

William M. Talley

The Silent Member in Groups

Anyone who has observed groups is well aware of divergent forms of behavior that are demonstrated within a group setting, especially groups' reactions to particular individuals. This paper will examine groups' reactions to silent members.

defining the silent member

Although we have not made any quantitative analysis of groups' reactions to silent members, we have observed over a period of time a unique pattern of behavior emerge in groups toward silent members.

By silent member we are referring to those individuals in a group who consistently verbalize very little or none during many sessions of group meetings. We are not including individuals who may remain silent periodically during the course of a group's existence.

There may be several reasons why members remain silent and there are a number of techniques whereby leaders and group members attempt to draw these members into the verbal interaction of the group. However, it is not within the scope of this paper to examine these reasons or techniques. Albeit, there is reason to believe that the theoretical framework within which a group leader operates may contribute to the number of silent members and the duration of their silence.

It should be noted at this point that even if a group member does remain silent, it does not necessarily indicate that he is a non-participant. His body posture, facial expression, eye contacts, and any number of other physiological responses may convey feelings and attitudes and show that he is well aware

of and reacting to what is being said and done in the group.

a pattern of reaction

There seems to be a characteristic pattern of group reactions to these silent members — an overall, general reaction from the group. We can project any number of reasons for this. It may be that the group perceives them as a threat to cohesiveness or group closure. Even though individual members seem to develop a sense of identity and a clearer understanding of self, the group as a whole appears to concentrate more and more on itself and develop a pronounced focusing on “us.” The silent member may be perceived as one who is preventing this. Then, too, the group may feel that the silent member is not playing according to the rules if he does not let himself be known to the depth that others have opened themselves. Thus resentment develops and manifests itself in group behavior.

Through close observation of several groups over periods of time ranging from twelve to twenty-four sessions, we have observed a characteristic pattern of reaction to silent member that generally develops in the following way:

The Initial Phase. In the first two or three sessions, usually no individual is regarded as a silent member as such. In this phase, individuals make distinct overtures to know one another's names. Since it is too early for anyone to be labeled a silent member, attempts are made to get to know one another and interact at a cognitive, but, sometimes, superficial level. Various individuals verbalize, but the group may fail to interact well with one another and statements seem isolated and egocentric. Communication is frequently in one direction — member to leader only.

The Tentative Phase. At this point a sort of withdrawal begins to take place toward those individuals who are not responding spontaneously. It is as though the verbalizing members are saying: “I've tried and now I'll back off a while and see what happens.” Or: “Let's make everyone feel comfortable and provide an environment that is free and non-evaluative and then maybe everyone will feel free to speak.” In this phase the silent member is accepted as a member of the group, but the group seems to be making the acceptance tentative while encouraging him to speak, mainly through nonverbal cues, such as smiles, eye contact, and other body and facial expressions.

The Reference Phase. In this phase, the group begins to make vague (and sometimes not so vague) references to "those who never say anything." The leader may also make overtures, such as: "I wonder if John would have anything to say on this . . ." Or. "Perhaps some who have not given their feelings on such and such would like to comment."

Also, if the members are writing a diary or turning in personal reports, reaction papers, or evaluation sheets, they may report a great deal of concern about those members who are not expressing themselves verbally.

The Open Confrontation. Finally, the group members may openly confront the silent members with the fact that the group does not know them and cannot know them unless they are willing to express themselves in the group spontaneously. There may also be statements directed at the leader expressing the group's hostility over his lack of facility in drawing everyone into the discussions. There may even arise a discussion and difference of opinion among the group members as to whether the group should directly ask the silent members a question or simply continue to provide a warm and understanding environment.

