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Leading a group activity can be tricky and challenging at times. Quite often you will have a few communication hogs who want to dominate discussions and monopolize your time. Don't fall into their attention traps. Yes, their ideas and knowledge are valuable, but so are everyone else's.

In some organizations, a few people may do the majority of tasks, either out of convenience or to stay in sync with an established system of actions; however, the decisions on courses of action of a group should be derived from wide-spread participation of the group's participants rather than by a few dominant personalities.

Participation—who participates, how often, when, and to what effect—is the easiest aspect of group process to observe. Typically, people who are higher in status, more knowledgeable, or simply more talkative, tend to participate more actively. Those who are newer, lower in status, uninformed, or not inclined to express their feelings and ideas verbally, generally speak less frequently. Even in groups composed of people of equal status and competence, some people will speak more than others; this variation is to be expected and is not necessarily a sign of an ineffective group. But when individuals or coalitions dominate the majority of the group's discussions on a continual basis, the group is opening the door to potential problems.

There are many reasons why unequal participation can reduce a group's effectiveness. Low participators often have good ideas to offer but are reluctant to do so or cannot contribute their ideas because they are squeezed out by high participators who dominate the meeting. This imbalance can be a potential problem because those ideas receiving the most attention inevitably become the ones that are most seriously considered when it is time to make a decision. Considerable research shows that the most frequently stated ideas tend to be adopted by the

group, regardless of their quality. This is one of the reasons groups often make poor decisions. Thus, a large imbalance in participation can result in potentially good ideas being underrepresented in the discussion, or perhaps not even expressed at all.

Another negative consequence of uneven participation, understood through common sense as well as research, is that low participators are likely to tune things out, lose commitment to the task, or become frustrated and angry—especially if they have tried to enter the discussion but have been ignored or cut off by high participators. These negative attitudes result not only in poorer quality decisions but also in less commitment to implementing the group's decision(s).

Several factors contribute to uneven participation. One is that people who have the most at stake in a given issue (and may therefore be the least objective) are more motivated to participate than others who may have better ideas to offer. Another is that different people have different internal standards on which they judge whether one of their ideas is worth offering to the group. Thus, people with higher internal standards may be less likely to contribute than those with lower internal standards.

Another hint that something could be wrong is a noticeable, marked change in a person's participation during a meeting. If a person suddenly becomes silent or withdraws during part of the meeting, it could suggest a number of possibilities (depending on the person's nonverbal behavior). For example, it might simply mean that the person has temporarily withdrawn to mull over the comments of a prior speaker. It may also be that the person has tuned out, or it may be a sign of hostility or frustration.

Here are some questions to consider in observing participation:

- 1) Who are the high participators? Why? To what effect?
- 2) Who are the low participators? Why? To what effect?
- 3) Are there any shifts in participators,

such as an active participator suddenly becoming silent? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interaction, such as criticism from a higher-status person or a shift in topic?

4) How are silent people treated? Is their silence taken by others to mean consent? Disagreement? Disinterest? Why do you think they are silent?

5) Who talks to whom? Who responds to whom? Do participation patterns reflect coalitions that are impeding or controlling the discussion? Are the interaction patterns consistently excluding certain people who need to be supported or brought into the discussion?

6) Who keeps discussions going? How is it accomplished? Why does the group leader want the discussion to continue?

Whether you are a group leader or group member, there are several simple and unobtrusive process interventions that you can make to bring about a better balance in participation. These interventions are particularly important if you think that potentially valuable minority views are not getting their share of time, that certain people have not had a chance to develop their ideas fully, or that some group members are not part of the discussion. One intervention is to try to clarify a point that someone had made earlier and that seemed to fall through the cracks—by saying something like “John, let me see if I understood what you said a moment ago.” A related technique is to reinforce a prior point by asking the person to elaborate on it. Similarly, a very direct technique for bringing out silent people is to simply query them—pick someone who has not participated and ask them what their ideas are on the topic.

The more wide-spread participation that you can obtain from a group's participants, the better the chance that the group decides well and performs well.

~ The End ~