
EQUALIZING POWER AMONG US

To equalize power among us, we need to keep ourselves in check – in whatever ways we have privilege.

Despite our best intentions, more often than not, we duplicate the patterns of power we find so abhorrent in dominant culture. Following are some guidelines to help us equalize relations. Privilege is invisible to those who have it. To create a context which embraces diversity, in which no one is marginalized, a conscious and ongoing effort is required. By noticing and changing what we take for granted, we make room for everyone's contribution. This list is offered as a way to help privileged group members reflect on their own behavior.

DON'Ts

- Don't interrupt
- Don't unilaterally set the agenda
- Don't patronize
- Don't assume you're more capable than others
- Don't trivialize the experience of others
- Don't challenge tone, attitude or manner
- Don't assume anyone is more "suited" for anything
- Don't take responsibility for, think for, or speak for others
- Don't assume someone is exceptional compared to the "average" person of their group
- Don't assume an individual speaks for or has the same opinions as others from their group
- Don't be the only one controlling the organization's resources
- Don't reduce difficulties to personality conflicts
- Don't assume the root of a problem is misunderstanding or lack of information
- Don't ask others to explain, prove, or justify themselves
- Don't mimic other cultural traditions or religious practices
- Don't expect to be treated as an individual outside of your group's history
- Don't flaunt how you may be different than others of your group
- Don't take up all the space or always speak first (or last)
- Don't ignore or minimize differences by emphasizing similarities
- Don't overlook history; don't equate all oppressions as equal
- Don't expect "others" to educate you about their group's history, conditions, or sensibilities
- Don't expect others to be grateful
- Don't defend mistakes by focusing on good intentions
- Don't take everything personally
- Don't assume everyone has the same options you do.
- Don't try to guess what's needed
- Don't assume that the visible reality is the only one operating
- Don't expect to be trusted

DOs

- Do take responsibility to learn about the history, culture and struggles of other groups as told by them
- Do make sure the context welcomes everyone's voice and listen
- Do appreciate efforts to point out mistakes. (You must be doing something right, or no one would bother to let you know)
- Do expect discomfort when relating to people different from yourself
- Do address the many dimensions of accessibility, including such things as money, space, transportation, child-care and language
- Do notice what you expect from and assume about others, and not what experiences formed your ideas
- Do name unacknowledged realities, so that the parameters of the situation expand to include everyone's experience
- Do remember that others speak about more than the conditions of their own group
- Do regard people as whole human beings with families, interests and ideas beyond those of the particular task
- Do take responsibility for equalizing power
- Do name dominating behavior when you see it
- Do encourage pride in your own and other's ancestry and history
- Do understand individuals in the context of their social history
- Do look for political differences rather than personality conflicts
- Do ask questions
- Do struggle over matters of principle and politics
- Do respect disagreements
- Do make accessible all information so others can decide if they are interested
- Do appreciate the risk a person takes in sharing their experience with you
- Do take risks
- Do trust others

In the Ways We've Been Oppressed...

In addition to keeping ourselves in check regarding whatever ways we possess privilege, it is vital that we stop constraining ourselves – stop keeping ourselves in check – in the particular ways that relate to how we experience being an “outsider.” We have to take the risk of putting our experience into the center. We can no longer afford to collude with our own oppression by accommodating and/or not acknowledging our own power. It is our experience that is needed to inform and shape decisions.

It is also important to remember that offensive behavior is not necessarily calculated to protect power. It is often simply a result of ignorance. Those with privilege have never needed to understand the experience of others. They are frequently oblivious to how their behavior reinforces the status quo.

*From a pamphlet by Margo Adair & Sharon Howell, **Breaking Old Patterns, Weaving New Ties: Alliance Building. Tools for Change**; P.O. Box 14141; San Francisco, California 94114; USA.*