

# Voice matters

## A personal story about learning to speak and listen in groups

### Alison Donaldson

*The question of whose voice gets heard in meetings and conversations is central to the practice of organisation development (OD). By tracing the difficulties I had in my earlier life in finding the courage to speak in groups – including the cultural influences that may have held me back – I show how I eventually “found my voice” and also reached a deeper understanding of how*



*power relations work. Meanwhile, I have continued to develop what I call a “conversational practice”, one that involves noticing the quality of conversations and making moves that might unsettle unhelpful patterns and make the interaction more lively or satisfying. Rather than offering a new recipe for OD practice, I offer my story in the hope that it stimulates others to reflect on their own lives in relation to mine, and maybe even to reconsider some of their habitual practices.*

#### Key words

Voice, conversation, meetings, groups, power, power relating, culture, normalisation

In organisational life, every voice matters. But some voices – whether in meetings, group discussions or informal conversations – get heard less than others. So, what is it about group dynamics that creates an imbalance? I am of course pointing to the vast and complex topic of power relations: our capacity to speak up in groups is influenced not just by our individual psychological history, but also by the power dynamics of each specific human interaction and the cultural patterns we are caught up in.

In the 15 years since I first joined ODiN (the Organisation Development Innovation Network), I have co-led two of its gatherings, both of which took up the subject of narrative (Donaldson, Lank & Maher 2011; Donaldson & Warwick 2016). In the spirit of storytelling, I want here to take my own experience of voice and power seriously. I will begin with an apparently minor anecdote about an encounter that happened many years ago.

## An invitation to speak

When I was an undergraduate, I went along to the inaugural meeting of the first “women’s lib” group at my university (Bath). It was 1973, not long after Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* came out. During the meeting, I was particularly struck by the way in which some of those present actively invited quieter people to say what we thought. To me this was a revelation. I felt valued and heard, and it showed me how a bit of encouragement can liberate those who feel less confident in groups.

I now think that this early experience contained the seeds of what was to become a major interest in my life: how does conversation work, and how can we make it more likely that every person in the room who wants to be heard is given the space to speak, is listened to properly and taken seriously? In pursuing these questions over the years, I have developed what might be called a “conversational practice”, that is, a practice of noticing patterns of human interaction and responding to them – e.g. by actively nudging the conversation in a new direction or just pointing to a pattern.

I didn’t always feel brave enough to speak up in groups, let alone initiate shifts in conversations and meetings. I lacked the necessary self-possession – which makes me wonder, can anyone become a masterful OD practitioner before the age of 50? Finding my confidence took many years, including raw experience and plenty of clumsy moves along the way.

My employers sent me on all sorts of training courses, including facilitation skills, presentation skills and negotiating skills, but these only made a marginal difference. In the end, the leg up I needed came from elsewhere. It began in my late-30s after I became my own boss. I was getting weary of what I referred to tongue-in-cheek as my “prostitute writing”, and I was looking for something I would really love doing. I took myself to countless short courses about communication and psychology, which showed me that, among other things, my internal dialogue sometimes undermined my self-confidence.

My real awakening, though, didn’t happen until my mid-40s when I went back to university and really learned to think critically. Doing a PhD had never been part of my life’s plan – not surprising, as there had been no academics in my family and I didn’t have a life plan anyway. But, partly through serendipity, I ended up with a doctorate in organisational change, and it changed my life. The three years of individual and group inquiry took me to a new level of understanding of social change, group dynamics and “power relating”. It also gave me the self-awareness and intellectual depth that I needed if I was to hold my own in philosophical and political discussions. The academic route to self-assurance isn’t for everybody, but it was just what I needed. (Paradoxically, though, to develop my voice I also needed to get away from my comfort zone – my desk. As I wrote those words, I noticed a pain in my shoulders and decided to stand up, stretch and walk about...)

