

# Activity 4.7 Recognizing Power Imbalances in Decision Making<sup>1</sup>

## Description

This activity makes visible the ways in which power works in society but more particularly, in the context of joint decision-making. It also examines the ways in which power reinforces stereotypes about how power is distributed in society. It can also offer an opportunity to challenge power.

## Learning Goals

- Participants will be able to examine their own stereotypes, how these might influence how decisions are made.
- Participants will also gain from the illumination of how power works covertly in many contexts.

## Practice (45 minutes)

<b>Step One</b>	<p>Break into small groups of 6-8 people.</p> <p>Each participant will be given a certain number of beans in an 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). <b>Participants should not reveal how many beans they have.</b></p> <p>Encourage 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:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A child (1-2 beans)</li><li>• Doctor (4 beans)</li><li>• Vaccine CEO (5 beans)</li><li>• Sick person (1-2 beans)</li><li>• Parent (2 beans)</li><li>• Business owner (1-3 beans)</li></ul>	<b>5 min</b>
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<sup>1</sup> **Citation for this activity:** Janice McMillan (2023). Recognizing Power Imbalances in Decision-Making. In Hartman, Britt, & Byrd (Eds). *The Interactivity Foundation Collaborative Discussion Toolkit*. Retrieved from <https://www.collaborativediscussionproject.com/module-4-culturally-responsive-collaboration>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Essential worker (1-3 beans)</li> <li>• Grandparent (1-2 beans)</li> <li>• Hospital CEO (4 beans)</li> <li>• CDC director (1-4 beans)</li> </ul> <p>The participant decides their own character based on their perception of power related to the stakeholder. They can only contribute to the discussion the number of times indicated by the number of beans. The discussion is over once all beans have been exhausted.</p>	
<b>Step Two</b>	<p>In your small group, <b>create a relevant scenario, select one from <a href="#">What IF...Scenarios</a>, or use the following:</b></p> <p>You are a community group living in a context 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/youth/skills center in the community 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>	<b>5 min</b>
<b>Step Three</b>	<p>After reading the scenario, participants <b>introduce themselves</b> as a stakeholder in this scenario and they take on an identity they associate with their given beans. Be sure that a variety of stakeholders are represented.</p> <p><u>No one should reveal their beans.</u></p>	<b>5 min</b>
<b>Step Four</b>	<p><b>Discuss the topic.</b> 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>	<b>20 min</b>
<b>Step Five</b>	<p><b>Debrief and reflect.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What impact, if any, did the number of contributions/power have on the discussion outcome?</li> <li>• Which stakeholders held more or less power? Does this seem accurate to you? How would you represent their power?</li> <li>• What would it look like for power to be more fairly distributed within discussions and society?</li> </ul>	<b>10 min</b>

## Reflection Assignment

- 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

- Jack Byrd, [“Managing Undue Deference in Collaborative Discussions”](#) (2 minutes) A short blog post highlighting strategies to counteract deference to authority figures, which can almost be a default action by participants in discussions.
- [Introduction to Difference Matters by Brenda J. Allen](#)
- [The Trouble We’re In: Privilege, Power and Difference. Allan J. Johnson](#)