From Gigi Coyle on Council Practice:

COUNCIL is about relationship. It is about creating an experience of bonding, empathy, teamwork, trust, rapport, fellowship, community, and ultimately love.

LISTENING FROM THE HEART
- **Seek understanding** (vs. agreement)
- **Accept others as they are** (vs. fixing them)
- **Empathize** (vs. criticize or judge)
- **Read the field** (the group’s energy & mood)
- **Stay centered** (calm your “monkey mind”)
- **Stay present** (vs. withdrawing emotionally)
- **Witness your internal responses** & put them on “hold”
- **Honor feelings** (both yours & the others’)
- **Find the gift in the wound**

SPEAKING FROM THE HEART
- **Use “I” statements** (vs. “you” – avoid characterizing others’ thoughts & feelings)
- **Tell your personal story** (vs. philosophizing)
- **Favor feelings** over mere facts & opinions
- **Reveal your process** (how you got where you are) as well as your conclusions
- **Tell the fullest possible truth** (vs. edited truths)
- **Cut to the chase** (avoid “fill” or “thinking out loud”)
- **Be spontaneous** (vs. rehearsing or editing)
- **Move toward vulnerability** (vs. away from it)
- **Trust your listeners & the circle**
- **Honor the Still Small Voice Within**

READING THE FIELD

The practice of council calls for the deepest listening. This includes listening for what is said “between the lines,” for the collective soul of the circle. We speak of this kind of attention as **reading the field**.

In practical terms, reading the field means being aware of the tone, energy, the needs, and intentions, as well as the ever-changing overall progress of the circle as a whole, even as we are speaking ourselves or listening to others.

This practice, of reading the field, is the essence of **witnessing**. It is a challenge specific to council to be both participant and witness simultaneously, sharing **who I am** in the context of a growing awareness of **who we are becoming**.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, this field exerts a powerful influence on what we think, feel, and sense, as well as on the choices we make, large and small. The more aware we can be of our emerging community, the more compassionate and effective we become as individuals.

This is true in life in general.
Following is a handy memory tool for staying mindfully aware of the group’s FIELD:

F = feelings
I = intention
E = energy
L = language (both verbal & body)
D = destiny (where we are evolving to together)

COUNCIL PRACTICES
While there are a variety of council formats for different needs, including consensus, visioning, problem solving, conflict resolution, group learning, peer review, etc., the Don’t interrupt (even by disagreeing in internally).
Be in the moment (avoid rehearsing).
Witness one’s own internal responses & commentary
& let them be until it’s time to speak.
Speak succinctly & from the heart.
Recognize each other as peers.
Seek to reveal & understand our individual positions & assumptions (especially unconscious ones), rather than defending or attacking them.
Seek a collective truth, viewpoint & wisdom from the circle, one greater than that of any individual (including one’s self).
Listen deeply, listen between the lines, listen to what is not being said as well as to what is spoken, listen for what is emerging.
Consider everything that enters the group’s awareness to be part of the process,
including the setting, interruptions, animals or children, sounds, weather & bodily needs.
Favor inquiry over advocacy.
Favor curiosity over opinion.
Favor understanding over self-defense.
Favor building community over scoring points.
Favor being truthful over being right.
Favor trust over doubt.

COUNCIL FORMATS
• BASIC COUNCIL — Talking Piece goes around circle; ideal for assuring that everyone who wants to may speak; good for opening & closing group processes & for assessing the group “mind.” May be “open” or focused on a theme or question.
• WEB — Talking Piece in the middle; speaker picks up Piece when moved, returning it to the center after talking, & so on; good for discovering themes, weaving images, developing the group story or going deeply into specific issues. Requires a slightly higher level of initiative.
• FISH BOWL — 2 to 6 seats in center with Taking Piece; chosen people in seats; outer circle are witnesses; Talking Piece moves among inner group only, until Witness comments at end; good for “hot” issues & encouraging team/group feedback.
• SPIRAL — 3 to 5 seats in center; volunteers flow from outer circle into center seats & back again; one “turn” involves both speaking & listening, that is, listening to the next person after you speak before returning to the outer circle; ideal of developing “spirit of inquiry” within a group & for conflict resolution. Works well for a sense of inclusion in large groups.
• **LEARNING CIRCLE** — A variation on the Basic Council, with at least one round each for the four questions: What happened? How do I feel about what happened? What did I learn? & What will I do differently in the future? If only a small number of the group were involved in the original event, it could be done as a Fish Bowl with the rest of the group as Witnesses.

