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**Engaging the Crew**

**Some Speak With Silence: Facilitating Mixed Silent/Verbal Groups**

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**Abstract**

Silence as an intended act of not speaking is common in many cultures. However, awareness of its use and the intended meanings and functions of silence are generally not well known in verbal cultures. In order for facilitators and facilitation processes to positively include and effectively communicate with all participants, it is important that facilitators are aware of, understand, and work effectively with participants and co-facilitators who speak with silence. Utilizing this awareness and understanding, facilitators can develop and use strategies and techniques that include silent individuals in facilitation processes.

In this paper, and during the conference workshop, I will share some of the meanings and functions of silence I have encountered. I will then describe some skills and strategies that facilitators might find effective when working with mixed silent/verbal groups.

**Speaking With Silence**

Silence as an intended act of not speaking is common in many cultures. However, awareness of its use and the variety of intended meanings and functions of silence are generally not well known in verbal cultures. In order for facilitators and facilitation processes to positively include and effectively communicate with all participants, facilitators need to become aware of, understand, and work effectively with those who speak with silence.

It is important that facilitators become aware of the different meanings and functions of silence so that they can develop skills that enable them to be more effective with silent individuals. They can also develop and use strategies and techniques that include silent individuals in facilitated processes and create a balance between silent and verbal participants.

**Meanings of Silence**

**"No"**

One of the most frequently encountered meanings of silence is 'no'. Silence is used here to avoid offending someone. The logic is that a verbal negative response might damage their relationship

while a silent response will be understood and maintain the relationship. This use of silence occurs in cultures that foster and value long-term relationships.

### **"Yes"**

The opposite meaning is also possible. Silence can mean 'yes'. Silence here signifies agreement and any proposed arrangements or statements are assumed to be acceptable unless you are told something different.

### **"Everyone already knows"**

If silence is meant to say "*everyone already knows*" and someone then talks about it, this could be interpreted as insulting. In verbal cultures, the opposite dynamic often occurs - information is repeated several times to clarify and remind. This verbal repetition is received as sound overload by members of silent cultures while silence is frustrating to members of verbal cultures.

### **"This is private"**

Another meaning is '*this is private*' and thus not suitable to mention in a public space. This meaning affects whether a topic can be discussed in meetings or training sessions since these are considered public forums. If silence has this meaning, then a confidentiality guideline is irrelevant since it is assumed that everything said in a public space is public knowledge and thus can be repeated to anyone.

### **"I cannot promise"**

Silence can also mean "*I cannot promise but I will try*". This use of silence is tied to the belief that one never knows what the future may hold and circumstances could occur where you cannot honor a commitment. This use of silence can lead to misunderstandings when a group wants to develop an action plan or gain commitment at the end of a meeting. The silent individual may strongly feel that they cannot make statements that are seen as promises although they will work toward the agreed goal. In verbal cultures, the response is often "I'll do ...." This usually means "I'll try and do..." with the assumption that if things go wrong it might not get done. This is very confusing to members of silent cultures who assume a verbal statement means exactly what is said.

### **"I did it"**

Often a member of a silent culture does not talk about actions they have taken because silence means "*I did it, therefore I don't need to say it*". In this instance, the person assumes that their actions convey the message and therefore words are not necessary. The meaning is in their behavior, not in words.

### **"I cannot speak until..."**

Silence may also mean "*I cannot speak until...*". Often leaders do not talk during discussions and meetings because whatever they say might be taken as a decision. In order to enable discussions to continue, these leaders remain silent. This situation often occurs in consensus decision-making cultures where leaders will voice the consensus decision at the end of the discussion.

### **"It might become real"**

Another meaning of silence can be "*if I say it, it will become real*". This silence can occur in meetings where a potential problem or concern will not be discussed because to talk about it is believed to 'make it real'. Silence with this meaning can also occur with print questionnaires - they will not be answered or negative issues will not be mentioned since even writing about them

can 'make them real'. In contrast, verbal cultures discuss problems as a way to avoid them, reduce their impact, or think about them ahead of time.

### **"I'm thinking"**

One of the most difficult meanings of silence to pick up is "*I'm thinking*". This 'time to think' means that the topic is not discussed - nor questions answered - until the ramifications have been thought through and the person decides it is the right time to share their thoughts and/or decisions. This 'internal thinking' is very different from the 'thinking aloud' pattern in verbal cultures. The time frame for this thinking process may be as long as two years. In the meantime, many of the other meanings of silence have probably been assumed and tension and confusion may have developed.

## **Functions of Silence**

In addition to silence having a variety of meanings, it also serves several functions. These functions convey additional meanings that need to be understood before we can consider skills and strategies for working effectively with mixed silent/verbal groups.

