

# **MODULE FIVE – HOW DO I CONNECT?**

## **THE HIGHLIGHTS**

### **Networking**

Networking is perhaps the scariest term in business lingo – just the thought of having to “work the room,” “press the flesh,” or “rub elbows” can weaken even the most confident cultural worker's marketing resolve. It doesn't have to be this way. All that is meant by networking is that people should talk about their interests with people who share them. Schmoozing can be fun, as long as you count your fingers after each handshake. Don't forget that the others in the room are also selling or browsing for ideas.

So, how do you find people with interests similar to yours?

#### **Go where people like you go**

Attend performances, exhibition openings, book launches, readings, public meetings, conferences - wherever people might congregate that you should talk to. If the thought of approaching a stranger terrifies you, don't stay home. Go to be “seen” – someone may approach you. At least appear to be interested in his or her “spiel”; you may learn something new and useful.

#### **Participate in online social networking**

As discussed in the previous session, using online social marketing are essential – and free – tools for reaching people who may be interested in viewing, listening to and supporting your work.

#### **Join a professional association**

Associations and Arts Service Organizations (ASOs) bring like-minded people together and provide a source of tremendous professional and personal support. These organizations normally offer their members an array of useful information about the industry, sometimes provide tangible benefits such as health insurance or professional development courses, and always present the opportunity to be a part of a network of colleagues. That network can counter the sense of isolation many self-employed workers feel and help them to remain focused on their work.

Note that, while membership in a professional association may not be free or inexpensive, there is usually a discounted fee for members to participate in association events, which allows the opportunity to network with other members and develop additional skills and knowledge. In Québec, being a member of a legally-constituted professional association is required under the Acts Respecting the Status of Artists in order to be recognized by the government as a professional artist.

Membership in a recognized association can provide certain financial advantages under the terms of these acts.

Take note that networking is most successful when you make the effort to learn about the other person, rather than just talking about yourself. Marketing is about relationship building and meeting customers' needs. You can't establish trust, or respond to someone's needs, if you aren't listening.

## **Volunteer**

The cultural sector thrives on the valuable work of volunteers. These volunteers have learned something that some business people never do – that volunteers often benefit as much or even more than the recipient of the donated time or objects. If you donate an artwork to the local children's hospital or offer your professional expertise to someone asking a question on an online discussion list, you provide something of great benefit to someone else. And, at the same time as you are doing something worthwhile, you are also promoting yourself, getting your work out where people can see and enjoy it, and might even be “creating” a customer or a market where none previously existed.

Beware, don't allow yourself to be “used” by volunteering while others benefit in material ways, such as by playing in a jam session at a bar or reading at an open-mike poetry bash. “Exposure” is either illegal or bad for your health. At the very minimum, your performance should be worth a free cappuccino or jug of beer to the coffee house or bar owner.

## **Learning networks**

Different groups gather for different purposes:

- Support groups are made up of people with something in common (such as artists or friends), and they focus on sharing personal stories, empathy, encouragement, validation.
- Focus teams or Communities of Practice are made up of people who share an area of work activity and want to engage in a process of collective sharing and learning

# THE HOMEWORK

## HOW DO I FIND A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION?

Professional associations are rooted in the old trade guilds. In the Middle Ages, the European merchant class was squeezed between the Church and the aristocracy, and guilds lobbied for their members, guarded trade secrets, trained apprentices, and disciplined them for breaches of acceptable business practices.

Modern professional associations represent their members in similar fashion. The services provided may vary from one association to another, depending on the terms of their constitutional by-laws.

In Québec, for instance, professional associations are officially recognized by the *Acts Respecting the Professional Status of Artists – S-32.1* and *S-32.01*. Such recognition confers specific rights and duties on both the associations and their memberships. The four principal reasons people join professional associations are: necessity because of close-shop agreements, professional accreditation requires membership, common sense, and sometimes idealism.

Membership offers opportunities for networking, lobbying, offers of engagements, protection against unethical treatment, information services, and various administrative forms and contracts.

Other associations as well as not-for-profit service organizations (which often grow from amateur enthusiast beginnings) can be invaluable sources of non-standard contacts, information, and work. Local cultural groups may be short-lived, but can be useful networking and creative resources.

