

Activity 4.7 Recognizing Power Imbalances in Decision Making

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Last Updated 09/07/2023



Description

This activity makes visible the ways in which power works in society but more particularly, in the context of joint decision-making. It examines how power reinforces stereotypes, but it also offers opportunities to challenge traditional power dynamics.

Learning Goals

- Critically examine how assumptions and stereotypes influence decision making.
- Illuminate how power works covertly in many contexts.

Instructions (45 minutes)

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| <p>Set Up</p> | <p>Prepare for the Activity</p> <p>Collect a stack of envelopes and place a different amount of beans in each envelope ranging from 0 - 5 beans in each envelope. The beans indicate the number of opportunities this person will have to speak during the discussion (and thus power or influence in the discussion).</p> <p>Create a relevant scenario for small group discussion, use the scenario shown below, or select one from the What IF...Scenarios collection.</p> <p>Organize participants into small groups (6-8 ppl).</p> <p>Begin by introducing the learning goals of this activity.</p> | |
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¹ **Citation for this activity:** Janice McMillan (2023). Recognizing Power Imbalances in Decision Making. In Hartman and Byrd (Eds), The Interactivity Foundation Collaborative Discussion Toolkit. Retrieved from <https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/activities/module-4>

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| <p>Step One</p> | <p>Introduce the Scenario</p> <p>Share and review the selected scenario for the small group discussion. Read it aloud as a full group if necessary. Address any questions.</p> <p>Sample Scenario:</p> <p>You are a community group living in a place where jobs are scarce, poverty is rife, and there are not many opportunities for making a decent living. The community is quite cut off from neighboring communities as the train that used to link the community doesn't run anymore due to the lines being faulty. You are able to receive some funding for a project and the community has to decide between the building of a resource center for youth skill building OR repairing the train line.</p> <p>A community meeting is being called to decide which of the 2 options the community will vote for.</p> | <p>5 min</p> |
| <p>Step Two</p> | <p>Distribute Envelopes</p> <p>Shuffle the envelopes and randomly distribute them to participants in the group. Participants should not reveal the contents of their envelope or how many beans they have.</p> <p>If doing this activity online, use the private chat function to distribute numbers, which will indicate how many times a person can speak during the discussion.</p> <p>Invite participants to imagine a character who might represent this level of influence or power. The character should be a stakeholder in the topic that you are discussing. For example, if you are discussing a public health issue like COVID, then they might imagine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A child (0-1 beans) ● Doctor (4 beans) ● Vaccine CEO (5 beans) ● Sick person (0-2 beans) ● Parent (2 beans) ● Business owner (1-3 beans) ● Essential worker (1-3 beans) ● Grandparent (1-2 beans) ● Hospital CEO (4 beans) ● CDC director (1-4 beans) <p>Allow each participant to choose their own character based on their perception of power related to the stakeholder. While you can provide a general list of stakeholders for the issue you are discussing if required, it is best to not provide details on what power (number of beans) each stakeholder holds. Rather, leave it open for them to decide.</p> <p>Explain that they can only contribute to the discussion the number of times indicated by the number of beans in their envelope. The discussion is over once all beans have been exhausted.</p> | <p>5 min</p> |

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| <p>Step Three</p> | <p>Introduce Stakeholders</p> <p>Have participants introduce themselves as a stakeholder in this scenario and take on an identity they associate with their given beans. Instruct groups that a variety of stakeholders should be represented within their group and no one should reveal their beans.</p> | <p>5 min</p> |
| <p>Step Four</p> | <p>Discuss the Scenario</p> <p>Invite each group to start their discussions. They must decide on a course of action. Each person must represent the views of their selected stakeholder. Each time a participant speaks, they put one bean on the table.</p> <p>At the end of the discussion, the group must come up with a decision or vote on the proposal (no additional comments can be added).</p> <p>If doing this online, after the group has reached a decision or voted, ask participants to share with their group the number they were assigned just to make it clear.</p> | <p>20 min</p> |
| <p>Step Five</p> | <p>Debrief as a Full Group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What did your group decide? ● What impact, if any, did the number of contributions/power have on the discussion outcome? ● What impact did the number of beans (power) have on you as a discussant? What did you notice yourself doing that you otherwise would not have done? ● Which stakeholders held more or less power? Does this seem accurate to you? How would you represent their power? ● What would it look like for power to be more fairly distributed within discussions and society? What can we do as individuals to notice and disrupt this power dynamic? What could you have done differently in this discussion? | <p>10 min</p> |

Reflection Journal

- How did you feel about the role you were in?
- Did you think the number of beans/amounts of power is a fair reflection of how society values certain people/roles over others?
- How can you challenge these stereotypes and the power that comes with different roles?
- What does this tell us about collaborative discussions and the role of power in decision-making?

Practice Journal

This week, take notice of power in a discussion. Who is in the discussion? Who is speaking the most and with the most authority? Why is this? How are discussants making room for others to join in during the discussion, if at all? Who is missing from the discussion? Who was not even invited to be at the table? How would the discussion be different if they were in it?

Dive Deeper: Additional Resources

- [Managing Undue Deference in Collaborative Discussions](#): Byrd, Jack. "Managing Undue Deference in Collaborative Discussions." *Interactivity Foundation*, 10 Feb. 2021, www.interactivityfoundation.org/managing-undue-deference-in-collaborative-discussions/. Accessed 7 Sep. 2023.
A short blog post highlighting strategies to counteract deference to authority figures, which can almost be a default action by participants in discussions.
- [Chapters 1-2 of Difference Matters by Brenda J. Allen](#): Allen, Brenda J. *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*. 2nd ed. Long Grove, Ill., Waveland Press, 2011, pp. 1-39.
- [Excerpt from Privilege, Power and Difference](#): Johnson, Allan G. "Excerpt from Privilege, Power and Difference." *Allan G. Johnson*, www.agjohnson.us/books/privilege/excerpt-from-privilege-power-and-difference/. Accessed 7 Sep. 2023.

Activity Cluster

[5.2 Developing an Awareness of Stakeholders](#)

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