



Creating an Atmosphere Where Everyone Participates

by Margo Adair & Sharon Howell
of *Tools for Change*

Organizations striving to create democratic relations usually function with the notion that everyone can and should participate equally. If s/he doesn't, it is viewed as a personal choice or limitation. All behaviors are seen as stemming from individual personality.

Yet patterns of social interaction form currents below the surface, directing how we view ourselves and each other. These dictate behavior, expectations, and to a large degree, who people take seriously.

Social power is accorded to individuals based on their membership in groups which have had more or less power in the larger society. Social power is not a direct result of an individual's personality, skill, talent or achievements. Rather, it is at all times embedded in a larger context, and reflects the social, economic and historical status of the group(s) to which a person belongs.

More often than not, social power is invisible, unacknowledged and unexamined. While formal roles and responsibilities are frequently clear, inequities based on gender, class, ethnicity, age, appearance and education are rarely addressed openly. For example, in most cultures, people are conditioned to give more weight to the words of men. As women enter organizational settings, they notice a distinct lack of attention given to their comments. Many studies have documented the tendency to rearrange papers, walk around the room, or begin side conversations while women are speaking. Efforts to explore this behavior as a socially conditioned phenomenon are blunted when incidents are explained away by particular circumstances. ("No one intended to show a

lack of respect, merely to get coffee-it just happened to occur when a woman started to speak.") Such patterns are deeply ingrained. They unconsciously dictate behavior forming a web of daily interactions that tell people from groups with less social power that their contributions are not as valued or welcomed as those from the majority culture.

Compounding the problem, those with social power take it for granted that they are the ones with the answers. They expect to be agreed with. After all, people have always sought out their opinions and given great weight to them. Yet it is exactly because of these dynamics that those with social power are the very ones least likely to have new information. Their presence in a group tends to provoke both compliance and silence. Those with social power usually have no idea that multiple realities have been relegated to the world of silence.

Creating a democratic atmosphere in which everyone participates means both putting ourselves forward and including others. To do this we must understand the dynamics rooted in issues of power, and do things which counter them. In the dominant culture, the degree to which one can operate purely as an individual without taking into account issues of social power is directly proportional to the degree of privilege one has inherited within that culture, i.e. how much social power one has.

A dominant/compliant dynamic is set when people simply jump in to express their opinions. The usual way that order is maintained is by having people raise their hands. This method does little to overcome social inequities. Generally, those with more

social power still take up the majority of the time available for discussion, believing they have the more important points. Those with less social power find themselves as listeners.

Shifting the Dynamic

To shift these dynamics, the same voices should not be allowed to dominate, even if the people who are quiet say they are in agreement with what is being said. Room is needed for the initiative and participation of everyone. The less people contribute, the less ownership they feel of the group's process. The structures and processes of meetings need to incorporate new ways of working together that encourage everyone's contributions. Skillful facilitation can shift the way in which social power is exercised in meetings, challenging long-standing patterns of interaction which filter out the rich pool of experience rooted in our differences.

Some people need support in reigning themselves in, while others need encouragement to express themselves. Facilitators can take specific steps to open up more room in the discussion. For instance, if it is always the same people speaking, switching to a go-around format in which people are free to pass will draw out other voices. The facilitator can simply ask those who tend to be quiet what they are thinking, or ask them to speak first on an issue. The latter is particularly helpful because it is the first couple of comments that tend to establish the parameters of the discussion.

The facilitator can make room for the "unspoken" or "invisible" by conveying that there are always numerous viewpoints on any issue. When only one perspective has been voiced, it is good to summarize it and then ask for different perspectives.