### **To access appropriate professional associations:**

Check out the discipline-specific resources from *The Art of Managing Your Career* for a list of professional associations' websites (go to [www.culturalhrc.ca](http://www.culturalhrc.ca), click on *The Art of Managing Your Career*, select a discipline, and refer to Links).

Not all Canadian organizations have "Canada" in their titles, and the names of some international societies that start with the word "America," like the Locals of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), which are actually homegrown entities, affiliated with the U.S. umbrella organization.

Associations lobby on behalf of their members, work with government and sister societies to improve work conditions, and offer advice, marketing and promotional opportunities, professional contacts, professional development, research and reports, and other benefits. Professional associations offer members networking and practical help, and membership may be one of the very first steps you need to take professionally.

Before joining any group, find out the following:

- What makes it pertinent to subscribe to a professional association? If so, what are the selection criteria?
- Will membership services be useful to you now and in the near future?
- What will it cost, in regular dues, fees, commissions, and other deductions from your fees?
- What obligations will you incur as a member? Will they compromise your career?

In some cultural careers, you must join the professional association in order to work in the field. However, those with strict controls may cut you off from work offered by engagers not willing to offer the association's required fees and conditions.

When you join, commit to making the organization work. If you think something could be improved, get elected to the governing body and change things. Being involved with the association's workings can increase your professional visibility.

Whichever organization you select, respect its rules and support the members of other professional, performer, and craft organizations.

## WHAT GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS CAN HELP ME?

The federal government (through the Canada Council of the Arts, Canadian Heritage, and other departments), the provincial and municipal governments all support culture. Government funds can help you to finance a project, receive necessary training, or produce a piece of work. You should frame your application to fit the granting criteria, but the first step is to find the best-fitting awards given by the appropriate agencies.

Some resources are well known, and advice on them is easily obtainable from:

- The agency concerned.
- Your professional association or other not-for-profit organizations.
- Companies operating in your field.
- Your fellow artists.

These programs are hotly contested, but you certainly won't get a grant if you don't apply. Don't throw in the towel if you fail to get a grant the first time you apply. Juries who decide the grants generally change after each round and all the money in a granting body's budget for each round will usually be awarded. Many an artist, failing to get a grant the first or even the second time, has reapplied for a grant for the same project and eventually walked away with the funding.

- Look at an agency's full list of grants for the ones that best suit you and your plans.
- If you belong to a minority group – the young, First Nations, special needs – look for targeted support.
- There are often awards administered by the agency, but funded by an endowment set up to further a personal enthusiasm.
- Check carefully; grants change.

Less well-known sources are worth looking for. Often an agency will give you a list of other support resources. The internet is the most important resource for trolling for arts funding. Look for **umbrella organizations** that have lists of their members. As an example, British Columbia has its Assembly of B.C. Arts Councils.

### A funding agency's name may not be immediately obvious

Saskatchewan has its Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Culture and Sport, but Quebec has the Ministry of Culture and Communications. Alberta's culture funding comes from the Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture and also from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. Not only are these names different from province to province, but also the names change, sometimes every time the government changes.

Many grants are funded by **endowments** set up in the memory of certain individuals or to promote specific ideals. They are often administered by arm's length agencies.

**Museums** and **schools** have special projects, as well as Artist-in-Residence programs, but you can look further afield.

**Agencies and government departments not directly concerned with culture** may provide funds either to answer a need you've identified, or, if you can find the tie-in, as part of their regular mandate.

A writer from B.C., for example, received a significant grant from the Fish and Wildlife Branch of the Ministry of Environment to fund a book she was writing on the wildlife of Vancouver Island, because her work was seen as providing a source of valuable information.

**Your theatre company** may get funding from immigrant, special needs or consumer protection agencies.

A **Business Initiative Area** or a **Tourism department** could help your pottery.

**Your play could be a project** of the Justice or Health departments.

**Regional Development programs** are available for high unemployment or disadvantaged areas.

Imagine a small band, *Charmin' Billies*, successful enough to tour from one small gig to another. To cover touring and booking costs, they might put together a Diverse Communities proposal for Citizenship and Immigration Canada. They propose to hit every provincial capital and play high school graduation dances, promoting support for minority groups with their new compositions "Canada in Your Face" and "Great White North – not just North, not just White, just all Great."

Organizations often win grants because they have more contacts and a proven track record. The enthusiasm of a single artist, backed by the accountability of a known organization, can be a winning combination.

