



## The politics of empowerment: An IDHP perspective

Mike Eales

The IDHP has been a core part of my professional life for almost twenty years, as a participant, co-facilitator of four diploma courses, committee member, and an outside facilitator on most courses.

For me the essence of the IDHP diploma is to empower participants in their professional and personal lives by:

**1.**

Developing their awareness and understanding of personal, interpersonal and group development and the management of change;

**2.**

Using a holistic approach to interweave and integrate intellectual, emotional, physical, spiritual, and other learning within an educational framework. Holism acknowledges the interconnectedness between personal and political, local and global, human and sacred, self-development and awareness of the planetary environment;

**3.**

Forming a learning community which aims to balance authentic hierarchy (where the facilitator takes a strong lead) with co-operative and autonomous ways of working. In the IDHP tradition the facilitators move along a gradient from hierarchy towards a peer relationship with

participants by the end of the course, and with a distinct move towards co-operation in the second year. 'Towards' is the operative word here as the speed of movement is in the context of the real-life dynamic of each group.

It is this third dimension I will focus on in this article. This active exploration of power structures both inside and outside the group (including the immediate outside of the IDHP committee, and the hosting institution) enables participants to gain more autonomy and choice, and to acquire the skills and awareness to empower others.

### The wider political frame

More and more, organisations throughout the spectrum of industry and commerce are recognising the value of more facilitative leadership and management styles in the quest to develop a well managed and empowered workforce.

Leaders and managers are being called on work in ways that empower their staff. The conventional role of the manager has expanded to include those of Leader, Coach, Mentor, Guide and Teacher. In order to fulfil these new demands, managers have to extend their repertoire of skills and increase their self-awareness. Smaller

decentralised groups, flatter management structures, internal empowerment and a good deal more respect is called for. In the more service based economy managers must remember to nurture - not neuter- those who bring the talent.

To an increasing extent good leadership requires the ability to enable others to attain personal and professional goals, and to get the best of our team-based working. It requires creativity, courage and emotional intelligence.

For the last twenty-five years the IDHP has been an active learning lab for such issues.

### **Our learning**

There has been a lot of misunderstanding about what working in a facilitative way means. What people often experience is a sort of messy democracy, where there is no clear contract or focus, where people sit on or misuse their power, where decision making is slow and often chaotic, and where there is no real opportunity to work through and learn about the group process taking place. Or else people experience much the same sort of leadership as ever was, except some of it is now labelled facilitation.

One of the key learnings of the IDHP approach is working intentionally with power, and being aware and intentional about the use of Hierarchy - Co-operation - Autonomy gradient.

### **The hierarchy/co-operation paradox**

There is a paradox that, as John Heron describes, 'it takes a good hierarchy to

bring into being a good peer political process'. The facilitator uses authentic 'healthy' hierarchy to contract with the group, to hold a high profile for as long as is useful, to be guardian of negotiated contracts, and to raise awareness of group issues. The aim of hierarchy here is to support people to become more co-operative and autonomous.

### **Inauthentic hierarchy**

Sometimes the facilitator holds on unhealthily to power. This maybe because the facilitator has not worked through own power issues, or fears the consequences of letting go. This is often a trust issue - do I trust that the group to be more democratic?

Inauthentic hierarchy can be expressed directly e.g. by being over directive about task, process, meaning etc, or indirectly e.g. not being open to healthy challenge, not abiding by group decisions or ground rules, low self-disclosure etc. Education and management has a long history of inauthentic hierarchy, real 'change' is often about challenging these old power structures which can atrophy organisational structures.

### **Push back to hierarchy**

The corollary of the above is a push back to hierarchy where faced with the difficulties of co-operation individuals or the group try to re-enlist the power of the facilitator. A stronger version of this is where the group project their own struggles with peer process back onto the facilitator, the task or the contract. 'It's your fault we are in this mess, so you get us out of it'. The challenge for the facilitator is to

respond to authentic requests for assistance, while handing back power to the group, and handing back any projections or attempts to manipulate. This is equally observable in organisational life.

### **Pseudo co-operation**

Here the group produces an elegant front where the real dynamic is submerged, or happens outside the main group. A key indicator of this is when there is more energy between meetings than in the meeting itself. Another indicator is when a lot of energy is focussed on issues outside the immediate boundary of the group (e.g. the room, the administration, the IDHP committee). The facilitator challenge is to raise awareness and not collude.

### **Three dimensions of power: The Rule of Three**

A helpful way I have found of working with power as a facilitator is to consider three dimensions of power. I have called this the 'Rule of Three'. It is a way of following the power dynamics of a group both by separating out different types of power, and also seeing where they fit into the group 'system'.

