FRAMEWORK SAFE(R) MEETING CULTURE

Introduction

Our industry is more than ever a place where **different profiles** come together. There is more diversity in gender, age, background and discipline. Different houses, (higher) art education institutions and small(er) organizations are trying to work together for a future for culture in which every artistic development has a place.

Working together is only possible if each participating member feels invited and safe to contribute to this common goal. In the sector, however, there is still a **discrepancy** between striving for diversity (in theory) and effectively caring for it (in practice). This discrepancy manifests itself, among other things, in a **meeting culture** in which - in spite of all the good intentions - unfortunately the loudest voice still gets the most attention, speaking time is not evenly distributed and some voices are not or barely given a chance. Moreover, opinions that deviate from the norm are sometimes considered less relevant.

As **ENGAGEMENT ARTS**, we would like to take care of that. After all, we are speaking here from an observational perspective as well as from personal and lived experience.

This toolbox suggests a set of **guidelines** that we believe can foster a constructive, warm and equal meeting culture. She makes suggestions for a meeting structure, provides some concrete tips & tricks for interactions and ends with a few sentences "stating the obvious". In addition, she focuses on non-verbal dynamics in a meeting. At the bottom you will also find some references and cross-references.

Would you like to know more after reading the toolbox or would you like to work with your organization to make a concrete change within your meeting culture? Contact us at **contact@engagementarts.be**.

Meeting Structure

A good and clear meeting structure is essential- that way everyone knows what to expect, goals can be formulated jointly and the time commitment is also made explicit in advance. This starts with the preparation.

Some suggestions:
- Prepare the meeting *together*: create an online folder for each meeting that contains the agenda (and the time reserved for each agenda item), documents to be prepared and other items. Agree when the agenda is final (e.g., 3 days in advance) and provide space at the beginning of the meeting to add various items.
- Start with a *check-in*.

A *check-in* means that everyone participating in the meeting briefly shares what emotions/thoughts they bring to the meeting. This way you get an idea of what is on everyone's mind and start the meeting by letting everyone speak briefly. Agree in advance that this is a brief moment; if there are big issues, you can agree to make room for them after the meeting. We recommend giving the desired pronouns during check-in.[1]

- Discuss the common *goal* of the meeting.
- Divide and rotate (per meeting) the *responsibilities*:
    - **chairing** & **agenda keeping** (is jointly prepared)
    - **timekeeping** (a certain amount of time is set aside for each agenda item)
    - **moderation**/**mediation** (the person who makes sure everyone is heard and has their say)
    - **summarizing** (someone who draws a short conclusion per agenda item; this way you can check whether everyone has drawn the same conclusions)
    - **take minutes** (preferably in an online document, so everyone can read along)
- *Reflect* - just before the end - briefly on the meeting (how did it go, were there any issues left unsaid, did everyone feel heard?).
- End the meeting with a *check-out*.

A *check-out* involves everyone speaking one last time. You gauge the emotions/thoughts that remain with those present after the meeting. This way you stay alert for issues that may need to be revisited and you reinstall a moment where everyone gets to speak again, this way you avoid having people who don't get to speak for an entire meeting and may not dare to claim that space.

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[1] Not everyone likes to be addressed with the binary he/she pronouns most commonly used in Dutch (and many other languages). There are non-binary alternatives, such as die/hun. Installing the habit of asking about preferred first names ensures that you don't portray those who may not choose the most common he/she as the exception or feel the pressure to bring it up themselves.

Interaction

What we talk about seems important.
How we talk about things is often underestimated.[2]

By installing a clear meeting structure, you weld in some things that can ensure more equality. But those arrangements cannot avoid certain voices being (much) more dominant than others. Methods on how to interact during the meeting, could potentially address that.

Some suggestions:
- Use nonverbal communication symbols (hand motions) through which you can show what you think about something and/or you want to add something to the discussion (these are suggestions, new hand motions can be added):
  - Do you agree with the point being made? Move both hands up and turn with your hands.
  - Do you disagree with something? Then move your hands down.
  - Want to say something in response to the person speaking now? Then raise one finger. *You will be the first to respond.*
  - Do you also want to add something? Then raise two fingers. *You will be the second to respond.*
  - Do you want to interrupt briefly? Then wrap both fingers around each other.
  - Need a break? Make a "T" with both your hands.

- Build in time for **interaction** and **exchange**, not just finishing the agenda. The collective as a whole and each individual within it needs care. This care takes time and should not feel like a "waste of time" from the "real" meeting.
- Make sure that each agenda item concludes with a **conclusion** that everyone agrees with: this may also mean that the item needs further discussion at another time. The "summarizer" can initiate this. Then, if necessary, insert a short **break** before moving on to the next item on the agenda.
- Be **aware** of who speaks during meetings (and for how long) and explicitly create space for the previously **silent voices** to also share their opinions, e.g., by doing a round of questions, having the mediator give the floor to people who did not raise their finger, etc.
- Encourage teamwork, **mentoring** and cross-training. Try to pair new members with more experienced colleagues, e.g. shared chairmanship with a trainer and trainee position.
- Create different **opportunities** for participation, e.g., adding small group discussions or written exercises to the meeting.

