

Submission of Excellence: Global Action Project



When Global Action Project (G.A.P.) undertook a strategic planning process several years ago, we were challenged to increase our impact as a social justice media arts organization. Since then, we've experimented with ways to ensure our values are reflected in both our vibrant youth programming and in daily organizational practices.

Fostering a new culture of affirmation

The most important of these – authentic collaboration and communication – have resulted in the emergence of a culture of critique and affirmation, known as CoCA. As a process, CoCA supports constructive, critical, honest and relevant feedback to improve practice and build capacity. CoCA is about slowing down and making time (lots of it) for the kind of critical reflection, affirmation, and trust-building that leads to organizational resilience.

Responding to internal and external challenges

CoCA addresses internal and external challenges. Externally, the world tends to endorse the activities of individuals versus collectives, which means it takes additional effort to build relationships that allow for new ideas to emerge, be genuinely heard and valued, and if set aside, the understanding they've been respectfully engaged. Individuals don't often hear affirmation from peers, which is essential to building confidence. This is especially true for those already grappling with powerful, oppressive institutionalized/internalized forces like racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Strengthening our team through healthy communication

As one educator reflected, “We’re often told to look at how we don’t measure up. Giving ourselves positive affirmation can be difficult for a lot of people. But it creates a sense of community. We should practice acknowledging what we do well and what we have to offer to others.” Internally, G.A.P. spends so much time critiquing the work that it is easy to miss the smaller victories that feed us. As an intergenerational community of artists who recognize storytelling as self-determination, enacting a vision for change begins with our own healthy communication.

The 4 I’s

A fundamental part of staff retreats, professional development, evaluations of meetings, events and programs, CoCA has four components for giving and receiving constructive feedback. Called the 4 I’s, and adapted from Social Justice Leadership, they are:

- Intent – Be clear about why you are giving feedback – what is the goal?
- Incident – Be specific, stick to events that took place, actions taken
- Impact – Use “I” statements; don’t make assumptions
- Improvement – Explore possibilities; negotiate a resolution, no ultimatums; hear other perspectives as relevant to future situations

Using these principles, CoCA offers structure for a constant practice of transparent, honest communication.



Developing authentic relationships

CoCA is a shift away from a previous practice of standard critique and of assumed trust in our conversations. Instead, we have an active, bold culture in which providing feedback, and being open to hearing it allows us to push through obstacles, change, and conflict. We build authentic relationships, and don’t assume they are present because we work

together. CoCA is the new norm. Now, when a youth asks for feedback or wants to provide it, they say, “Let’s CoCA,” and we know something good will happen.

Changing organizational culture is a collective effort

Making organizational culture a priority given the break-neck speed of non-profit life is not easy; ultimately, implementing CoCA took nearly two years as we piloted, set aside, re-examined, and finally committed to making it a custom of staff retreats, closing out staff meetings, and integrated it into youth training programming as a team-building technique. CoCA gained momentum once educators witnessed what it did for group dynamics and deeper youth relationships. It continues to change as staff and youth amend and adapt it as a means of communicating with each other and the wider world.

About Global Action Project

Global Action Project (G.A.P.) is an acclaimed media arts organization that brings young people together to participate in high-quality media arts and leadership programming. Our mission is to work youth most affected by injustice to build the knowledge, tools, and relationships needed to create media for community power, cultural expression, and political change. For nearly two decades, low-income and working class youth of color, many of who identify as new immigrants or as members of the LGBT community, have come to G.A.P. to build community with other young artists, gain critical thinking skills, discover new perspectives, and speak their minds. Working together over the course of many months, they produce multi-genre social issue media that speak to and shape the artistic and cultural life of New York City. Recently, their work was recognized with a 2010 National Arts & Humanities Youth Program award bestowed by First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House.

G.A.P. has a small, dedicated staff of media educators who teach programs with up to 75 young New Yorkers every year who, in turn, reach audiences of more than 275,000 through screenings, online venues, live events and broadcasts. Youth have created over 130 videos on topics such as education, immigration, and gender/sexuality, and their work regularly gets national awards and acceptance into festivals across the world. Over 800 organizers have been trained in G.A.P.’s unique methods through its Media in Action institute.

About Meghan McDermott, Guest Contributor

Meghan McDermott is the executive director of Global Action Project, an award-winning social justice youth media arts organization.

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