



Facilitating a Learning Culture

What's a learning culture and why does it matter?

Community-led development (CLD) requires us to be intentional about 'learning by doing'. We want it to be safe for people to 'do' - experiment, try out new ideas and explore new possibilities. Effective practice also requires a commitment to 'learn' from whatever happens, the good and the not so good. A mindset of 'learning by doing' also supports us to keep adapting our CLD mahi. Change and uncertainty are now ever present, so being ready to respond and adapt is essential.

In a learning culture, we celebrate our successes, affirm everyone's contributions, and reflect on what helped make that activity, moment or event go well/or not so well? We observe and acknowledge what has happened and treat each experience as a learning opportunity for what we might do more of/less of/differently next time.

Some of the benefits of a learning culture include:

- We can reduce fear of failure, conflict, and tensions in CLD by growing a no-blame, no-shame culture of learning from everything we do. Such a culture feeds the energy of our mahi by amplifying the positive and holding us through the vulnerable times, because review and feedback are the norm.
- Simple habits of observing, reflecting, and learning at every opportunity (both formally as a group and informally in our interactions with each other), help create a foundation of trust that feeds people's confidence and skills to take



initiative, share leadership and find solutions together for issues as they arise.

- A learning culture feeds our ability to keep adapting how we do things to be effective as our community initiative keeps evolving and different people contribute or pull back, while growing a collective knowledge base.
- A learning culture supports whakawhanaungatanga/relationship building, storytelling, sharing hopes, fears, vulnerabilities, and strengths in a way of being together that can be fun, kind, inspiring and empowering as we find ways of sharing in each other's wisdom

Some simple tools for getting started

The simplest of debriefing processes can be a powerful way of building a learning culture e.g., a relaxed inquiry based three core questions:

1. What did you think **worked well** today? *Encourage specific examples and celebration of successes*
2. What **didn't go so well**? *Encourage focus on issues, not blame on particular people*
3. What do you think might **work better next time**? Or what should we do differently next time? *Encourage creativity and solution finding*

This conversation can work as a group round, or a silent activity where people write on three posit notes then share/discuss anything in the group they want to. Sometimes we make it much simpler – like sharing a word that expresses a feeling, thought or learning from today. We judge what is the right time for lighter or deeper conversation, but it helps if the habit of debrief is always there in a variety of forms, so it doesn't just become a tick box exercise. So, here's a few other simple learning and reflection question formats:

Another tool for individuals and teams can be to learn from highlights in the last week/month (can equally be done around lowlights, just need to tweak the words).

1. What is your highlight from the last week/month?
2. Why was this so?
3. What's now possible because of this?

For community-led groups and initiatives it can be useful to reflect on what's changing in our community:

1. What's one significant change you've noticed this month?
2. Why is it significant?
3. What might have contributed to this?



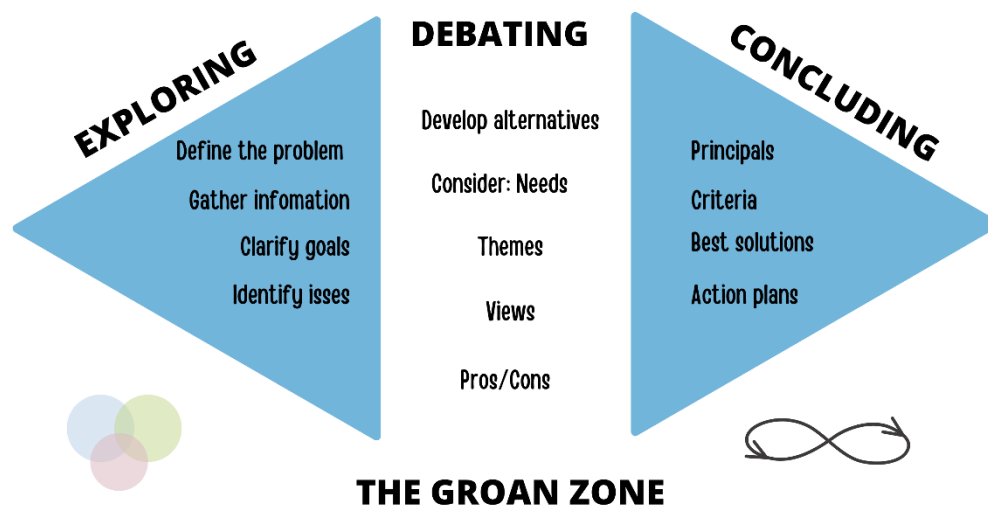
What skills help support a learning culture?

