HeartWood
Centre for Community Youth Development

Community Standards

Community Standards (CS) can be the most valuable aspect of the entire program. It is an opportunity for the participants to create the standards of how they want to be as a group and the principles that they want to live by and strive for during the program (and beyond!). All groups need some form of community standards and they can look like lots of things: like a mural, poem, list of principles, or a sculpture created together! The process of creating community standards is an invaluable experience for any group.

Objective
- To create a set of standards that participants will strive to abide by
- To provide participants with a voice to express their needs within the program structure

Outcomes
- Empowering and inclusive experience
- A challenging team building experience
- Increase in participant and facilitator trust
- A sense of ownership and accountability for the experience

Ingredients for Facilitating Community Standards
- Each CS session is totally different and depends on things such as the size of the group, objectives of the program, length of program, participant population, physical location...

- The timing of the CS session is crucial. It has to be after the group has had some time to get to know each other and feel comfortable having a CS conversation, and should not be so late that expectations and community guidelines are not clear and people do not feel safe.

- For safety and legal reasons there are certain foundational standards that the facility and HeartWood (or your organization) have to provide, such as no drugs, no violence, no sexual harassment... be clear and upfront about these (ideally before the participants arrive). Review these static standards and explain them as the foundation to build your community and convey to participants that by choosing to attend this event, you have agreed to these as a minimum.

- A key ingredient is that there is a natural and clear progression that leads to the bigger question of "How do we want to be as a community? What are our standards?" Below are some examples of different progressions used to facilitate a CS session:

  1. Ask them to list some communities or groups they are a part of (school, sports teams, family, friends, neighborhood...)? What are the characteristics that make these communities work (or not)? Lead into a discussion on how during this program we are community and what would you like it to look like...?

  2. Lead into discussion on what is a standard? (define and examples) who sets our standards for us? (in our home/school/community) What are standards that we agree/disagree with? Why are these standards set? This is an opportunity to set and live by our own standards...

- Depending on numbers, it may work to split the group into smaller size (5-6 per group). Each group is to come up with a list of standards that will be presented to entire group or you can give each group categories (safety, behaviours, logistics...)

- With a smaller group, it can work well to ask: "What is of most importance to you in how this group works/lives together?"

- However it is organized, by the end there should be a visible representation of the standards and some form of a commitment that everyone will try their best to live by these standards

- Discuss consequences. It is important that the notion of consequences be explored as part of the CS session or community meeting, and that they are clearly defined and understood. The group as a whole can generate these, and it may be necessary to coach them to suggesting consequences that are connected and in proportion to the standard broken. Consequences need to be enforced, or CS becomes disrespected.

- Lastly, introduce community meetings as a tool that anyone can use as a forum to revisit community standards. If this is not happening naturally, as a facilitator you should create time to revisit the standards and make sure they are working.

Helpful Hints

- Do something playful or light after Community Standards, to keep energy of group up.

- Keep an eye on participant energy level. If you anticipate that it will be a lengthy process, set a time limit at the outset that everyone is aware of, and have a backup plan to conclude the conversation.

- Think about CS session as a container that can change size according to the population, decide beforehand how big to make the container, and how much the group will be able to decide for themselves (things like bedtime, language...)

- If the group will be working together over a long period of time, it's wise to have a copy of the standards provided to each person, to be included in their journal, etc.

- Get Creative. CS sessions do not have to end up as just a list of standards. It can involve anything; music, play-doh, poetry, theatre...