

Voices: the building blocks of social change

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"If we don't speak up, then no one will know we are here"

Rose Mapendo – Pushing the Elephant

Out of the diversity of "voices" we find the richness of conversations, and out of our rich conversations spring the relationships, ideas and impulses for change. We are social beings and it is through our many voices in many conversations that we are most social. How authentic voices are brought, received, engaged with and supported makes a world of difference to the quality of conversation, to human engagement and to the contribution we each can make to processes of change.

This small piece explores some thoughts about voice that I have collected over the years, experiencing both my own voice and those of others, and becoming more conscious of the power that lies in voice.

Finding my voice is more than just finding out what is it that I have to say. Finding "my voice" is itself a conversation, with myself, an inner dialogue of the many voices that I have within

me. I am a diversity of voices populated by all the people and influences in my life, each with opinions, each a part of who I am (even if I don't like it), competing to be heard, recognized and acted upon. I have to choose which voice gets "airtime" and which voice is obeyed!

I believe that the more voices I allow to be expressed, in conversations with myself, and from which I can form my own opinion, the more authentic and powerful the voice I actually bring to the world.

Most of the time the voice or voices that I express come from an unconscious or intuitive choosing. This is OK most of the time. But if I have had an unresolved relationship with a dominating father then his voice may come out first, what he would have said, and this may easily be something I regret saying. Or I may express the opposite of what he would have said as I struggle to rebel against his influence. But if I am able to bring more voices to my inner conversation, then my wisdom is enhanced by the many and the voice I choose to bring is the result of a more conscious and weighed decision, one that has a better chance of connecting to my values, what I believe to be important. This is my authentic voice.

Practically, what does this mean for social change practitioners. So often in the social processes we support or facilitate, we lead people straight into conversation with each other. The result is that those who are most resolved about their opinions or can quickly sort through their "voices", tend to dominate. Yet I have found that if I allow small, silent spaces for individuals to collect their thoughts, to give space to their own inner conversation, perhaps to write some things down or to chat to a neighbour, testing their voices, before the group starts to engage, then they are able to bring a more formed and confident opinion or contribution. This improves their participation and empowers them. If social change is about effective participation then these small moments of personal "inner conversations" are a foundation stone. Try this and see if there is a difference.

Finding our voice: we need to remind ourselves that it is not only about being heard; finding voice is about connecting to and thinking with others to inform new conversations.

It is therefore important that space is created for all the different voices to find expression. The conditions have to be right for all voices to be brought into direct dialogue in order to alter the power dynamics.

The power of finding voice happens when people can speak out of their own experience and this enhances their ability to learn from such experience.

Practically, it is useful to offer people in groups opportunity for a 'round' of sharing on a topic, before opening for more 'free' engagement and response. This is not simply about

being sensitive to quieter people. It's an exercise in group intelligence for individuals to have to hear all that is existing in the group and encourages dialogue with the whole, rather than simple debate with one or other point. Such a practice really does help us find 'our' voice .. and enables something new, and truly shared, to come to life in the group. Try this and see if there is a difference.

Bringing voice is a process that allows for voice to find expression in a space. In everyday life it is a diversity of voices that have to come through into a space for direct dialogue in a way that creates a 'new' story and, where possible, effect positive change. Working with diverse voices that are brought into a space demands an ability to listen to, live with and hold different narratives in a way that allows for a new, jointly created narrative to emerge.

In order to enable meaningful conversation, it is important to hold and work with the tension that manifests where diverse voices struggle to find expression, seemingly against each other. How each voice is brought depends on the place from which it is coming. When the voice comes from an experience of anger, it may be brought in a way that directs that anger in any direction, affecting and even distorting voices coming the other way. When coming from an unconfident place, the insecurity and uncertainty may easily diminish valuable messages. Yet these same angry or insecure voices can bring healthy energy or relieving honesty, if brought and received well.