Facilitation is a core skill supporting CLD and a learning culture. The art of facilitation is about being a process guide, making it easier for people, groups, and teams to achieve their kaupapa or purpose. Facilitation brings together skills like listening, observation, asking powerful questions, summing up key threads of a conversation. Facilitators pay attention to what is happening in the life of a group/community and design ways to help build awareness, self-reflection, trust, relationships that support people to confidently work, learn and take next steps together.

Facilitation can happen informally in our interactions with others – e.g., by diffusing little tensions that arise between people, or encouraging someone to pursue an idea they have – or be a more formal role – e.g., hosting a group debrief at the end of a community event. We can also facilitate ourselves to reflect on our own practice – e.g., by asking: how have I been today?

Facilitators actively massage the flow of conversation by structuring ways for groups to get the best out of their time together. In the exploration phase, facilitators encourage all voices to be heard in contributing to agenda setting and framing what's important to be talking about just now. In the middle phase, facilitators structure processes to enable creative or generative discussion, healthy debate and weighing up consequences. And in the final phase, facilitators help group members come to agreement. It's easy to get stuck in the groan zone in the middle. Any member of a group can help facilitate a way forward, not just the person formally in that role.

PHASES OF CONVERSATION/FOCUS



Adapted from *Facilitators Guide to Participatory Decision Making*, Sam Kaner, New Society Publishers 1998



Good facilitation supports people to feel respected, valued for what they contribute, to grow confidence, to have fun and be inspired to contribute towards a shared vision. Facilitators have their eyes on process, relationships, the experience of *how* people are working together on the journey, and what might help remove barriers to *what* people are trying to achieve. A facilitator encourages curiosity around what everyone is observing, feeling, thinking and what sense they are making of what's happening, and what's needed next. They encourage the group to do the work and share in the learning, not to directly 'teach' or impose how they think things should be done. This approach makes a vital contribution to growing everyone's strengths and confidence to contribute to community-led decisions and action.

The art of facilitating requires attention to the constant interplay of three things:

- **Self-awareness:** How am I feeling and behaving? What's impacting on me? Is anything getting in the way of my ability to hold space for others/this group?
- **Awareness of others:** What's happening for and between the people in this group? Who is engaged/not engaged? Are any tensions building? How is the energy/mood of the group?
- **Commitment to the group fulfilling its kaupapa/purpose:** Are we on track? Does something need developing, untangling, clarifying, adapting? What will help the group get closer to reaching its aspiration or next step?

Careful observation of and reflection on these subtle threads are key skills for effective CLD facilitators and leaders. Our awareness of these three dimensions helps shape the practical preparations and interventions we make when we [facilitate meetings and community](#) – e.g. how we welcome people, how we set up the space, the kai/food we offer, the way we structure time and activities, the questions we ask, the adaptations we make to any planned agenda. how we welcome people, how we set up the space, the kai/food we offer, the way we structure time and activities, the questions we ask, the adaptations we make to any planned agenda.

More Practical 'Learning from Doing' tools

"What, so what, now what?" for making sense of what's happening

This tool is helpful to take a deeper look at our work than just our usual quick debriefs. For example, this could be a simple structure for some group reflection and future planning, or useful when some tensions are growing, and you are trying to understand what's going on and how to move forward.

The [What, So What, Now What?](#) process helps us pause and make sense of what is



happening in the community eco-system we are working in. Three steps unpack first everyone's observation of: WHAT? (What happened? What did you notice, what is the data telling us? What observations stand out?), then some collective sense-making about what we think is going on: SO WHAT? (What is changing, surprising, concerning, exciting? Why is that important? What patterns, trends are emerging?) and finally: NOW WHAT? (What else might we need to find out about? What decisions or actions do we need to make or take next?)