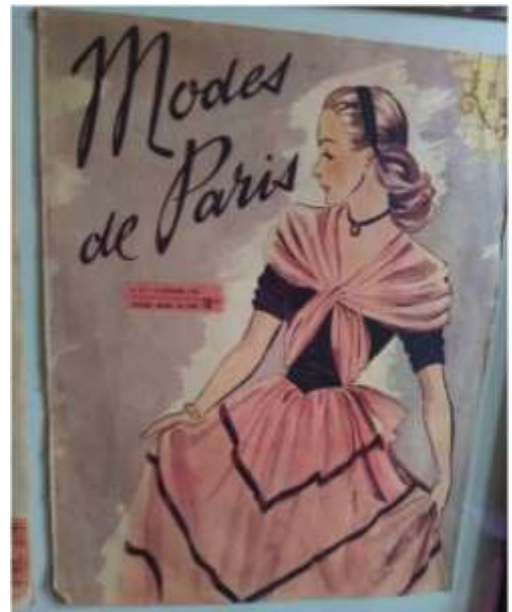
Whenever people meet, each individual has their own psychological history. In sharing part of mine, it is worth stressing that it is not just about me – it also speaks of the cultural contexts I have been part of. For instance, as a young girl, I rejected dolls, tutus, babies and religion and, as a teenager, I felt indignant about the low expectations of girls. This fed a desire to prove to the world (and myself) that “I could do anything a man could do”. I stopped wearing make-up, learned carpentry, sought out intellectually stimulating company and studied economics at university.

Where did my sense of society's expectations come from? No doubt I imbibed the model of the life of the conventional wife from novels and films, and maybe also from subtle signals coming from people around me. I also watched my much elder sister pursue the route of secretarial-course-followed-by-marriage-and-babies in her early 20s. All these influences suggested what was normal and natural for my gender. It was not for me. No wonder the following scene from the biography of an accomplished French author and personality speaks to me so strongly.

### When Napoleon met Mme de Staël

To most, Napoleon was the epitome of power, and yet he was wary of one particular woman, the famous salon hostess Madame de Staël, whom he met twice in person.

The first encounter was in 1797, when Parisian society had recently started talking about this young general (a mere 28 years old) just back from his victory in Italy. Not surprisingly, when Mme de Staël set eyes on him, Napoleon looked tired. All he said to her directly was that, on his recent passage through Switzerland, he had been unable to meet up with her husband (the Swedish ambassador at the French court). He then promptly took his leave and Mme de Staël remained in the room feeling stunned and voiceless.



Magazine cover 1946  
Photo: Alison Donaldson



Book cover: portrait by **Firmin Massot, 1809**  
Photo: Alison Donaldson

We see in this scene that, in the course of one short conversation, even a confident and well-connected person like Mme de Staël could feel silenced in a certain kind of situation. She wanted to be taken seriously for herself, not as the property of a husband. But, given the rules of courteous behaviour and the role of women in society in that era, any female would probably have felt equally silenced. For his part, Napoleon effectively controlled the situation – by making one short statement, showing no curiosity or acknowledgement of Mme de Staël as a person, and leaving the room before she could respond. In many ways I feel fortunate to have been born 200 years later, and yet I suspect that such exchanges, or something like them, still happen today at least from time to time.

## Noticing

This historic scene is also an example of what I meant earlier when I talked of noticing specific human interactions – in this instance, in a biography. In real life, paying attention to such meaningful interactions starts with noticing a striking moment (Donaldson 2008). Often such moments reveal something bigger about human relationships and society.

This kind of noticing may sound simple, but that doesn't make it easy. It means being able to pay attention, not just to the topic of a discussion, but also to one's own feelings and inner dialogue, and to the quality of the human interaction (or "process" in the language of OD and psychotherapy). When I am actively noticing in this way, it is as if there are two 'me's in the room at the same time. One is reacting in the moment, the other is reflecting and responding. For instance, I constantly watch the turn-taking, or the "dance of control", as certain people try to steer the conversation their way, others pull it back in their direction, and yet others just follow. Often competition and cooperation are at work at the same time. And there are always the silent conversations going on in people's heads, which we cannot hear but might see in their facial expressions and body language.

