

A Case Study on Holding Space

Learning to Listen; Listening to Learn

The idea of holding space has proved one of the most powerful for colleagues across the Teach For All network, but it is also one of the hardest to define or translate. We sat down with Maliha Fawzia, Teach For Bangladesh's program director, as well as Steffy Ramos and Paola Ponciana from Enseña Ecuador, to hear what holding space means for them, the role it has played in the evolution of their organizations, and what it takes to develop this practice.

HOLDING SPACE TO TRANSFORM RELATIONSHIPS

"Holding space means treating all the participants as human," says Maliha Fawzia of Teach For Bangladesh. "It means we listen to each other, and we feel beyond your words. That means everyone will have their own emotions, histories, and understandings. For me, holding spaces comes with all these other human elements, which I sometimes find missing in other technical spaces."

The practice of holding space has changed how Maliha approaches her check-ins as a manager. "My check-ins in the past were more transactional — you tell me things, I tell you things. It was effective, but it was on a surface level." More difficult emotions would tend not to surface. "For example, I was really annoyed about an issue with this person. I would not tell them, but it would be on the back of my mind, draining my energy during the check-in."

As they engaged more with the practice of holding space, check-ins started to change. "Often my managees come to me feeling very overwhelmed," says Maliha. **"How do you hold spaces to let them feel their feelings? Out of that process we can hear what they want to do. Check-ins these days have got more complex and more difficult. It takes more time, but I think it's working."**

Paola Ponciana from Enseña Ecuador has also found holding space useful in check-ins. One challenge in doing this has been growing more comfortable with silence. "Silence doesn't mean there's nothing else to say and the meeting's over," says Paola. "It was really stressful for me being in silence. I always want there to be more questions. **Suddenly I noticed that silence is powerful not only to have space for a personal moment but also to process what is going on in the meeting or the co-creation process.**"

WHAT IS "HOLDING SPACE"?

One of the core practices of collective leadership is holding space — the ability to design and maintain conditions that enable dialogue and learning. Learn more about the Collective Leadership and Learning tool.

Related competencies: patience, non-judgement, deep listening, building relationships.

Where it is useful: Check-ins, team meetings, planning sessions, co-creation.



Maliha Fawzia (left) of Teach For Bangladesh

HOLDING SPACE TO BUILD A SHARED SENSE OF PURPOSE

Enseña Ecuador were trying to build a shared sense of purpose among staff and fellows. “I think we are working in a living system,” says Steffy Ramos, “and we need to be flexible to the changes that might happen. Our theory of leadership and logic model are not static products, but living documents. We are always in this learning process.” Given this perspective, holding space has proved a vital tool. “We are trying to hold spaces with our fellows so that we are able to create this cycle of learning.”

One example of this was a listening tour the Enseña Ecuador staff conducted. “We went to the Amazon to visit seven fellows,” says Steffy. “One of the things that was very powerful in that visit was that they were able to understand that we were all learners in that space.” In the past, fellows might have “expected the organisation to have all the answers,” says Steffy. But now, they were clear that their aim was to hold space to collectively explore a way forward.

Similarly, for Teach For Bangladesh, holding space has enabled more to surface in group discussions. **“When we hold space there is less judgement, fewer complaints,”** says Maliha. **“We see people showing up authentically. We see people not driven by fear.”** For example, as a staff team, if we are discussing what we want for fellows in the next quarter, we would rather hold a space for a discussion that is not so technical. People can share, “This is what I think, and I don’t think sending this message in this way to fellows work’. We are hearing concerns more clearly than we have done before.”

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– Maliha Fawzia,
Teach For Bangladesh

HOLDING SPACE AS A JOURNEY OF SELF-AWARENESS

A key challenge in holding space, Maliha says, is “How do you appreciate and include?” This is not easy. **“In order to hold space for others,”** says Maliha, **“you need to have practiced a lot, and to be self-aware enough that you can support others.”** This led to a choice to prioritise developing their team. “First we need to build our team, and strengthen the practice. Unless you are somebody who is embodying this, it is very hard to coach someone else,” says Maliha.

Part of this work, has been helping people to deepen their self-awareness, as opposed to seeing problems as something ‘out there’ to fix. “For example,” says Maliha, “a coach comes to me and says ‘I just hate this fellow, and this fellow is not listening to me, I keep giving him flexibility with his deadlines, but nothing is getting done’. Before I would ask: ‘What is this fellow’s motivation? ‘What is it they want to do?’ But now I would ask: ‘How are you feeling about this?’ ‘How are you feeling right now?’ ‘What is out there that makes you so angry?’ And then I would go deeper. It goes beyond giving next steps. It helps the person being coached feel more confident and emotionally supported.”

For Paola Ponciana from Enseña Ecuador, the heart of this has been a journey to become more present in spaces, and a realisation that the quality of the space you hold for others will never exceed the quality of space you hold for yourself. Being genuinely open to hold space can be challenging as many of us have been trained to approach conversations in a more closed manner. Paola noticed that her background in the private sector, working in marketing, had trained her to be transactional in meetings. “I noticed that the listening tours were just to get the answers we need and then go back. It was not a reciprocal space. It was just ‘Give me what I need to create the vision, then go back to your activity’. I start thinking about not just having closed questions, and having open questions instead. This mindset changed a lot. We started holding spaces so we were creating together.”

Paola says, “I noticed when I am in meetings I am thinking about other stuff I have to do, or I need to ask quick questions to finish this as fast as I can because I have to do another thing. But then I noticed it’s not very powerful to be in a space not 100%. So one of the things I have been practicing is to be present in every space for real. I’m still on a journey, I don’t have the whole mindset to create good spaces, but I think we are on the path to achieve this, and I see that in other team members as well.”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What is gained by holding space for dialogue and learning? What is lost?

What competencies and perspective do you think are important for holding space well?

What do you find most difficult about holding space? What elements of your training or education do you think may have contributed to these challenges?

When have you experienced space being held well? What was the impact of that experience?

In what ways do you think your work, and that of your organisation, would benefit from holding space? Why?