

## **NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT**

Auckland September 2001

### **Workshop on Leadership and Governance:**

#### ***“Participating is not interrupting!”***

##### ***....enhancing refugee and migrant opportunities to participate in community organisation governance and leadership***

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This presentation will describe some leadership development work our organisation is involved in, with refugees and migrants. We have piloted some training for Non English Speaking Background volunteer members of our ESOL Home Tutor Scheme committees over the last two years. This year we are taking that same workshop out to other refugees and migrants involved in community organisation committees in Hamilton and Auckland, in partnership with the Auckland Refugees as Survivors Centre.

The training has a practical focus on governance roles and skills, with a particular emphasis on empowering active participation in decision-making. For some participants, it has simply been a case of wanting more knowledge and skills, to meet expectations of them as committee members – the kind of training that many new committee members would appreciate. But for many there are additional cultural barriers to participation – like the Chinese woman who explained that she felt she was doing something rude if she spoke up during the meeting. Deeply ingrained in her was a message not to interrupt the teacher. She should ask her questions after class, if at all. Naming these barriers was a critical first step to changing the potential for future participation.

The presentation will give an overview of this initiative, a taste of some of our learning from it as an organisation and the connections we are making with other governance development work we are involved with.

***Participating is not interrupting!***  
***....enhancing refugee and migrant opportunities to participate in  
community organisation governance and leadership***

In spite of our national identification with a flightless bird, we Kiwis are a remarkably well-travelled people. And so, many of you here today will have had a glimpse of what it is like to arrive in a new country, where you don't know the language, culture, social or other systems. As a tourist for a week, or even a few weeks in a foreign land, you will probably have attended to a transition phase of becoming familiar with some basic survival needs of food, shelter and finding your way around, before exploring the further complexities and opportunities of your new environment.

For the more than 50,000 permanent residents who arrive each year in Aotearoa, NZ, the transition phase is not for long like the exciting adventure of a young tourist on their first 'OE'. The conflicts and tensions that have precipitated so many migrations to our nation over the last centuries continue to be mirrored in the lives of many refugees and migrants today.

**Key transition phases**

Arriving to settle in a new country is a time of major upheaval as well as one of great hopes for a new beginning. There are clearly identified key transition phases in terms of adapting to a new country's language and culture:

- First impressions – feeling like a visitor – everything is curious, interesting, full of possibilities and surprises
- Survival problems – dealing with reality, finding services, solving problems. Mental exhaustion and depression are common
- Getting by – normal routine established and enough English to cope with the essentials of everyday life
- Dissatisfaction – frustration at lack of in-depth conversation in new language, lack of confidence, loneliness and homesickness may re-emerge, ethnic community support and traditions particularly important
- Full acceptance and integration – fluent in English, accept and understand new culture, interaction with native speakers now comfortable and full participation in society is possible

Certainly, acquiring proficiency in English (or even more, in "New Zild" English!) is an immediate requirement for any new New Zealander. But life in a new country is more than simply understanding. It is just as important to participate as a citizen in New Zealand society, be it using civic amenities like a library or swimming pool, or filling in a census form. Participating in a new society is usually easier to do as a group rather than an individual, and one of the first steps taken by new groups in New Zealand is to form an ethnic community association.

If we look at where new New Zealanders come from these days we are faced with a hugely diverse array of cultural backgrounds within which there may be several sub-cultures and/or ethnicities. For example, we have Kurds, Assyrian Christians and Muslims from Iraq now living in New Zealand, who may or may not have come as refugees; and within these three groups there are up to seven sub-groups whereby ethnicity, language, religion or politics prevents them from being one cohesive community here (just as it did in their homeland.) The challenge of New Zealand's increasingly diverse social make-up, is one that our society, and in particular our social service agencies, are struggling to come to terms with.

At the same time a multiplicity of ethnic community organisations are struggling to get to grips with the processes, procedures and responsibilities of participating in our western democratic socio-political construct.

### **Our organisation**

ESOL Home Tutor Schemes are voluntary agencies that began in NZ over 25 years ago, in response to New Zealand's growing diversity. With a mission to provide English language skills and social support for effective resettlement these schemes aim to support adult refugees and migrants to gain sufficient language and cross-cultural understanding so as to participate fully in the daily life of their new country. There are now 25 local schemes in which more than 3000 volunteers are involved each year in supporting over 6000 new New Zealanders.