I might also notice the pace of a conversation – is it going too fast for some people to contribute, especially if the language spoken is not their mother tongue or they have poor hearing (like me, unfortunately)? Has it shifted from inquiry and dialogue to arguing? Is somebody complaining a lot? And sometimes it is important to notice whose voice is not in the room. Certain people may not have been invited. Others may choose to exclude themselves from official occasions by "meeting offstage" (around the water cooler or in the pub, for instance). Whatever the situation, by paying close attention to human interaction, it is possible to discover all sorts of hidden depths.

## Making a move

Learning to notice in this way has taken time and effort. But going from noticing to *making moves* has been even harder. I learned much about this by working with Patricia Shaw, whose term for this kind of practice is "working live" (Shaw 2002; Shaw & Stacey 2006). But to put what I learnt into practice, I had to experiment in my own time and different settings.

By now, "making a move" has almost become second nature. A small example: not long ago, I was in a pub with some friends. There were six of us (three men and three women) sitting round a rectangular table and, as the conversation got under way, I noticed that one man was talking a lot while the others listened politely. After this pattern had been going on for some time, I felt frustrated, and by the look on their faces so did the others. I wanted to hear what they had to say, so I started to search for a move that would unsettle the pattern. When I noticed an opportunity to chip in, I said to the group "I've got a suggestion for our conversation. Would you be interested?" They seemed receptive, so after a while I invited each person to give their own reply to the question "What subject would you include in the educational curriculum that probably isn't already covered?" (no surprise in revealing that my own answer was "human relating"). From this point on, the conversation felt much more balanced and everybody was engaged – and possibly a bit relieved. (Their responses were so interesting that I made a note of them on a paper napkin, which I later shared with them via email).

Sometimes a conversation shifts almost of its own accord. Another anecdote: the other day, my husband (yes, I did eventually get married) and I had friends to dinner, and a remark from one guest prompted me to speak about my parents. When I reached a natural pause, someone asked another guest about their parents. And so it went on, with each person telling a very different family story. It reminded me of the Maori practice of “whakapapa”, where people coming together for the first time share stories about their ancestors (Wikipedia: someone reciting their whakapapa “proclaims their identity, places themselves in a wider context, and links themselves to



Traditional Maori home or *marae*  
Photo: Alison Donaldson

land and tribal groupings...”). When I participated in one such group in New Zealand, I noticed how connected the personal stories left me feeling with the others present.

The two examples from recent encounters with friends may sound fairly ordinary. Are they relevant to OD practice? I think they are. Conversations between friends display the same dynamics as any official meeting or discussion. The crucial common factor is power relating.

### **Fathoming how power relating works**

Like everyone else, I have always experienced power relations, whether I recognised them as such or not. But the concept of power always made my brain hurt. And, although I learned much about it through my postgraduate studies, only recently have I felt a real appetite to delve more deeply into how it actually works – on an intimate scale as well as the wider one. The pivotal moment was a café-style conversation that I co-convoked in 2018 with a close colleague, John Higgins. John had recently been commissioned to co-author a book on “speaking truth to power” (Reitz & Higgins 2019) and between us we came up with the idea of inviting a small, select group of people to join us in sharing personal stories and experiences of the topic. Of the 11 people present, most held, or had experience of, senior positions in universities.

On the day, John and I arranged the chairs in a circle and initiated the conversation by inviting each person, including ourselves, to say a few words about what had brought them to today’s gathering. Beyond that suggestion, we consciously held back from “intervening” or directing the conversation. We had agreed this much beforehand – we were reluctant to exert our authority as hosts by imposing a turn-taking structure, instructing people to break out into pairs, rescuing people when things got tense, or trying to restrain those who seemed to be speaking too much. Any of these would have gone against the spirit of what we wanted to do – to listen to stories and see what emerged.

As the conversation got going, I quickly noticed the usual dance of controlling and letting go. If and when I felt strongly enough about something, I joined in. I think once or twice I gently encouraged quieter people to speak up, but I quickly noticed what I was doing and told myself to relax and let go. Given the topic of discussion, whatever happened in the room was bound to involve power dynamics, whether or not we stepped in.