**Make your performance youth-focused and educational.** It is a good and renewable source of funding, which may be obtained with the assistance of service clubs, such as the Lions and the Kiwanis. The odds are improved if you can demonstrate that, once established, you will generate income, or at least qualify for funding from other sources.

**Diversify your funding base**, rather than depending on successive grants from a single source. If you become dependent on one source of funding, your project will fail when government priorities change or the source decides arbitrarily that you have drunk from the same well just once too often.

Government departments are staffed by people, and people have enthusiasms. **Cultivate your contacts**, tell them about your work, make them part of your vision. A thank-you note goes a long way. A stamp could be the best investment in your future.

## **HOW DO I WRITE A SUCCESSFUL PROPOSAL?**

- Find the granting body offering the grant that's right for you.
- Persuade them you're the right recipient. Do this by describing your project in terms that fit the grant criteria.
- Get advice from your peers and your professional association, even from a paid consultant, but write the proposal yourself. Your personality and your enthusiasm are part of your project and writing the proposal will ensure these shine through.

### **Before you need funding...**

#### **Look for grants**

Get details about grant sources from their websites (you can find contact lists in CHRC's Careers in Culture; go to [www.culturalhrc.ca](http://www.culturalhrc.ca), click on Careers in Culture, select a discipline, click on Contacts).

Look at programs, catalogues, the acknowledgement pages of a book, to see where other people working in your artistic or cultural sector have found funding.

Talk to grant administrators and previous grant-selection jury members if possible. Follow their advice.

#### **Build a reputation**

Tell your grant-giving contacts about your current work. Send them invitations to see it.

#### **Get the facts**

Assemble hard data about what you do and what it costs, starting with your own tax records and the books for any past projects.

#### **Collect third-party opinions**

Keep reviews and articles, whether in print or online. Prepare supporters to talk about you when asked for a reference.

### **When you need funding**

- Start your grant-getting early. A year in advance is none too soon.
- Look close to home first. A major agency is more likely to give you money if smaller bodies have already funded you.
- Get the latest information and forms. Rules and deadlines change.
- Ask yourself:
  - Does the project fit the criteria? Look for funding elsewhere for the part that doesn't fit.
  - Can you meet the deadline? Application deadlines are strictly enforced.
  - Will the grant be in time?
  - Would the money arrive before you start? You won't get funding for something that's already under way.

# Applying for Funding

Make your application legible, concise, and easy to understand.  
Follow the instructions precisely.  
Answer every question – if you can't, ask the administrator what you can substitute.

## **An application is likely to ask for:**

### **Cover letter**

A one-page executive summary showing your confidence in the project. Be interesting, be brief, let your enthusiasm shine out...

### **Introduction**

Who are you? What do you do? Who are your clients/audience? What makes you especially deserving?

### **References**

Choose people who are respected in your field and will write passionately about this project. Call them first, as a courtesy and to prime them with information.

### **Needs assessment**

What outside problem will be addressed? What will be the advantages to others?

### **Objectives**

What will the outcome be in measurable terms?

### **Methods**

What precisely will you do? Why is this the best way to achieve your objectives? Why have you turned down the alternatives?

### **Collaborators**

Have their commitment nailed down before you make a part of the formal application.

### **Evaluation**

How will you and the funder know you have succeeded?

### **Recognition**

How will you acknowledge your funding: on programs, publicity, your website?

### **Future funding**

What other sources of funding will cover any next stage?

## **Budget**

The form will lay out what they need. Be realistic: your application will be reviewed by experts. Be cautious: don't rely on the best outcome.

## **Appendix**

This is for information that isn't crucial but may be useful.

## **After your application...**

### **Keep notes**

You'll have to report to the funding agency anyway, and if you don't get this grant, you'll do better in future.

### **Follow up failure**

Ask the administrator about successful applications. Compare and contrast.

### **Stay in touch**

Successful or not, thank people for their help. Stay in touch, ask about new and changed programs.

### **Apply again**

If at first you don't succeed, don't abandon hope. Apply again during the next grant round for funding for the same project (if it didn't go ahead at all) or for a new one. Selection juries usually change every round and you may get the right jury for your project.

## **WHERE ELSE CAN I FIND FINANCIAL SUPPORT?**

Governments are not always the best place nor the only place to look for funding. Many sources of government funding have shrunk or disappeared, and other funding sources are so well known that they are oversubscribed. By their nature, formal cultural and artistic programs usually have inflexible criteria that your project might not fit without being bent out of shape.

