

Guide – Clearing Procedure

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Text adapted from Maeve Gavin, Deborah Benham, Amy Downing and Ruth Bradley 2012

What is a Clearing?

A Clearing is a procedure where a 'charge' and its 'trigger' are recognised and explored.

An emotional 'charge' is a feeling of holding an unpleasant or uncomfortable emotion (sadness, anger, discomfort, confusion) toward another person, as a result of one or more interactions or incidents with them. The term derives from the idea that emotions can be negatively or positively charged with electricity or energy. It can take some time for an emotional charge to build up -- to the point where it feels like something is under pressure and could leak out or explode. An individual may be initially unconscious of many of the past psychological reasons contributing to a charge.

A 'trigger' is a specific subject or interaction which causes a charge in the present. It can result in an emotional reaction to something someone said or did.

For example: “J. said I am always late, and that's a big trigger for me.” or “your behaviour triggered me, and I got upset’.

What is the difference between offering feedback and requesting a Clearing?

Offering constructive feedback is a process of sharing information with the intention of helping someone become more aware of a behaviour or pattern which may have affected an individual or a group. Feedback is seldom accompanied by a charge. Feedback is ideally neutral, and expressed with the best interests of the individual or the group in mind (see [Offering & Receiving Feedback](#)). Clearings are helpful when a relationship with someone is feeling more heated or tense, and your thoughts and feelings about the other person may be accompanied by unchecked assumptions and stories about them.

Examples of feedback:

“When you speak very fast, I miss some of the meaning of what you're saying. I experience this as frustrating and sometimes overwhelming. If you slowed down your speech, I would be able to listen and understand better. This could be helpful for both of us, and the rest of the group.”

“I notice that you're talking about B. a lot and seem unhappy. I know we've agreed to talk to people rather than about them, so I'm wondering what's happening for you at the moment? I wonder if you've spoken to B. directly about how you're feeling, or if there's something getting in the way of that?”

Example of where a Clearing may be needed:

“I feel so hurt and angry with M. I can barely be in the same room with them at the moment. They just don't respect me or value my work.”

Why request a Clearing?

A Clearing is intended to address a conflict between two individuals. Other tensions, like those around group dynamics, roles, or a systemic organisational issue, can be addressed by other group processes, including some from shared governance.

Clearings can be an element of a group developing a 'feedback culture' (see [Feedback Culture](#)). It is common for individuals working in collaborative groups to regularly feel tension, friction, or conflict with each other. Ideally, individuals can most frequently offer each other constructive feedback, receive it well, learn from it, and make adjustments. Sometimes, however, a tension can develop into a charge. Ideally this happens infrequently.

A collaborative group culture prioritises both individual well-being and relationships with others. A charge can prevent two people from having a good working relationship. A Clearing can often help to remove misunderstandings and increase empathy, so that two people can begin to feel good about their working relationship.

A Clearing procedure can provide a well held and structured process for those times when it is not enough to simply offer feedback.

Preparations for Clearing

BEFORE

Personal Considerations

Take responsibility for understanding yourself. Consider your personal history, patterns, past difficulties and issues ([see Personal Reflection](#)). Explore your own 'triggers', edges, sensitivities, limiting beliefs, or invented stories. For many people, these are common. Some of yours may have arisen in previous situations. Be prepared to explain some of your patterns, and their effects on the situation, during the Clearing.

Find a way to quiet your mind and emotions. Re-centre yourself ([see Mindfulness: Re-Centering](#)) and find personal balance or peace. Spend some time using any personal tools which help you to regain a balanced emotional state. These may include meditation, connecting with nature, physical exercise, or talking with someone you trust.

If you are struggling to re-centre yourself, or to understand your part in the situation, try asking for help from someone you feel comfortable with, and who will be honest with you ([see Seeking Support](#)). Make an agreement that anything you say will remain confidential. Explain what has happened and ask them to reflect on your situation. Sometimes others can see your awareness gaps better than you can yourself.

