out of your respect for their opinion. Explain that the purpose of the meeting is to gain the highest wisdom possible from the group on a specific question or request(s). If more than one, each issue and corresponding request will be “worked” separately and the duration of the CP will depend on the number of issues or questions on the table.

Core Principles and Agreements

Explain that you’ll be working with a few simple principles and agreements. Be sure to achieve unanimous acceptance of both the principles and agreements for the duration of the Council Process.

1. The Principles of Engagement provide the basis for the engagement.
2. The Agreements provide a form or context that allows for a sense of safety.

1. Principles of Engagement

Council Process is not a conversation, it is a process.

Everyone belongs, there are no exceptions.

All questions, requests, and responses are respected; none are regarded as “wrong.”

All voices will be heard, if they wish to be heard.

Active listening is valued. It is said we “listen” each other and ourselves into being.

Silence is honored and is okay.

The roles of Wisdom and Advice

Advice speaks to someone from our body of knowledge and experience. It is an offering of suggestions about what or how to do something.

Wisdom tends to consider both the intellect and heart for a more holistic offering, often addresses how to BE in a situation. Wisdom is a culmination of awareness, knowledge, and knowing.

The difference between “good” or “bad” advice and wisdom is usually quite evident the moment either is spoken.

Listen for the wisdom waiting to come through.

2. Agreements

Everything said in a Council Process stays within the group. Confidentiality is core to the safety of the group, unless otherwise stated and agreed upon.

Council starts and ends on time.

The Convener requests and is given the authority to convene, which is to say to facilitate the process, to keep CP on point, and to move things along.

No response is required. The right to choose to be silent is as valued as the freedom to speak.

Speak with brevity.

Each person seeks to understand and be of service.

Roles of the Council

The Convener

Articulates the Principles of Engagement and Agreements, creates the form and facilitates the Council Process, including keeping time agreements.

May choose to participate as a responder or not.

Holds the energy of each person and the *container* simultaneously while asking: “What is the best possible outcome for the assembled?”

The Asker

Frames the issue and makes a specific request or question to the Responders.

The Participants as Responders (the Council)

Each has a distinct and critical role in the unfolding of wisdom: Listen, seek to understand, seek to be of service, and offer wisdom.

Council Process in brief

Quite simply Council Process creates the right environment for wisdom to come alive through three components: the articulation of an earnest question, deep listening, and a request for wisdom. The mirroring back and forth between the asker and responders (council) ensures understanding, the precursor to the offering of one's wisdom.

The CP is designed to illuminate the wisdom inherent in the group in a safe environment free from unnecessary comments, back talk, and side dialogue. The goal is not to "work" an issue but to hear clearly the issue and question and then respond with wisdom.

If more work is needed on a particular issue, or additional questions are stimulated, either another Council Process can be called or other more dialogic processes may be used as a follow-up.

The Convening Process

This process can be done in person or virtual. The steps are logical and sequential:

Preparation

- People arrive via an invitation to participate.
- The Convener opens the session by *setting the context* for the session, stating the purpose for gathering, then establishing the principles of engagement and agreements.
- The Convener then offers a transition exercise, such as a brief poem, quote or request to sit in silence for a few moments as a way to clear and become fully present. (More details below)
- "Hearing all the Voices" comes next. It is recommended that each person say, in turn, their name, their affiliation to the Asker (if appropriate) and a few words about why they are present at the CP.

The Asker

- The Convener requests the Asker to briefly frame the context of the request or question within 3-5 minutes. The Asker concludes with a concise, direct question to the group that invites more than a yes or no response. Example: "*I request your wisdom on how I might talk with my staff about the upcoming relocation.*" As the Asker frames and considers the question the Convener may inquire as to the deeper or more essential aspect of the question or request, thus helping the Asker to get to the essence of and hone the essential question.
- While the Asker speaks, the Responders are requested to sit in silence, listening for the core issue and question while *seeking to understand and be of service*.

Notes may be taken. Responders are asked to listen without judgment or certainty and to be prepared to respond when asked for their wisdom.

Reflections to the Asker

- Once the Asker has framed the question or request to his or her satisfaction, the convener asks 2-3 Responders to briefly mirror back clearly, concisely, and even verbatim what they have heard to be the question or request. Redundancy is good because it reflects common themes emerging. Allow the 2-3 Responders to speak until each has reflected the key points. The Asker's role is to listen to the reflections and not respond.

Asker Responds

- The Convener then asks the Asker if they have been heard. If not, a brief clarification or a reframing of the question may be requested. If points of misunderstanding are deemed minor then move on. If fundamental differences have been noted, the Convener will ask the group to respond once again until the Asker has felt "heard."

The Council Offers Wisdom

- Now the Asker is ready to receive the wisdom of the group. The Convener instructs the Responders to pause and consider what wisdom is theirs to share. The Convener reminds the Responders that they have been seeking to understand and be of service, and also the difference between advice and received wisdom.
- The Asker is receptive and silent during the wisdom offering. He/She may take (or ask someone to take) notes at this time. The Responders offer their wisdom directly to the Asker in the form of brief declaratory statements or questions designed to illuminate the key issue and address the request. It is suggested there be an order established for each offering. Choosing to pass, to remain silent, is honored. There may also be more than one round, depending on size of group, time allotted to Council and/or need.
- At the end of each go-around, if someone has passed, the Convener can ask if there is something they might now want to contribute before moving on.

Asker Responds

- Once the Responders are finished the Convener turns to the Asker requesting him/her to speak to the Responders about what has "landed" for him/her so that the Responders now feel heard.
- The Council/Responders listen to the Asker's response. When the Asker is finished he or she asks if the Responders have fully heard the response and if they too feel heard. If not, further clarification will be necessary.

Council Closes

- The Asker then thanks everyone for his or her wisdom. The session is complete.

Tips:

- Note-taking is encouraged, especially by the Asker during the wisdom sharing.
- Wisdom feels whole-hearted, generous and generative, like a gift.
- Ask, "What do you know deeply" (from your experience) vs. "What do you think?"
- Wisdom may be expressed as a question. *Ex: "Are you yourself comfortable with the upcoming relocation? Have you yourself come to terms with your own issues around the move?"*
- Wisdom may *come through* as a "samurai" (as a direct comment). *Ex: "Relocation is always difficult because change always requires a disturbance of the familiar. Clear direction and bountiful support are the answers."*
- Often the wisdom generated is a combination of both questions and samurai direct comments.
- Remember to repeat that we are *seeking to understand and be of service* at all times. This reminds us that we are seeking wisdom and generosity.

Comments on Council Process...

I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to be the role of "Asker" two times in the Council Process. Each time I was moved by the words of wisdom, and stunned by my experience of love and caring coming from the Responders. There is something profound about having a group of people listening deeply, totally interested and focused on you, with the desire to be of service.

How wonderful and satisfying to be sharing in this way in CP. I didn't feel very heard through my childhood and adolescence. I knew I was loved but not able to voice my fears, etc. This is an extraordinarily wonderful experience to share what is going on inside without self-monitoring: "if this is important enough or crucial to share." It is incredible reflection – what being human means. If I can't do it with others, why am I here?