Taking Stock of Taking Stack

I first noticed the downside of taking stack at a conference for organizers and radical activists I attended three years ago. Taking stack is a process in which the facilitator makes note of the people who raise their hand to speak and responds to them in turn.

At the conference, I attended a workshop called ?People of Color and Radical Organizing,? led by an experienced organizer of color who I respected. I hoped that we would have time to get into some rich discussion about some of the questions I wrestle with as a person of color doing organizing work and strategies for being able to work effectively from that identity. I was sorely disappointed. The facilitator told a brief story from his experience and then asked for comments.

The workshop had drawn a large crowd and many hands went up. The facilitator then proceeded to take stack and go around the room, giving each person who had raised their hand a chance to tell their story. He did not encourage people to react or interact with each other. He did not probe more deeply into anyone?s comments to assist any of the people who shared to be reflective of their story in a way that helped identify common themes or tensions in the room. The result was that we had one long go around where a number of painful stories were shared. The variety of experiences shared did not have much relationship to each other or the theme of the workshop. Other people made esoteric comments that left the room feeling even more disconnected. The energy in the room down-spiraled. The mood at the end of the workshop was stagnant and despairing. A number of people had shared but we hadn?t talked to each other. I didn?t feel like I left with any new insights, ideas or challenge ? it didn?t seem to me that others did either.

Have Your Say

There is plenty that could have deepened the conversation, but a core piece that held this group back from a more dynamic experience with each other was the strategy the facilitator chose when taking comments from the group. This facilitator chose to use the technique of taking stack to run the conversation in this group. The value reflected in this choice is that everyone who appears to want to speak should be able to, in turn. It is a method with a democratic principle and also an orderly way of running a conversation, that limits interjections or people talking over each other.

Taking stack can be an appropriate method when facilitating groups ? I do use it sometimes. For example, in meeting situations when a group is trying to arrive at a decision about something and it seems important that everyone in the group is given an opportunity to weigh in on the decision. In situations like this it can be a helpful way of managing large groups when there is already likely to be a great deal of energy behind a conversation. I use it to make sure a few loud or passionate voices are not the only ones weighing in on the decision.

However, my choice to use the method of taking stack is based on a particular diagnosis of the group and what I think will be most useful for the process at hand ? it is not my default. In the workshop at the conference, our group needed more support to find focus around some common themes so that we could get into a real discussion, but instead, the facilitator valued equality at the expense of the life of the group. So while each person got a chance to speak, the group itself found no collective voice and suffered. I noticed people remaining fixated on having their say on a particular point, oblivious to the flow of the conversation. Active listening was discouraged by the method of taking stack in this instance because, as people waited their turn to prepare what they want to say, they were not fully present to the comments that others were making. They did not learn from what others had to say or adjust their own position based on what they were hearing.

The kind of individual obsession underlying the notion of equality in this context reaffirms Western bias for individualism and individual expression. It?s a cultural statement that puts the needs of individuals ahead of the needs of a group as a whole.

Follow the Energy of the Group

When I am concerned about participants getting stuck in their point of view and want to support them to connect into common themes that create new reflections, I don?t take stack. Instead I have come to belief in following the natural energy of the group. I see groups as both a collection of individuals and its own unique organism. As people come into the room with their own experiences, identities, baggage, and agendas and begin interacting with each other, the group takes on an emotional life of its own. As this happens, the group surfaces all kinds of interesting dynamics for the facilitator to navigate.

An effective facilitator will try to track the life of the group, noticing patterns that show up and asking themselves, ?What are the behaviors, attitudes or fears that seem to be holding this group back from learning the most or ?getting real? with each other?? ?What are the common themes that are showing up here?? ?Who in the room seems to be holding some piece of knowledge, experience or insight that might move others towards a fresh perspective??

As a facilitator, I am accountable to moving the group forward, not merely catering to the individual needs of the participants. By paying attention to what is ?live? in a group and where it is at in its learning process, I can adjust my choices to emphasize points that will resonate the most. It also gives me more space as things pop up organically, to make the most of moments that seems ripe with learning. At Training for Change, we sometimes call this ?following the energy of the group?. For example, I was in a training of trainer workshop where several participants at different moments had made reference to their own lack of confidence, or sense of not being ?good enough? to be in front of the room. From a facilitator perspective, this theme was a self-limiting belief that needed to be explored in order to move the group forward. My co-facilitator and I designed an activity that was meant to address this theme.

One young woman responded with a great deal of nervous energy, anxiousness and laughter. This body language, along with comments she had made earlier, seemed to be inviting a push from the facilitators. This made me think she might be ready to do some personal work on this theme. When it came time for the debrief, she raised her hand, along with several others. Instead of taking stack I called on the young woman and asked her to share. She began talking openly about what the activity had brought up around her own insecurities as a trainer. I followed her willingness to disclose and spent ten minutes using elicitive questions to assist her to identify where these insecurities were coming from and ways that she was holding herself back. As she talked, I watched as the rest of the group lean forward, paying close attention to her process.

At the end of this session, only a couple other individuals had time to share their personal reflections. But inviting one person to confront a self-limiting belief, with the time to go deep and work it out, had a huge ripple effect within the workshop. As the workshop went on, other people became bolder with their participation. All of a sudden there was lots of laughter and playfulness. It was clear that a lot of energy in the group had been freed up as others had started to let go of the things that were holding them back.

When following the energy of the group, the flip side of encouraging an individual to share more deeply is limiting comments from a participant who is not being helpful to the group. In another workshop, I had a participant who spoke in very obtuse and passive aggressive language despite some ways I tried to assist him to be clearer and more direct with his point. He wanted to speak often but as the workshop went on I could see others drift off whenever he spoke. People would roll their eyes, lean back in their chairs and sigh at their confusion. Since he did not seem interested in taking the invitations I was making to get real about some underlying things that might be troubling him, I eventually started asking him to hold his comments so that others could share. If I hadn?t done this, I think overall participation from the group would have decreased considerably.

Following the energy of the group does take more attention and focus from the facilitator than taking stack. Rather than just tracking the order of who will speak, you are responsible for noticing the dynamics that are occurring in the room and making decisions in the moment about what will support the group to move forward. However, the benefits for the learning and engagement of the group are huge and it will keep you on your creative edge as a trainer. So next time you?re tempted to take stack, take a moment to consider how that method will impact the group in front of you. Maybe following the energy of the group will do more to produce the participation you are looking for. Just try it!

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