Try to avoid bringing strong or uncomfortable emotions into a Clearing. This can create defensiveness from the other person and hinder a useful outcome. Give your strong emotions some time and space in advance ([see Making Space for Uncomfortable Emotions](#)). If you need to release some emotions, like anger or frustration, ask someone you feel safe with to witness and hold space for you. Make an agreement with your witness that anything you express during this time will stay confidential. Inside this agreed space and time, ask for and give yourself permission to express or 'vent' your strong emotions, maybe even using words that are aggressive or confused. This can be an important part of raising your self-awareness and restoring peace. Afterwards, during the Clearing, you may be able to describe your emotions more calmly and clearly, in a way the other person can better receive.

Align to your best intentions to find the best outcome for all ([see Connection to Self, Others, & World](#)). Acknowledge your own emotions and the impact of the situation on yourself. Try to imagine what a good outcome for everyone involved could look like. Try to remain aligned with this perspective during the Clearing.

Trust your gut. It's normal to be a little nervous before a Clearing. If, however, you are experiencing extreme emotions or physical discomfort (headache, nausea, sleeplessness, etc.) and are certain you will not be at your best, it's OK to say 'no' to the Clearing for now ([see Inner Feedback for Personal Resilience](#), [see Respecting 'Yes' and 'No'](#)). You can reschedule the Clearing and spend more time preparing, to get into a more centered state.

Practical Considerations

- **Timing:** Find a time convenient and comfortable for all parties where no one will feel pressured or rushed. Agree on a time limit. A clear boundary will prevent the Clearing from becoming too long or exhausting. During the Clearing, speak with accuracy and economy. If more time is needed, schedule another session.
- **Location:** Find a place convenient and comfortable for all parties. What kind of space feels neutral, good or supportive for everyone? Somewhere outside? Also, consider which positioning feels best: side by side? face to face?
- If it is supportive, add flowers, a bowl of water or salt, or a candle. Beautiful or ceremonial items can help create a sense of respect, safety and positivity.
- **Invited Parties:** Make certain both participants feel comfortable with everyone invited, and that all parties know their role in advance. A Facilitator can help open and close the space, maintain the pace, and guide the Clearing Procedure. Additional support people or 'Allies' can be invited to lend participants energetic and moral support. Allies can also help to suggest words if speech becomes difficult.
- **Choosing a Facilitator:** Before arranging a Clearing, make certain there is no charge between any of the participants and the Facilitator. If there are any issues, find another Facilitator. Ideally choose a Facilitator who feels comfortable holding safe spaces, and has some experience with this Clearing procedure or other conflict resolution processes.

DURING

Notes for Facilitators

- Take time to make participants feel comfortable and set a respectful, positive atmosphere. Actively guide the Clearing through the steps (see 9 Steps below).
- Use the procedure flexibly, if that serves the Clearing. e.g. step 8, responding, does not have to come last; it can happen several times between other steps. Try to ensure that most steps happen, while maybe giving more time to some than others (see 9 Steps below).
- Insist that the participants be very specific with their data.
- Offer regular opportunities for both parties to speak and listen. Encourage them not to interrupt each other.
- Ask good questions that help the process stay or get back on track: e.g. 'Is that an emotion, or could you be straying into a story you are inventing about this person?'
- State clearly, gently, and firmly whenever you observe a miscommunication or confusion arising. Let participants know that you will occasionally interrupt or intervene for this purpose.

Notes for Participants

- Speak using your 'best words': Be kind. Be mindful. For example: ask for help investigating the 'charge' to understand the situation better, rather than saying 'I have a problem with you'. This will help reduce defensiveness and increase a shared attitude of curiosity.
- Take your time and discuss the issue slowly. This encourages speaking truthfully from the heart.
- Get curious whenever there is a charge. Instead of avoiding or defending, investigate the charge. For example: imagine yourself displaying the exact behaviour or attitude which has generated the charge. Does that feel uncomfortable? Does it clash with your values or beliefs? Is this a behaviour or attitude that you wish you were more comfortable with? You might learn something about yourself.
- More relaxed body language will help everyone to speak more gently and may help the conversation to move more easily. Get comfortable. Breathe from your belly. Use a soft focus and peripheral vision rather than staring at each other with intensity.
- If strong, confusing, or overwhelming emotions arise, notice and name this. You can pause, ask for help, or take a break.