Practically, it is useful, even in groups that are mostly self-managed to have a facilitator. This person is especially alert for the climate of contributions and able to hold and frame 'hot' and 'edgy' contributions. Fight and flight responses to these voices are quite normal. Having a facilitator role – even one that is mostly quiet – helps groups to receive the benefit of these voices and not silence or avoid them. Try this and see if there is a difference.

Receiving voice is an important dimension. How different voices are received depends on various things. Sometimes voice can be experienced as disturbing, aggressive, insulting and infuriating, but actually this may say more about the listener than the speaker. Receiving voice demands an open heart, a suspension of judgement. Indeed when our hearts are fully open we can notice and observe things that transcend the words, that can hear deeper messages that the owner of the voice may be utterly unaware of.

Receiving different voices can be a conscious act; it demands of us to be awake, sensitive and respectful. It is when our hearts are open that we can experience the humanity of others and tap hidden worlds of meaning. Try this and see if there is a difference

Engaging voice and how this is done can become a driver for change. When voice is engaged with positively it can provide the impetus for transforming the power dynamics that are held in relationships. Engaging voices in conversation demands active listening for the real message that is carried, responding in a way that validates, augments, expands and even challenges what is heard – these are not mutually exclusive. From experience we are aware that engaging with voice does not always have to be a gentle process - authentic conversation often requires robust and critical engagement, but without lessening human positivity. Critical, robust conversation creates movement and brings people to a place of fresh understanding, perspective and appreciation of one another. In order to engage this voice in a meaningful way there has to be understanding, tolerance and acceptance of other. More importantly, it demands respect for difference and otherness.

Practically, it can help to jot down notes while listening to and contributing to conversations. The temptation to react can be tempered by jotting down some thoughts ... and formulating a response that really does engage – not simply react to – the voice of others. Try this and see if there is a difference

Ghost voice: in any social setting there can be dominant voices, silent voices and even the ghost voice. A ghost voice is hidden, swallowed or whispered in corners, asking the difficult questions and expressing the shadow stuff that no-one wants to admit, the issues that make the organisation uneasy and uncomfortable, especially those with power.

The power of the silent ghost voice is often underestimated. Silent voices are often associated with powerlessness but, this is often untrue. Silent voices can sometimes be the most powerful – they can shape the whole direction of conversation.

However, the ghost voice when sufficiently ignored can also become frustrated and be expressed in exaggerated and seemingly destructive ways, experienced as ‘noise’ by those who cannot hear what is behind it. If the voice is ridiculed it can set in motion a destructive cycle with unforeseen consequences.

Social change practice which focuses on the marginalized and excluded must have focus on the ghost voice and the enormous challenges of transforming this voice into one of leadership. Often the ghost voice emerges as distraction, or as the joker; perhaps the complainer. The one who shrugs. Sometimes the ghost is even more silent than that. As facilitators and as conscious participants, how do we see what is hidden? How do we hear what is not said? Our awareness needs to extend beyond what occupies our immediate attention and reach to what is hidden. It affects how we observe and how we listen, stretching into the ‘negative’ spaces, into what we see in the corner of our eye, into the silence that we actively listen for. Try this and see if there is a difference

Writing voice: we need to distinguish between speaking voice and writing voice. It is very challenging to me that someone with an amazingly articulate and passionate speaking voice cannot put those same words onto paper – what gets written down is often correct but lifeless, stripped of its authentic voice. How can we support people to write how they speak?

I have, in the past, ridiculed people who go to elocution lessons, and I am still not sure what they do there. But as I think of voice and the need to bring mine more authentically I wonder if we don't all need such lessons, if they can make us more conscious of our own and each other's voices, how we communicate what we really want to say and how we listen deeply for what is trying to be said. Our voices truly are gifts to nurture.

As social change practitioners, the voices of the marginalized that we seek to encourage and amplify are the most vital resource. How often we see government officials wilt when addressed and undressed by the powerful and authentic voices of community leaders who speak for the many voices that they represent. These voices are already there, hiding. How can we support their emergence and strengthening?

