

Community Meetings

SANDRA L. BLOOM, M.D.

BACKGROUND



Since its origins in post-World War II England and Scotland, the Community Meeting has been a central concept of the therapeutic community (TC), a spatial expression of the democratic process that is central to the democratic TC [294, 363, 434, 742]. In traditional democratic TC's, Community Meeting is where much of the psychotherapeutic work of the community actually occurs. When the TC concepts were adapted for shorter term settings and became "therapeutic milieus", the Community Meeting became the critical time when staff and clients would gather together to discuss issues affecting everyone. Over time, however, and as a result of the wide-ranging organizational stresses that we have been describing in this book, the knowledge base about how to run Community

Meetings and their basic functions in a milieu setting, have been lost so that many staff members currently working in therapeutic settings are afraid to bring groups of clients together and have never experienced the power of one of the simplest methods of creating and maintaining a nonviolent environment.

But Community Meeting isn't just a therapeutic tool for clients who are in treatment settings. It's an interesting fact that although most workplaces in the for-profit and non-profit world are dependent on collective effort, rarely is there any attention paid to how a collection of independent individuals become a group capable of thinking and acting together in service of a shared goal, rather than simply thinking and acting as separate individuals. We just assume that when it works, it works and when it doesn't it's because we don't have the right combination of individuals. It may be true that the right people aren't in the room or the problem may be that we don't have the right process – a process that honors the transition from "me" to "we". That's what makes starting a meeting – any meeting – with some version of a Community Meeting so necessary if you want groups of people to pull together in service of a larger goal. Community Meetings are actually as ancient as human beings – gathering in a circle to meet each other eye-to-eye has been the basic structure of human groups for as long as there have

been human groups. Circling-up, circling the wagons, the sacred hoop all represent this vital form of interactive connection and interdependence.

WHAT IS IT?

A Community Meeting is a deliberate, repetitive transition ritual intended to psychologically move people from some activity that they have been doing into a new group psychological space preparing the way for collective thought and action. For all members of any group it provides a predictable bridge that directly and indirectly reinforces community norms. It is *not* a therapy group – although therapeutic things are likely to happen during it – and for the purposes of the Sanctuary Model it is meant to be brief and meaningful in a way that does not interfere with the logistics of the meeting or the day ahead.

For Community Meetings to be most effective they must be inclusive of all members of whatever community is having the meeting and the meeting itself must embody the Seven Commitments of the Sanctuary Model and therefore be enacting the group norms on a regular basis. As people become accustomed to the form they actively can demonstrate concern for others, interpersonal safety, open communication a sense of social responsibility, a willingness to learn and to listen, and a shared commitment to the well-being of the whole group. The form in physical space of the meeting, and the opportunity for everyone to have a voice, represents the concept of democracy at its most basic.

WHAT'S THE PURPOSE?

The regular and repetitive enactment of Community Meeting is a necessary practice for deep democracy. In the form and content of the meeting, people nonverbally and overtly pressure each other to conform to community norms and expectations. Rules are made and administered by authority figures and are likely to be broken. Norms emerge out of a group and most people are influenced by group norms. Community Meeting gives everyone a voice and offers a safe and nonthreatening environment within which people can begin finding words for feelings on a regular basis and it conveys to the community that emotional intelligence is important while at the same time recognizing that feelings are “no big deal” because everyone in the community can watch feelings, even distressing feelings, come and go, wax and wane even over the course of a fifteen minute meeting. The leveling of hierarchy that is expressed in the group through the form of it tells everyone in the community that “we are in this together” and reinforces the notion of social responsibility while keeping the importance of relationship in the forefront. Once the skill and safety of Community Meeting is established, then it becomes a natural and spontaneous process that any member of the community can use when trouble is brewing, tension is rising, or an untoward event has occurred. In this way, Community Meeting becomes an extremely effective tool for creating and sustaining an atmosphere of nonviolence.

During the Sanctuary Institute, staff are trained in how to run Community Meetings and are asked to begin holding Community Meetings, or if they are already holding Community

Meetings, they are asked to hold them more frequently and take them more seriously as a significant method for changing the culture. In the Sanctuary Model, two Community Meetings a day provide punctuation and structure for the beginning and the end of the therapeutic day. These meetings are structured, simple and designed to steadily and repetitively reinforce the social norms of the community.