

## **The 'Tree of Culture' activity – a tool for exploring organisational values**

The 'Tree of Culture' is a narrative methodology, based on the 'Tree of Life' (Dulwich Centre, 2006). The 'Tree of Culture' has been adapted by SNAICC as a tool to explore organisational values and create a collective document that can represent an organisation's or service's values.

The aim can be twofold; firstly it can be used for a group of staff, board members or even disparate group brought together, as a way for them to interact and get to know one another, i.e. as a team-building exercise. The second aim is to explore some of the values the participants share, in relation to their work with the organisation/service.

Depending on the size of the group, one collective 'tree' can be developed or, with larger groups, participants can break into smaller groups, who develop their own 'trees'. If the latter approach is taken, the second stage of the exercise is to combine the concepts documented into the one collective document.

### **These are the instructions for multiple groups:**

For this activity, participants form into groups of three to five members. Groups are supplied with paper at least A3 in size and a range of textas, coloured pencils and/or crayons. Each group will need to work in a place where they can comfortably draw, but within earshot of the facilitator. Each group begins the process by drawing a tree; complete with roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves and fruit. The tree can be any kind – a eucalyptus, a palm tree, an oak tree, or a fruit tree ... Encourage the groups to consider that every tree will be different, and there is no 'right' result.

While the trees are being drawn the facilitator asks participants about what words they might use to describe a tree. This draws out the metaphorical aspect of the exercise. Some of the descriptions could be:

*Resilient, strong, flexible (moves with the wind), safe haven (for animals), beautiful, useful (wood, fruit, shade, carbon transfer, eucalyptus and ti-tree oil, bark for canoes, hollow logs for burial), place where bees create honey.*

Once the groups have drawn their trees the facilitator then asks the groups to write down key words in response to a series of questions, which relate to an area of their tree.

The facilitator needs to observe when the groups are close to finishing each part of the exercise, allowing for around 5 – 10 minutes to document their words, before moving on the next question.

## Questions

**Roots** - what is the history of your organisation, service or group? Why did your organisation/service come about?

**Ground** – what is the context in which you do your work at your organisation/service? (Policies, ‘culture’, laws, how the sector appears in the media etc)

**Trunk** – what are your organisation/service’s values? (Mission statements, who they are working for, what are they trying to improve or change)

**Branches** – who is your organisation/service working in partnership with, and what benefits do they bring? (These could be funding, in kind support, skills and knowledge, advisory role etc)

**Leaves** – what are your organisation/service’s projects and policies and how do they contribute your sector/community? (Advocacy, resources, policy, networking, delivering training etc)

**Fruits** – what are the gifts you, as individuals, gain, and what do you get out of working with your organisation/service? (educational opportunities, training, networking, personal skills, travel, role modelling, personal contribution etc)

Once the tree is complete each group, in turn, then presents their tree and the concepts it documents to the other groups. Trees are then pinned up together to form a ‘Forest of Culture’.

***This part of the exercise can take 10 minutes or so for each group.***

Once all groups have presented and the ‘forest’ is complete, the facilitator asks the groups to name the words, or metaphors, that can be used to describe a forest:

*A place of beauty, wonder, a place where animals and people can forage, live, and breed; a place of safety, where small trees can grow up strong, safe from weather, a creator of oxygen – the lungs of the earth, a resource for timber, kindling, fruit, flowers, nuts, places of play and adventure and tree houses ....*

The next part of the exercise, for multiple groups, is to ‘combine’ the key words and concepts on to one large tree, (that has been pre-drawn). This tree then represents the collective values of the organisation/service. Each group can be responsible for one part of the tree, eg roots, and needs to gather the key concepts that were represented on all of the group’s trees.

Tip: Make the collective document as decorative as possible. Get the best artist in your organisation to draw the tree on a large sheet of high quality paper, available at an art store. Groups can be supplied with coloured paper shapes, representing the leaves, and fruit, for example, and on which their words are written.

This final collective document can be framed and displayed in a prominent place in the organisation. It can also be photographed and the image photocopied on a colour copier as a poster and given to each of the participants as a visual reminder of the team-building process they undertook and as a way of keeping the organisation or service's shared values in front of them.

The exercise can end there, but there is also the option to expand the exercise to talk about the hazards that 'forests' are subject to. Again, this is a metaphor that leads to speaking about the hazards the group face in their work.

## **Hazards**

The facilitator asks; forests face many hazards – can you name some of them? Some of the descriptions might be:

*Storms, fires, lightening, logging, diseases, drought, erosion, floods, poisons, clearing, bulldozers, rabbits, 'progress'.*

The facilitator asks; is it the forest's fault? What can forests do to stand up to the hazards that they face? Some of the descriptions might be:

*Put down deeper roots, sprout after fire, trees can re-coppice after they have been pruned, seeds regenerate after fire. As a forest trees protect other trees from the wind, allowing the smaller trees to grow up towards the light.*

The facilitator asks; what are some of the hazards that your organisation/service faces, or could face?

As participants call out their ideas, these words and phrases are documented by a scribe (either on a whiteboard that has a printable facility or on butcher's paper, so that a record of them can be kept.)

The facilitator speaks of the many strategies that the organisation/service has for overcoming hazards. The group shares what some of those could be.

*These documented by a scribe as 'our resiliencies'.*

The group is asked to share what might be their hopes and dreams for the organisation/service?

*These hopes and dreams are documented by a scribe.*

## Conclusion

*'When the oak-tree is felled, the whole forest echoes with it; but a hundred acorns are planted silently by some unnoticed breeze.'*

*Thomas Carlyle*

After documenting a substantial list of hopes and dreams, the facilitator reminds the participants that by working together, in strength, they can overcome many of the hazards that they face, acknowledging the amazing array of strengths, resiliencies, experiences, people and organisations that support them. The facilitators sums up the hopes and dreams that are held by the organisation and the work that is done to fulfil those hopes and dreams every day, in spite of the obstacles.

The facilitator acknowledges the Forest of Culture that participants bring to the work they do, within their sector and as part of the community.

If you try this activity with your organisation, please give us feedback by contacting Jane and SNAICC.

*'Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.'*

*- Abraham Lincoln*

### **Delivering the 'Tree of Culture'; things facilitators need to be mindful of when delivering with Aboriginal participants**

The 'Tree of Culture' is a narrative methodology based on the Tree of Life (Dulwich Centre, 2006). It has been designed to create a collective document which records, through a series of questions relating to areas of the 'Tree', the history of our cultural influences. Although this method uses a strengths-based approach, facilitators must acknowledge the collective trauma Aboriginal people have experienced since colonisation. Participants may have experienced it themselves, or through family members or their communities. Even a process such as the 'Tree of Culture', which aims to document the positive influences in a participant's life, may bring up feelings of trauma, loss and grief, as they reflect upon their past. Facilitators, especially if they are not trained counsellors, need to be sensitive to those times when participants may be overwhelmed or triggered by negative memories from the past. As a facilitator you may choose to have an Aboriginal counsellor, such as those who may operate out of a local Aboriginal Health Service or Co-op, on standby by phone, should participants need to talk about issues that arise as a result of this process. Should the group need to debrief, individually or as a group, the counsellor may need to be available to attend in person, so it may be useful to check in after the session to see if participants think they could benefit from debriefing.

***That said, culture and art can be healing, and the 'Tree of Culture' methodology incorporates both. The 'Tree of Culture' can be a powerful tool to enhance team building, wellbeing and can be FUN!!!!***

*-Use the tree image on the following page to get started..*



