

GROUP HEALTH FOUNDATION

Lessons Learned from Community Engagement



Masc On / Masc Off (MOMO) Retreat in May 2018

DESCRIPTION OF ORGANIZATION

Masc On/ Masc Off (MOMO) is a people of color masculinities circle in Seattle. The practice seeks to support grassroots people of color leaders with best practices regarding abolishing patriarchy, healing masculinities, and creating social connection among masculine leaning people of color in order for them to serve the people in a more meaningful way.

Our mission is to abolish patriarchy. To provide a collective people of color centered space to address patriarchy and male-supremacy.

GROUP HEALTH FOUNDATION

Lessons Learned from Community Engagement

1. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We have purposefully grown at a slow rate and understand that the work we are doing is for the long-term. There is considerable literature that demonstrates the clinical validity of using talking circles in Native American communities, being that we are also indigenous people that exist in diaspora, we have found that this method is essential to healing masculinities and the stress and life experiences that our focus population lives (Mehl-Madrona et al, 2014).

Beyond the practice of a regular talking circle that we refer to as a “masculinity circle,” we have also valued creating social time together with participants. According to a team of scientists from Utah who conducted a meta-study comparing social relationships and mortality risk, they found that participants with stronger social relationships had a 50% higher likelihood of survival in terms of years of life (Smith et al, 2010). Our masculinity circles in this way are supported by scientific data that confirm that our practices to heal functional and structural aspects of our social relationships will increase the overall wellbeing of our membership in terms of years of life.

2. COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

The masculinity circle is a tried and true technique for better behavioral health that has seen success across the continent by similar anti-patriarchy spaces that have emerged in people of color and indigenous communities. We are most closely influenced by our personal relationship to a masculinity circle based in East Los Angeles that is run by an indigenous Mexican community but is open to members of their entire community. Their structure has been in operation for over a decade and is a part of the *Mujeres de Maiz* organization. Their

GROUP HEALTH FOUNDATION

Lessons Learned from Community Engagement

circles run year-round and can be as big as 20 people at a time, and they are linked to a femininity circle that regularly provides witnesses to facilitate cross-communication and accountability for the whole community.

Here in Washington, we have from the beginning co-designed and co-created solutions that work for all members of our communities. The first masculinity circles in 2014 were intergenerational, there were five masculine identified participants, two adult witnesses and one child witness who helped center the space who did not identify as masculine themselves. They spent the duration of the talking circle making tobacco bundles as gifts to the participants and entered in the conversation to provide a synthesis of the issues that were discussed at that circle. The space was centered with an altar and we used the smudging stick of sage as our “talking stick”.

Our community was included through the planning stages for the circle. Luzviminda Carpenter, a community activist who had a tremendous amount of intellectual and practical wealth in regard to past community accountability experiments in Seattle, housed the first masculinity circles for people of color as a healing project of the *WonderLab*, a grassroots organization in Seattle. Because the main facilitator/ organizer of the space, Tomas A. Madrigal fell ill, the project fell into a hiatus and was released from *WonderLab* in the spring of 2014. The masculinity circle for people of color was revived through the support and mentorship of *Women of Color Speak Out*, a local grassroots organization in Seattle in the fall of 2014. The leadership of this organization met with five men of color, three of which remain part of the

GROUP HEALTH FOUNDATION

Lessons Learned from Community Engagement

membership of the current Masc On/ Masc Off (MOMO) iteration and a new series of masculinity circles was launched.

3. ENDING OPPRESSION

This is an important matter that we necessarily have to address if we are claiming our mission to be to dismantle patriarchy, one of the main systems of oppression in our society. One of the ways we have attempted to address inequities in our community engagement work is to attempt to take on as much of the emotional labor needed by our masculine identified participants upon ourselves. Mutual support to undo lifelong habits formed around what we term “deep patriarchy” is central to our method of addressing the inequity of having feminine identified members of our community do that emotional labor for masculine identified members of the community all the time. We are not perfect at this practice yet having vocalized it, we are making progress in this area.

4. SUCCESS

Our organizations patience, reflectiveness, openness to criticism, and desire to be data-driven has helped perpetuate our existence. We can't say that we are successful beyond still existing and doing the work that needs to be done. Faith and commitment, being that the ultimate goal of this group is to abolish patriarchy in its internalized, externalized, institutionalized and systemic forms.

Our organizational structure has allowed us to maintain authentic community relationships, since we transformed into a series, participants have been required to recommit over and over again towards the abolition of patriarchy, making this a core organizational

GROUP HEALTH FOUNDATION

Lessons Learned from Community Engagement

shared value that allows us to be in relationship with our mentors, even when we don't live up to that value.

We are such a small grassroots organization that we do not have staff nor a board of directors. We do have consistent facilitators that have been trained in facilitation through movement spaces and well-known organizations in our community. We continue to be mentored by Women of Color Speak Out, members of API Chaya and the Black Power Epicenter.

5. CHALLENGES

One of our most significant challenges has become a strength. We have not been able to convene a routine masculinity circle for longer than 5 meetings at any given time. We first saw this as a challenge or misstep. Through the creativity of our facilitators and planning team, we came to realize that we could purposefully run series of masculinity circles on a year-round basis that were flexible enough for us to keep our membership engaged, and another added plus was that the participants would necessarily have to re-commit to abolishing patriarchy on a regular basis. We realized that because of the heaviness of dismantling patriarchy and toxic masculinity, that we could sustain a talking circle for a series of meetings and then required a small break. We have since completed several “series” of masculinity circles and our membership has been slowly growing. This development came with the mentorship and support of Priya Rai of *API Chaya*, a harm reduction organization in Seattle, who mentored our facilitation team towards developing this emergent strategy towards the sustainability of the masculinity circles.

GROUP HEALTH FOUNDATION

Lessons Learned from Community Engagement

Another area that our organization must address that is a current challenge is figuring out how to manage money in a way that is equitable to our community. To do this we have been in communication with our mentor organizations, but also have decided to reserve one meeting a month to address organizational needs.

6. HOPE FOR HEALTH EQUITY

Being awarded this operational grant has fast-forwarded our organizational process. The hope that this gives for a future that is more equitable is that we have had to reflect upon the masculinity circles and really value them and see them as a practice that we definitely want to continue to prioritize regardless of any other organizational need. We have also prioritized strengthening our social relationships to one another and with our mentors as we move forward.

We have committed to have the masculinity circles meet every other week and be independent from any organizational conversations, we have reserved a separate meeting to discuss organizational needs and have committed to reserve time every calendar month for our membership to engage in a social activity.

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