Book Group for Work  
Program Guidelines

The Maine Humanities Council has over twenty years of experience building Book Groups where people who work together have a chance to hear themselves think. These guidelines are intended to help each Book Group be successful and valuable to participants and to the Organization.

Each Book Group program consists of four or five discussions, held in a meeting space at or convenient to the Organization. Each discussion lasts 1½ to 2 hours and is accompanied by snacks or a light meal, provided by the Organization or arranged to be provided pot-luck.

1) Participants:

• The optimal size for a Book Group tends to be between 10 and 25 participants. The aim is to have sufficient perspectives for a robust conversation, on the one hand, and sufficient space for all present to speak, on the other.

• The Book Group is open to all who work in the Organization, and we encourage invitations to community partners who share in the work the Organization does. Book Groups are richest when participants from many departments and occupations in the Organization and surrounding community attend.

• Participants are not, however, expected to represent their department, role, or organizational affiliation in Book Group. Rather, all who attend do so as themselves, and speak only on their own behalf. Regardless of normal Organizational practice, first names are used among participants during Book Group.

• Participation in Book Group is free of charge. If the Organization asks that participants acquire the book(s), provision should be made to ensure that this cost is not a barrier to participation (see below on Readings).

2) Book Group Liaison:

A member of the Organization’s staff must be willing to serve as Book Group Liaison. The Book Group Liaison is MHC’s primary contact within the Organization, and the on-site linchpin of the Book Group. Book Group Liaisons are strongly encouraged to find one or two people to assist them, especially with outreach to potential participants.

The Book Group Liaison
• Works with MHC staff and the facilitator to
  o identify issues and themes important to participants
  o choose appropriate meeting dates and times
• Arranges meeting spaces (and snacks / suppers)
• Arranges publicity, with MHC support
• Distributes MHC-supplied readings to participants
• Organizes acquisition of books for participants
• Assists MHC with program evaluations (results are shared with the Organization)
2) Book Group Liaison continued:

- Completes all necessary MHC paperwork, including records of participant registration and attendance; Book Group Liaison’s program reflection; in-kind contribution record
- Communicates regularly with MHC staff and the facilitator about how Book Group is going, and about any issues that arise.

3) Readings:

Each reading list is intended to invite consideration of large issues relevant to people’s lives from a wide range of perspectives and voices in ways that surprise, enliven, inspire, sober, inform, and expand understanding. Completing the reading not only enables participants to join most fully in the discussions, but is also in itself a vital part of the Book Group experience.

MHC provides all Book Group participants with copies of all short readings included on the list.

The Organization is responsible for organizing participants’ acquisition of books included in the reading list. The Organization may elect to purchase books for participants, or to ask participants to acquire their own copies – but book acquisition should not be a barrier to participation.

MHC can provide assistance with book acquisition in the following ways:

- information about borrowing from public libraries, including via inter-library loan
- information and resources about accessibility, including large-print, braille, and audio-books
- book grants to provide copies for participants for whom book acquisition would be a barrier to participation

4) Facilitated Discussion:

MHC contracts an experienced Facilitator with humanities expertise for each Book Group. The Facilitator communicates ahead of time with both MHC and the Book Group Liaison, and plays a role in establishing dates and times for discussions.

The Facilitator creates and maintains a good atmosphere for a discussion in which all participants have the opportunity to share their ideas and questions, and invites depth and breadth of thinking.

Participants may find it helpful to prepare for discussions by making brief notes on their reading, flagging pages or passages, or writing down questions or thoughts that arise as they read.

The aim of Book Group discussions is joint reflection – finding words that express the thoughts, ideas, and questions that a reading gives rise to; listening as others find words for their own experience; pausing while the wisdom or pain of what someone has said settles in the room. There is no other end goal: no particular problem to solve, no set number of observations to reach, no consensus opinion to generate. Joint reflection rewards patience, open-heartedness, clear speaking, gentleness; it yields up not the answer but a larger and more varied view of things.

Questions? Contact a Maine Humanities Council program officer:

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