A Revolutionary Decision-Making Process

By C.T. Butler

If you were asked to pick one thing that might bring about major social, political, and economic change in this country, what would you pick? Most people would pick their favorite issue; be it civil rights, demilitarization, environmental sustainability, or whatever. Some people would choose a system of values to replace the capitalism system such as socialism or the Ten Key Values of the Greens. But few people would even think of changing group dynamics (the way people treat each other when interacting with one another in a group); or specifically, the process they use when making decisions.

Process is the key to revolutionary change. This is not a new message. Visionaries have long pointed to this but it is a hard lesson to learn. As recently as the 70's, feminists clearly defined the lack of an alternative process for decision-making and group interaction as the single most important obstacle in the way of real change, both within progressive organizations and for society at large. Despite progress on many issues of concern to progressive-minded people, very little has changed in the way people treat each other, either locally or globally, and almost nothing has changed about who makes the decisions. The values of competition, which allow us to accept the idea that somebody has to lose; the structure of hierarchy, which, by definition, creates power elites; and the techniques of domination and control, which dehumanizes and alienates all parties affected by their use, are the standards of group interaction with which we were all conditioned. There are but a few models in our society which offer an alternative.

All groups, no matter what their mission or political philosophy, use some form of process to accomplish their work. Almost all groups, no matter where they fall on the social, political, and economic spectrum of society, have a hierarchical structure, accept competition as "natural", acceptable, and even desirable, and put a good deal of effort into maintaining control of their members. It is telling that in our society, there are opposing groups, with very different perspectives and values, which have identical structures and techniques for interaction and decisionmaking. If you played a theater game in which both groups wore the same costumes and masks and spoke in gibberish rather than words, a spectator would not be able to tell them apart.

So what would an alternative revolutionary decisionmaking process look like, you ask? To begin with, a fundamental shift from competition to cooperation. This does not mean to do away with competition. Ask any team coach what the key to

victory is and you will be told "cooperation within the team". The fundamental shift is the use of competition not to win, which is just a polite way of saying to dominate, to beat, to destroy, to kill the opposition; but rather, to use competition to do or be the best. In addition, the cooperative spirit recognizes that it is not necessary to attack another's efforts in order to do your best; in fact, the opposite is true. In most situations, helping others do their best actually increases your ability to do better. And in group interactions, the cooperative spirit actually allows the group's best to be better than the sum of its parts.

Cooperation is more than "live and let live". It is making an effort to understand another's point of view. It is incorporating another's perspective with your own so that a new perspective emerges. It is suspending disbelief, even if only temporarily, so you can see the gem of truth in ideas other than your own. It is a process of creativity, synthesis, and open-mindedness which leads to trust-building, better communication and understanding, and ultimately, a stronger, healthier, more successful group.

The next step is the development of an organization which is non-hierarchical or egalitarian. A corresponding structure would include: participatory democracy, routine universal skill-building and information sharing, rotation of leadership roles, frequent evaluations, and, perhaps most importantly, equal access to power. Hierarchical structures are not, in and of themselves, the problem. But their use concentrates power at the top and, invariably, the top becomes less and less accessible to the people at the bottom, who are usually most affected by the decisions made by those at the top. Within groups (and within society itself), there becomes a power elite. In an egalitarian structure, everyone has access to power and every position of power is accountable to everyone. This does not mean that there are no leaders. But the leaders actively share skills and information. They recognize that leadership is a role empowered by the entire group, not a personal characteristic. A group in which most or all of the members can fill any of the leadership roles cannot easily be dominated, internally or externally.

The last and most visible step towards revolutionary change in group process is the manner in which members of the group interact with each other. Dominating attitudes and controlling behavior would not be tolerated. People would show respect and expect to be shown respect. Everyone would be doing their personal best to help the group reach decisions which are in the best interest of the group. There would be no posturing and taking sides. Conflicts would be seen as an opportunity for growth, expanding people's thinking, sharing new information, and developing new solutions which include everyone's perspectives. The group

would create an environment where everyone was encouraged to participate, conflict was freely expressed, and resolutions were in the best interest of everyone involved. Indubitably, this would be revolutionary.

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