

“Check-In” as a Tool for Co-Sensing

Duration: 5 minutes - 1 hour

of Participants: 2 or more

PURPOSE/DESCRIPTION

The “Check-In*” has long been used to begin meetings. It is an effective and reliable way to help participants to become fully present, to get everyone’s voice into the room, and to hear what’s on people’s minds around a particular question. When we use a check-in as part of a change lab workshop, it can serve an additional purpose: it gives the group a chance to “see” itself—an important aspect of collective sensing. A check-in lets everyone see what is going on in the group as a whole, by making explicit what is happening within and among us. Our check-ins weave us together, and the comments form a snapshot of our whole. By practicing how to listen empathetically, to suspend judgment, and to create a safe space where each member can share their authentic feelings and thoughts, we are able to learn a lot about who we are and where we are in our individual and collective journeys. We can identify trends, explain differences, and be able to make any necessary mid-course corrections with greater confidence. And by practicing our capacity to see ourselves more clearly, we can better work together.

GENERAL NOTES

It is important in describing the check-in process to differentiate between thoughts and feelings. Often people are asked how they feel, and they respond with a thought (in English, statements including “I feel like...” and “I feel that...” usually express thoughts rather than feelings), so some coaching on feeling statements might be appropriate. Feeling statements are important, as they may be reflective of something people are not yet able to articulate and of patterns that are common in the whole group. They are easy to relate to and difficult to argue with.

PROCESS

1. Have the group sit in a circle.
2. Explain why we do check-ins (see above).
3. Explain the process. Ask people to pay attention to what is being said and to suspend their “voice of judgment.” Ask them to listen in a supportive, empathetic way—and to help create a safe, non-judgmental container—so that everyone will feel free to share their feelings or perspectives. While the act of checking in helps each person become more fully engaged and present, the intent is to encourage people to share what’s *really* going on with them, not just what they think is *expected* of them. You can also say a few words about the value of sitting in a circle: It’s the only form of meeting where we can all see each other’s faces; there is structural equality/shared responsibility for what we are creating together; and the circle has a center.
4. Give the group an appropriate question. The questions will, of course, vary based on the context you are working in. Here are some examples.

For the first round of check-in with a new group:

- Don’t ask “Who are you?” Self-aware people will find this to be an overly daunting philosophical question.
- Why is being here important to you?
- Why have you come?
- What drew you here?
- What is a question you are carrying with you about what we’re doing here (or about creating new social realities)?

Good check-in questions for a group that has been working together or for later on in a multi-day workshop:

- What is becoming clearer to me?
- What questions am I asking myself?
- What questions are living in me now?
- What am I feeling now?
- What is growing here among us?
- What am I ready to let go of?
- What learning survived the night?

5. Let the group reflect in silence or journal first before speaking. This helps them to be less influenced by what others are saying and more authentic.

6. Based on group size, determine what is most appropriate:

- Sitting in one circle and using a “talking piece.”
- Getting people to first talk in pairs or triads for several minutes and then do “popcorn” sharing to the whole group.

When introducing circle rounds with a talking piece: *“I will pass around this talking piece, simply to help us focus our listening and to grant each other the opportunity to speak. If it comes to you before you are ready to speak, feel free to pass it, and it will come back to you.”*

When introducing popcorn-style sharing: *“Speak when you are hot to pop.”* This implies a random order; not everyone will necessarily speak.

7. When people begin sharing, it can be helpful to harvest the output by taking notes on what is said, and then to mirror back at the end what the voices and roles in the room are saying, helping people to see what is there. Give the group the opportunity to add anything else that they heard in case you missed something.

8. Close the check-in by thanking everyone for sharing their authentic voices.

VARIATIONS

Here are some alternative, quick check-ins when time is short or people don’t want a long check-in:

- Each person makes a movement that reflects how they are feeling. When they have finished the movement, they do it again with the whole group.
- Imagine you have a piece of clay in your hand. Create an imaginary sculpture with the clay and pass it on.
- Say one word that describes how you are feeling right now/the significance of this gathering for you/the significance of this day for you...

REFERENCES

*The basic meeting “Check-In” gives each participant a turn to briefly share what is happening in “their world”—what they are thinking, feeling, and wanting at that moment—have it acknowledged by the group, which allows them to “set it aside,” so that they can be more fully present at the current meeting and not distracted by everything else. For more information on the basic Check-In process, see *The Systems Thinker*, May 1994, “Check-In, Check-Out” by Fred Kofman. You can download the article for free until October 31, 2009 here: <http://www.pegasus.com/PDFs/check-in-check-out.pdf>.

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