At this stage either of two things may happen :

Rejection or Rapid Closure. If the silent member still refrains from voluntary participation in the group participation, the group often shuts him out on a psychological level, moves ahead, and simply operates as though he were not there. However, if the silent member begins freely and willingly to speak when he is confronted, he may open a virtual floodgate of verbiage and the group moves rapidly toward closure. (This writer had one experience in which a silent member began to verbalize at this stage and spoke for forty-five minutes without interruption.) His role in the group is accomplished much more quickly than that of the other members.

summary

Observation of groups tends to confirm the belief that a group's reaction to silent members follows a discrete pattern. This pattern appears to be:

1. *Initial Phase* — when all members are becoming acquainted with one another :
2. *Tentative Phase* — in which the verbalizing members extend tentative acceptance to the silent one :
3. *Reference Phase* — in which references are made to

the silent members in the group:

4. *Open Confrontation* — when the group directly confronts the silent members about their silence:
5. *Rejection or Rapid Closure*: in which the member is either rejected or accepted by the group as he begins to participate as a verbalizing member.

Comment

by Stephen D. Shatkin

Dr. Talley's article depicts the phases which groups pass through as they react to the silent members in their midst. He readily states that he will not delve into the etiology of the member's reasons for being silent, his responses to his treatment by the group, or methods that might be employed by the skillful leader to involve the silent members or help the group to deal with the silent member. These would make interesting topics for follow-up articles.

The first reaction of the reader is to question the type of group Dr. Talley is dealing with. Not only leadership in style and member characteristics, but also purpose, function, and size of the group will greatly affect the reaction of a group to its silent membership. For example, a school committee may be so constituted as to include several non-verbal types, but functions effectively because several of them are willing to allow the tasks and decisions to be accomplished by the others. Similarly, a group led by an authoritarian type would tend to thrive on non-participation by most of its members. We may presume, however, that the writer is dealing with a T-group, sensitivity group or encounter group as he thinks through the various stages, a group that has for a major function the individual development of its members, in some definable way.

The writer appears to attach his own values implicitly for determining group success, which seems to challenge this assumption of type of group being considered. ". . . the group as a whole appears to concentrate more and more on itself and develop a pronounced focusing on 'us.'" I question this direction, or at least that this should be the goal for groups to pur-

sue. Though Dr. Talley somewhat softens this value presentation by describing the silent member as not necessarily a non-participant, one reads the article with the distinct impression that to be silent means to be divergent. I would maintain that certain groups may thrive on silent members, just as during counselling sessions we accept the notion that there are meaningful silences. We must not preclude the fact that for some individuals, silence is meaningful when they are in the group and so this is to be valued in the group.

The five phase pattern of group reaction to the silent member is readily acceptable except at one stage, the Initial Phase. Though it might be classified as an initial phase of general group development, this reader fails to see its relevance to the immediate topic of concern. As the members are "getting to know one another," in particular, "the names of the other members," I doubt very strongly that there is any identification of the silent member possible. He is not likely to be unwilling to relate at a cognitive and superficial level; his silent behavior seems to emerge at a later time. As Dr. Talley himself points out, during this stage, "usually no individual is regarded as a silent member as such." Further, "statements seem isolated and egocentric," which he posits more as a group phenomenon than as behavior of a potentially silent member.

I would prefer to view this stage as an Emergent Phase, during which members are identifying themselves as to their degree of involvement, individual and group, both verbally and non-verbally. Further, at this stage, it is very possible for the leader, trainer, coordinator or the group itself to structure certain types of activities which will give a totally different slant, purpose, and mode of operation to the group, even to its treatment of silent individuals.

Each of the remaining four stages seems to add a great deal to understanding groups' reactions to silent members. Beyond the first phase, when the leader influences in the group can determine the implicit procedures for dealing with divergent members, there is no better time to thwart silence (if this is an unwanted behavior) than during the second, or "tentative" phase. Again, in future articles, I would hope that methods and timing of these procedures will be discussed.

During the third stage, the "reference" phase, there is probably very little that the group can do to gain the verbal participation of the silent member. No matter what is attempted, the result will probably be the confirmation of

silence on the part of the silent member. The critical time for redemption by group planning has now passed. The group must now wait to pass through "open confrontation" when the ultimate determination will be naturally made, that of "rejection" or "rapid closure" as described in the article.

Dr. Talley mentions that there have not been any quantitative findings as yet to support the proposed phase structure. He should be encouraged to study many such cases and gain descriptions of groups of others' reacting to silent members and thus perhaps contribute more to validation of his proposed developmental scheme.