

Awakening an Organization through Council
(Excerpt from *The Way of Council* by Jack Zimmerman
& Virginia Coyle, Chapter 11)

We have been experimenting with the integration of council and hierarchical authority at The Ojai Foundation – and helping other communities, business organizations, and schools implement similar intentions for over fifteen years. The major challenges in establishing a viable council practice have included clarifying the organization’s vision, maintaining clear operational goals and learning to balance the use of these efforts, the spirit of council has gradually found its way into a variety of organizations, bringing with it the following tangible changes.

- Members of the organization listen to each other more carefully and greater personal honesty is fostered.
- Members become more patient.
- Members find it easier to acknowledge personal conflicts and do something constructive about them. Hearing each other’s stories and sharing feelings more readily fosters trust and intimacy in working relationships.
- Members are less likely to impose their ideas on others.
- Members are more respectful of what has been accomplished in the past when offering suggestions for change.
- Agreements between members are made more consciously and, therefore, honored more consistently.
- The need to “gather around the water cooler” decreases, because this innate desire for personal contact is satisfied by integrating council into the organization’s daily operations.
- There is less free-floating personal anxiety, since council offers a safe place for dealing with concerns and problems honestly. As a result, actions and behaviors based on fear and anxiety automatically diminish.
- General feelings of personal well-being are generated through the opportunities for positive feedback and acknowledgement in council.
- Being less fearful, members are able to risk being more innovative and creative in doing their work.
- Decreasing fear and increasing trust leads to less stress.

- The increased attentiveness that occurs in council during the decision-making process easily compensates for the additional time spent in the circle. Fewer decisions have to be made more than once. The experience of being heard and the strong connections with the group that results from this way of operating increases individual participation and creativity in implementing decisions.
- Learning to listen to the voice of council helps members understand the goals and purposes of the organization. Individuals see more clearly how their activities relate to the overall scheme of things. Thus, the alienating feeling of working in isolation diminishes. Seeing how they “fit in” also increases the member’s capacity to take greater responsibility and pride in their work.
- Through council, the organization’s leadership continuously undergoes “in-service training,” since they work less in isolation and receive more honest feedback. Leaders who do not listen well are encouraged to change their ways. A leader’s tendency to over-control becomes apparent.
- Over a period of time, council helps develop the sense of collective awareness that is possible in groups that share a spiritual practice. As a result, there is a greater sense of the organization as an “evolving organism” rather than as an entity fixed in time and space. Members become more flexible and innovative about the organizational structure itself.
- With more room for authentic personal interaction, the feeling of separation between home-life and work diminishes.

Council Process in Business and the Workplace

The Council Process offers individuals the opportunity to interact and communicate authentically on a regular basis and to discuss issues through storytelling and group dialogue. Utilizing personal reflection and group dialogue, individuals have the opportunity to share vision, intuition and creativity in the workplace. Council facilitators provide a structured and safe environment where individuals can achieve open, honest, and heartfelt interactions and communications.

Council’s roots can be traced to the League of the Iroquois, the People of the Plains and Southwestern Pueblos and many other indigenous cultures. More recently, the council practices have been combined with contemporary knowledge about group dynamics to create a way of communicating that has been extremely effective in encouraging young people and adults to listen and speak to another “from the heart.” It represents a communication and organizational form which honors the wisdom and the contribution of each person and the whole.

Everyone is an equal participant with the usual hierarchies not operative in the process. Council is a horizontal form of communication, in contrast to the vertical

hierarchical structures that exist in most work environments. Authority and responsibility is shared equally by everyone in the circle.

Council honors the practice of listening – listening to views, stories, and visions of each person. The process offers members of a group a way of communicating that encourages attentive listening and compassionate expression. It can be used to explore root causes, assumptions, effective solutions, decision-making processes, and to experience renewed sense of meaning, purpose and wholeness in the workplace.

Council in the workplace allows for the integration and synergy of the heart, body, head and spirit to work in harmony and to flourish in educational, entrepreneurial, and corporate worlds. The Council process can assist an organization in reinventing itself by renewing the human spirit, increasing its productivity, and deepening its creativity and sense of commitment throughout all levels of the organization.