Some sentence "stating the obvious":
- Apply **zero tolerance** to bullying, disrespectful language, interruptions, shouting, etc.
- Be an active bystander/ **ally**.

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[2] Lotte van den Berg, in: *Building Conversation - The Scripts* (2022), red. Peter Aers, Lotte van den Berg en Sodja Lotker, pg. 78.

> ! Unfortunately, a meeting culture often reflects a broader culture: hence exclusionary mechanisms such as sexism, racism, classicism, validism, etc. from the broader society often echo in meetings (i.e. [young] women who are systematically interrupted more often, people of color whose opinions are more often cornered into activism, people who are systematically taken less seriously, etc.). Create an awareness about these dynamics and don't just discuss them as they occur: provide moments of reflection on these structures and insert awareness training.

More inspiration can be found on the website: http://ttttoolbox.net/. The TTTToolbox (Teaching To Transgress Toolbox) is a research and study program on critical pedagogy in the arts, based on peer-learning and collective research practices.[3] Funded by the European Union and developed transnationally by three art schools: ERG (BrusselsBE), HDK-Valand (GothenburgSE) and ISBA (BesançonFR), this Erasmus+ strategic partnership (2019-2022) consists of workshops, public events and an open access publishing platform that shares the resulting works, methods and tools with others to use in their specific educational context.

Their website includes tools for collaborative reflection and further work on the safety of interactions (cf. Brave Space).

The nonprofit organization Morphradat also developed the book *Can We Rule It Out? Collective ideas for keeping sexual abuse out of art spaces*.[4] Pages 40 and 41 ask some questions that make sense for organizations to answer before starting a meeting.

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[3] Inspired on the book: *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) of bell hooks, 1994.
[4] "Mophradat creates opportunities for artists from the Arab world through an inventive approach to funding, commissioning, collaborating, and gathering." See also: https://mophradat.org/en/who-we-are/.

Framework and code

*Each conversation is carefully introduced and prepared
with the participants. It doesn't start before an
important question has been asked that establishes
the basic social contract of the dialogue:
will you join?[5]*

Meeting together is choosing together to step into a certain code. Without making these codes explicit, we often (unintentionally) fall into patterns, in which, for example, the loudest voice gets the most attention, speaking time is not evenly distributed and some voices are not or barely addressed. It makes sense to be aware of this. Working on a safe meeting culture, therefore, requires making your work code, meeting structure and manners explicit together. It is advisable to discuss this in advance (preferably in a different room than the one where you will conduct the meeting) and also to ask everyone individually if they would like to join this code.

Take the time and space to re-evaluate your code once in a while (Is this still working for everyone? Is our timeline correct or are we always running late? Are we not lapsing into the same roles? etc.).

The physical space in which meetings are held can also contribute to a safe(er) meeting culture, by ensuring a good setup where everyone can see each other and the presentation (in case you use it) clearly, the temperature is comfortable, water and any snacks are available, and the acoustics are calm. Inquire with each individual if there are any specific needs regarding the accessibility of the room.

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[5] Sodja Lotker, in: *Building Conversation – The Scripts* (2022), red. Peter Aers, Lotte van den Berg en Sodja Lotker, pg. 14.

References and acknowledgements

Want to know more? Check out these websites:

- Gender Avenger toolkit, "20 Ways to Bring Feminist Practices Into Online Work Sessions". **Click here**.
- Feminist Frequency, "Feminism in the Workspace". **Click here**.
- *Teaching To Transgress Toolbox**. **Click here**.
- Building Conversation. **Click here**.
- Mophradat. **Click here**.

Other references and sources of inspiration include:

- bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994).
- Mai Abu ElDahab, Naira Antoun, Habiba Effat et al (Arabic & English). *Can We Rule It Out? Collective Ideas for keeping sexual abuse out of art spaces* (2022). Their book can be ordered via **their website** or read **online**.
- Paolo Freire. *Pedagogy of the oppressed (*1968).
- Peter Aers, Lotte van den Berg en Sodja Lotker (red.). *Building Conversation - The Scripts* (2022). This book served as inspiration. Read their book **online** and look for opportunities to apply some of the strategies in your own meetings.
- Priya Parker. *The Art of Gathering: How we meet and why it matters* (2018).
- Sarah Schulman. *Conflict is not Abuse. Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility and the Duty of Repair* (2017).