• **RESPONSE COUNCIL** —
  a. The person holding the Talking Piece may empower brief dialogue with other people, short answers to questions, improvisational moments, etc., all without shuttling the Talking Piece back & forth.
  b. If there is time & space, a person might choose to do more extensive work or exploration by holding the Piece & asking for input or responses from as many people as desired (i.e., from one to the entire circle). Excellent for peer reviews.

• **DYADIC / COUPLES’ COUNCIL** — Two people sit in council & pass the Piece between them, working on an issue, exploring a vision, etc. One or two Witnesses may be present & offer their comments & perspectives, either during or at the end of the process as pre-arranged. If working in a group, as during relationship intensives, Witness Seat(s) may be left open for people to enter intermittently. This form is good for connecting with the essence of the relationship, the “Third Presence,” the bigger picture. (See *Flesh and Spirit*, by Jack Zimmerman and Jaquelyn McCandless.)

• **POPCORN** — The facilitator, or anyone holding the Talking Piece, can invite a Popcorn Council, where any and everyone may speak up with a word or phrase, a brief offering, a sentence or two, on a given theme or subject. The Talking Piece does not need to be shuttled around, but is held by the “inviter.” This is often a good technique for gathering group witness comments, taking a quick poll of where people are, inviting additional themes or issues, or as a closing round at the end of a program or activity. A kind of “group summary” process. A good way to express gratitudes and appreciations.

**COUNCIL ELEMENTS**

**TALKING PIECE**

**ROLE OF THE FACILITATORS** (from *facilitare* meaning “to make easy”)

- To safeguard the integrity of the process.
- To safeguard the sanctity of the “container” (see below).
- To establish & clarify the ground rules before beginning.
- To encourage the flow of group energy.
- To deflect transference away from themselves as leaders & return it back to the circle.
- To assist the circle in clarifying its needs regarding goals & logistics, especially including confidentiality, timeframes, breaks, endings, etc.
- When necessary, to invite or input any “voice” or perspective that may be missing.
- To turn the question to the group when there is doubt as to what to do next.
- Whenever possible, paired facilitators (ideally of both genders) work best.

**ROLE OF THE WITNESS**

- To hold the heart of the group (its highest intentions) foremost in their awareness during the session.
- To maintain a relatively unbiased perspective or eagle's-eye-view of what the
group is engaged in.
• To observe & when invited, to offer feedback on the group’s process & dynamics (vs. content & subject matter).
• The Witness usually remains silent throughout the Council, sharing only at the end, after all participants have finished. The Witness has the “last word,” an honor & a responsibility.

CREATING THE CONTAINER
• Make the physical space beautiful, harmonious, safe & inviting before hand.
• Assure that the emotional space is open, safe & nurturing.
• Assure that there will be no interruptions, including pagers & cell phones.
• Arrange seating in a circle (unless absolutely impossible).
• Avoid conference tables, desks or other furniture in the middle that might serve as a barrier, hiding place, or crutch.
• Honor the center of the circle with symbols & objects meaningful to the group.

OPENINGS
• Mark the sanctity of the process (e.g., light a candle; offer an intention, prayer, or dedication; invite the group’s “blessing” or commitment; place a flower; & so on.).
• Honor the transition from the “real world” & “business as usual” into Council, perhaps with a moment of silence or centering.
• Invite any clearings that people may need to do in order to be fully present.
• Perhaps a check-in or brief open council would bring people together & open the space for sharing deeper issues.

“TURNING INTO THE SKID”
• When circumstances, or a sudden eruption of suppressed issues, feelings or problems takes over & derails the planned agenda,

    go with it. Do not deny or pretend this isn’t happening — often an instinctive response. Instead, embrace the disruption & lead the group toward the learning or opportunity hiding within the chaos. This is known as “turning into the skid” — paradoxically, the best way to avoid an accident when a vehicle skids out of control.

CLOSINGS
• Determine the group’s needs regarding closure (e.g., summary?, next steps?, decisions?, expressions of gratitude?, etc.).
• Acknowledge where the circle is & isn’t. If things are left hanging or incomplete, acknowledge that; if a lot has been accomplished, celebrate.
• Create an opportunity for everyone/anyone to offer a closing comment, perhaps one brief final round, or place the Talking Piece in the center for individuals to add an afterthought.
• Invite any Witnesses present to share at this time.
• Mark the end of the council, e.g., by blowing out the candle.
• Close with some formal or ceremonial gesture: a group thank you, a cheer, a moment of silence...whatever is appropriate.
WHEN & WHEN NOT TO USE COUNCIL

Council can be an effective tool for:

- Discovering the group mind/soul
- Co-visioning
- Arriving at consensus
- Conflict resolution
- Brainstorming
- Aligning the couple, family, group
- Building a sense of trust & teamwork
- “Rhino hunting” & uncovering difficult issues
- A check in — “taking the temperature” of a family or group
- Acknowledgments and recognition
- Confirming the integrity, or wholesomeness, of a decision before implementing
- Returning to “center” when things fall apart
- Embracing differences & diversity