There are three basic options:

#### **Option 1. Intra-personal power**

This explores the internal dynamics of individuals in order to gain awareness about own power issues, work on emotional distress triggered by past experience and learning, cognitive reframing, overcoming personal fears, releasing tensions and blocks, and expanding personal presence and confidence.

The basic questions here are 'What is my stuff, that I need to work and that gets in the way?' and 'What does my own authentic power look like?'

Our own past experience can lead to unconscious drivers in the present. This might mean that we hide or over-exert our power. Strong unconscious drivers lead us to feel we are right, even in the face of feedback. The Ayurvedic texts of India call on physicians to master their 'subjectivity' - which contains all of the above. They say wisely that the closer it is to the source, i.e. our own unworked unconscious baggage, then the harder it is to see it or accept it in ourselves, and the more dangerous it is. In modern parlance it leads to projection, illusion and transference.

We also need support to feel centred in our own authentic power. Often it is others who have some investment in keeping you powerless.

#### **Option 2. Inter-personal power**

This explores the operational dynamics of the group. It is here-and-now, face-to-face interaction. The basic question here is 'what is really happening between group members?' So if I feel put down it is because someone really is putting me down. I may have issues about it to work on, yet this does not deny the intentional or unconscious behavior of others.

At this level the here-and-now workings of political power can be worked with. The task here is to improve interpersonal communication, work on criticalness and judgement, identify blocks to communication, and to work with conflict, participation and decision making.



Mike Eales and John Heron in conversation

### Option 3. Transpersonal power

By this I mean the broadest definition of transpersonal - states of consciousness beyond the limits of personal identity.

One question here is 'What is it I experience that is beyond me?' I am picking it up in the group field or the dream field, yet it belongs somewhere else - I am the conduit for it. This is the subtle clairvoyance of group life. As open and sensitive human beings we tune into and receive thoughts and feelings from those around us, or the dream field around us. Without experience it is easy to feel that it is our own feeling, and then to get confused as to why we are feeling it.

This can range from attunement to the other human beings in proximity to me, through attunement to events in the world, to going beyond conventional categories of experience.

An example of simple attunement is that I might start to feel an emotion

e.g. anger, I do not understand why and checking it out in the group I find someone else is angry and have not yet expressed it. As their feeling is named, I stop feeling it.

Further up the scale, the group may experience a deep moment that feels out of time and space, or maybe sense that the ancestors are present. It may be an emanation of our higher selves, an experience of the common unconscious, of collective regressive issues, or connection with something beyond ourselves.

In group life this level of awareness can be refined through altered states of consciousness, celebration, regression work, meditation, ceremony and ritual which of themselves bring up another kind of power issue. Fear of the transpersonal is often based on experience of the power dynamics of religion, and group members often have to work hard to find that spiritual authority is within. This fear is often expressed though intolerance of others'

transpersonal experience. The issue to watch is people using transpersonal power to up their temporal authority, and not acknowledging the intrinsic right that spiritual authority is within.

### **A systems approach**

All of these options need to be honoured in a group. Otherwise it can lead to manipulative behaviour, what I call 'professional fouls'.

For example, over emphasis on option one is oppressive. In some groups individuals can feel constantly 'theraped' - whatever happens is worked on as their material. If I actively use my power to put you down, and then tell you that you have a problem with being put down and need to work on it, I am committing a professional foul. It can lead to inner confusion, a deep sense of unfairness, and a crisis of confidence. Of course it is important to work with option one, but not to the exclusion of the others, otherwise the most vulnerable or foolhardy end up doing all the work of the group.

In option two we can see how groups develop ways of not focussing on what really is happening through:

**Repression of tension** - becoming collusively shallow, distracting or avoiding.

**Paralysis by analysis** - over theorising, or attempting to analyse and change individuals (see above).

**Winding up the energy** - upping the stakes, driven by past hurts, and hurting each other. This is still a defence against looking at the here-and-now dynamic.

**Majority/minority** - those in power see the minority as strange, inferior, paranoid, attacking, mad etc. Denial

of option two is a group game that leads to pack attack.

Denial of option 3 means that shadow issues for the whole group get safely contained. This can be either by focussing on one person (option one), or by trying to analyse them away by revisiting some interpersonal dynamics (option two), rather than being explored by all with openness to the whole dream field from group, societal and planetary perspectives. If option three is not allowed to flourish then the group becomes a hermetic political system where learning is limited.

### **The future**

This is an on-going inquiry for the IDHP. Our task is to keep the ethos alive while working in a co-operative research culture that keeps the IDHP committee, facilitators and participants alive to their own power dynamics, and a vision to be agents of change for the wider world.

### **Further Reading**

John, Heron. (1991) 'Confluent and Political Learning on IDHP Courses', *Self and Society*, Vol XV1V No. 4. London.

Mindell, Arnold. (1992), *The Leader as Martial Artist*, Harper, San Francisco

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