

# The Power Tableau Exercise

Part of the Community Innovation Network Toolkit



The power tableau is a kind of human sculpture that Mark Chupp learned from Kip Hargrave, who used this simple but profound tool while serving as a Maryknoll lay missionary in Honduras. It is powerful because each participant can apply it to do a structural analysis of their own situation, because it can accommodate a host of goals and because it draws on both right brain and left brain thinking.

## Tableau

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1. *A graphic description or representation:  
PICTURE;*
2. *A striking or artistic grouping;*
3. *A depiction of a scene usually presented on a stage by silent and motionless costumed participants.*

## Power Analysis

The tableau provides a practical tool for analyzing power, especially in situations where a significant power imbalance exists. According to Garner (1997), structural change occurs when “a great many people lose their positions in the structure at once” (p. 13). As you probe further, you can explore both structural conflict and interpersonal conflict that has systemic roots. You can use the tableau to accomplish a variety of goals depending on the needs of the situation, whether you want to focus on analysis or change strategies, and how much time you have. You cannot do justice to it in less than an hour.

Power is dynamic and multidimensional. As stated by Wilmot and Hocker (2007), power “is not owned by an individual but is a product of the social relationship in which certain qualities become important and valuable to others” (p. 104). The Power Tableau analysis is an interactive tool and used to understand the power relationships among policies, institutions, and people; it helps to visualize the challenges facing unequal power relations that need to be solved and to develop effective strategies and enhance capacities to address inequalities (Mayers, 2005).

## Empowerment

There is usually a great opportunity at the end of the exercise to discuss empowerment, which occurs “when ordinary people discover that they have the capacity to solve the problems they face, control the means to do so, and have final, authoritative say in decision making” (as quoted in Rubin & Rubin, 2000, p. 77).

Empowerment is a process, which allows individuals and communities to gain efficacy and capability in challenging their status quo and achieving collective goals (Rubin & Rubin, 2000).



Art Designed by: Ms. Gwendolyn Garth



## Setting-up the Tableau

Invite 3 volunteers to come up, letting them know they will be in a mostly non-speaking human sculpture for about 30-45 minutes. Invite Person B to take their shoes off.

- Person A lies flat on the floor, face up.
- Person B stands beside Person A (facing the group) with one foot resting lightly on the stomach of Person A.
- Person C stands on a chair, which is placed directly behind Person B. Person C puts both hands firmly on the shoulders of Person B. Ask Person C to support and stabilize Person B.
- Throughout the exercise ask the volunteers to stay in character and not participate in the large group discussion apart from their role.

## Facilitating the Tableau

### 1. Simple analysis of what we see

- Based on the work of Paolo Freire and consciousness raising, facilitate a group analysis and reflection using the four steps below:
  - a) Ask those not in the sculpt to think about what is happening, what this human sculpt might represent? Allow a moment of silence for people to think. What specific situations in their lives or society, does this configuration resemble?
  - b) Ask several people to share a situation and identify whom each person in the tableau represents for each particular situation.
    - What does this represent? What does each person represent? List on flip chart.
    - Ask people to get very specific – solicit responses that range from the personal to the macro (even global).
  - c) Conclude by asking who is right (everyone is right from their perspective).
- Every person sees reality from their own perspective and constructs meaning with which to interpret and make meaning of their reality.

### 2. Reflection on What is Happening and How Each Feels

- Ask each person in the sculpture how they feel. Encourage them to talk about their physical feelings as well as their emotions in their particular role.
- Ask each person in the sculpt:
  - **Q1:** How do you feel?
  - **Q2:** What can you see from your vantage point?

- **Q3:** How do you feel about the other two tableau members?
- **Q4:** What are expectations people put on you?

### 3. The Change Process

- Ask Now, conduct a deeper analysis with the rest of the group, using these questions as a guide:
  - **Q1:** Is this the way it has to be?
  - **Q2:** If not, how would you change it? Invite individuals to try to change the arrangement: initiate a change process. \*Coach each role to stay in character as they respond.
  - **Q3:** Stop each intervention and ask each person in the sculpt: *\*Emphasize that change is destabilizing, and often those in the situation don't want change.*
    - How did that feel? What were you thinking?
    - What are the consequences for the roles? For the change agent?
- Most participants try many strategies for changing the structure and helping the person on the bottom of the tableau without ever talking with or engaging that person.
- The outsider presumes to know what is best and proceeds to act on, rather than with those in the structure. Another common theme is that it rarely does a group decide to act collectively; the various change efforts are typically one individually trying to act alone.
- After several people have tried to make change, ask:
  - **Q4:** How many tried to initiate change at the bottom vs. the top? \*The point is that folks tend to focus almost exclusively on the bottom.
  - **Q5:** How many tried to engage those in the roles rather than imposing/forcing change on them? \*The instructions never put this constraint on you.
  - **Q6:** How many tried to involve others in the change process? Was the change agent an individual or a coordinated group effort?
    - *\*Often no one asks others to help them change the power arrangement in coordination at multiple levels.*

### 4. Application: How Can We Apply This To Oives?

1. Thinking of the sculpt as your own situation, place yourself according to where others see/identify you (not where you would like to see yourself, or where you identify).

2. Position yourself in a freeze frame in that position to try to reflect what you would like to do to initiate a change process or influence the system in some way.
3. Have everyone place themselves in the sculpt and then freeze action; hear from different people, asking them to state what the situation is, who they are, and what they are doing.
  - If people are honest, this is often the first time class differences emerge – ex: a privileged person might get on the chair.
    - *This is a vulnerable thing for this person; don't pressure them to share, but acknowledge them somehow. Affirm honestly for where people place themselves.*
    - *Typically there are two groups on the bottom: people who really are at that level and people who "wannabe" on the bottom. Encourage honesty/ authenticity from the latter group:*
      - "You identify with people on the bottom, why?"
      - "How do they see you?"
4. Final debrief on what was learned from this exercise (list up on flip chart).
5. The Power Tableau allows a group to do a structural analysis of power relationships in society in a way that promotes openness, self-reflection and dialogue. Would you use this exercise in the future? If so, how and with whom?

## References

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