WORKING TOGETHER IN THEATRE: COLLABORATION AND LEADERSHIP
By ROBERT COHEN and JOEL VEENSTRA
Second Edition web resources

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS EXAMPLE (Chapter 1 Activity)

Chapter 1 introduces the tool of community agreements (sometimes called a "working agreement," as they were known at Oregon Shakespeare Festival under Bill Rausch's artistic leadership, or even group "Rights and Responsibilities"). Community agreements are developed (ideally early in a process) to build a shared understanding, articulate shared group norms, and set forth expectations that all community members understand, support, and agree to follow. Another way to think about these is as a Code of Conduct, Ground Rules, or a Community Contract that is created with altruistic mindfulness to all those in the community and ideally crafted by the community, not handed down from the hierarchical head. Those impacted by these items must have agency to agree, disagree, discuss, or amend with the community culture in ways that elevate everyone.

Here are some potential Community Agreements (inspired by ground rules pgs. 19-21):

- **Controversy with Civility**
    - Conflict is to be expected in diverse groups. Our community will seek to continue engagement, moving through conflict – with the goal of understanding contrasting perspectives and identifying shared values and/or interest, rather than attempting to change opposing viewpoints – knowing this will strengthen our diverse community.

- **Own Your Intentions and Your Impact**
    - Actions and engagements have an impact that can be distinct from our intentions. In our community, when an individual is negatively impacted by

our actions (especially if they communicate that impact to us), we will listen

and take ownership of that negative impact – despite our intentions - and seek

restorative resolution, engaging external advocates as needed.

- **Challenge by Choice**

    o Communities and individuals grow by working through challenges. Everyone

    has agency to decide when and how we engage, especially outside of our

    comfort zone. Our community will seek to support and honor these choices

    (being mindful of the impact of such choices). When we chose to avoid a

    challenge, we will consider what aspects of the challenge makes us un-willing

    to engage so we may be able to understand more about ourselves, our

    community, and how we engage with our community.

- **Respect**

    o Everyone is different (with unique cultural and lived points of view);

    communities advance in collaboration, innovation, and creativity when

    everyone is welcome to be their authentic self to share their own unique and

    diverse perspectives/approaches as an invitation to collective and individual

    self-examination. Our community seeks to create a space of belonging – not

    homogeneity – for all individuals demonstrating acceptance, attentiveness,

    politeness, appreciation and high regard, and seeking to avoid harm, even in

    disagreement. If conflict or missteps are made, the most respectful action is to

    seek restorative resolution, engaging external advocates as needed.

- **No Attacks**

  o When diverse individuals with different ideas, perspectives, and approaches come together, discussions and critiques naturally follow. It's important to remember that the idea is separate from the person who shared it. In our community, we commit to avoiding personal attacks and instead focus on engaging in respectful dialogue about differing ideas. This way, we can thoughtfully evaluate and improve our shared practices.

Here are some additional potential Community Agreements (inspired from a variety of sources documented below):

- **Be fully Present as much as Possible**

  o Limit use of backchannels, keep your focus with the group.

- **It is okay to Speak / Share in Rough Draft**

  o Ideas do not need to be fully formed to be shared.

- **Be Curious / Assume Positive Intent**

  o Value multiple truths - suspend judgement. It is okay to disagree, respectfully. Listen to understand, not just respond. Reframe assumptions as questions for exploration. Questions create choice, assumptions limit choice. We are all working towards the same or similar goals.

- **Speak from your own Experience / Use "I" statements**

  o Take responsibility for your words, feelings, & actions. Speak from your own perspective and lived experience. *Nobody knows everything, everybody knows something, together we know a lot.*

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- **Take Space / Make Space**

    o Notice how much you are speaking and create space for others to share. WAIT (why am I talking / why aren't I talking?) Step forward, step back. Don't dominate the conversation, try to be concise. Does what I am going to say move the conversation forward?

- **Lean into Discomfort**

    o Don't expect closure. We are engaging in ongoing work. Approach each conversation with awareness of your own biases and fragility. Focus on yourself as an individual and as a member of this community, industry, field, planet. Learn, practice, grow.

- **Confidentiality**

    o What's said here stays here, what's learned here leaves here.

- **Relax and laugh**

    o Hard work doesn't have to feel hard.

The concepts above have been shared in multiple venues and communities evolving with each group engaging with them to create equitable and inclusive spaces combatting anti-blackness and oppression. Often, community agreements are paired with Land Acknowledgements denoting the original and current Indigenous People who have been the caretakers of the land. Joel Veenstra's initial introduction a similar list was at the Emergency Virtual Conference on Undergraduate Theatre Education hosted by George Mason University (GMU) faculty Sherrice Mojgani, Debra Sivigny, and Mimsi Janis with presentations by Kaja Dunn and Porsche McGovern in July 2020. These agreements are seen in Glenn Singleton's and Curtis Linton's 2005 social justice text *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide*

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for Achieving Equity in Schools. Each community that utilizes them adjusts the concepts or adds to them with insights from their own communities and experiences, including each cohort of UCI Concepts and Collaboration students (additions of note include Blake Elliott's insight from xyr professional practice "Nobody knows everything, everybody knows something, together we know a lot." and Julian Tushabe's "pause" when space is needed with a challenging topic). A host of organizations and institutions have also utilized similar agreements or processes, including Canadian Actors' Equity Association, Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), the Production Managers' Forum (PMF), and a host of other organizations, theatre companies, and academic institutions.

Here is the **UC Irvine Drama Department Code of Conduct** from 3/31/07:

The following are the core values of the University of California, Irvine, as affirmed by Chancellor Drake in May of 2006:

- **Respect:** We understand that respect is the cornerstone of human interaction.

- **Intellectual Curiosity:** We are committed to learning, teaching, creativity, and research.

- **Integrity:** We tell the truth and strive to earn the trust of those around us.

- **Commitment:** We always give our best effort.

- **Empathy:** We act with compassion and sensitivity.

- **Appreciation:** We appreciate different opinions and points of view.

The Drama Department endorses these values wholeheartedly.

The Drama Department also gives special focus to **Civility** as a core value of our department. We find that the key elements of civility are both complementary and congruent with the core values of the university:

- **Community:** We place the greater good of our community over individual interests.

- **Openness:** We say what we mean, mindful of tone, and strive for mutual understanding.

- **Responsibility:** We fulfill our commitments and are accountable for our actions.

- **Empathy:** We act with compassion and sensitivity.

It is expected that members of the Drama Department will be guided by these university and departmental values as we conduct our work together.

These are examples to inspire you and your community – it is essential that you collaborate to create your expectations for engagement collaboratively to enhance your working together in theatre and beyond.

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