

# Making Committees Work

*Based on a Word article written by Daniel Hunter ('01)*

At 9 a.m. Saturday, November 4th, 2000, a dozen students climbed the stairs up to Wellness 2240 to participate in a training on "Making Committees Work" by George Lakey, Executive Director of Training for Change. Brought by Student Government, the morning session was one of two trainings social action trainer George Lakey led on Saturday to help students understand how to find a voice in their committees.

Lakey began by having each participant share a story of a time they felt powerful. George Lakey then talked briefly about different types of power: power-over, power-from-within and power-with-others. These latter two forms of power are based not on controlling others but on one's own skills and abilities for cooperation. As students search for power, these are the types of power Lakey suggests students strive for.

During the training, students brainstormed a comprehensive list of changes they, as students, could make. These changes included ways to think about committees, to support fellow students and to interact in the meeting itself.

Before the committee meeting, students suggested getting a copy of the agenda as well as relevant information. Lakey said this helps the entire group, especially the convenor, keep thinking ahead of time. Another tactic mentioned was meeting with fellow students beforehand to discuss the issues to be raised in the meeting, concerns that the student body might raise (just picture what your hallmate might think about the implications) and ways to support each other in the meeting. Some ways to do the latter included sitting next to each other or making good eye contact. Lakey emphasized reinforcing each other's questions and comments in the meetings.

During the meeting, students found they can be a service to the committee by asking when they do not know. One student described a situation in which after he asked a seemingly extremely basic clarification

## Top 10 Ways to Make Committees Work

1. Talk to other students in your committee.
2. Ask questions.
3. Remember that the process works best when students are informed and engaged.
4. Get the agenda and pertinent information before the meeting.
5. Set a tone of listening.
6. Support fellow students.
7. Acknowledge vulnerability.
8. Network with fellow committee members.
9. Food helps.
10. Be aware of and point out rank differences.

question, several faculty members admitted that they did not know. More informed students leads to "better discussions which means better decisions," Lakey said.

Lakey emphasized reinforcing each other's questions and comments to help them be heard. Students can encourage a general atmosphere of listening by listening to and paraphrasing people's statements and opinions.

"When committees run at their best, all members are allies," participant Kumar Sathy said. Students proposed discussing informally with other members of the committee to help this.

Lakey suggested that having food can often help bond a committee and, even in tight conversations, help people relax. Raisins were highly recommended.

Lakey said that with rank differences, it is often helpful to remind those with more rank that the rank differences exist. Reminding faculty and administration of the various forms of power they hold can be useful for the entire committee. Students are, after all, asked to be on committees because they are students.

Students cannot do their best job if they do not understand a decision well enough to explain it to the student body. For committees to run at their best, students must feel able to represent the student body to the committees. This means that the empowerment of students on committees is in the interest of all the committees and people at Earlham College.