Luckily, there are other sources – from large foundations to the artist in the next studio – so check them out.

### **Formal support**

To find sources for support for your art, check out the contacts in CHRC's Careers in Culture (go to [www.culturalhrc.ca](http://www.culturalhrc.ca), click on Careers in Culture, select a discipline, click on Contacts). In addition to seeking provincial, territorial and municipal funding, you can search the Internet for arts funding foundations. As well, look in material about other artists' projects for their acknowledgement of support from donors. Examine their publicity material and programs of performances.

## **Personal support**

There are services and money that come to you, rather than to your project.

## **Love money**

Your family or your life partner may provide shelter and occasional gifts or regular support. A centuries-old tradition.

## **Credit cards**

The only organizations that press funding on you. The traditional way to finance independent films. Shop around for the best interest rate: you can pay half again as much for different cards in the same institution. If your income is high enough, you may qualify for a line-of-credit account, accessed through your credit card, with a lower rate of interest. Pay off your "loan" as soon as possible. Interest is a business expense.

## **Micro-lenders**

If your operation looks like a retail store, employs staff, or attracts tourists, you may get a low interest business loan based on your financial assets, credit worthiness, and the viability of your project.

Government agencies, provincial and municipal arts councils and foundations support local grassroots projects. Search the Internet for information on possible support for a project, and be broad in your search as pockets of support for arts project can be found in unusual places. One unusual search term is "loan circles" (cercles d'emprunt, in Québec) or "credit circles," which offer business training, planning, and small loans to individuals investing in the establishment of most types of home-based or small-scale businesses.

## **Local groups**

Members of school boards and parent-teacher groups, and of service clubs such as the Lions and Kiwanis, can offer access to unexpected funds. Educational, youth- or immigrant-focused, and local-interest projects might get funding on an ongoing basis.

## **Your college**

Look for endowments or other forms of support, often targeted at a small group or certain individuals for defined purposes.

## **Professional organization**

A source of lists of funding agencies, it may offer direct support, in the form of grants, loans, or scholarships, or through mentoring.

## **Non-cash support**

Cash is always hard to get, but organizations can often make their in-kind services available at low cost or for the publicity value. A brewery may run a beer tent for your Renaissance Fair; your local printer may give you a deal in exchange for an acknowledgement on your website.

If you have cultivated the **person who has the** power to make the decision, the most unlikely sources may materialize. Spread your publicity net wide.

### **Applications**

Reread “What government programs can help me,” and “How do I write a successful proposal”, and go through the same careful preparation when you apply for loans and scholarships, cash, or free services. Remember:

- Start early.
- Pick the best source.
- Present yourself as an enthusiastic proponent for a project that fits the source’s criteria.
- Get the application details right, whether it’s filling in a form or knowing when the local business person will be most receptive.

### **Support each other**

Canadian culture’s biggest source of funding is its practitioners. We’re all in the same boat, and we should row together.

Six photographers can rent and equip a state-of-the-art lab. Five carvers can rent a truck and drive around farms looking for seasoned wood. Four actors can form a co-op and mount a production.

We are each other’s best resources. We know the facts, we have the contacts and experience, we can offer help even before we’re asked. It’s a great feeling for all involved.

### **HOW CAN I GET GOOD PROFESSIONAL SERVICES AT THE BEST PRICE?**

There’s no point in going to a famous lawyer, like Eddie Greenspan, because your life partner isn’t sharing the grocery bills. You may need a counsellor, but first just try to talk things through. Paying a professional won’t make your problem disappear, although an expert can help you reach your best solution.

### **Know what you need**

Break down your situation into five or six main facts.

Write down what you want in a sentence. If you can’t, you haven’t thought it through.

### **Know your budget**

If you can’t afford a certified professional, there are alternatives.

- Provincial Law Societies often have recorded legal advice lines and Legal Aid clinics.
- A paralegal can handle form-filling.
- An uncertified tax preparer may be just what you need to do your return.
- Professional associations often run seminars, or offer help with contracts, tax, and dispute resolution.
- Do research online and at your local library.

Quality of service is a risk with out-of-the-mainstream solutions. Certified professionals are governed by their association's rules, and their higher fees help guard you against fraud and incompetence.