Volunteer home tutors meet with their learners either in the learner's home or in a community-based Social English Group, and commonly assist with the individual's English language support and everyday settlement issues ... such as what a letter from DWI might mean, or understanding of the importance in this country of keeping one's lawns mown – a very daunting activity for anyone raised in a high-rise apartment with a balcony! The friendships formed represent not only a key source of language learning but also of cultural learning for the volunteers. We believe these relationships make a significant contribution to building a culture in Aotearoa of valuing diversity and welcoming new settlers.

In 1992 The ESOL Home Tutor Schemes around the country formed a national association so as to make the most of the learning schemes could share with each other, to more effectively provide funding and tuition resources for local schemes, and to provide a national voice on refugee, migrant and adult education issues.

### **Our NESB committee-training project**

Whilst the work of the national association aims to strengthen the ESOL Home Tutor service as a whole, an extension of its work directly benefits ethnic community groups. This is clearly illustrated by the training programme for member schemes' NESB (non-English speaking background) committee members. This training programme arose from the challenge to our organisation of effective stakeholder input into decision-making when language is a barrier.

While schemes met constitutional requirements to have learner representatives on their committees, there were genuine frustrations from both sides about the barriers to their effective participation. Scheme committees reported frustration at the irregular attendance and lack of input from the NESB members; those members, on the other hand, often felt sheer fear when put on the spot for their opinion when they were trying to keep up with the process of the meeting, or patronised when their view was given then apparently not acted upon.

One of the many benefits of this national training programme has been the opportunity to bring together these often very isolated refugees and migrants who had been encouraged to join local ESOL Home Tutor Scheme committees. Through a weekend training workshop about the mysteries of this kiwi institution called a committee, we have begun to build networks amongst these NESB participants who come from as diverse a cultural spectrum as Eastern and Western Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. They have grown in confidence to participate more fully, not only in our organisation's governance but in other spheres of their lives as well, as their expertise has been more fully valued and utilised within our organisation.

We believe this is an important expression of the value we place on the fullest possible participation of refugees and migrants in NZ society. It is also of enormous benefit to our organisation's development to have the expertise and experience of NESB people reflected in the local and national governance of our organisation.

Before we describe the training project in more detail, take a minute to talk to the person next to you about what has been difficult for you about participating in a committee. (Report back from group about some of the difficulties)

Many of these same issues we have addressed in this training, including:

- What's the committee for?
- What is my role on the committee?
- What's the difference between governance and management?
- What are my legal duties and liabilities?
- What am I looking for in reading the financial reports?
- What is expected of a committee as an employer?
- How can I get something of concern to me talked about?

In fact, training in these issues is something that many of our ESOL Home Tutor Scheme committees would welcome. We are currently putting together a comprehensive committee training resource kit that schemes can use locally which includes these topics and much more.

But the priority for this intensive training has gone to our organisation's NESB committee members. Because the reality is that there are more barriers than these that you and I face, in empowering real cross-cultural participation in

committees. And the most interesting part of leading this training has been to learn more about the cultural barriers from participants and to begin in some small way to reduce these.

So what are some of our learnings from this work about barriers that participants have spoken of and strategies to address them?

### **Create the climate of acceptance**

- Learn about people's needs and cultural barriers
- Provide openers for participation and feedback
- Responsiveness and hospitality

For example, some women from Europe (both Eastern and Western) felt that kiwis "beat about the bush" in their effort to be sensitive and polite. These women have discovered that their direct expression of feelings and opinions has got them into strife in their relationships on kiwi committees and elsewhere.

In contrast, the Chinese woman explained that she felt she was doing something rude if she spoke up during the meeting. Deeply ingrained in her was a message not to interrupt the teacher. She should ask her questions after class, if at all. Hence the title of this workshop – which became one of our slogans over that particular training weekend...."participating is not interrupting!"

Similarly, Turkish people are used to long monologues without interruption and find it difficult to function in a society with short exchanges. So a Turkish woman was simply not used to interjecting and often did not pick up on non-verbal cues to take her turn in discussion.

