



Silence in Groups

Judi Neal

We learn our attitudes about silence very early. What are some of your first memories of silence? Are they good ones or are they painful? For most of us, our childhood stories about silence are not happy ones.

When I think back to some of my childhood experiences of silence, I recall the family dinner table. One of us three children has just spilled milk on the table and it is now running onto the floor. We sit in stunned silence, paralyzed, unable to move, waiting for Dad to respond. He begins to yell at the poor child who has just spilled the milk, while Mom runs to get something to clean it up with. We all hang our heads, wishing we could be invisible, knowing that even if we weren't the culprit this time, it would happen to us some other time soon. After Dad finishes his diatribe, a different kind of strained silence hangs in the air for quite awhile.

So how do you think I responded when I first began learning about teams and working with groups? Right. As soon as there was silence, I would jump in and say something as a way of avoiding my unconscious discomfort. Silence terrified me, and I wasn't even aware of it.

Things are different now. I have been practicing meditation and hatha yoga for years, and these spiritual practices taught me a lot about what can happen in the silence. I began to get much more comfortable in facilitating groups when silence would occur. I learned that quite often some of the best ideas or breakthroughs would happen after periods of silence. When I am the leader of a group, I find that my comfort with silence also helps the group to be comfortable with silence and to get in touch with their inner wisdom.

Lately I've been learning that we can be even more proactive about using silence in groups and in our work with organizations. I used to wait for silence to happen on its own. Now I explicitly create it in the work that I do with some groups. Native Americans and other indigenous peoples have been using silence in their council meetings and other gatherings for centuries. It is part of their spiritual practice. Silence is a way of welcoming Spirit into the group so that the group can be guided by a higher wisdom. The Society of Friends (or "Quakers") have also used silence as an explicit tool to guide meetings and business decision making. Some of these approaches and practices are now making their way into the world of work.

I think it is important for each of us to get in touch with our feelings and our comfort levels with silence and to work with these as part of our personal and spiritual growth. And as our comfort and understanding of the power of silence grows, we can begin to take steps to share this gift with our workplaces.

Using Silence in Groups:

1. Suggest to the group that the meeting begin with a moment of silence so that people can get centered and feel aligned with the purpose of the meeting.
2. If a group is getting into a difficult conflictual situation, ask for a moment of silence so that the group can be guided by higher wisdom into a creative solution to the conflict.
3. Chris Schaefer and others of High Tor Alliance www.hightor.org are facilitating meetings of leaders who want to support each other in their inner work. If someone in the group has a difficult issue or problem to deal with, the group takes a moment of silence to “carry” that group member. They also do this individually between meetings.
4. The Center for Visionary Leadership in Washington, DC takes 15-20 minutes every day at lunch hour to make time and space available for staff to meditate together.
5. One organization has a bowl of crystal marbles in the center of the table. At any time during a group meeting, if anyone thinks that a moment of silence might be helpful, they can take a marble out of the bowl and everyone else will honor that silence. When the person with the marble senses that the silence is enough, he or she returns the marble to the bowl.