### **Choose your professional...**

#### **Make a list**

- Ask your professional association for recommendations.
- The association that represents the professional you need.
- People who have solved identical problems, or even look for recommendations online. You'll need three or four well-recommended choices – more, if you're relying only on anonymous online recommendations.

#### **Call around**

- Call up each candidate and read them the outline of your situation.
- Make notes as they reply.
- You want someone who understands what you are talking about, and who treats your problem as interesting, but something they solve as part of their regular business. Do not hire an insurance claim lawyer to deal with an entertainment or copyright issue.
- Remember: *you* pay for *their* research.

#### **Compare and contrast**

Make a shortlist from your notes and set up appointments to discuss engaging those professionals. The best prospect will recognize your problem, give you a likely outcome based on his experience, and quote you at least a ballpark figure of your costs. Do not hesitate to ask about his/her fees.

#### **Make your choice**

Go with your instincts.

Given basic competence, choose the person you like best.

#### **Different strokes ...**

Bookkeepers and office administration services can work very efficiently. You could do the work, but they may save you time.

Galleries and Agencies provide access to clients. You can be a musician without an agent, or a visual artist without a gallery, but your opportunities may be reduced. These professionals may have a self-regulating organization: many talent agents belong to the Talent Agents and Managers Association of Canada, while art dealers have the Professional Art Dealers Association of Canada. The organization will generally give you referrals from its membership list, details on acceptable business practices, and a range of approved fees and commissions.

Accountants, tax preparers, and business managers may be essential if your finances are complex, or your income is high. Even if you use a professional, understand your own affairs: your tax return is your own responsibility, and no financial advisor can guarantee the avoidance

of, or the subsequent successful conclusion of an audit. Go to the office of professional help with everything clearly organized on paper. Don't forget: they charge by the minute.

Insurance brokers, financial advisers, and bank staff are salespeople. Their products may be what you need, but you will seldom be told about competitors' products. Ask about front end and/or back end loads, and the exact nature of their fee structure. In the case of percentages, ask percentages of what? Get it in writing.

**Some specifics:**

- The Insurance Brokers Association of Canada will help you find a broker.
- Your financial advisor advises. Only you can decide if an investment's profit outweighs the risks and actually saves you money after the fees are paid.
- Different banks, trust companies, and credit unions have various fee structures.
- Different branch managers may be either more or less sympathetic to your needs.
- Don't hand your problem to the first professional you find online. "AAAAA Loans for U" may not be the solution.

**In summary:**

- Understand your problem and define it.
- Will a professional help?
- Make a list and shortlist the competent individuals or firms.
- Go with your gut instinct.

# INFORMATION MEETINGS

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## WHAT IS AN INFORMATION MEETING

What is an information meeting? How does it differ from an "information interview"?

## BEFORE SETTING UP AN INFORMATION MEETING

Through your research and networking, you'll be able to create a list of individuals and/or organizations that you'd like to get information from. Before making the list, identify for yourself what kind of information you want. Be sure your need for information relates to your work action plan goals.

In advance of setting up information meetings, ask yourself if you are limiting yourself regarding the types of meetings you are intending to set up. For example, many artists limit themselves by only setting up meetings with other artists in the same discipline. From your experience in SEARCH, however, you know there is much to learn from artists of all disciplines.

## THE NATURE OF INFORMATION MEETINGS

Like an effective network, information meetings work best if you create an environment in which mutual exchange can take place. Everyone has needs, and the person/organization you're planning to meet with is no different. Your research will turn up many helpful ideas regarding what those needs may be and you can prepare yourself accordingly.

Whatever you do, don't sell yourself short. You've got experience, perspective, information, ideas, advice, enthusiasm, and ears to listen: often it doesn't take much to fulfill the need of the person you are meeting.

Start where you are comfortable for your first few information meetings -- begin with a colleague. Then try a friend of a friend. Then their friend. And then...

## SETTING UP THE MEETING

Here are a few basic tips to consider as you work through this process.

- Do your research before setting up an appointment.
- Be prepared for the meeting to begin immediately over the phone.
- Use the names of those people who provided you with the contact.
- If necessary, work through someone else in the organization to arrange the meeting.
- If you can't discover a specific contact person through your research and network, call the organization's general line first and ask for advice.
- Consider contacting an arts service organization and asking for recommendations.
- Expect the process to be slow - you may not be considered a high priority.
- Expect rejection and persist - don't take it personally.
- Practice in advance what you plan to say when requesting a meeting.
- Have a list of key points and ideas handy as reference.

