

Handling Hot Issues in Subud

By Stefan Freedman

It took me decades to clock that “being positive” didn’t always resolve things, and my best teacher was one of my step-children who refused to be sweet-talked, soothed or reasoned out of her anger. From the time that I faced her anger and we “had it out”, things got a lot better. The air cleared and there was more honesty and hence more closeness between us.

What she wanted was a full-on confrontation, and eventually I learned that you can’t have conflict resolution if you don’t allow the conflict first.

I’ve always been a lover of harmony. I find loud arguments heartrending and hearing a litany of complaints demoralising. I can well understand those Subud members who find conflict challenging. But I strongly believe that—like pruning a plant—it’s a vital part of our organisational health. Without a culture that encourages open discussion, dissenters will leave Subud and those left will be a dwindling number who all hold the same views.

With Subud’s “don’t rock the boat” culture many find it really hard to raise something controversial. But every healthy organisation needs people to play different roles. Some are drawn towards continuing current practices and others are good at embracing change, so in a thriving set-up, the conservative and progressive elements don’t fight each other but have a complementary role.

A plea to progressives:

Everything we now have in Subud took time, effort and devotion to develop, so the challenger should expect to encounter resistance and needn’t take it personally. Recognise that the conservers cherish Subud too, and that’s why they hold tight to what we have. Your input must convince and inspire, if something new is going to stick.

A plea to conservers:

A challenge to an established idea or practice is not an assault on Subud’s integrity, nor a threat to harmony. Far from it. In most cases it is coming from someone very committed to Subud, who wants our association to keep evolving and to reach all humankind as Bapak hoped. Rather than being dismissive towards critics or shouting them down, consider the revitalising role of criticism, of new ideas and of humour. Subud needs some experimentation to help our development and renewal. Every organisation needs this. Don’t presume that a challenge has a “negative” effect. Make use of it as feedback and examine it seriously. There will be benefits.

When I go for my latihan it’s an oasis of sanity and peace—not the time and place I want to be having long, heated, talk sessions. So there needs to be an arranged meeting ground for those who would like to talk together (and possibly ask for guidance through testing) about unresolved serious concerns which are not just individual but may be shared by many. This meeting of those interested in change can be part of our local, regional, national and international networking. In theory this happens at congresses, but as yet many grass roots members don’t find a connection between their vision for Subud and our organisational culture.

Hence, members can become alienated, leaving Subud not because the latihan isn’t working but because they feel unheard and isolated, their perspective not valued. I know a good many whom this applies to, including my wife who was turned off by unquestioned assumptions, particularly about women. For some years I was feeling

despondent about “entrenched ideas”. I had a struggle with myself not to drift away from Subud.

In my work as a group leader I am learning about frameworks which support open and frank discussion. It helps if the group begins with several agreements, such as these:

- *judgement-free*: If I disagree with someone’s idea, I still listen first without jumping in or interrupting, and show maximum respect for the person and their words.
- *“I statements”*: I avoid assumptions or generalities such as, “Well you know what we all think about that!” and speak personally.
- *trust*: Delicate personal histories that arise within a session are treated as confidential and not referred to in any report, unless the person wants it known more widely.

Particularly in a larger group it helps to have one or two people in a mediator role, making sure everyone is listened to (and that nobody goes on and on interminably). The mediator(s) can divide the participants into small groups at times to include everyone and to keep the exchanges alive. In line with our other Subud bodies, the mediator role should be rotated.

The sessions I am positing, are, first of all, likely to have an individual therapeutic potential. Secondly, they most definitely will help bring Subud people into a more dynamic relationship, creating a culture of honesty and openness. Thirdly, perhaps the most important, is that they are part of the process of group change (even for those not present). If more members get involved in shaping our culture and organisation (rather than just feeling passive or frustrated about the way it is), there's a greater chance we'll “show signs of life” to the world at large. This is the antidote to atrophy. Some agreed-upon conclusions from our exchanges are needed, or the fruits will not be harvested. Those conclusions should be published.

I was deeply heartened when I saw at the Spokane World Congress a workshop advertised as “Gay and Lesbian Issues in Subud” and another called “Is Subud a Cult?” Bethan (my wife) and I have many gay friends and one family member. I have wondered how accepted or included they would feel if they came to Subud.

I've also met people who perceive Subud as cult-like (“Oh yes, that’s the group where women are advised what to wear!”), and at those Spokane meetings it was good to hear other peoples’ concerns and share our experiences about these thorny issues. As you can imagine there were diverse and heated feelings and views expressed. But I was grateful that these meetings looked at sacred cows and challenged our existing culture of avoiding or ignoring controversy.

It’s not just a matter of airing and sharing views. The follow-through is of enormous value. I notice how successful service businesses are constantly inviting customer feedback, and actively responding—making visible upgrades—based on what individuals have to suggest. I wonder if there’s also scope for something like a Subud group suggestions board or box, whose contents would be open to all, and used for beneficial review and improvement. Wouldn’t it be useful, at this juncture when so many people are feeling “held back”, to create a small dynamic group to help follow through on useful suggestions—a Subud working group on *change*?

I have made a case for airing and not burying “feedback” and hot issues in Subud. The issue is not whether we all reach agreement on a particular question,

but can we speak freely? Can we come closer to understanding someone else's different experience? Members will feel more involved when we can share ambivalences and conflicts without feeling judged. Vitality, a culture of honest dialogue and evolution will result. And the biggest challenge for us is to find ways to follow through. The impetus and "buzz" created by frank exchanges will then translate into palpable improvements: a dynamic that will be seen and felt by potential members encountering Subud.