Constructive Communication: The VT Network Approach.
February 3rd, 2010

Outlined below are 8 principles for constructive communication. The staff of the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Violence hold these principles as vital to our work environment and the achievement of organizational mission and goals.

In brief, constructive communication:
- ➲ upholds the empowerment of individuals within the group,
- ➲ works towards preserving positive relationships between communicators,
- ➲ moves towards finding solutions and
- ➲ includes respect for diversity as an intentional part of our communication commitment. Diversity incorporates a full range of identities, including but not limited to ethnic, cultural, racial, sexual orientation, gender and ability.

The principles below frame our communication philosophy
and suggest tools for implementation.

1. The goal of communication is to increase individual and group understanding and to strive for consensus to further organizational goals.
This works best when:
- We invite different perspectives, to enhance our understanding of the issues;
- We give intentional consideration to others' views;
- We focus on building solutions;
- We have confidence in our individual and group ability to communicate constructively.

2. Communication is enriched when different communication styles and different perspectives are respected and valued.
This works best when we:
- Create space for all to speak, recognizing that some may need more time or space to process;
- Recognize that different perspectives are valuable and broaden the thinking of the group;
- Allow room for disagreement;
- Validate other's opinions and experiences when disagreement occurs;
- Acknowledge and respect the "lone voice" if one exists.

3. The organization and its members are collectively responsible for empowering each member of the group.

This works best when:
- Each person is responsible for her/his own voice, for hearing the voices of others and for supporting the inherent value of each voice;
- Each person acts in a way that supports her/his own needs, including her/his safety and the safety of others;
- Communication practices reflect the organization's commitment to striving for egalitarianism within our hierarchical structure and the broader culture. To that end, each person is accountable for striving to understand her/his privileges, both institutional and cultural, and the way privilege impacts communication.

4. Constructive communication is the responsibility of each person.

In order for communication to be constructive, whether one-on-one or in a group setting, each individual should strive to do the following:
- Engage in self reflection.
- Be aware of the intent of your words and the potential impact they may have on others, acknowledging that there may be a discrepancy between the two.
- Recognize that our communication with one another may be impacted by the difficult nature of our work and the personal experiences that may draw individuals to this work.
- Use "I" statements.
- Be respectful, kind and patient.
- Assume good intentions.
- Speak one at a time to avoid interruptions.
- Use active listening.
- Avoid blaming, shaming, undermining and attacking self and others.
- Understand that each individual impacts the dynamics of the group.
- Be open to feedback.
- Sit with discomfort before responding.

5. Addressing concerns directly allows the group and individuals within the group to move forward constructively.

It is the responsibility of organizational leadership to foster environments, structures and skills which promote direct communication. It is the responsibility of individuals within the group to name conflicts that impact the ability of the group to move forward constructively. It is each person's responsibility to address concerns directly.

In addressing concerns, it may help to do the following:

- Check your assumptions, understanding that assumptions can lead to unhealthy communication and misinformation;
- Understand and own your role in the conflict;
- Seek strategic feedback from a third party to process raw feelings and determine how to frame an issue. It is each person's responsibility to seek out a perspective which will assist in accountable exploration rather than one that will provide allegiance;
- If you find yourself seeking feedback repeatedly, the time has come to address the problem directly;
- A third party has the right to decline to participate in, or withdraw from, the conversation.

  It is the responsibility of a third party to:
  - Encourage one or both parties to seek understanding;
  - Not get involved in the conflict;
  - Avoid any action that would worsen the conflict.

6. It is essential to respect confidentiality.

When considering whether or not to share information, each staff member has a responsibility to communicate in a way that upholds respect for colleagues, the organization and community partners, and to refrain from gossiping.

- Each person is responsible for stating her/his own expectations regarding the sharing of information;
- Each person has the right to share her/his own information;
- It is valid for group members to agree that what is said in the room stays in the room;
- Respect confidentiality as it related to human resources, finances and payroll, and other confidential information;
- Respect confidentiality as it related to sensitive information about programs, other partners, victims and survivors, etc.

7. Transparency allows individuals, the group and the organization to operate at their highest levels.

Transparency is key to constructive communication and empowers all participants in group and organizational processes. In order to make sustainable and collaborative decisions, all participants must be fully informed.

We believe:
- Persons have a right to information that affects them.*

- Personal agendas are valid. Group processes work best when individuals are aware of their personal agendas, and personal agendas are stated honestly and are respected by the group.
- Hidden agendas can create dishonest communication and undermine the work of the group.
- We strive for transparency in interpersonal & group communication.
- We strive for transparency in institutional processes and policies.

within the bounds of confidentiality requirements, and principle #6 related to confidentiality

8. The means are the end. How we do our work is as important as the result and we believe the quality and the longevity of our work are determined by the process.