

Roots of Change program

INTRODUCTION TO THE GROUP PROCESS

Every study circle is different--in composition, structure, purpose--from every other group. But regardless of such differences, the success of any group depends upon awareness of interpersonal interactions and structures. Paying attention to this group process can help members move towards increased understanding and community.

Here are a few important areas to consider in forming and maintaining your study group:

Clarity of goals and purposes. ISEC's goals are primarily to increase the level of understanding about the systemic causes of today's crises, and to foster strategic meaningful action. We are also hoping that this process will help create community and that many or all of the members will stay in touch, support each other, or even work together long after they have finished going through the study materials. In addition to this central focus, each local group will have its own particular constellation of interests and motivations. It is a good idea for each person to speak about their personal expectations at an early stage.

Clarity of structure and agreements. Some structural elements--like the study materials themselves and the choice of a local co-ordinator--are set up by ISEC. Most of the other elements are a matter of group decision. Among other things, these include:

- where meetings will be held;
- how frequent and how long meetings will be;
- how to use and structure meeting time;
- what tasks various members will take on;
- how communication between members will be handled between meetings;
- whether and when to add new members;
- what the content of each meeting will be;
- how decisions will be made.

Whatever the group decides, the decision-making process needs to be clear enough so that members all agreed upon the same guidelines. It is especially important to have a discussion that anticipates future conflicts and tensions that might emerge during the group meetings, and agree upon a conflict resolution process. Conflicts and tension may never arise, but discussing these issues ahead of time will help prevent them from disrupting the group if they do.

Leadership and facilitation. ISEC will work with a volunteer(s) from each group to coordinate and facilitate meetings. While a group may eventually divide up facilitation duties, the designated co-ordinator provides the initial focus, and serves as a central contact person for ISEC and for each member of the group. The co-ordinator is not considered to be an 'expert' or necessarily the most knowledgeable person in the group. However, he/she should

be prepared to take the lead in keeping the discussion focused, help negotiate a balance between different personalities and levels of participation, model good active listening, and seek resolution to conflicts. Group members are encouraged to assist in these tasks.

Your group may also want to experiment with alternative methods of creating respectful, nonhierarchical and democratic learning spaces. Feel free to contact us for ideas.

Evaluating process and content. Your group may wish to leave 5-10 minutes at the end of each meeting (or on a regular basis) to reflect on how well the group is functioning. What might you want more or less of? What is working and what isn't? Allowing time to consider these issues helps the group to evolve and improve.

Working with emotions. Looking at the big picture and reflecting on how we and our children are affected by the global economy may at times feel overwhelming. There is sometimes a tendency to shy away from discussing our own emotions. Talking as a group, in a supportive setting, about feelings that come up as you work through the material can be very important and valuable aspect of the study. Each group and participant will be different, but it is important to make space for those participants who wish to express feelings such as frustration, anger and powerlessness, as well as excitement and inspiration.

Building trust and community. Taking time in meetings to get to know one another helps create trust. This involves valuing the feelings of the other participants as well as their ideas. It is important to listen to and validate what others are saying--even when you disagree. Rituals like opening 'check-ins' or occasional 'go-rounds' give everyone an opportunity to speak and can be very helpful. Some groups may find it useful to assign rotating roles like timekeepers or 'emotion watchers' to help assure balance. Groups whose members acknowledge successes, give compliments, and trust each other enough to state differences openly are generally the most successful. In order to strengthen community ties, ISEC also recommends group activities like cooking and eating together, taking walks in nature, dancing, singing, or meditating. A major theme running throughout the *Roots of Change* curriculum is community-its breakdown and renewal. In a very real sense meeting and learning together as you work through the curriculum is itself an act of community renewal.

Last word. Much of the material in this curriculum can be overwhelming, especially the first half. As an antidote to despair, we've compiled a selection of inspiring quotes, poems and parable on themes such as working through despair, hope, expanding boundaries, and personal/social transformation. We call this the 'Hope Trove,' and strongly recommend ending each session by reading one or two of these out loud with the group.