

Transforming the Work Environment with Gracious Space

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In 2008, I was asked to develop a program to improve the leadership for the 35-member management team of Horizon House, a non-profit retirement community. I met with four members to design the first session, where I suggested an inspiring kickoff video and small group breakouts for conversation. Their response was memorable: "We can't do that! We don't have enough trust." I was stunned. This group was responsible for guiding an organization of 300 employees, yet it lacked the trust to have separate conversations. They wanted all conversations to occur in the large group so nothing would be said without everyone's knowledge.

Needless to say, I backed up and we began differently. We began by building trust, and I introduced the principles and practices of Gracious Space. Four years later, Horizon House is recognized as an industry leader for creating a positive workplace culture and for its commitment to leadership development.

Every organization faces issues of trust and communication and needs practical tools for making decisions, solving problems, having difficult conversations, and leading in complex environments. Susan Scott, author of *Fierce Leadership*, says that the next frontier for exponential growth in individuals and organizations lies in human connectivity, not strategy and tactics. Communication is not a soft skill, she says; it's the most effective skill for executing wisely, so we must find ways to do it well.¹

Gracious Space is an effective way—proven in hundreds of applications, many in diverse and confrontational settings—to improve trust and communication and foster collaboration and a healthy work environment. So what exactly is Gracious Space, and how can it improve employment relations in your organization?

Gracious Space is a body of work developed by the Center for Ethical Leadership in Seattle, Washington, as a way to foster authentic dialogue and facilitate lasting relationships to help people work better together. The principles and practices have helped over 15,000 people in 30 states collaborate more courageously and creatively around critical issues. Gracious Space is applicable in every sector, including health care, business, government, community, nonprofit, and private and public education, and in issues that span the organizational range, including leadership programs, performance appraisals, coaching conversations, new vision, mission or strategic plans, reorganizations, building a team, or closing a company. Regardless of the context or issue, Gracious Space is like a secret sauce: it just makes everything better.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF GRACIOUS SPACE

Gracious Space is (1) a spirit and (2) a setting where we (3) invite the "stranger" and (4) learn together. These four elements form a safe environment to have difficult conversations and

to move forward, together, into creative problem solving.

Spirit

The spirit of Gracious Space means intentionally building a supportive atmosphere for the work. Individuals need to pay attention to their demeanor and intentions. How we show up matters. Our presence is contagious, and the mood "infects" others and spreads throughout the group. So, an important aspect of transforming the work environment is for each individual to take responsibility for how he or she shows up. Do we bring openness and a willingness to learn and collaborate? Or do we come with prejudgments and closed-minded certainty about others or the project?

Groups, by extension, possess a collective spirit. The group's spirit shows up in how it interacts with others and gets work done.

Lifting our heads to remember the goals that connect us contributes tangibly to a positive and supportive spirit.

Many of us have experienced being in groups where the tone of the meeting starts negatively and spirals down from there. This collective spirit can be shaped purposefully, but too often it is left to form on its own or not at all. Instead of intentionally creating a positive environment for the work, groups often assume that getting down to business is the most effective use of their time, and the collective spirit languishes.

A third important aspect of spirit is the greater vision or purpose groups can tap into. What is the ultimate purpose of the work? Often we get bogged down in detail, which

can lead to petty arguments and frustrations. Lifting our heads to remember the goals that connect us contributes tangibly to a positive and supportive spirit.

Several years ago, the new executive director of KITH, a housing organization for homeless families, wanted to improve the collective spirit of her staff. Being homeless is stressful, of course, and helping the families was stressful for the staff because of the myriad challenges they had to navigate to find jobs, food, child care, and health care for their clients. The case managers were crumbling under the pressure and snapping at each other in their close quarters.

"Being the new director, I wanted to impact the culture of the organization for the good. I wanted it to be an environment where people felt appreciated and good," said Jan Dickerman. "The staff loved it! People were really open and made themselves vulnerable while they shared their personal stories. They are thinking about how we can be even more appreciative of one another."²

Months later, Dickerman reported that Gracious Space was present in the way the case managers interacted with the families and each other: "Gracious Space helps the staff be more forgiving, and feel supported. Gracious Space is a big piece in how those goals are coming about." Together the group became more gracious and accepting, and members were able to deliver their mission with less stress and fewer interpersonal altercations.

According to the Centre for Conflict Resolution International,³ more than 65 percent of performance problems result from strained relationships between employees, not from deficits in individual employees' skill or motivation. Interpersonal conflicts are often the most uncomfortable and stress-producing

part of any job. One antidote to this is Gracious Space. In an Evidence-Based Practice⁴ study in 2010, survey respondents were asked to name the result of bringing Gracious Space to the workplace. Nearly 90 percent said using Gracious Space directly improved the respectful communication among workers.

Setting

Setting is simply paying attention to the physical space where the work takes place. The physical space influences the way people feel, the type of interactions that are possible, and productivity. Important physical aspects apply to office space as well as meeting space and include natural lighting, air movement, spatial layout, noise control and good acoustics, comfortable chairs, the ability to see others, food, and convenient restrooms.