Learning from success through Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry is a strengths-based approach that looks for evidence of what helps things go well and what can make things go even better in the future. It's a powerful way to draw learning from success – and often useful when things aren't going so well too!

[Appreciative inquiry questions](#) help us understand what supports success. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) starts with people reflecting on their past experiences when things were working well. This helps the group think forward creatively about how to do more of the things that support success and less of the things that undermine success. AI addresses key issues or problems from a strengths-based lens.

Tool in Practice – Randwick Park <http://www.randwickpark.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Appreciative-Inquiry-in-the-community-final.pdf>

Using the Community-Led Development Principles to check progress

This is a practical way for a group to learn more about CLD principles and to reflect on 'how' they are working together, not just 'what' they are doing together.

You can use [Community-led development principles](#) to take stock of 'how' you are applying each principle to a greater or lesser extent. Is a shared vision starting to grow? What strengths/assets are we uncovering? How well are we engaging different groups and sectors in our mahi? What's shifting in terms of people's confidence to take initiative and share leadership? How well are we learning from our doing? Affirm wherever you are and then encourage a generative conversation about opportunities to enhance your CLD practice further.

Eco-cycle Framework

This tool is useful to help us make sense of the ever-changing landscape we are working with. It uses the metaphor of a forest's life cycle, including when the fire comes through, to help us understand what we might do next.

Use the [eco-cycle framework](#) can help a group reflect on where they have been, where they are now and where they might be heading next, what resources they can draw on, and what kind of leadership might be needed.

Tool in practice – Great Start Case Study <https://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/IC-Reflections-and-Learning-from-Great-Start-FINAL.pdf>

Inspiring Communities' [Theory of Change](#) is another resource which can help you reflect



on what stage of development you are at on your CLD journey.

There are many, many other tools and resources on our own and other’s websites – see further resources section at the end of this resource for a few of our favourites, after our troubleshooting tips.

Trouble shooting tips

This table has a few strategies for overcoming common challenges in growing a high trust learning culture

Common issues	Some strategies	We know things are going well when
Meetings are very focused on the immediate action and there is no culture of deeper learning	Build powerful questions into your regular agenda format. For example: Why do you think people engaged with our Matariki hangi event more than our usual community dinners? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are we learning? Any ideas for what we might do differently? 	There are deeper conversations happening naturally People can unpack insights and learning without it being forced These insights are based on the feedback we have intentionally gathered and discussed and fed into our evaluation and planning work
The group gets easily distracted and goes off track	Help the group form an agreed purpose at the start: What matters most today? How can we make the best use of time available? Help the group decide on agreed tikanga, values, norms. How will we work together? How will we know we are on track?	Anyone in the group feels they can respectfully bring the conversation back to the agreed focus, while being open to tangents, which can bring important insights too. The group actively hold each other accountable to the agreed group tikanga/values/norms
People aren’t showing up to meetings or activities	Meet people where they are. Get to know and work with their reality and their passions. Ask what’s getting in the way – e.g. transport, childcare, timing, not enjoying or getting value from group. Respond and plan accordingly. Check if you do have a shared vision? Does it need revisiting in light of changes in the community or participants?	People show up every time because they are getting real satisfaction and they prioritise this group over other commitments. People use their own words to express the shared purpose of this CLD initiative
Trust isn’t high enough to enable open discussion and deeper sharing and learning	Invest time in relationship building as a group.	Trust isn’t high enough to enable open discussion and deeper sharing and learning
Trust isn’t high enough to enable open discussion and deeper sharing and learning	Invest time in relationship building as a group.	Trust isn’t high enough to enable open discussion and deeper sharing and learning
Some people become the “experts” who think they	Encourage the ako/ako principle as part of your tikanga: we are all teachers and	People are giving and receiving feedback in constructive ways



