

A Feminist Perspective on the Ethics of Communication Explored in the Context of an On-Going Group of Women with Decision Making Responsibility.

Kit Evans
August, 1980

In a Feminist work group we must recognize that every act of each woman reflects our pioneering of a new/old woman ethic. It is time to face the reality that how we treat each other, how we feel we are being treated, affects the direction of our movement and deeply affects our individual view of working with women through/in feminism.

Each time we communicate with each other, we create a negative or positive thread in our weaving/work. Because I believe this, this paper twines issues of personal woman to woman sharing, with women communicating within a group and as a group.

There are basic principles for ethical communication at any level that I would like to suggest:

1. Personal agendas are valid. Secret agendas are anti-group and invalid. Dishonesty/secrecy of purpose creates dishonest/unethical communication.
2. Invalidating another woman is an unethical means of advocating a point of view.
3. Seeking power over group direction by blocking the voices of other women is non-consensual in intent/outcome.
4. It is the group's responsibility to make sure that no woman is alone, though she may hold a singular viewpoint.
5. Empowerment of each member is the responsibility of each other member.
6. Persons have a right to information that affects them.
7. Each member has an obligation to get/be/stay clear with each other member; each woman owes it to each other woman to do that clearing with her, not by speaking it out with others.
8. The purpose of each individual's communication within a group is to work towards agreement, not to shape decisions in her own image.
9. There are times when it is valid for members to agree that what is said in the room stays in the room. It is fair for the group and its members to demand that some things be spoken about only as a group, in the group.
10. Women know/notice when there is conflict, pain or mistrust between/among members. There is a patriarchal process that ignores feelings in doing business. It is women pioneering to seek a way that acknowledges and validates as a part of our work.

11. Every personal relationship between members of a group affects the group and therefore may be personal but not always private.

12. THE MEANS IS THE END.

To explore:

1. PERSONAL AGENDAS ARE VALID. SECRET AGENDAS ARE ANTI-GROUP AND INVALID. DISHONESTY/SECRECY OF PURPOSE CREATES DISHONEST/UNETHICAL COMMUNICATION.

The purpose of communication is to reveal/share your thoughts, plans, feelings with others. Among women, we must fight against clouding our clear touching with using communication to gain power OVER each other. We invalidate our new/old ways with secrecy, dishonesty, discrediting. As women we are the victims of twisted words, hidden meanings, words that say one thing while producing another effect. (See Gyn Ecology by Mary Daly) As women, our power is to TRANSFORM, it is beneath us to seek power OVER. (I attribute this knowledge to Adrienne Rich).

We have the space to move forward to experience creation of a new/old way within our group. A step on the way would be to state, as we give our views on an issue:

- "My agenda is to see 'X' outcome" . . . or . . .
- "This discussion touches upon an overall direction I would like us to see us take" . . . or . . .
- "My reason for not wanting 'X' woman to take/be given this responsibility is that I feel her region/viewpoint/class has too much influence already."

At our last meeting California women gave us a strong example their action in requesting time history of their work, and in their representation demands. They came clear, they spoke early, plainly and gave their demands over to the group for decision. They were implacable, some people may have felt blackmailed - that is not the issue being addressed here. The element for learning was that they revealed their intentions, their feelings, their plans. Another way would be to wait, lobby, deal, align. . . to use stalking horses. While this may be appropriate strategy for dealing with male-dominant systems/institutions, for us to proceed in this path only means that we become (remain?) woman-run, male process dominated groups.

It is the nature of secret agendas that some members in the decision-making process have more information than others. No true group decisions can be reached if one segment of members manipulates, misinforms, under-informs another. Each woman feels/knows that a secret agenda is being played out. And decisions made under those circumstances will never hold. It will become part of the history of warring, old wounds, inexplicable factionalizing later. It will be over-turned, block movement, create hostility so great and wearying that old and new members alike leave in turmoil and disgust. I am not describing the event of members leaving because they cannot support the decision, but of those who will/must leave because they cannot support a dishonest process.

2. INVALIDATING ANOTHER WOMAN IS AN UNETHICAL MEANS OF ADVOCATING A POINT OF VIEW.

There is a deep and devious process open to all of us, that of quietly undermining a woman's being/acting and thereby invalidating her point of view. We have all been taught how to do this by the examples of decision-making/politics we have watched/experienced. Every woman knows of her passions, beliefs, creativity being rendered silly female, of being discounted. If we follow this way, we again become patriarchal in our process, and a male process dominated group.