Evidence is accumulating that the physical environment affects both job performance and job satisfaction. One study indicated that an additional investment in ergonomic tables and chairs for workers yielded a five-month payback in terms of increased productivity.⁵

Improving the physical setting can also be an inexpensive fix. One manager simply removed the pile of reports from the guest chair in her office and remarked that her meetings were now more productive. Another introduced colorful “squishy” balls at the staff meeting to lighten the atmosphere. Yet another hung four-foot images of the ocean and mountains in a room with no windows to provide visual relief and inspiration for meeting participants.

In a pertinent example of what *not* to do, a hospital leader once asked the Center for Ethical Leadership to facilitate a conversation with employees who had just been laid off. To reach the outplacement seminar, participants had to walk down the back stairs, past the

boiler room, past a room labeled the Morgue, to a room at the end of the hall. Someone clearly had not paid attention to the setting, nor had thought about how the visceral experience of the meeting facility would impact the already-stressed employees. It certainly was not the best setting to inspire people to take the next step in their careers.

Invite the “Stranger”

Invite the “stranger” means to seek out the “other” and embrace difference. In today’s world, we are highly interdependent and need to stay connected to each other to do our best work. Inviting the stranger is an active stance in which participants gather diverse perspectives so they can get smarter before making a decision. Who else needs to be in the room? Whose voice is unrepresented and needs to be heard?

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It is not uncommon for some senior leaders to make decisions without input from stakeholders or employees who know the most about the actual issue. Making assumptions and decisions without diverse input limits thinking and possibilities for creative action. Especially when the path is uncertain or the territory is new, we need input from multiple perspectives. The military has a term for these conditions—VUCA—an acronym meaning volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. In these conditions, more information is needed to make the best decisions. Homogenous group membership and unchallenged thinking are dangerous to the vitality of any enterprise.

Much has been written about the benefits of diversity in the workplace, such as a greater adaptability to changing markets, a broader range of skills, a larger pool of ideas and experiences to draw from, better solutions and services, and, ultimately, higher productivity. However, if an organization is to fully benefit from the promise of embracing difference, its members must answer some important questions:

- Why do we want a diversified workforce?
- What do we do with this diversity?
- Who or what brings the diverse perspectives we need most?
- How will we authentically engage the diverse perspectives?

Acting on rigid images of others ensures that we will get the results we expect because we haven't created openings for a different outcome.

Although promising, inviting the stranger and embracing diversity also places a higher demand on employees. A diverse workforce requires that employees are trained effectively in communication, conflict management, adaptability, and change. Inviting the stranger requires people to challenge their perceptions, be open to learning and doing things differently, and learn the skills to navigate differences in race, gender, age, cognitive style, tenure, function, education, background, and more. When these diverse perspectives bump up against your own worldview, it can look and feel a lot like conflict. Diversity will only increase in the coming years. To be seriously effective about transforming the workplace, our organizations need to see difference as vital, welcome diverse perspectives at all levels, and become conflict-competent cultures.

Learning in Public

Learning in public means judging less, listening more, and being willing to change your mind. It means letting go and opening up to possibilities. If we want our people to innovate, collaborate better, and actively participate in creating and maintaining a healthy workplace, they need to be willing and able to actually learn from each other. When we hold tightly to our viewpoints, we crowd out any ability to be influenced by others. When we hold closely to our own expertise, we stop listening to the helpful insights in others' experiences. Our judgments and assumptions about others lock them (and us) into a rigid box. Acting on rigid images of others ensures that we will get the results we expect because we haven't created openings for a different outcome.

When we temporarily suspend judgment, it creates room to explore assumptions and understand others better. It can be hard to admit we need help or don't know the answer, particularly for those in a position of responsibility. Yet, managers working in VUCA conditions can't always know the right thing to do. One manager in a large public utility told us of making a decision for her team that didn't work out. After she learned of Gracious Space, she went back to her team and said, "My decision didn't work very well. We all need to work together to come up with a better solution." And they did. What is more, her willingness to learn in public led her team to be more willing to take risks with each other.

In one Washington state agency of 1,200 employees, the 54-member IT division was experiencing low morale and productivity that were a result of ongoing, anonymous accusations about the work environment and

leadership conduct. An independent investigation was conducted that exonerated the agency and leadership of any improprieties. This was a welcome relief, but the allegations left a cloud of general mistrust. Seattle-based consultants Brian Mason of Mason Consulting Group and Mark Radonich of Cultural Effect Consulting used the principles of inviting the stranger and learning in public to broaden the division's perspective. They brought the division together to openly review the survey results and talk in groups about what was really happening in the work environment.