STRAIGHT TALK

- Make “I” statements whenever talking about your own thoughts, beliefs, assumptions and feelings.
- Do not characterize other people’s thoughts, feelings or motivations, unless invited to do so.
  Such expressions as “You don’t understand...,” or “You always think that I....” or “You’re afraid that...” etc., are judgments, not facts, and are certain invitations to trouble. Such character-izations quickly torpedo trust and any sense of mutual inquiry.
- Use “listening checks” when shared understanding is the goal.
  “Let me see if I understand you correctly....”
- Be sure everyone is “on the same page” and “playing the same game” by the same rules.
  Confirm before beginning talking that everyone understands (1) what the process options are, (2) which process is chosen, and (3) what the goal is: e.g., council, open discussion, information sharing, going for a decision, brainstorming, fact-finding, questioning assumptions, reaching consensus, voting/majority rules, expressing doubts, airing differences, seeking buy-in, etc.
- Do not “change games” or rules without first agreeing as a group.
  E.g., don’t go from brainstorming to challenging facts and assumptions without first getting everyone’s buy-in on the new rules. This is especially important when moving from a conversation or argument to a metaconversation (talking about how we are talking), a risky, potentially loaded option without up-front agreement.
- Do not give advice, unless invited to do so.
  Unasked-for advice is almost universally unaccepted and unacceptable, a waste of time. Many people find it offensive and the advice-giver arrogant and demeaning, however well meant their intentions. When people are genuinely ready for new input, they will usually give you clear signals, often explicitly requesting it.
ACTIVE LISTENING

Studies show that most of us spend around 30% of our waking hours listening.

ACTIVE LISTENING involves a conscious choice to create a Win/Win situation. The intention is building common ground, rather than “scoring points,” “being right,” or defending oneself.

GOALS:
• Create Interpersonal Rapport
• Achieve Mutual Understanding
• Build Partnership & Community

GUIDELINES:

1. Come from your Center — Be present & attentive; internally align Mind, Heart, Body & Spirit.
2. Initiate Rapport — Make eye contact; match energy, body language & subject matter with your Partner.
3. Focus on Content — Identify & honor the central theme or subject of the conversation. Stay focused.
4. Seek Understanding — Pay attention. The test is being able to repeat both the content & tone of your Partner’s communication.
5. Suspend Judgment — Set aside evaluation, agreement or disagreement until later; concentrate first on understanding both the letter & the spirit of your partner’s message.
6. Use Listening Checks frequently — From time to time paraphrase what you are hearing and feed it back to your Partner for confirmation. “Let me see if I’ve got this right....”
7. Acknowledge Feelings — Observe & confirm your Partner’s emotional content as well as ideas. “You seem sad (anxious, delighted, angry, etc.) today.” Often there will be additional or even contradictory information being expressed through body language & feelings.
8. Ask Questions — Ask questions rather than only making statements.
9. Resist Distractions — Don’t change the subject or introduce unrelated thoughts or issues.
10. Listen “between the lines” — Be open to the flow of ideas. Listen to what is not being said. Listen for implications as well as facts. Listen for what is emerging.
11. Mutually Agree when “Changing the Game” — If you wish to challenge ideas, offer suggestions, give advice or change subjects, confirm this up front with your Partner before launching into a new agenda or new ground rules.

What you communicate by ACTIVE LISTENING:
• I’m interested in you as a person.
• I respect your thoughts and feelings.
• I feel you have a contribution to make.
• I want to understand.

If people don’t listen to you, you may not be listening to them. To be an effective
communicator, you must assume your responsibility as a listener.

THE ONE WHO LISTENS IS ONE WHO IS LISTENED TO.

GUIDELINES

1. Be genuinely curious and willing to change your viewpoint or assumptions if the evidence points in that direction.
2. Balance speaking with listening. Balance statements with questions.
3. Ask questions of others’ views in order to understand fully.
4. Inquire into the reasoning, evidence and assumptions by which they arrived at their viewpoint or conclusion.
5. Offer up your own reasoning, evidence and assumptions.
6. Invite inquiry into your own position, assumptions and conclusions.
7. Invite divergent or differing points of view from the group.
8. If you arrive at an impasse, or people are reluctant to express their views, inquire if there is anything the group can do together to move things forward. Try whatever the group agrees on, no matter how seemingly irrelevant or “out of left field.” If that doesn’t work, return directly to the Shared Vision and hold a council on the purpose or underlying intention of your group.