

12 Ways to Improve the Odds for a Fulfilling Men's Group

CHECK-IN

By Jaco B. ten Hove and Friends

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"Checking-in" is an almost ubiquitous activity in sharing groups, yet it can sometimes be quite time-consuming with less than inspiring results. A modest survey of some experienced men's group participants turned up the following hints and suggestions:

1. Whoever goes first can set the tone, by modeling vulnerability and keeping comments reasonably short. This can help make the check-in an effectively meaningful time.
2. A period of silence (or appropriate instrumental music) prior to check-in can help us distance ourselves from the way men often communicate in daily interaction. This pause can help deepen a sense of sacred space where risks can be taken in the presence of safety and trust.
3. Having a designated, rotating facilitator can help because someone is then given authority to monitor and offer reminders, as necessary.
4. It can be healthy to vary the check-in process over time or as an experiment. For instance, if whoever is leading has the freedom to try something new or different, he might suggest that one session's check-in use adjectives exclusively.
5. Check in mostly about your current feeling state. Avoid long, chronological accounts of the past week. Discern what is animating you most at that moment.
6. Beware interruptions—even friendly ones—during a man's check-in. Gently but firmly suggest that there be no "cross-talk" or feedback during check-in. (See "Check-in With Sparks" on the other side for another model.) Let each man be in charge of his own sharing, start to finish. Invite group members to offer no advice, judgment, questions or personal testimony that disrupts another's sharing. Focused and patient listening is a gift that fosters an environment in which full authenticity is more likely.
7. Occasionally, in order to expedite check-in (say, to allow for a particular program or agenda later in the meeting), try what has been called a "whip check-in." (This refers to whipping around the circle quickly.) *Take one minute of silence first*, then ask each person to express where he's at in a single word or phrase. It's amazing what can be said in a few words when that's all you've got!
8. Design separate check-in rounds for the past, present, and future.
9. With experienced or on-going groups, sometimes a good check in can include inviting group members to take turns asking each other about significant issues that have been raised by that member in the past.
10. Don't assume that check-in need be a regular routine. Instead, at the onset of each session invite anyone who wants time to share (outside any prepared program) to identify that need right away. That way people don't feel obliged to check-in and perhaps ramble on when they really don't have much to say, taking time from someone who really needs attention.

11. Make it explicit in your group’s “norms” that “passing” during check-in is okay, and model it a few times so that people really know it. Some groups may unthinkingly “require” everyone to check-in, even though a meaningful sharing just may not be appropriate for every group member every meeting.
12. Invite members to identify ongoing personal issues they are struggling with or want the group’s support on, and rotate through these “member-specific” issues as check-in themes for everyone. However, each man would respond to and personalize the particular issue for himself, which could offer valuable insights.

Check-In with “*SPARKS*” — an easy way to engage each other

With a little greater-than-usual investment of time, a group might try this technique, which could, if desired, lead into a full meeting’s worth of personalized, deepening conversation. It works well with both long-established groups and introductory, or even one-time-only meetings.

- Plan on going around the circle twice. The first round, use any kind of relatively short but personal check-in process, *but announce that after that round, each person will be asked to respond to something someone else said that “sparked” them in some personal way.*
- When learning this technique, be sure to remind the group (when about half have checked-in the first time) to listen carefully to the sharings *and* be inwardly attentive for whatever “sparks” might emerge.
- On the second go-around, each person speaks to another in the group (directly, by name), first identifying whichever previously mentioned phrase/experience/emotion it was that “sparked” something in them and then briefly elaborating on what that spark brought up from their life.
- After all have shared their “sparks” during the second round, the group can decide if a further round is desired. (Sometimes a person who has numerous sparks to share can be allowed to mention them before the group moves on.) Often there is already enough juicy material to follow up on for as long as the group might want.
- With practice, a group can either move relatively quickly through the process to allow for other programming, or use it to move into deeper sharing over the full length of a meeting.

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The **Unitarian Universalist Men’s Network** supports a mature, liberal religious masculinity with resources and leadership, and can be contacted via

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