"When everyone saw the cumulative information, it immediately dispelled the workplace mythology that everyone was unhappy," Mason recalls. "In fact, people concluded that only five people were very unhappy, and these five were contaminating the work environment for everyone else. It was the most important part of the year-long initiative because people became more curious, the staff and the leadership team felt safer, and it opened the door for the rest of the work."⁶

After the meeting, the division quickly reached consensus on an accelerated implementation of ITIL, the most widely adopted approach for IT service management in the world. Previously stalled for two years, the implementation was completed a few months after the meeting. The new program provided an enhanced, standardized, and predictable customer service experience. Agency executives, internal customers, and the IT team itself reported a 180-degree difference in work performance and how it felt to interact with the IT division.

Some believe that caring about how employees feel is a waste of time—they are just there to get the job done, right? But developing a trusting and respectful workplace that

invites difference and promotes learning together without fear isn't about coddling; it's about leadership. It's about running a smart department or organization. These allegedly "soft skills" are directly linked to productivity.

In 2001, Michael Hammer published *Reengineering the Corporation*⁷ and made popular the mantra "the soft stuff IS the hard stuff," which quickly became a shared belief among many corporate executives. An engineer and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Dr. Hammer showed that while the hard skills of making money, minimizing costs, managing quality, and enforcing rules might be working in an organization, the people side might not. He proved that attention to the people side can make or break an

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organization and forever changed how leaders think about employee engagement.

TAKING RISKS

According to the *Washington Business Journal*, the typical manager spends 25–40 percent of his or her time dealing with workplace conflicts⁸—that's the equivalent of one to two work days per week. Conflict in the workplace, defined as one employee or employer having different views and opinions from others, can have a profound effect on morale and productivity, and, in worst cases, can lead to violence. When cooperation and collaboration are low, effects can be measured in lower productivity, customer service, retention, and recruitment ability and higher

organizational and individual stress, unscheduled absences, sick leave, and medical claims.

The purpose of creating Gracious Space at work is so everyone—employees, managers, executives, customers, suppliers, and the board—will work better together in any situation. Sometimes people mistake Gracious Space for polite space, where real, hard conversations and conflict are not welcome. In fact, the reverse is true. Gracious Space is exactly the right container for conflict. Gracious Space does not eliminate conflict but creates a holding environment for discussing areas of discord and stuckness, such as the “elephants” in the room, unhelpful or harmful patterns that groups develop, and working around threatening personalities or big egos. Gracious Space helps us “catch conflict

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upstream” and develop the skills to collaborate better before things erupt.

To do this, workers have to become skilled in “running toward the roar.” This term derives from a story in Africa, where the lions have a specific strategy for hunting. The old, toothless lions go to one side of the savannah and roar! All the other animals hear that and run the other way . . . right into the jaws of the silently waiting hunting lions. So the elders in Africa tell their children: if you are on the savannah and hear the roar, run toward the roar!

This is, of course, counterintuitive, yet the same holds true in organizations. In every organization, there are times when we feel threatened or afraid and our natural reaction

is to run the other way. But sooner or later, we find the threats returning and compounding. Effective leaders realize that survival, success, and true safety come from going toward the place where the fear seems to originate and having the courage to confront those threats.

This is how Horizon House improved its work environment. After four years of improving their capacity to speak openly, invite difference, recognize their own patterns, and learn together in public, the organization conducted a survey of participants. Results included:

- Increased trust among members;
- Increased ability to solve problems collaboratively, without blame;
- Higher employee engagement; and
- A tangible sense that they were living their organizational values on a daily basis.

“For the past four years, our leadership-development program has been inspired and organized around the principles of Gracious Space, a practical guide for working better together,” said Horizon House CEO Bob Anderson. “We have found Gracious Space to be a highly effective leadership tool, but it is not limited to leadership or business settings. In that sense, Gracious Space applies to almost any human interaction. With the pace of change ever more rapid, I predict that people will be seeking more of what Horizon House has developed as its essential ingredient: Gracious Space.”

Using Gracious Space and the accompanying change framework to their greatest potential is about developing individual and group capacity to run toward the roar. To truly transform the work environment, employers and employees need to bring courage to their

collaborations and venture into the unknown together.

NOTES

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2. Interview with KITH Director Jan Dickerman, published on CEL website under Impact/Gracious Space Stories/ "Support in the Workplace."
3. Centre for Conflict Resolution International, http://www.conflictatwork.com/conflict/cost_e.cfm, from Dana, D. (2001). *The Dana measure of financial cost of organizational conflict*. Prairie Village, KS: Mediation Training Institute International.
4. Hughes, P., & Leinaweaver, J. (2010). *The impact of Gracious Space in communities and organizations: Results of an evidence-based research project*. Seattle, WA: Center for Ethical Leadership.
5. Vischer, J. C. (2007, February). The effects of the physical environment on job performance: Towards a theoretical model of workplace stress. *Stress and Health*, pp. 175-184.
6. Interview with Brian Mason, October 2011, Seattle, WA.
7. Hammer, M., & Champy, J. (2001). *Reengineering the corporation: A manifesto for business revolution*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
8. *Washington Business Journal*, May 2005, reported online by State of Virginia, Department of Human Resource Management, Conference Presentations, "An Overview of Employee Dispute Resolutions, Conflict Resolutions Services."

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