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SILENCE IS GOLDEN

ABSTRACT: Many of us find ourselves in a leadership role with discussion groups and other loosely defined teaching functions. We have all, at one time or another, experienced "that uncomfortable silence," and it always seems to be the responsibility of the leader to "jump in" and get the thing going again. A leader who fails to come to the aid of a faltering group in this instance can engender a good deal of ire, indignation, and disappointment on the part of the group members. Yet, an interjection by a leader at this point is usually unsatisfying to the leader as it is tantamount to a summation of the proceedings in a closing action on the issues at hand. Groups tend *not* to start up easily after this point and leaders have to spend considerable time and effort to regenerate a productive level of discussion. There is a third approach to the dilemma which I have tried, namely the legitimization of silence.

In counselling and psychotherapy, silences are used on the part of the client as political or transference manoeuvres. They are also used to indicate that the client is thinking or sometimes that "nothing is coming" to the client, indicating some resistance to look at a problem from a new perspective. In sensitivity training and encounter-group work, silences are utilized deliberately to build pressure on the participants and many people need this sort of catalyst to overcome a resistance to express in a group as well as looking at problems.

In content based groups, such as study-skills workshops, academic seminars, problem solving meetings, and even in committee work, our leadership role is more that of *teacher* or *co-ordinator of the proceedings*. We do not tend to view ourselves as psychotherapists or counsellors as this implies a different social contract. Yet a leader of a committee is responsible that the membership of the committee come *to know a solution to a problem*. This implies a change equivalent to, in many respects, that *knowing* that goes on in academic seminars. The *knowing* implies a change in the participants of the group and this calls to mind the resistance to change literature.

However, we can approach an understanding of the problem from a different perspective. Marx and Tombaugh (1967) in their book *Motivation: Psychological principles and educational implications*, can throw some light on this issue from a social-learning perspective. Marx and Tombaugh, along with many writers on the subject, indicate that pre-schoolers have a great deal of ideational spontaneity; that is, they readily have ideas in response to environmental situations. Marx and Tombaugh make a strong case for a list of variables which inhibit this ideational spontaneity during the public-school years of students. Moreover, this inhibition is operative in situations that resemble a classroom experience. A strong case is made for the idea that when the leader is present one is not responsible for thinking. I have elsewhere (Blythe, 1971) made a case for the concept of ideational or cognitive apathy on the basis of these situational variables. This cognitive apathy seems to coincide with a conative apathy or lethargy in a tendency to sit around common rooms, etc.; even in the face of potential

pleasurable activities such as sports, card playing, or socializing with the opposite sex. Also, occurring with these two kinds of apathy, I have observed an affective apathy or coolness to one's environment and those fellow human beings in the environment. The point here, is that many of us have learned to inhibit mental activity on these three mental planes and situations mitigate to reinforce this inhibition.

With this in mind, my approach in groups such as seminars or committees or study-skills sorts of workshops is to legitimize silences. This is done openly and explicitly by stating that "silence is golden" and that these silences serve us with some very important time out for our minds to have an opportunity to work. With this time out and an uneventful situation, each member is implicitly required to do his best to be productive. A question followed by thirty seconds of silence, then by my quick interjection that "silence is golden," changes an apparently hopeless situation, from the point of view of the participants, into an optimistic workshop atmosphere with the right people doing the work and having a sense of satisfaction because of it.

RESUME: On se retrouve souvent dans la situation de leader d'un groupe de discussion ou d'apprentissage plus ou moins bien défini. A un moment ou à un autre, nous faisons tous l'expérience du "silence inconfortable." Il en résulte habituellement un dilemme qui amène le leader à soit intervenir, en s'attirant l'indignation ou la colère des membres, ou à ne pas intervenir, avec un résultat analogue. J'ai expérimenté une troisième façon d'éviter le malaise en rendant le silence légitime. De cette façon il est possible de contrecarrer l'utilisation du silence comme manoeuvre de résistance dans les situations de counseling individuel ou de groupe.

REFERENCES

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REVIEW

CITIZENS ADVOCACY AND PROTECTED SERVICES FOR THE IMPAIRED AND HANDICAPPED

By Wolf Wolfensberger and Helen Zauha.

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It may come as a surprise to some that this book is not a plea to implement representation for the handicapped and impaired, but rather