- Consider asking the person out for coffee or lunch.
- Respect the person's time: ask them how much they have to spare (and know how much time you need).

### **DOING THE MEETING**

- Be prompt to your meeting.
- Prepare your questions in advance.
- Keep the meeting brief - you are responsible for keeping track of time.
- Take notes -- it is permissible.
- Consider tape recording the meeting (only with permission of course).

### **AFTER THE MEETING**

- Send a thank you card/note.
- Or call with thanks (if appropriate).
- Or email (ditto).
- Stay in touch.
- Follow up on contacts, ones gotten and ones given.

# FOCUS TEAMS: Finding the Fit

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Diversity is an important factor in creating a successful focus team. People whose artistic discipline, gender, age and cultural background are different from our own can provide insights and assist us as we focus, as can people from other areas like business, accounting and so forth. At the same time, differences mean that we must check out and challenge our assumptions, and ensure that our communication is clear and understood. Forming and working with a focus team will give you the opportunity to gain the benefit of other peoples' input, test your communication skills, and assess how this tool could be used to support your work life beyond this program.

Think about the purpose of the focus team as described in the handout you received earlier. Reflect on your experiences and your goals for achieving success in the months to come. **Complete the following sentences. When you have thought about each of these things, you will be better prepared to discuss your needs & strengths with potential focus team members.**

## 1. What I have to contribute to a focus team (briefly list):

**Specific skills...**

**Areas in which I have contacts (circles of influence):**

**Interests and experience....**

**Other:**

**What I think I need from my focus team members:**

**Specific skills:**

**Areas in which I need contacts (circles of influence):**

**Interests and experience:**

**Other:**

**3. My greatest concern about entering into a focus team....**

**4. What I am hoping my involvement in a focus team will do to help my earning potential...**

# Leading a Focused Conversation

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## Some Things to Keep in Mind

...a conversation leader needs to keep certain priorities or values in mind. These values are implied by the method itself, but need to be stated clearly here. Make note of how each of the following is, or can be, applied in the AMYC course. And note any instances where this did not happen, and how it affected the outcome of the activity.

### 1. *The Leader Has Nothing to Teach*

A primary quality of the facilitator asking questions, according to John Kloepfer, is his or her openness, or what Socrates called *docta ignorantia*. While the facilitator is a skilled methodologist (the “docta” part of that famous phrase), he or she simultaneously professes an ignorance – *ignorantia* – a ‘not knowing’, an extreme openness required for true insight to emerge. (Kloepfer, John. *The Art of Formative Questioning: A Way to Foster Self-Disclosure*, p. 146).

This means that the person asking the questions is required to stand in the “not knowing” required for openness. Any facilitator’s preparation is to develop a real curiosity about what the group might know – the opposite of hoping against hope that they come up with “right” answers – that is, those that gibe with the views of the facilitator.

Those who have been teachers or trainers have developed a certain itch for intervention. They have been trained to correct, amplify or amend what has been said. But a focused conversation has nothing to teach. The only failure is failure to learn what the group actually thinks, feels and wants.

At times, of course, the conversation leader may have a body of facts that are best shared through a presentation. If the facilitator is an expert, say, on financial management, she may want to start by asking the group some questions to determine where their concerns and unclarity lie.

Then she can focus her presentation accordingly. In that case, the presenter will first do a focused conversation, and then tailor her presentation to the group’s level of experience. After the presentation, she might lead another conversation on what the group found helpful or confusing in the lecture, or a problem-solving session based on principles she presented. In such cases, where presenting and reflecting are combined, it is important to separate the roles of conversation facilitator on the one hand, and the role of presenter on the other. If it is not possible to have different people play these roles, the presenter should avoid slipping into the expert role while leading group reflection.

### 2. *The Wisdom of the Group*

A good conversation leader trusts the wisdom of the group. Unless proven otherwise, he assumes the group knows more than any one of its members, including himself. When all the perspectives are heard, a more holistic picture appears, like a diamond with many facets. The object of the conversation is to draw out that many-faceted wisdom.

