

Cultural Indicators and Power

("Small Group Communications" McGraw-Hill)

The cultural indicators discussed in the Culture and Small Group Communication unit are also useful ways of studying the way power is exercised within a group. By investigating small group culture, you can uncover processes that typically work behind the scenes in the group's interactions. Thus, you can examine that which we normally take for granted in small groups by taking a closer look at key features of small group culture.

Vocabulary: what terms are used to describe various group members? For example, is there a clear distinction between "newbies" and "elders"? Do different coalitions or factions use different terminology? Is some terminology considered better or more sophisticated than others? Who controls the language the group uses? How does the group define itself?

Practices: how are decisions made in the group? Do coalitions gather before group meetings to plan their strategies? Are meetings opportunities for promoting hidden agendas and personal goals? Who controls the way group members accomplish their tasks? To what degree do group members have autonomy as they complete tasks and make decisions?

Stories: who tells stories? Who are the winners in the stories? Who are the losers? Who makes decisions? Who carries out those decisions? Who gives out rewards/punishments? Who receives those rewards/punishments?

Metaphors: groups who refer to themselves in military terms ("She's the commander; I'm the lieutenant" "We battled it out in the meeting") are likely to have a clear hierarchy with power concentrated at the top. Groups who describe themselves in more egalitarian terms ("Our group is a brain; different members control different group functions") are likely to have a more democratic approach to power.

Rituals: does the meeting start when the group's leader arrives, or can anyone begin the meeting? Who is rewarded in ceremonies? Are all group members rewarded, or are specific individuals singled out? Who develops group rituals? Who implements them? Who participates in rituals? Who does not?

Objects: objects often embody the essence of the group. The slogan or logo the group chooses to represent it can reveal the way power is distributed in the group. In addition, the way the slogan or logo is selected (by one person or by many) indicates the level of influence individual group members have.

When examining the ways in which power is regulated within a group, it is important to look beyond the cultural indicators to the values beneath them. Stories, practices, and vocabularies legitimize power structures so group members accept such structures without question. In analyzing group culture, group members should ask, "Who is privileged in our group?" and "Who is left out of decision-making and problem-solving processes?" Then group members should ask, "How can we more equitably distribute power in our group?" That is, group members should work together to empower themselves. How can practices serve to empower group members? What rituals will encourage all group members to exert influence in the group? What might be a more appropriate way to talk about our group?