<p>know best</p>	<p>learners. Affirm what you have learned from others in the group.</p> <p>Brainstorm some useful phrases for giving constructive feedback or advice like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What I have found useful in a similar situation is... • I hear what you have said about what's difficult about XYZ... What do you see as strengths that we could draw on? • Whose voice is missing? How could other voices be invited into the conversation? 	<p>People are being teachers and learners at different times</p> <p>People are learning to ask thoughtful questions to engage in genuine dialogue, not just give their own opinions and advice or insisting they are right and others are wrong</p>
<p>Venting going nowhere People getting bogged down in what has happened rather than moving forward</p>	<p>Collective inquiry can lead from hard places to out-of- the-box solutions.</p> <p>Sometimes getting started to try/do/be differently is difficult. Appreciative inquiry questions can help. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking back, what positive changes have you noticed? • What helped those succeed? • What small steps could we take towards change? • What support might we need? 	<p>Group facilitators acknowledge challenges, and the need to listen and understand root causes.</p> <p>The energy of the group is around noticing strengths, assets, allies that could create conditions for positive change.</p> <p>Any innovative solutions and ideas shared are welcomed, refined together through discussion, experimented with through action and then reflection.</p> <p>People feel inspired by new possibilities and perspectives and are clear about actions they can take</p>
<p>People in the group not working well together</p>	<p>Use regular end of meeting debrief (as above) to tweak meeting style regularly.</p> <p>Make sure the group can visibly see/feel how their feedback has resulted in changes next time.</p>	<p>Group grows confidence and skills to name and work through conflicts within its own dynamics. This can be a model for what's needed to build a more inclusive community.</p> <p>Problems are not personalised but addressed early on and constructively.</p> <p>Respect for and enjoyment of diversity grows through experience.</p>
<p>Too much/too little structure</p>	<p>Use regular end of meeting debrief (as above) to tweak meeting style regularly.</p> <p>Make sure the group can visibly see/feel how their feedback has resulted in changes next time.</p>	<p>The group adapts and learns as it goes, from modelling how to invite open, constructive feedback and taking action in response.</p>
<p>A few people are dominating in group discussions and others are quiet</p>	<p>Review facilitation techniques. For example, you could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce more structured groups/pairs/threes • Frame some powerful questions • Share your observations or concerns: e.g. I am noticing a few people have shared valuable input today. Has everyone who wanted to contribute on this topic had space to do so? 	<p>The group builds awareness and confidence in everyone around skills for effective facilitation and participation.</p>



Further resources

The [Liberating Structures website](#) offers a very creative menu to help enable fun and effective collaborative learning and planning spaces. Their emphasis on ‘including and unleashing everyone’ and ‘engaging in seriously playful curiosity’ aligns very well with CLD - we want the learning to be a fun, meaningful part of our community-led change culture.

[Check out this resource](#) and this one on [growing a learning organization](#) if you want to review what else you could put in place to support your learning and strengths as a community-led initiative. if you want to review what else you could put in place to support your learning and strengths as a community-led initiative.

There are many other resources on facilitation that can support you in creating a strong learning culture, for example: [The Art of Hosting](#). If you prefer books, check your local library for *The Art of Facilitation* (Hunter, Bailey and Taylor, 1994).

Inspiring Communities’ facilitation skills [workshops](#) are a great place to enhance your facilitation skills. You can reflect on and evidence your CLD facilitation practice and complete a mini-qualification with us. Check out our [menu of learning/training options](#).

With a learning culture established, you may decide you want to take your learning to a more formal level – e.g., to share your learning more widely and/or document the difference you are making more clearly. Check out our other resources on our [Learning by Doing](#) webpage to help expand your ‘learning by doing’ practice.



Inspiring Communities catalyses locally- led change, to achieve sustainable, effective outcomes.

We are the reference point for community-led development in New Zealand, building on international and local practice-based evidence to grow and share expertise.

Inspiring Communities operates across many sectors at multiple levels.



RESOURCES

Harakeke/Flax - from the root to the flower the harakeke shares its properties.



ADVICE

Korimako/Bell Bird - fluent, graceful speaker.



EVENTS

Whakaatu/Presenting - the peak of the mountain as a stage to present from

Talk to us about your CLD training, workshop needs, coaching, support and opportunities in your community or region. We understand diversity! We can tailor packages to your specific requirements.

Email us exchange@inspiringcommunities.org.nz