### **3. Abstract Questions, Abstract Answers**

Abstract answers can be partially or wholly offset by asking specific questions. We are familiar now with the adage of "Garbage in, garbage out." A similar pattern exists with questions. If the leader asks vague or abstract questions, he will tend to get vague or abstract answers. Specific questions have a better chance of getting specific answers. "What do we need to be able to communicate better?" is a vague question. Notice the difference between it and this more specific question, "What are the elements of a good communication system?" Specific questions get better results. For example: "What results do you see?" is more specific than "What do you see?"

### **4. The Right Group**

If the facilitator does not believe in the group, this comes out in subtle ways. The leader will accept responses tentatively, and not question abstract responses. The facilitator will blindly accept all the answers he gets – since they're not going to make much difference, anyway. Or, the facilitator will rush through the stages, attempting to get it over with, so that he can go and talk with "smarter people" with more acceptable answers. Any group knows when it is being trifled with or dishonoured. The people will never really trust that facilitator again.

The facilitator has to believe in the group, even when this may be difficult. To help with this, one facilitator developed a mantra she recited before beginning: "This is the right group of people to wrestle with this issue at this time. This group has the wisdom needed to wrestle with the questions and issues that are facing them. The group is at exactly the right place, struggling with the right issues." She found it very helpful.

### **5. Validity of the Data**

When a participant contributes to the conversation, we normally assume that statement to be valid and to come from an authentic life experience. The discussion leader does not have to agree with any answers to her questions. She does need to understand them so that she can help the group see these options and discuss them. If one member's views seem strange to others, there is probably a good reason for them in that person's life experience. After all, we continue to grow by our effort to understand different viewpoints and insights, and this often involves letting go of our own preconceptions about life.

While each piece of participant data can be assumed to be valid, no piece is the whole picture. Everyone has a piece of the puzzle. But the whole picture comes together through hearing and understanding all the perspectives. There are always conflicts, as people fail to understand each other's perspectives and experiences. But this book is predicated on the possibility that any group can arrive at a common understanding. Whether that understanding is precisely true and complete is a matter of opinion. For that group, at that time the understanding they arrive at is appropriate wisdom. It is temporarily the truth for them. For truth is not set in concrete, forever immovable. It is a moving target, an evolving construct. The group always has to come to its own understanding of its own business.

### ***What About Answers That Are Ethically Or Factually Wrong?***

At times, a participant's answer will be ethically or factually wrong. The answer may be racist, sexist, bigoted or quite cynical, or historically or geographically wrong to the point of embarrassment. (It may also be the response of someone who wants to get his agenda on stage.)

If the answer was factually wrong, it is important to listen to the tone in which the comment was made. The facilitator cannot let it pass, but how he responds will depend on the situation.

The facilitator may ask, "Why do you say that?" or may say, "That doesn't match the understanding I've heard, but I could be wrong. Please clarify it for me." Or he could say, "What in your experience has led you to that response?"

It is important to honour the person. At the same time, the person's comment cannot become the entire focus of the conversation. For this reason, if the facilitator thinks the group can absorb the comment, he could ignore it and move on. But if he sees the group is visibly offended by it and looking to him to do something, then he can use one of the approaches above.

It is important to make sure that the facilitator's agenda does not get on stage. For example, a facilitator who had fought all his life against racism, and was passionate about racial justice might be tempted to move the whole conversation towards that. This abuses both the conversation method and the group.

## **6. *Group Ownership of the Issue and Content***

While the facilitator asks the questions, the group owns the issue being discussed. They live with the situation and with their decisions about it. Therefore, they own their responses, and have an interest in how their insights are used. Some managers forget this. They bring a group together to discuss a problem, then take the notes of the meeting away with them and never speak to the group about it again. Naturally, the group members then assume their reflections have disappeared into a black hole. It is important to let the group know what will happen with their input, and how it will be used.

## **7. *Facilitator's Responsibility***

There is a difference between following a plan for the conversation, and taking total responsibility for how it unfolds. A leader who simply reads off a list of prepared questions and takes all answers without comment, does the group a grave disservice. No one likes to be treated like a robot.

The leader has to do more than build a plan and go on automatic pilot.

The key to effective dialogue is a give and take between questions and answers. In the midst of your conversation, you may find that the questions you wrote initially don't quite fit the situation. There might be too few questions of a certain level to enable adequate reflection. The tone of the questions may be too formal for the mood of the group in these instances, a little thinking on your feet helps you invent new questions, skip questions, or re-phrase them. This usually means working very hard to interpret responses as they are made, and creating new questions on the spot that keep the group digging deeper for meaning.