

TRAINING FOR CHANGE

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Training after Tough News

By Erika Thorne and Nico Amador, with special thanks to Celia Kutz, Shreya Shah, Daniel Hunter, Nikki Marín Baena, Holly Hammond, Diana Gonzalez, Karen Ridd, Matthew Armstead, Katey Lauer, Betsy Raasch-Gilman, Zein Nakhoda and all others who made contributions to this thread.

Recent events, from major political set-backs to police violence against Black civilians and Indigenous water protectors at Standing Rock, have many of us on the left having to absorb the shock of hard news on an all-too-regular basis. We expect that the days to come will see an escalating number of incidents and announcements that will have more and more participants arriving to our workshops in various states of crisis. As movement trainers, educators and organizers, it's our job to help groups build up their skill and resiliency for weathering these moments.

The recent US presidential election is just one example. Within hours of getting the results announcing Trump's election, almost every Training for Change trainer and many others in our network had to decide how to go forward with the various workshops we were committed to over the next few days, despite the devastation that was live for so many.

Rage, grief, numbness, and fear were right at the surface. The shock that many people expressed right after the election wasn't just an emotional experience. Many of us, trainers and participants alike, experienced the physical effects of exhaustion, fogginess, disorientation, nausea and acute anxiety.

Yet, we also knew that there were reasons to go forward. Not only to keep moving on the urgent work that was underway long before the election results were announced, but because we know that a workshop or classroom can provide a refuge – a place for support and connection, room for expression, and a way to ground in our commitment to action.

Erika Thorne, wrestling with her own emotions that election night, and preparing to fly out for a long workshop the next morning, sent out a communiqué to our network, with options she'd used in the past for groups in grief or shock. A storm of emails followed, with trainers from as far away as Australia adding ideas to the list and reporting back on how the workshops had gone. Not a single workshop collapsed under the weight of these challenges. The series of emails itself became a source of grounding, strength and comfort through the following week. We were not alone; many of us faced similar challenges in our workshops.

The following are some guiding principles and tools that we've used to generate options when a significant portion of the group is likely to be in distress. We share them in the hopes they'll be useful to you in the days ahead.

Welcome the emotional range that might be present – Recognize that reactions and emotions will be different among participants, and the differences will likely be influenced by race, gender, class, culture differences, and each individual's sense of how personally they experience the impact of whatever has happened. Verbally and visibly make space for all by naming and welcoming emotions that might be present (despair, resolve, hopefulness, rage, exhaustion, depression, passion, shock, cynicism, gratitude, love, anger that some people are just waking up to the issues or their urgency, etc.) and/or by using tools like a simple go-around that allows a number of different voices to express what they are thinking or feeling.

Use tools that give you, as the facilitator, a sense of what the group needs – We can guess about how a group is doing, but we might need more information to assess how much we need to adjust. Celia Kutz and Shreya Shah started their workshop off with two spectrums. They asked people to place themselves on a line between “strongly agree/disagree” in response to two prompts: *I’m overwhelmed by the range of emotions I’m feeling this morning* and *It’s challenging for me to be present in the room this morning*. They then debriefed with a discussion about what would help people be present in the room and what requests participants had.

A body-based process can support an emotional process to move forward – Many people experience shock or trauma as feeling stuckness, tightness, or shut down in their bodies. By using kinesthetic activities, we can help people release that feeling in their bodies and clear space for other emotional states. For example, Erika Thorne suggests a game like Moonball, where participants arrange themselves in a circle and take turns hitting a beach ball up into the air, trying to keep it from landing on the ground. Set it up so that as each person hits the ball, they yell out a thought or feeling about whatever’s happening, encouraging competition or other ways for this to get bigger and louder. If you can’t do a game, breathing exercises, gentle stretching, dancing, or anything that creates expansion in the body, can help.

Encourage people into a fuller expression of what they might otherwise deny – Activists carry a strong sense of *should*, that at times will contradict their primary feeling state: “I’m really tired but *I should* show up to the protest.” “I’m enraged but what I *should* be doing is to ground in love.” “I don’t feel hopeful but I *should* express hopefulness to support the people around me.” When we are torn between two impulses, we are less likely to think and act at our full potential. Trainers can help the part of people that is more easily denied to find voice. Daniel Hunter and Nikki Marin Baena started a workshop with a mingle where they did two rounds, first: *Where else would you like to be today instead of here?* Then: *What value can you get in being here anyway?* This helped people locate a reason to stick out the workshop, without disavowing the part of them that didn’t want to be there.

Talking isn’t always the best way for a group to process - Matthew Armstead and Karen Ridd reminded us that singing, or similar modes like chanting, prayer, or even just listening to music are ways for groups to process. Moving out of the cognitive level can support some people to access emotional or spiritual resources. After an emotional evening in a workshop for people of color, trainer Shreya Shah encouraged people to throw their chairs at a wall to support further release and processing of their anger.

Break down isolation and create strong support systems – One response to trauma is to feel that we are alone in what we’re experiencing. Help people through that by using buddy systems, pair shares, and checking in with individual participants during meals or breaks. Another tool is “Stand-Up/Sit Down” or “Hands Up/Hands Down” where any member of the group can say, *Who else... (is feeling pissed off, is scared for their family, wants a revolution)* and other members of the group can stand up or raise their hand if they agree. For a more active version, try “Get On The Bus if You...”, in which people move to join the speaker on an imaginary bus in the front. If the next speaker says something that’s not true for them, they return to their place in the room. All the back-and-forth can unleash energy, loud voices and laughter.

Use rituals to help move the energy through – a ritual doesn’t have to be a solemn, stylized process. Even groups who would resist the word “ritual” may welcome a symbolic way to express emotions. Zein Nakhoda and Erika Thorne started a retreat with a blazing bonfire. After

a little framing about how some may be feeling like a wildfire has overtaken their lives, they invited people to draw or write their feelings, or find a natural object in the surrounding field. Next, they invited people to fuel this fire, placing their drawings or objects in it, speaking briefly about them as they did. People fully embraced the transformative power of fire. The structure made room for a wide range of responses. Even in indoor settings, similar rituals can be created through the use of a candle, bowl of water, or plant that people can leave written notes or objects around as a ritual and to create a centerpiece that can be a sacred place in the room.

Allow a group to experience its resiliency – We may adjust our agendas to create a structure at the beginning or at different points of the workshop where participants can get support for whatever their feeling. But we should be careful not to quickly abandon the goals of the workshop out of a care-taker instinct or a belief that the group can't push through. In pretty much every workshop we did after the election, trainers used some of the methods described, and then went on to have hugely productive workshops. As movement trainers, it's critical that we allow groups to have this kind of success -- it helps counter any internalized narratives about our weakness or failure, and helps people develop the skills to move more fluidly between various emotional states. The workshop is one place where activists can learn that it's possible to feel sunk at one moment and then find the will to keep fighting in the next.