

GPP Narrative Process

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INTRODUCTION

A key ingredient to success is having a small group of people to work with in guiding the process. Beyond logistics they can help shape the questions that will work best with the group, be part of the synthesis, and shape the next steps. These folks can also play key roles in opening each session and re-enforcing why this process is important. They can help guiding the work after the narrative is drafted, in getting it as part of on-going work.

PROCESS:

The process is done over 3 sessions. The first is four hours while the other two are three hours long. These are done over a 6-8 week period to help maintain continuity. Try for a consistent group; anyone coming to the 2nd session who missed the 1st needs to be debriefed by one of someone from the group.

Session I

- Focus on relationship building (this is usually done at tables or in small clusters – use a question or two that helps people get to know each other some and grounds them in the content of what we are going to be doing.

- Definition of narrative – We use something like this:
 - *Narratives or stories (not anecdotes) have the power to shape people's perceptions, understandings, analysis, sense of what needs to be done, etc. The elements are:*
 - *Often grounded in some element of someone's truth but not beholden or limited to it*
 - *Provides an understanding or interpretation of people and situations*
 - *Grounded in and reflective of a larger set of values and beliefs*
 - *Usually designed to shape outcomes – serves a purpose*

 - Then introduce the idea of a dominant narrative and have people unpack an example to get them grounded in the idea: *what is the dominant story in our country about people who are poor – imagine you've landed in the country 2 weeks ago and have been reading the paper, listening to the news, watching TV and movies, listening to conversations in coffee shops – what is the narrative about poor people?*

- Naming the dominant narrative – this is done in small groups with each group writing up all the phrases that come to mind about the dominant narrative about them and their situation (public education and teachers,

offenders and ex-offenders, immigrants, public housing residents, etc); they are asked to name which ones evoke the strongest emotions in them and then all that is reported back. Unpack why this important and why it is about power, using questions like:

- *How does it impact public support for changing the criminal justice system including the rights of offenders and ex-offenders?*
 - *How does it impact people and families dealing with the system?*
 - *How does it impact your morale?*
 - *How does it impact our community?*
- Where does this come from – this is done by both examining whose interest is served but also understanding the dominant worldview narrative (“their” beliefs and big ideas) and how they are mutually reinforcing. To understand the power of these narratives ask people to share stories of how they have consciously or unconsciously been part of reinforcing this narrative. The point is we live in and out of these narrative whether we know it or not and they limit/trap us. BUT THE GOOD NEWS is they were created by humans and can be changed by humans.

Session II

- Reground in the dominant narrative and deepen understanding – Have a list of the key elements they named in the current dominant narrative about them and ask them to read them out loud and pay attention to how it feels. Ask them to share stories about where they’ve seen this narrative at work since our last session.
- Then engage them in a series of questions that deepens their understanding of what goes into a powerful narrative
 - *Who/what is being valued? Who/what is visible? Who/what is invisible?*
 - *What is the nature of relationships in this narrative – including the nature of and who has power?*
 - *What is the understanding of the purpose of the criminal justice system?*
 - *Who does the criminal justice system belong to in this narrative?*
 - *What is in the narrative that draws on what is in all or most of us in society? Why does it resonate with many people?*
- Preparing to create a new narrative – this is usually time for people to talk with each other about values/beliefs that they hold in their own lives (generally) and sharing stories about where they came from (also builds relationships)
- Brainstorming elements of new narrative – this is done in small groups– this is not always an easy task as people want to go to solutions. Have both a

handout (see end of this document for a sample) and train table facilitators – the focus is on creating short phrases that start to capture their own values/beliefs – we use a version of the questions we used to unpack the dominant narrative earlier to prod thinking – each group writes up all the thoughts and flags those that are most resonant to verbally report back on.

- Group debrief
 - Start with “how did this conversation feel” to get some of the emotional impact out
 - Then short (2 min) reports from each group followed by discussion (‘what surprised you’, ‘where did you see differences’, ‘where did you see similarities’)
 - Ask people what would be different with these elements.
- Form synthesis group – Have the group identify people to do this (often it’s the table leaders from this session) and keep it open to others who want to join in.

Synthesis

- the first steps is to get all the brainstorming typed up, formatted and printed out so that slips of paper can be cut up for each idea
- the synthesis group meets to sort and begin labeling themes
- 1-2 people are recruited to write something up that will be shared at the next session

Session III

- The purpose of this session is to engage people with the draft narrative in three ways:
 - personal and emotional. Emphasize the importance – all politics is emotional as well as cognitive
 - cognitive and contents
 - uses – meaning for their work
- personal responses - after a brief explanation of how the synthesis happened, the draft narrative is handed out and people are asked to hold on reading it so that we can read it out loud together (actually a few readers read it)
 - ask them to hold off “thinking” about what they are hearing and pay attention to how it hits them – what emotions does it bring up – people then discuss those in pairs/threes.
 - then there is a group sharing
- Cognitive – This is a chance for people to say what they thought was missing, what didn’t work for them – avoid a wordsmithing session and offer people a chance to turn in specific suggestions

- Meaning for their work – this is the part of the three sessions that most needs to be adapted to the group.
 - The purpose is to engage them in thinking what it would mean to act/live out of this new narrative. What would they do differently (not just say differently)
 - What kind of relationships would you need to build and with who
 - How would you respond differently to a specific situation
 - How would you tell your personal story to unmask the dominant narrative, project the new narrative and/or contrast the two
 - And similar questions

- Next steps. This is tailored to the group. Usually the small core group shapes and leads this and gets commitments from people.

- Evaluation/reflection Do a little of this each session. Do a bigger evaluation at the end, and have people talk about the impact it has had on them

GOALS/OUTCOMES

Some of these are explicit goals, some might be implicit goals:

- building relationships and a core of people willing to act together
- building identity – related to the last one but more explicitly using narrative to bind them together more
- building leadership – getting people to see themselves as part of creating something that can dramatically enhance the possibilities of change – there are a number of places where people also are asked to exercise leadership in these sessions – and the whole session is geared towards saying “you are the ones who can make it happen”
- bringing in new people
- creating a foundation (narrative) for future action
- deepening understanding and analysis of what it will take to “win” – another component of building leadership
- creating energy – improving morale