

# Creating Space Reflections Thinking and Learning about Inclusion

## CSVII Reflections from the LLC Leadership Team

We would like to thank Creating Space VII participants for taking time to complete our survey and help us learn about how to best host and facilitate community learning. Over half of the community of participants took time to give us very thoughtful feedback. The survey results have been published so that the community can continue to engage with us in this learning. We, as a staff, want to share with you a few of the primary lessons emerging from the evaluation about how to strengthen Creating Space along with some of the most complex areas of learning about inclusion around which we invite continued input and dialogue.

**What worked and what didn't work?** There are no easy answers to this question since participants come with different learning styles, cultures, experiences, work contexts and interests. As you will see in a review of findings, Open Space worked for some and not for others as was the case with the fishbowl conversation and the community catalysts. We did receive helpful feedback about how to make these components work better and in what contexts.

On the meeting overall, we had the full range of responses from “great meeting – eager to return” to “just didn’t work for me, not sure why” and “great learning” to “disappointed in the depth.” One insight we had is that by focusing on each of the component parts of the meeting, we often neglect how the meeting worked together as a whole. We believe there are opportunities for innovation when we focus on what is emerging for us as a community through Creating Space. What is the edge of our current learning about how to deepen and expand our ability to learn and share as a community? What is the next innovation we need in our meeting design to take our learning and sharing to a deeper level? The design team will continue to work with these questions.

**What Worked:** There were a few things that stood out as positives among the responses:

Community Contribution Sessions: These sessions received the highest rating for the CS activity that best supported member learning and contributions. This feedback is a tribute to members of the community who have done a good job of identifying learning from their own experiences that has value to others and to the field. It is also a tribute to long-standing CS participants who generously give their time to solicit, select and work with a diverse range of session leaders to make sure they are interactive.

Community of participants: There was widespread appreciation for the opportunity, as one person described it, to “meet good folks doing good work” or in the words of others: to network, collegially share, and gather creative ideas.

**What Didn't Work:**

Space and Logistics: Participants acknowledged the unavoidable limitations of working with large hotels for non-profit meetings. Given these restrictions this hotel had some nice informal meeting spaces but as one participant pointed out it was not adequately accessible to people in wheel chairs and as others commented it was hard to spend so much time in banquet rooms. LLC does have a

commitment to trying to find spaces that are accessible, provide informal community meeting spaces, have natural lighting and that are affordable (as much as possible) to our diverse community of participants.

Insufficient unstructured time: Survey respondents ranked unstructured time as the second most valuable part of CS. We recognize that there is never enough time for participants to actually get to know each other and fully mine the resources available in the room. It is important to trust that learning takes place in the unstructured as well as structured time, and to see the value of providing this space. The design team will continue to explore how to maximize learning and allow time for more informal sharing.

## A Discussion about Inclusion

By far, the deepest area of discussion and learning in the survey feedback has been around the issue of inclusion. We appreciate the candor with which folks approached this question. In survey responses 53% of participants gave CSVII the highest score of 5 for inclusivity, followed by 23% with a 4, 14% a 3, and to the lower end of the scale with 7% rating CSVII as a 2 and 2% at 1. Despite these fairly high overall ratings the feedback and critique raised many issues that signal the importance and difficulty of inclusion for many of us. We would like to address the issue on several layers.

### Inclusion in our approaches to diverse leadership development views and experiences.

A number of folks in attendance questioned whether their approach to leadership was really a fit with LLC and the more traditional approaches. One individual pointed out that CS is a self-selecting group and that it might be necessary to do more outreach to other kinds of groups and leadership programs locally and nationally. One person expressed surprise that there were so many newcomers to leadership development at CS while others commented on the lack of young people and over representation of women.

These comments raise or ask important questions about LLC's outreach strategy that we would like to be transparent about. While ultimately, participation is self-selecting, we do put a great deal of energy into emailing and calling to provide encouragement to former CS participants and circle participants. We also identify new programs for outreach. This may be based on new areas of work, like recruiting health leadership programs since we are initiating a Health Affinity Circle. We have also put some energy into identifying grassroots/community leadership programs because this is an approach that is not strongly represented or understood as deeply. When we come to a new region, we also see this as an opportunity to do regional outreach to the specific area. The question of setting recruitment targets is an important one. Who is underrepresented and should be included to enrich our learning?