With permission, we audio-recorded the discussion, and a few weeks later I drafted a personal write-up and circulated it to everyone who had been in the room, asking them for responses. Things then became even more interesting. After a while, noticing that some had still not responded, I sent out a gentle reminder to each of them *individually*, thinking that this might coax a response from them, and it did indeed set off further rich email exchanges that brought something new to light about those who had been relatively quiet on the day.

For example, Marta (not her real name) sent me and John some very thoughtful reflections on her experience, referring to herself as a “young black woman”. She had enjoyed the session but had felt an outsider, and had been aware of a great irony in “attempting to speak truth to power in a room of such powerful people.” The first thing that had struck her on entering the room was the demographic of those present: “able-bodied, cis-gendered, predominantly white and middle-aged people so notably different from the demographic of people I interact with in my day to day life.” Finally, she remarked: “I can’t help but feel that few people would have asked themselves what the experience of that afternoon was like for me as I struggled to speak over some powerful voices and found my comments at times dismissed by some members of the group.”

With permission, I included some of the email exchanges in my revised write-up, which I called “[Can we get wiser about power relating?](#)” (Donaldson 2018). My intention in doing so was to use the writing to bring in the voices of people who had not felt properly heard – and to go some way towards correcting the imbalance on the day.

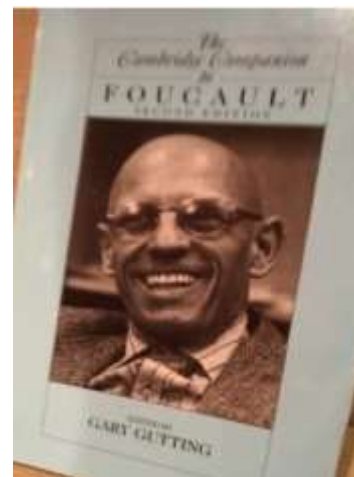
My exchanges with Marta opened up a whole new raft of questions in my mind about power relations and “identity politics”. By the end of this episode, which stretched over several weeks, I was thoroughly hooked on these interrelated topics, so (characteristically) I busied myself reading books, but I also continued to explore my own experience in my daily reflective writing. That writing provided the “starter culture” that eventually produced this article.

### **Power relating – an attempt at a summary**

So, what is my understanding of power relating today? First, like many, I see it as pervasive in human interaction and we can learn a lot about it by studying voices in a room. An imbalance of voices is not necessarily a problem – it depends entirely on the situation – but it can be a useful clue or indicator. Sometimes going quiet is a form of protest, but it can also mean that someone feels unable to speak, excluded, unheard or not taken seriously. This collides with our basic human need to be included and recognised for who we are.

Fundamentally, humans are dependent on one another, so we cannot just say anything we like to each other, since it might upset, offend, rupture a relationship or stir up unwanted conflict (Elias 1998; Stacey 2012). The more constrained we feel in a particular group, the more potential there is for feeling excluded, voiceless and powerless. And it is not just powerless people who feel constrained. People in positions of authority and responsibility face their own barriers – once promoted, they may struggle to have meaningful conversations with people with whom they could once have chatted quite naturally and spontaneously.

The kinds of constraint just described are largely *relational* – they arise out of the specific relationship between those involved. Another, related, form of constraint is more *cultural*. This is often detectable by noticing “what seems normal” in a particular situation, group or society at a given moment. Michel Foucault wrote extensively about “normalising power” (Gutting 2003), while anthropologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu used the term “habitus” to describe a similar or identical phenomenon (Traeger & Warwick 2018). Whichever term you choose “what seems normal” helps to shape every conversation we have. For example, when a person entering a room looks noticeably different from those already there, their “otherness” is often the first thing noticed. And even if they feel respected, they may be very conscious of being different, maybe part of a group that has been disadvantaged in society for centuries. It’s encouraging to see that “unconscious bias” is now a much-debated topic, even on British radio (BBC 2019).



Foucault on book cover  
Photo: Alison Donaldson

We have no choice but to live with these patterns or biases. They emerge over time from countless negotiations between competing and cooperating interests, and they continue to manifest themselves in everyday human interactions. Indeed, such constraints are not *separate* from our conversations. They are not above, beneath, behind or around them. They are simply part of the dynamic between people, influencing whose voice is taken seriously and whose is not.

