

Guidelines for Participants engaged in Trialogue Meetings

These guidelines are not intended as hard and fast rules developed and dictated by people who assume some sort of expertise in this area. They have been developed by request from people interested in Trialogue; based on over two decades of people engaged in Trialogue Meetings and for now adopted as work in progress guidelines for the Mental Health Trialogue Network Ireland. They may be helpful for others interested in developing their own Trialogue Meetings.

All groups have different formats depending on their purpose and Trialogue Meetings are no different. As a way of promoting an empowering space, providing opportunity for people to develop Open Dialogue communication skills and for some to experience a personally nourishing and transforming conversation the following guidelines seem to work:

Some useful Ground rules

- Topics would normally be decided by the participants on the evening of meeting or possibly in the previous meeting so that prospective participants know in advance
- Generally Trialogue Meetings take place in a circular gathering with no barriers in between participants. This provides a neutral open space for conversation
- Where possible *'leave your hat at the door'*. One of the frequently voiced empowering things for people in Trialogue Meetings is to be able to speak their mind without feeling restrained by their day to day responsibilities. For example, a carer normally focussed on the needs of their family member may speak out on behalf of themselves; a service user normally intent on trying to get through the day may want to seriously question the choice of care available to them; and the mental health professional may wish to voice their frustration with daily organisational and/or legal restraint on their ability to provide the care they know is good
- Everyone in the meeting is understood to be bringing their own expertise to the conversation so that all can gain from each other
- People leave their mobile phones off or on silent
- The right to anonymity is important. People are not asked to say who they are or where they come from, which is quite different from many other groups
- Everyone has the right to speak or not to speak
- One person speaks at a time with no one speaking over another
- Every ones opinion and comments are both respectful and respected
- Participants should ensure that they feel personally safe and comfortable in the group

- Although there is no onus on people not to talk about the Trialogue experience and things that comes up at meetings, it is expected that outside of meetings people respect what people said and do not personalise comments
- Usually Meetings last between an hour and a half to two hours with some informal chat before and after the meeting. Some people have a refreshment break half way through or at the end.

Facilitating or Moderating Trialogue Meetings (words sometimes used interchangeably)

Just like ground rules, the role of facilitation or moderation in meetings or groups depends on the purpose of them. For Trialogue Meetings the role is kept very simple on the basis that any participant can moderate a meeting, and in Trialogue the intent is not to manage or guide the conversation according to any agenda other than the open conversation about an agreed topic. It is useful to have some one who is happy to co-facilitate, particularly if the group is large.

The group will usually agree a facilitator at the beginning of each meeting or in some cases they agree that one or two will take on this role for a designated period of time. Alternatively the group may just agree to have a rotating facilitator from meeting to meeting.

The principal role of the facilitator or moderator is to ensure that the ground rules are respected and that the meeting starts and finishes on time. The group themselves will usually ensure that this will happen and may only need a gentle reminder at times.

Ensuring that the ground rules are respected may entail a number of actions by the facilitator during a meeting. For example, she/he:

- Will observe for indications (sometimes a nod or a hand raised) that someone wants to speak and bring them in and encourage turn taking
- May encourage responses to comments made
- May seek clarification or try to summarise(in their view) what has been said so far
- May signify that one person or conversation piece is monopolising the overall conversation
- Will ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak by asking at various times (particularly towards the end of meeting) if anyone who has not spoken yet would like to do so

Triologue Meetings can be very energetic and enthusiastic conversations and at times it is different to stick to the agreed topic. The facilitator will also remind the group of the topic if this occurs and ask if they wish to refocus on it.

Some Common challenges with facilitation

As with any meeting or conversations amongst people, there will be challenges. Usually the group themselves will manage to overcome them, and a humorous comment or further question from the facilitator will usually help. Some of the common ones occurring in Triologue Meetings are outlined below.

One person or small group monopolising the conversation

This is a common occurrence in conversations and the facilitator may need to remind people to be more inclusive of all of the participant's voices.

Personal arguments

Sometimes debate becomes more of a personal argument between two or more people and it may be useful to remind people that this is an open conversation for all participants.

Silence

Silence can be awkward for some, though it is often a time for reflection and not a bad thing. Usually it happens at the beginning of a meeting and will eventually be broken by someone beginning to speak. If necessary, the facilitator could reintroduce the topic for conversation or relay it again in a slightly different way if it appears that the silence is lasting too long.

Personalising the issues raised

The topics of conversation in Triologue Meetings are very important to participants and some may find themselves personalising comments in a non respectful way to other individuals. A reminder of respectful ground rules will usually address this.

Going off the topic

Going off the topic tends to be the norm and is not necessarily an issue, as it is the conversation amongst participants that sets the direction. However, the facilitator may remind the group of the agreed topic and ask are people happy to continue with the present theme or refocus on the topic.

Keeping the conversation going

Sometimes the conversation just runs out and people stop talking or appear to have nothing more to say. Some simple questions from the facilitator like - 'have we

anything more to say about this', 'is there another way of looking at this' or 'is there another burning issue relating to the topic that someone wants to discuss' may stimulate the conversation again.

Distress

People may get distressed when talking about very personal issues in Trialogue Meetings and this would be accepted as normal. Because these meetings are normally very safe spaces with respectful ground rules and a group of understanding experienced people, those experiencing and voicing distress tend to find it comforting to be in the safe space of the Trialogue Meeting. At times the facilitator or co-facilitator (friend or co-participant) may approach a person who voiced distress, after the Trialogue Meeting to offer reassurance and establish if they are okay.

Acting out

Some participants have at times expressed concern (outside of the Trialogue Meeting) that individuals may act out in anger, distress or as a result of emotional turmoil during a Trialogue Meeting beyond 'acceptable/safe behaviour'. In the experience of several decades of Trialogue Meetings 'acting out' in this manner would be very rare. In these instances the normal human response would be to manage that situation with all of the available expertise in the room, rather than ignore it and try to continue the meeting.

Avoiding facilitator pitfalls

Being the meeting facilitator particularly if new to the role or where people in the group might perceive you to have more of an important role in the conversation than is the case, may sometimes cause pitfalls that can be avoided.

One of the normal disadvantages for the facilitator is that it is likely they will not engage in the conversation with their own opinion as much as others, because they are focussed on facilitating the whole conversation. However, it is possible that the facilitator in trying to generate discussion will end up using their 'speaking rights' to monopolise the conversation with their agenda or their opinions and this is to be avoided.

The facilitator may sometimes find themselves aligned with one stream of conversation or alternatively at odds with a stream of conversation. It is important to realise this and ensure that they do not inadvertently try to direct the conversation because of their own views. At the same time they do not need to censor their own views.

Sometimes the facilitator may find themselves defending a view or expressed opinion over another, or offering a defence in response to what some participants are saying about others. This may have the consequence of interfering in the 'open dialogue' where everyone's opinion no matter how diverse is respected. This pitfall is difficult to avoid at times, where the facilitator may not be used to strongly diverse opinion being key to a good Trialogue Meeting.

Everyone brings their own characteristics and experience to facilitation, which is something to celebrate and with rotating facilitators particularly, the diversity can help to enrich the flow of conversation in meetings. Two common pitfalls that people may inadvertently fall into depending on their back ground experience is to either: (a) manage the meeting a bit like a an educational, action or committee meeting; or (b) facilitate the meeting as if it were a therapeutic group. Both approaches have the potential to distract the conversation from its intended purpose. There are other forums where this type of facilitation is crucial and beneficial, though not within Trialogue Meetings as they have so far evolved.