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Project conference – a communication tool to activate underserved target groups

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In the following, the communication tool *project conference* is presented. This tool is used in projects with underserved target groups to teach its participants skills such as self-responsibility, self-confidence and a respectful interaction with others. A project conference is based on democratic decision-making and group dynamics, in which each participant is a full and respected member of the group. This tool has been developed and successfully tested by KIZ Prowina.

The origin of the project conference dates back to 1970. The psychologist Thomas Gordon presented the so-called Gordon Model, a communication model for conflict resolution, in his book *Parent Effectiveness Training: The Proven Program for Raising Responsible Children*¹. The core component of his model is an approach that is designed to help resolve conflicts in a family democratically and to give equal weight to each voice of the family members. Gordon proposes the so-called family conference, which is held at regular intervals (weekly, monthly) and in which all family members can participate and raise their issues. The goal of a family conference is to openly address conflicts and to find common decisions and rules that are fair to all. Guidelines such as "active listening", "I-messages" and "mutual respect" are an essential part of this. Each conference is also chaired by a different family member who has the responsibility to give each participant enough space to share their problems and, as a family, determine the next steps.

The project conference which KIZ Prowina implemented is based on the family conference and follows closely Thomas Gordon's conflict resolution model described above. As the name project conference suggests, this conference is used in the project context, mainly with disadvantaged target groups (e.g. young school drop-outs, long-term unemployed) and helps to establish a democratic decision-making process between participants and coaches. These disadvantaged target groups often experience a lot of pressure and coercion in their private and professional lives and retain a last bit of self-determination through refusal. Refusal often means not applying for a job, not wanting to do an internship or not participating in the respective project which makes integration in the labour market difficult. In order to break down this resistance in a project and to help the participants to define their self-worth again through other behaviour patterns, the aim of a project conference is to decide together with all participants and the coach on contents and topics in the project. The participants are actively involved in the design instead of tying them to already established procedures and contents and giving them the feeling that they themselves do not know what they need. It is the responsibility of the participants to shape the project in their own interest and to become an active member of the group. Every participant is responsible for their own actions and project goals.

Through this democratic decision-making process and the personal responsibility of each individual, it is intended that the participants identify with the project and feel comfortable in the group. The group is also another important pillar of the project conference. The participants become an active part of the group and

¹ Thomas Gordon: Parent Effectiveness Training: The Proven Program for Raising Responsible Children

want to be seen as a full member. The participants quickly find themselves in a group dynamic and naturally do not want to lag behind the successes of the others (e.g. finding an internship, finishing their CV).

To successfully conduct a project conference, KIZ suggests that the project has already been running for a few weeks before the coach introduces the project conference. This helps to establish a familiar setting between the participants and gives them the opportunity to get to know each other a little bit better. The following recommendations are based on the experiences of KIZ coaches and underserved youths who participated in project conferences during their measures. Firstly, it is important that the coach creates the appropriate framework conditions for a project conference. This means that the coach organises a suitable venue for all participants and creates a relaxed atmosphere (e.g. by bringing sweets, fruit, drinks). Secondly, the coach provides a flipchart and coloured pencils so that all wishes, goals, suggestions and problems can be written down on it. Thirdly, the coach also takes minutes during the project conference and serves as a moderator who makes sure that everyone has their say, that common next steps are determined and that there is a respectful way of dealing with each other. It is important that the project conference is held at regular intervals in order to be able to respond quickly to the needs, concerns and problems of the participants, but also to be able to build on the decisions made. Ideally, the project conference is held once a week and each participant formulates daily and weekly goals and writes them down. It encourages them to see their own goals written down and to be able to decide individually about the next steps.

Moreover, the participants say that they feel as part of a democratic group (*we-feeling*) and that they have gained more self-confidence and openness through active participation and the right of co-determination. They also say that they have become more critical (*able to dish it out, but also to take it*) and that they can deal with their emotions better. The project conference is also a good opportunity for them to give feedback to the coach and to acquire more social skills. Through the project conference they have also learned to take on more responsibility and to lead discussions.

The project conference is a very powerful tool to actively involve participants and to lure them out of their refusal position. At no time is pressure built up on them or the feeling given that they have to do something. Instead, they are allowed to take full responsibility for their own actions and are seen as full members of a group that can decide on content and next steps.

In the KIZ context, this communication tool is used to teach school dropouts in Germany to act responsibly and to help them step into the labour market. However, this approach can also be applied to other target groups and to different cultural contexts in order to help the participants to (re)-integrate into the labour market.