### A modest proposal

If I were to summarise the main activities and approaches that have worked for me in developing my understanding of voice and power – and which I might recommend to others – I would highlight:

- Noticing the quality of conversations and meetings, finding the courage and confidence to disturb unhelpful patterns and, if appropriate, rebalance the voices in the room
- Making space each day for some kind of reflexive exploration of one’s own experience of human interaction, whether through quiet contemplation, the company of a stimulating conversation partner, pertinent reading, or reflective writing (journaling, freewriting, personal narrative writing)
- Paying attention to the many interlinked dimensions of power relating, including: the way power works in human interaction; the influence of psychological history; and cultural context(s) – what seems normal.

My intention here has been to give an account that is more specific than abstract and that reveals something of my “tacit knowing”, while also illuminating something broader about the world we live in (and sometimes wish was different). I don’t have any magic formula, framework or list of conversational “strategies”, and I am no fan of trademarked conversation tools. Nor do I generally plan a move in advance – it is much more about

having the courage to be spontaneous and take a risk. And it is of course fundamentally situational – it always depends on context. Noticing means being very present and, in the midst of whatever is going on between people, coming up with something that might just help.

Is this just another way of saying that I am a “facilitator”? Maybe it is, and I am certainly not dismissing that valuable and challenging role. But I do want to reframe it, at least for myself. I might even be bold enough to suggest that what has worked for me could be useful to OD practitioners. Rather than (or as well as) facilitators, perhaps we are “animators” (as in the French word “animer” – I don’t mean that we make cartoon films). Another useful phrase is “a practice of noticing”.

In short, whether we are male or female, black or white, rich or poor, in a position of authority or not – we are all participants in the great social game called life. None of us can escape power relating, so we may as well try to understand it better, and one way to do that is to notice the balance of voices in the room. Others have looked into other aspects of group dynamics and workplace democracy, including who sets the agenda, how decisions are made and how conflict is handled (Gastil 1993). But for my taste, the question of “voice” is worth a lifetime’s study. I hope that the story I have told stimulates you to reflect on your own life in relation to mine (Wall 2006, p.7), and maybe even to reconsider some of your habitual practices.

### **A note on first-person writing**

I originally wrote an almost complete version of this article in a more conventional form. It had three “key ideas” – or were they surreptitious recommendations? These were reflected in three major headings: (i) paying attention to human interaction; (ii) understanding cultural constraints; and (iii) taking psychological history into account. (I was well-educated by my three-year stint as editor and communications specialist with the consulting firm McKinsey & Company in the 1980s.)

As I reflected on what I had written, I noticed that I had given birth to something that felt a bit wooden and teacherly. I had little appetite to continue with my “three key points” structure. The trouble with such neat abstract categories is that, while we feel momentarily satisfied with the clarity we seem to have produced, we then start to stumble over our own categories. I noticed how mine overlapped and mutually influenced each other. Human experience doesn’t fit into boxes.

So I put the first version to one side, sat down with a pen and paper and drafted an entirely new version, in one sitting. The expanded and edited article you see here is much more of a personal story than what might have been – it is both management writing and autoethnography rolled into one.

The irony in my choosing this form to explore the subject of “voice” is clear: as well as connecting the personal with the cultural (Wall 2006, p.7), a central purpose of autoethnography is to *allow the voice of the author to come through*. A second irony is that, as I have matured and my voice has become stronger and clearer, I have developed hearing loss, which means I have to listen very intently to other people’s voices.

The use of first-person writing to explore power in my own life has shed new light on the difficulties that I (and maybe others) have had in speaking up in groups. It has also shown me that I am on an ongoing quest to find or make space for more democratic conversations. That quest will probably only end when I die.



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## About Alison Donaldson

I have been an independent writer and writing coach for nearly 30 years. Nowadays I spend most mornings reading and writing before escaping from my desk after lunch. Long ago, before becoming my own boss, my work (in policy research, consumer journalism and management consulting) made me familiar with three of the main “voices” in the economy: employees, consumers and business. My current interests include conversation, writing, reading, stories and ecological activism.

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