

Explainer: Deep Democracy

What is it?

Deep Democracy is a concept and methodology that was initially developed by [Arnold Mindell](#) (Physicist and Jungian analyst and Founder of Process Orientated Psychology) in 1988. [Myrna](#) and [Greg Lewis](#) then adapted Mindell's concept which is known as the *Lewis Method of Deep Democracy* in response to complex organisational change issues that arose at a large energy utility in South Africa shortly after the political changes and break down of Apartheid.

Democratic processes usually involve voting or majority rule to achieve consensus, but in reality are often more about fighting and winning resulting in outcomes that usually suit the majority (or the most powerful). Deep Democracy is based on the belief that the capability and wisdom required to resolve complex problems (including the most wicked social issues) resides within the individuals, group or communities rather than those with formal authority alone. It involves noticing and engaging with all people, all views and all levels as a means to tapping into the wisdom and potential of the group and to discover creative and new solutions to complex (adaptive) problems. It is a method for engaging productive conflict and diversity.

Whilst Deep Democracy is a method that can also be applied and practiced at a personal level, it's usually applied to group processes. The power of this method is that it enables individuals and groups to be more deeply aware of what is known to the group as well the underlying unknown views, beliefs and experiences of it's members and to work with the moment to moment behaviours that emerge during the group's process.

What does it involve?

There are three levels that Deep Democracy engages:

Consensus Reality: This level of the group's awareness is tangible, conscious and shared. It involves real people, facts and real situations that are known by all. For example the group's intended vision, the meeting agenda, the history of the group, the budget they have or don't have, available resources, the job title for each member.

If one attempts to solve complex problems or take difficult decisions with only this level of awareness, then the likely outcome is a lack of true consensus and unsustainable solutions. The status quo is maintained and real change is unlikely.

Dreamland: This level tends to be unknown, disavowed or unconscious to the group. It could encompass the "unspeakables". This potential sits in the background and whilst it may be felt by the group or some of the group members, it's not noticed or understood. The "it" may be an atmosphere, unseen expressions, unspoken beliefs, cultural influences, dreams and hopes.

Essence: This is the deepest level of the unconsciousness of the group, the subtle feelings, common ground or a type of oneness that exists, yet is far from their current reality.

Deep Democracy involves 'pulling up' or tapping into this less known information at the 'dreamland and essence levels or fields that can bring greater wisdom to the group process and potential for creative and new ways of solving complex issues and gaining long term commitment to making progress together.

Deep Democracy also works with the roles that exist inside and outside of the group. See the *Explainer of Role Theory* for further information. The success of this method is heavily dependent upon the neutrality of the facilitator and their capacity to utilize metaskills.

How do I use it?

All SLA facilitators are trained Deep Democracy Practitioners who apply and teach the methodology in our customised and public programs as well as in our consulting work. We find that both our clients and students get the most from this method in the following ways:

In a team setting or from the role of authority: to identify, sort and prioritise organisational/ community/ group issues and create a deeper awareness within groups. This is a great way to build teams and commitment to making progress on the most challenging of problems. It also helps groups learn how to take up the opposite or missing role, they develop a deeper awareness and appreciation of the views and beliefs of others. Particularly for more uncomfortable roles like the “critic” which tends to either get ignored, shut down or taken-out.

For those in positions of authority: to develop the required metaskills and practice required to create and engage the holding environment required for progress – it doesn’t happen on its own.

Intact teams: Working on “stuck” issues which cannot be solved using technical skills and resources .

Organisation or Communities in conflict and/or Organisations seeking transformational change: As outlined in this document, this methodology is idea for surfacing the required wisdom, knowledge and creativity required for transformational change and to resolve conflict and tension e.g. during company mergers.

Further reading/resources

Process Work Institute : <http://www.processwork.org/>

Deep Democracy The Lewis Method: <http://www.deep-democracy.net/>

Arnold Mindell. (2014) *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity.*

Arnold Mindell. (2002) *The Deep Democracy of Open Forums: Practical Steps to Conflict Prevention and Resolution for the Family, Workplace, and World.*