### **Respect**

Silence is often used to show *respect*, especially respect for a person of higher status. If speaking in front of high status individuals can be interpreted as disrespect, the response of choice is silence. This function can occur whenever a person from a respect behavior culture interfaces with someone of perceived higher status, including facilitators.

### **Conflict avoidance**

*Conflict avoidance* is very important in many cultures and silence is one way to avoid direct confrontations that are very stressful.

### **Embarrassment avoidance**

'*Saving face*' or *embarrassment avoidance* is a key value in many cultures. In these instances, the *face* often belongs to someone else. Thus a participant may be silent in order to save the face of the facilitator or another participant - or even a whole group of people who are not present.

### **Defense mechanism**

Silence may be used as a *defense mechanism* by members of groups that have been in a submissive position over a long period of time. One of the complications in trying to understand various meanings of silence among Native Americans is that situations where they have been observed being silent are often contexts where historically they have been dominated.

## **Functions of Silence in Verbal Cultures**

Silence can serve several functions in verbal cultures. In these instances, members of silent cultures are usually not affected by them because they already use silence for their own meaning and purpose.

### **Power over**

Silence is frequently used by members of verbal cultures to obtain and/or maintain *power over* others, especially in situations involving information. If access to and control of information is power, then not sharing information is a way to gain or retain power.

## **Manipulation**

Silence can also be used *manipulatively* as a way to obtain information from individuals who are uncomfortable with silence. This is a common technique in police and other interrogative processes. The assumption is that the interviewee will become uncomfortable with silence and freely talk.

## **Assumed agreement**

Some leaders and facilitators work from the assumption that *silence means agreement*. If members of silent cultures are in the group they will not verbally express disagreement with ground rules or issues that are being discussed. It is often much later that the assumed agreement turns out to be non-existent.

## **Skills**

Silence is effective in homogeneous cultures where everyone understands the various meanings (they have been taught them as children) and can interpret silence in different situations. In these cultures, differences between public and private space are important since verbal discussions can occur in private spaces.

## **'Ear for silence'**

An essential skill is an '*ear for silence*'. This relates to awareness that silence carries potential meaning and different listening skills are needed to hear and interpret it. A person from a verbal culture first needs to develop sensitivity to moments of silence and then use observation skills and patience to interpret them.

## **Observation**

*Observation* skills facilitate interpreting silence since meaning is often carried in the context of a given situation. For instance, you observe that some individuals are not speaking in a meeting and then notice that their supervisor is present.

## **Patience**

*Patience* needs to be cultivated and practiced because the various clues to meaning often occur over a period of time. Only when enough clues are observed can a reasonably accurate interpretation be attempted.

## **Strategies**

In developing strategies for working effectively with mixed silent/verbal groups, an understanding of some cultural patterns is helpful. A common assumption in any culture is that there are universal interpretations and meanings. Thus members of both verbal and silent cultures do not see a need to clarify and explain what they mean and intend.

In silent cultures, respect behavior often dictates silence in the public presence of high status individuals. In more private and personal situations, the possibility for discussion exists.

## **Develop trusting relationships**

The possibility of a discussion about a meaning of silence is strongly tied to the importance of relationships. If a *trusting relationship* exists, the meaning of silence might be explained in

words. Thus, in order to obtain verbal interpretations of silence, trusting relationships with members of silent cultures need to be fostered and maintained. These take time and energy to develop and preserve. The benefit is that once the relationship is strong it is possible to privately ask for interpretations and explanations.

However, it is important to remember that the private/public space criteria is still critical. A colleague might be willing to explain a meaning of silence in private but will not do this in a public forum such as a meeting.

### **Small group discussions**

In meetings and large group sessions, forming *small discussion groups* can create a safe space where silent individuals will discuss issues they would not talk about in a larger group. A more verbal member of the group can then share their discussion points with the larger group.

### **Indirect channels**

*Indirect* means of obtaining information and comments are often used in silent cultures. Exercises where participants write down ideas and comments anonymously often enable silent individuals to share their ideas with the group. Members of silent cultures might also involve a close colleague to speak for them.

### **Balanced exercises**

Exercises can be used that *balance* the speaking opportunities of verbal and silent members. In order for these to work, it is critical that a respectful and safe environment has been created and trusting relationships exist between the participants.

## **Summary**

The language of silence is rich with meaning. Skills in listening to and interpreting silence as well as strategies that include silent speakers and balance verbal and silent members will improve the potential for success of many facilitated sessions.

## **The Presenter**

Barbara Pirie is a cross-cultural and diversity consultant who often facilitates mixed groups of silent and verbal individuals.