Clearing Procedure – In Nine Steps

1) Create a respectful and positive environment: This step can vary depending on context, the relationship of the people present, and what you believe will best serve this aim. This step can help increase good intentions and positive emotions, and support a more successful outcome. Examples may include:

(i) reviewing shared agreements that affect conduct and communication, e.g. to work together and to be compassionate.

(ii) sharing respect or appreciation for each other, particularly if the participants usually have a good relationship.

(iii) focus on a wider context, e.g. finding a way forward so you can work together, and how this may benefit any larger group you are part of.

2) Data & Facts: Outline what happened to create the 'charge,' the unpleasant emotions you are holding. Be clear, honest, and accurate. Avoid large generalisations ("you always do that," "I've told you a thousand times"). Allow the other person to respond. There may have been an unknown miscommunication which, when revealed, eliminates the 'charge.'

3) Your Emotions: Using one of the five basic emotions - sad (hurt), mad (angry), glad (happy), bad (shame), scared. Describe how the situation made you feel ([see Guide to Emotions](#), [see Knowing What I Feel](#)). This helps increase empathy and promotes understanding of the effects of our actions ([see Empathy & Compassion](#)).

4) Your Judgments: Conflicts that involve uncomfortable emotions commonly lead to unconscious judgments based on assumptions. Notice your judgments and speak them aloud. Get curious about whether your assumptions are untrue. e.g. “When you spoke to me sharply, I felt afraid that you no longer respect me.” “What? I was preoccupied with something personal, did I speak sharply to you? I do respect you!”

5) Your Regrets: Share whatever you have done (or not done) that may have increased the conflict or neglected the relationship. “I regret that I haven’t had more time to connect with you.” “I regret not tending our relationship.”

6) Inner Reflection: Reflect on which part of the 'charge' may be coming from you.

- The Past: Do you have a history, behavioural pattern, or family dynamic that could increase your sensitivity to the situation? Observe yourself and take responsibility for your part. e.g. “I am sensitive about receiving criticism, because my father was very critical, so I have a hard time with it.”

- Emotional Needs: Everyone has emotional needs (love, belonging, appreciation)([see Guide to Emotions](#), see [Compassionate Communication](#)). An unmet emotional need can develop into a 'charge.' Determine if you have any unmet emotional needs in your situation. Speaking aloud your emotional needs can increase understanding and empathy ([see Empathy & Compassion](#)).

7) Requests: Ask for a behaviour change or follow up actions. What will help to resolve or heal the issue? e.g. “Can we spend time once a week and get to know each other better?” or “I would love it if you could remember that I work more slowly than you. Can you be patient with me while I learn?”

8) The Other Person - Active Listening, Mirroring, and Responding: At regular intervals allow the other person to respond. Listen to their response fully and from the heart. When each person has finished speaking, summarise what you have heard, so each can feel understood. If you feel there is any truth in their judgment (e.g. you were angry with them, or you were impatient), take responsibility and explain why.

9) Gratitude: Say thank you, appreciate the process, whatever progress you have made, and close.

References

Lineage

This document describing the Clearing process is an emerging piece of work with roots from many compassionate communication sources. Over the last few years it has been shaped into this and similar forms by practitioners from 8 Shields and the Art of Mentoring - an international movement for deep nature connection and nature based community building. The process has been used successfully across a wide variety of groups, events and organisations including Art of Mentoring camps, co-housings, communities, nature connection and wilderness schools and residential education centres. The people cited at the top of this document are those who have been most involved in shaping the current version of this process.