

Shhh...you don't have the stick

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Do people have a tendency to talk over one another in meetings you attend? If so and it contributes to unproductive results, then it's time to use a little gimmick to improve the situation.

I learned an effective tactic while attending a course at a military academy. It involved using a tangible item (like a stick or trophy or symbolic coffee cup, etc.) and the concept was this: When the item was in one person's hands, only that person could speak. It certainly stopped people from interrupting each other. And for me, it allowed me to think before I spoke, preventing me from blurting out things I regretted afterwards.

When I began using this technique during professional meetings I chaired (only used it when necessary) I noticed the same degree of effectiveness as that at the military academy. I added an extra rule, though: no person could possess the stick for more than two minutes straight to prevent a monopoly of the stick. However, depending on the type of meeting where understanding and comprehension are important, it

might not be effective to set a time limit for possession of the stick.

The military didn't invent this concept, though, as many groups of people for centuries have used it to conduct effective meetings. Native American Indians have perfected this tactic for centuries by using what they called the Talking Stick. The Talking Stick was an intricately carved, five-foot-tall stick with an Indian name or symbol inscribed or carved on it. The Talking Stick concept added another purpose. Here's the theory behind it:

Whenever people meet together, the Talking Stick is present. Only the person holding the Talking Stick is permitted to speak. As long as you have the Talking Stick, you alone may speak until you are satisfied that you are understood. Others are not permitted to make their own points, argue, agree or disagree. All they may do is attempt to understand you and then articulate that understanding. They may need to restate your point to make sure you feel understood, or you may just simply feel that they understand.

As soon as you feel understood, it is your obligation to pass the Talking

Stick to the next person and then to work to make him feel understood. As he makes his points, you have to listen, restate and empathize until he feels truly understood. Once each of the parties feels understood, an amazing thing usually happens. Negative energy dissipates, contention evaporates, mutual respect grows, and people become creative. New ideas emerge. Keep in mind, though, to understand does not mean to agree. It just means to be able to see with the other person's eyes, heart, mind, and spirit.

How do you get started? Find your designated item and begin exercising the tactic during your meetings. Make the item something that has a symbolic meaning or maybe humorous, but never anything embarrassing. If any attendees are unwilling to comply, then politely excuse them from the meeting.

Using a Talking Stick or other similar item may very well be the solution to your meeting's communication problems. Try using one and see if it makes a difference!

~ The End ~