

Part 1: The Gift of Gracious Space

When your group meets, you will come together in a physical space, be it a meeting hall, classroom, or even your own living room. In that physical space, your group will create a figurative space – the atmosphere and environment that pervade your meetings. The creation of this figurative space is inevitable; it arises as a byproduct of the ways in which your group members interact. For your group to achieve effective community change, the space you create – both literal and figurative – must foster healthy, strong relationships. We’ve found that establishing Gracious Space is one of the best ways to do this.

The Center for Ethical Leadership (www.ethicalleadership.org) developed the notion of Gracious Space. Gracious Space is safe and comfortable for your members; it promotes healthy discussion, debate, and friendships. Most important, Gracious Space invites all members to share freely and work together, despite differences in age, class, gender, race, or ethnicity. What you need to remember in establishing Gracious Space is that no one can impose any single definition of Gracious Space on your group; it should arise organically out of the needs and understandings of your members and their community. The next two activities will help you talk about Gracious Space with your group, then make Gracious Space a reality.

ACTIVITY: DEFINING GRACIOUS SPACE

A safe space is a crucial aspect of creating an atmosphere that fosters relationship building. Working to define Gracious Space with group members is a great way to involve them in that process while creating a shared vision for your group.

OVERVIEW

This exercise opens up space, literally and figuratively, in a group and creates a shared definition of Gracious Space as well as a safe place for group members. This activity invites group members to engage in a discussion about the definition of Gracious Space. It is helpful at the beginning of an extended training or community-building project.

OBJECTIVES

- To build a safe, supportive space within your group
- To create a group definition of Gracious Space
- To help group members understand how to intentionally address each element of the definition of Gracious Space

TIME REQUIRED

Approximately 25 minutes

SUPPLIES

You will need a flip chart and markers for this activity.

WHAT	TIME	HOW	MATERIALS
Step 1: Setting the context	5 min	<p>Tell the group, “Our task today is to create the culture that will support our gathering.”</p> <p>“Right now, on your own, think of a time when you’ve experienced Gracious Space, whatever this means to you. What was the setting? What did you experience?”</p>	
Step 2: Pairing up	5–10 min	<p>Ask that group members pair up with someone they don’t yet know well. Instruct the pairs to share their stories of Gracious Space with each other for the next 5 minutes.</p> <p>While the pairs are talking, write the definition of Gracious Space on the flip chart: Gracious Space is a spirit and setting where we invite the stranger and learn in public.</p>	<p>Flip chart</p> <p>Markers</p>
Step 3: Discussing as a group	10 min	<p>Ask the pairs to come together again as a large group. Ask the group, “Without retelling your stories, who would like to share some of the characteristics of the Gracious Space you and your partner talked about?”</p> <p>As participants share their characteristics, record them on the flip chart. Then, share the definition of Gracious Space that you wrote on the flip chart while the group was paired off.</p> <p>Read the definition aloud and emphasize each element. (More detailed descriptions of the four elements appear after this activity). If you have time, discuss some of the questions with your group.</p>	<p>Flip chart</p> <p>Markers</p>
Step 4: Reflecting	5 min	<p>Ask the group, “Can we create this Gracious Space we defined here and now for our gathering? How?” Make notes of their suggestions on the flip chart.</p> <p>Then, share the poem “Oh the Joy”:</p> <p><i>Oh the joy- the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person having neither to measure words nor weigh thoughts Pouring them all out just as they are, chaff and grain together Certain that a loving hand will sift through, keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness – blow the rest away.</i></p> <p>–Dinah Craik, adapted from an Arabian proverb</p>	<p>Flip chart</p> <p>Markers</p>

ELEMENTS OF GRACIOUS SPACE

Spirit

What do you do to prepare for a difficult conversation or an uncomfortable new situation? (Share an example.) For example, when I know I'll be entering a discussion with a difficult person, a conversation starts in my head. *Why do I have to keep dealing with this person? Why does he make things so hard?* An alternative way of preparing for this meeting is to bring a positive intention into the conversation. In my head I tell myself, the other person means well. I tell myself, *look for his gifts that might help the situation.* The spirit you bring into any situation can have a big impact.

Spirit is also about the energy we create together as a group. Do we want our solution to be adopted or do we want to understand one another? Gracious Space seeks to create a spirit where people develop their ideas together.

Setting

The external setting matters. Look around the room we are gathered in. What about this setting supports the kind of interaction we want? (Listen to four or five examples.) When working on the setting, it's important to ask this question: How can the setting support the type of interaction we want? This requires us to look at three elements:

- **Physical space** – Do we want to be in a retreat setting away from distractions? How important is natural lighting and air?
- **Time** – How much time will we allocate? Is the time sufficient to have the depth of conversation we intend?
- **Format** – Do we want to sit in a large circle to be able to face one another and share stories? Do we want to be at round tables to support small-group discussion?

Welcome the Stranger

We want to welcome difference in background, experience, perspective, etc. We need to ask ourselves, *who else in our community needs to be included in this work?*

Learn in Public

How will you open up to learning? What do you need to let go of – for example, certainty, expertise, solutions – to open up? How will you create space for the ideas, wisdom, and expertise of others to show up?