3. SEEKING POWER OVER GROUP DIRECTION BY BLOCKING THE VOICES OF OTHER WOMEN IN NON-CONSENSUAL IN INTENT/OUTCOME.

A tool of power in communication that is often used is to block or harass the expression of others. This can be done by seizing on a fragment of the issue and making it central to discussion, thus deflecting the attempts of others to express their thoughts on the body issue, by inciting feelings through rhetoric, by using techniques to invalidate the woman (I'm sure we could all expand this list). When opposing views are not allowed a full airing, or at least a complete concise expression, and a decision is reached, it will again create the kind of lack of long-term support for the outcome described in #1. It is simply true that persons who feel that they are not allowed input will have no investment in upholding the decision and may, in fact, feel they have the right to undermine the group or the individual they see as having blocked/harassed them. Energy must be spent in insuring that individuals know that while the group has chosen another course, they were listened to. It is also critical to note that when one of us blocks/harasses another into silence, the group operates without full information.

4. IT IS THE GROUP'S RESPONSIBILITY THAT NO WOMAN IS ALONE, THOUGH SHE MAY HOLD A SINGULAR VIEWPOINT.

When a woman speaks her views, it is critical to remember that by the nature of our group's representation guidelines, she is on of u. She alone may hold that view, but by allowing her to be/feel isolated, we invalidate her (see #2). More important than the content of her view or ours, is the content of our behavior. I have seen women isolated by their view; I have seen a group member move to sit by her, a group member seek her out after work social times, such as meals or drinks; a group member verbally support her by acknowledging/noticing that she has the courage to be in a difficult stance/relationship with the rest of the group. (I attribute the genesis of these thoughts to Quest, a Feminist Quarterly . . . I do not remember the author's name.) Each of us has the responsibility to reach out to the member with the solitary view.

5. EMPOWERMENT OF EACH MEMBER IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EACH OTHER MEMBER.

This is done by what I call, noticing. Noticing is the act of being consciously aware of currents and movements in the beings around you and can occur with or without their

presence. In this context, it means, that each woman is responsible for the group process. Noticing is a fundamental woman skill in communication and a part of many of the things discussed in this paper. An example: noticing (a) who is not speaking, (b) who has made several attempts and not been heard, (c) who has been cut off.

It is common nature in any kind of meeting for persons to be more absorbed in formulating their own thoughts and getting a chance to express themselves rather than putting attention into easing the way for someone else to participate. Yet, we in woman's work must remember that empowerment is a principle that we cannot leave back at our programs; we need to extend this right to each other, to recognize that we are not each equally verbal (thank the goddess!) nor equally aggressive in group speaking.

If we do not concentrate on living the principle of empowerment with each other we, as a consequence, will wind up in a competitive rather than communal/communicative stance. We can avoid this by noticing and then, sometimes, letting go of our moment to speak and, instead, asking the opinion/view of another or redirecting attention back to a woman who has been trying to speak.

The value to our work is that it will effectively affirm the communal nature of our thinking/being; it will create an action of sharing/caring and actualize the belief in the validity of each member's contribution. Concentration by every member on the importance of each person's views begins to create a trust and safety that automatically disperses disagreement/dissatisfaction with the group product. No one chair can monitor this function completely; the benefits can only be experienced if it is a group/individual commitment.

6. PERSONS HAVE A RIGHT TO INFORMATION THAT AFFECTS THEM.

The obvious meaning deals with issues of factual information. I feel your work on the committee has been very effective . . . Our program is going after 'X' grant . . . I don't have time to do that job.

The process of imparting more complex information, or highly charged information becomes more central than the statements. There are only 2 ways I know to avoid holding within yourself, information about another person, and that is to see to it that she receives it from the person(s) imparting it to you, or that you tell her yourself. This is one of the most critical processes in breaking down the old male-taught habit that we are separate/in competition and cannot trust each other.

Each of us knows women who leave us feeling angry-opposite . . . women we judge to be devious, or blatant, or male-identified, or stardom-hungry, or non-productive, or incompetent (use your own words). The common habit is to pour out our feelings to another person(s), usually someone who we feel will sympathize with us, or even will agree with our judgment. There is a point of validity in seeking out another woman to talk over our feelings with it is not to find sympathy or agreement! It is to gain perspective. When you are honestly seeking perspective, the person you seek out to explore your feelings with, will often be very different than if you wish only comfort or allegiance. This may be the first clue for you as to what your intent/motive is.