These comments raise a question about our ability to embrace a diversity of perspectives about what leadership is and what leadership development should look like. It is easy to privilege more established approaches to leadership if we are not intentional about honoring what can be shared and learned across a range of approaches and experiences. We also want to recognize that newcomers can bring valuable new ideas or innovations that broaden our thinking about leadership development. It can be difficult to work along these continuums in ways that value all experiences. If we have a tendency, it may be that in trying to give voice to emergent or diverse models that have

not had adequate recognition, we inadvertently placed more value on “new”. LLC’s role is to create an environment that attracts and values a diversity of experiences and perspectives on leadership development that can be shared in a mutually respectful environment. The feedback is an important reminder for us to attend to this role.

Inclusion of multiple political perspectives: Definitely, the juiciest area of feedback was focused on the inclusion of diverse perspectives with regards to viewpoints on change strategies and the focus of our change efforts. Some survey respondents referred to this as inclusion or lack of inclusion of multiple views more representative of the broader “political spectrum.” One respondent commented, “There was definitely a view held by a larger group which happens to be the view I hold. But, I can’t help but think that people who did not hold a ‘liberal’ view might have felt as though their views were not welcome.”

**Inclusion and Culture:** One participant made the interesting comment that perhaps we should have simply been explicit that we were having an event for people involved in supporting social justice leadership: “Just because it is a place that more social justice folks feel comfortable, does not mean that it was inclusive. It is probably more meaningful to admit the unity of thought and celebrate it---rather than act as if the group is authentic and inclusive.” This raises an interesting question. LLC has been making an effort to reach out to groups that have less access to events like Creating Space. In fact, at CSV in Boston when we had a conversation about engaging more youth in CS, the point was made that the ‘culture’ of the event would have to become more ‘youth friendly.’ The implication of this particular discussion might be that marginalized groups generally feel less welcome and comfortable in traditional gatherings, even those seen as liberally leaning. Are efforts to make an environment more welcoming to new groups (in this case more grassroots/social justice programs) experienced as less inclusive by groups more accustomed to a normative facilitation style and format? Is there a dominant culture that as a default defines most meeting formats; and if so, can we create a culture where those at the margins and those at the center will feel equally supported, welcomed, and respected?

**Purpose and Sources of Learning:** The focus of CSVI was on how to create a more culturally inclusive leadership culture. Part of this work is to cultivate respect for multiple approaches to meeting/learning, leadership styles and political viewpoints. Some respondents wondered how we would have responded to “military” programs, for example: “It felt incredibly inclusive of all of those present. One interesting thought I had...I wonder how things would have shifted if we had had more military/corporate leadership models represented?” It is important that we not confuse the source of learning and the purpose, i.e. learning to what end. If we are clear on our mission to support leadership development that, for example, preserves the planet, cultivates respect among all peoples, provides for basic rights to health, education, and employment, then we need to mine all leadership development wisdom (regardless of the source) to advance our mission. There are programs operating within the military and business that would share LLC values and goals. There are programs in these and other sectors (including the non profit sector) that would not be aligned with the change we hope to support in the world through our leadership development work. While we would hope to learn from these organizations our energies would not be focused on helping these programs achieve their goals.

**Diversity and Learning/Respecting Difference:** To enrich our learning we must have a healthy respect for a diversity of perspectives and experiences. One participant pointed out that diversity is not accomplished by encouraging the expression of multiple views when they are not in the room,

“Different points of view were welcomed and encouraged but I don’t think they were represented.” We won’t necessarily all feel comfortable as we invite multiple perspectives among which there will certainly be strong differences, but we should all feel respected! We need to pay attention to how multiple viewpoints are reflected throughout our events to model more of an engagement among different perspectives to deepen learning. While LLC has attempted to ensure stronger representation of different approaches, we could do a better job of recruiting from different sectors and to make sure the multiple viewpoints are being expressed and debated within the community.

**Affinity and Inclusion:** The idea that there is value in a meeting for social activists or that attention needs to be paid to being “youth friendly” points to the value of and benefits of working within affinity groups, especially for groups that operate at the margins. There is an opportunity for us to think about how ‘affinity’ and ‘inclusion’ might complement one another to enrich learning. We may need to create places of affinity that draw in groups that often do not feel welcome or equitably supported to ensure that these groups are contributing to the learning. At the same time, we want to ‘create space’ where multiple stakeholders and constituents will come to cross traditional boundaries in order to learn from others they would not be likely to have contact with. All of this requires a neutral facilitation of the space that welcomes all participants, invites lively debate based on a healthy respect for difference, employs diversity of processes, and understands that affinity grouping within the broader convening helps to build inclusion.

These are difficult issues not to be glossed over easily. We have raised more questions than answers in this preliminary response to an important issue. We welcome this discussion in the community as an opportunity to bring spirited debate and our best collective thinking to an important issue. This is an issue at a macro level internationally and domestically and at a micro level in all leadership development programs. We hope that you will continue to share your views.