

Building Movement

Inspiring Activism in the Nonprofit Community

MINI CURRICULUM I: TALKING ABOUT TAXES

Exercise II: A Conversation About Taxes

Created originally by Kim Klein for the Building Movement Project
www.buildingmovement.org

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Before starting this exercise, each participant should have 5 coins in front of them.

For the next 15 minutes you are going to talk about a community project (chosen by the facilitator or as a group) and the role of taxes in funding that project, and listen to the opinions of other people very different from you. You will be assigned a role from the list below. Take a few minutes to get into your character and to familiarize yourself with the other characters in your group.

In front of you are five coins. Every time someone says something that you personally think is a good point, even if you disagree with the point being made, you are to give that person one of your coins. When someone thinks you have made a good point, they will give you one of their coins.

Remember that when you are speaking, you are the voice and opinion of your character, but when you are giving out coins, your judgments are based on your own opinions.

THE CONVERSANTS

1. You are a janitor at Wal-Mart. You are married with two children. Your spouse also works at Wal-Mart. Your children qualify for the free lunch program because you earn so little money. Your parents were small farmers, and were forced out of business by corporate agribusiness. You believe that corporations rule this country and that taxes are never fair to working people. You are ashamed that your children have to take advantage of the free lunch program, and you volunteer as much time as you can with the PTA helping raise money for school projects.
2. You are a retired widowed librarian. You live on a social security and a small pension. While you are able to manage, you have no extra money and worry what will happen to you when you can no longer take care of yourself. Although you believe many services should be provided by the government through taxes,

you have given up thinking that government can change. You no longer vote. You do volunteer with the Friends of the Library and help with their book sale, but basically believe that personal friends are the only true security and you spend a lot of time with yours, and are available when a friend needs a favor.

3. You are a social worker. You have worked for many years in a federally-funded agency for disabled children from low-income families. Over the years, your agency has lost funding, then regained it, but now may lose it again. You believe in the role of taxes in taking care of children with special needs, and you are tireless in talking with friends, service clubs, religious groups, etc. to advocate for increases in taxes. You believe the government basically does a good job with tax money.
4. You work as a mechanic and if your customers pay in cash, you do not charge them sales tax. You earn well over \$100,000 a year. Most of your business is in cash and you do not declare your actual income, and you pay a fraction of the taxes you owe. You believe the government wastes money and that you can do much more good with your money than can be done by taxes. You are active in your community, you sit on a couple of boards, and you often volunteer for beautification projects, shoreline clean up, building playgrounds and the like. You give away a lot of money to people you think deserve it.
5. You inherited \$500,000 in your early 20's and then parlayed that into several million in real estate. You and your siblings paid 50% of your inheritance in estate tax, partly because your father believed in estate tax and did not set up his estate to avoid it. You give away 50% of your income every year to your alma mater, the local hospital, historic preservation and the upkeep of the veteran's memorial. You believe estate tax should be abolished. You think this will result in more money being given directly to nonprofits, and in people investing in the economy. You think the private sector can do everything more efficiently than the public sector.
6. You teach high school chemistry in a large public high school, and you have been doing so for some time. Your salary is \$55,000. You are an active member of a liberal faith-based organization and give 10% of your income every year to your house of worship, which itself sponsors a soup kitchen, homeless shelter, day care center and school. You believe that taxes have their place in maintaining roads, hospitals, defense, and things like that, but that social services should be provided in neighborhoods by churches, synagogues, temples, mosques and the like. You are active in ecumenical groups, and the issue of federal funding for groups like yours is often on the agenda. You do not believe government funding should be used for any faith-based purpose.

After the 15 minutes of discussion are up, share what you learned as a group.