One gift we can give each other, the choice/integrity we can create, is to respond to a discussion of an absent person in the following way: I will listen if you are using me as a sounding board with the understanding that the next person you discuss this with is the person with whom you have the concern/conflict. If you cannot agree to that, then you need to know that I will hold what you say in confidence. We can recognize that the difficulties in confronting another woman are strong often more than we are willing to give energy to. We must also recognize that if a person is not willing, that none of us have the right to know what has been/is being said.

Participating is discussing/criticizing another woman and aiding in keeping her ignorant of the feelings about/against her. It is keeping her in bondage by withholding critical information. It is deciding that she will not have choices or the maximum amount of information for those choices. It is deciding for her what she will use, how she will respond, whether it is good or bad for her to know, that she will react in a way that may endanger some goal, that she has the power to punish the speaker, that she can't take it. It presumes the worst, whatever the excuse is. We, as sisters, cannot afford to continue to deny other women honest feedback, the right to make decisions based upon real interpersonal information to avoid feedback on our judgments and feelings to create through secret discussions, allegiances against each other. It weakens us, dissolves progress, degrades our work and the lessons we would teach others about women power.

7. EACH MEMBER HAS AN OBLIGATION TO GET/BE/STAY CLEAR WITH EACH OTHER; EACH WOMAN OWES IT TO EACH OTHER WOMAN TO DO THAT CLEARING WITH HER, NOT BY SPEAKING IT OUT WITH OTHERS.

If we agree that we will not participate/listen to one woman about another except that she goes next to that woman we must also agree to a process that will support and give safety and strength to those who have that courage. A way I know is this: If you have twice been moved to speak about your problems with another woman, in private with someone else, then you must know that the time has come to act/clear. Ask the woman to make a space when you can share some uninterrupted time. Know that she may resist, she may be afraid of what you will say, she may not think time with you is important enough to her. Since it is your integrity you are seeking to live out, insist. If appointments are broken, tell her you will ask a third person's intervention, or take it to the group, and the choice can be hers. If you have been able to meet privately, remember the basic guidelines of confrontation and adhere to them.

GUIDELINES FOR CONFRONTATION

- Confrontation is loving, in that it is an act of commitment to yourself and to the belief in giving energy to getting clear with another woman.
- Confrontation is not a one-shot act. It is not hit and run. You must be prepared to be there to work it through. If not completed in the first meeting, then stand by for further sharing.

- Confrontation is not dumping. Speaking is not the end. Getting it off your chest is not the goal. The goal is growth of understanding. Dumping/trashing is vengeful and woman-hurting.
- Confrontation must be done with respect for the woman being you are touching.
- Confrontation is sharing, touching, struggling with another woman.
- Confrontation can be gentle. It must BE DONE WITH HONESTY.

(I attribute this knowledge to Lynne Prossick, Anchorage, Alaska).

If the efforts of you and other women cannot reach understanding, resolution or create clearness, ask her to have a facilitated meeting. We are not all equally skilled in expressing our feelings, or in hearing another's, or in problem-solving when we are in conflict with another woman. One's integrity is not measured by one's skills. Choose a person with whom you both feel comfortable, whose objectiveness is trusted by both. If a facilitated meeting(s) is not productive, if the problems still remain severe and feel blocking to goals of the group, either person has the right to take the issue to the group. This can only be done after telling the other woman that you have chosen this.

It is foolish to believe that any conflict of personality or ideology is private business. No organism can be fully effective if parts of it are in serious, ongoing discord.

The process is not infallible. It is the commitment to getting, being, staying clear that gives life and health that reflects woman courage/pioneering.

8. THE PURPOSE OF EACH INDIVIDUAL'S COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE GROUP NEEDS TO BE TO WORK TOWARD AGREEMENT, NOT TO SHAPE DECISIONS IN THEIR OWN IMAGE.

It often becomes difficult to remember that our work is of and for women who are not present, not for the expansion of a sole ideology. We bring widely varying experiences and understandings of how things are, based on extremely diverse backgrounds. It must be clear to each of us that the group has a life of its own, its own growing to do, its own experiences and herstory to contend with. There are natural rhythms to the evolutions of a group. We are each responsible for exerting our view/guidance on that growth, by it providing choices and information from a given perspective. There may be ways that our life has not shown us that will be discovered by the group. Being together in a group is, before all else, a learning way.

9. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN IT IS VALID FOR MEMBERS TO AGREE THAT WHAT IS SAID IN THE ROOM STAYS IN THE ROOM. IT IS FAIR FOR THE GROUP AND ITS MEMBERS TO DEMAND THAT SOME THINGS BE SPOKEN ABOUT ONLY AS A GROUP, IN THE GROUP.

It is common practice for members of a group to spend time out of the room together, and to go over their perceptions and feelings of what is going on. It is very difficult to do this without, at times, discussing the words and actions of persons not present for the de-briefing. As a rule, such open-ended times can be constructive given attention to those things discussed in #1, #6, and #7. I am speaking to those times that the group deals, as a group, with interpersonal issues among its members. It is a habit not to speak fully on painful or angry subjects, waiting, instead, until afterwards to be with those who think as you do. For a group to allow this means much of the time given over to feelings is wasted. It also blocks communication from members who would speak but know what they say will be dissected out of their presence rather than being confronted within the support and respect of all the members (and I believe that women's work cannot be done in any other context).

The group must build in safeguards for the sharing of those feelings, and for individuals who choose to come to the group for help in resolving conflicts. A safeguard I know (I attribute this knowledge to Ellyn Derman, Anchorage, Alaska), is to, at specific times, seek commitment from each member to keep what is being said, within the full group. This means, no minutes. It also means that members who are not present can be informed of context. . .we discussed the feeling that some people have that decisions are made before meetings by a power clique, but not in terms of content; not who said what, did what.

The only times issues can be explored out of the presence of the full group is when a woman wishes to speak with another woman about her individual sharing, not to include or refer to the sharing of any other woman, but to share further or seek clarification between the two of them. . .I heard you say that you always felt left out. I'd like to talk about what I may have done, and learn more about how you have been feeling. . . To discuss another woman's rage, tears, confrontation or self-exposure outside of her presence is to denigrate her courage; is unethical communication in the extreme. It assumes that her presence is not central to the communication being discussed, even though it was her communication originally.

10. WOMEN KNOW/NOTICE WHEN THERE IS CONFLICT, PAIN OR MISTRUST BETWEEN MEMBERS. IT IS A PATRIARCHAL PROCESS THAT IGNORES FEELINGS IN DOING BUSINESS. IT IS WOMAN PIONEERING TO SEEK A WAY THAT ACKNOWLEDGES AND VALIDATES EACH WOMAN AS A PART OF OUR WORK.

Let us get clear that we know what is going on in our groups. We may not know the content but let's own that we do know, deeply so, where there is conflict, pain, mistrust, alliances, a sense of pre-planned decisions. By not acknowledging this to each other we maintain complicity in allowing women to be hurting, angry, isolated and invalidated. We each bear the responsibility of speaking, naming (Mary Daly's word) what is going on. It does not always have to be dealt with. The group may decide other business must have priority, but when it goes un-named, un-noticed, we are guilty of ignoring, confusing, mystifying our own process, our own goals, our own blood's work. We join the patriarchy in pretending women and their being/needs/feelings/responses do not exist. And our anger will turn on us and overthrow our work.

11. EVERY PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEMBERS OF A GROUP AFFECTS THE GROUP AND THEREFORE MAY BE PERSONAL BUT NOT ALWAYS PRIVATE.

This is to recognize that personal relationships often provide affiliations of thought and influence. Woman bonding is legitimate power. Each woman is responsible for keeping it so (as opposed to lobbying, false friendliness etc.).

We each must pay attention to forming power blocks among ourselves. To find agreement creates power, the group has the right to notice that power, to monitor it, and to call the individuals on it if other members begin to feel it is being wielded unethical ways.

Another time personal interactions fall within the province of the group is when they are issues of conflict. We have all experienced the predictable and continual disagreement between group members, relationships based upon sniping, depreciating, regardless of subject. The group has a right to deal with that if it chooses. Any member has a right to notice, to verbalize her concerns with that behavior. Lastly, as outlines in the process discussed in #6 and #7, the group may be asked to mediate/assist in interpersonal issues that those involved cannot resolve.

12. THE MEANS IS THE END.

How do we do our work will determine that product, how it will instruct/teach, how long it lives, and what, if any, value it will have to women.

(Technical Editing by Grace Poore)