Good group facilitation, including establishing inclusive ground-rules can really enhance participation. The most important of these seems to be the message that "there's no such thing as a silly question – only the one you don't ask". Taking time for introducing people and building relationships within the group is also important – to find out the particular needs and cultural issues in each instance. These needs might include particular food needs (e.g. halal), time and space for prayer, the opportunity to bring the whole family along. We can't expect to know what all these needs are, but we can make an effort to create a climate where people feel they can speak up about their needs and concerns.

Participation is encouraged when the chairing of meetings creates a safe environment. Others interrupting need to be told to give appropriate space, less formal meeting styles can feel more welcoming of participation, and sincere interest in understanding different cultures are all strategies that participants identified as helpful towards their genuine involvement.

### **Beware our own assumptions**

- We don't know what we don't know
- Checking for understanding

For example, a Chinese member reported that, when asked to join the committee, his immediate response was “No, thank you.” He had no intention of being part of the government of New Zealand. Being on a “committee” has a completely different function in a communist country.

An Indian woman spoke of how voluntary work had a significant social status attached to it in her culture. It may be completely outside the experience of your family and friends if you did not come from the strata of society that engaged in such work. Despite the enthusiasm of the local ESOL scheme for you to join their committee, you could feel a real sense of not belonging in such a role.

Language proficiency is clearly another barrier for most NESB participants. While many have achieved a fairly good level of everyday English, there is another whole set of language to learn associated with committee work. A Dutch woman recalled how very strange she found it when, a few years after arriving in New Zealand and having a baby, she joined the local Plunket committee where she could barely make sense of all the moving of motions! Part of the training was to look at the particular language associated with committee work, its meaning and application to procedures such as moving and seconding motions.

And just as we don’t know what we don’t know, so too the learners on this training wanted an overview from us of the general areas of committee skills and responsibilities. Each session was highly participatory, and responded as much as possible to the learning needs participants had identified. However, the training had a framework of a bigger picture than any one of participants would have identified as a learning need for themselves.

In terms of meetings, participants noted that the Chairperson or someone else summing up the discussion, especially before moving motions, was particularly helpful. Many of these practices can benefit all participants.

### **Slow down**

- Level and pace of language
- Length/content of sessions
- Use plenty practical examples
- Group work and discussion time

We all know that there is a significant difference between being able to listen to and understand what is going on in a meeting, and being able to find the words and the space to speak up. This is a particular challenge if the meeting is not in your own language, and the cues for contributing to discussion are not those you recognise. We need to create processes in our meetings and workshops to invite and support participation.

Some of the critical factors that a trainer of NESB people or people in a group meeting need to bear in mind about language include:

- the pace of delivery – don't slow down your speech unduly, but create natural pauses between phrases
- take care when speaking not to use too much idiomatic language or slang
- grade the language of handouts or papers so that they are in Plain English
- focus explicitly of specific language – in this instance, on committee vocabulary, and build up a pattern of questioning and explaining words as they arise
- provide opportunities to practice techniques for participating, such as interrupting, taking turns

In a cross-cultural group there were significant difficulties for participants in understanding each other's accents. The trainer or group leader sometimes becomes an "interpreter", repeating and paraphrasing the points raised. Slowing down also meant the challenge of having less content and more discussion time. Working as co-trainers helped us monitor pace and language needs of the group.

It was also interesting that our usage of written material was different. Rather than providing handouts as we went through the training, we put them together in a booklet provided at the start. However one participant suggested that it would have been even better to have the written material beforehand, to allow more time to absorb the information, which was obviously not in their first language. Having written material before a meeting would be just as important as before such training. It provides not only a better opportunity to read and understand the material, but also to ask questions.

### **Diversify communication styles**

- Variety of activities
- Use of visuals
- Use of humour

The training used lots of movement and activities to reinforce the key messages. A number of exercises had words pre-printed on cards to be sorted or matched. Small group work did not always require written report back, although in one exercise this was successfully achieved. An exercise to get them to describe what it felt like to be on a committee began with some collective drawing of faces and naming the emotions associated.

A variety of visual images were used on OHTs to present concepts. These were chosen with care, because illustrations, and indeed humour, are often culturally bound. Illustrations without words work best, although they were at times used to back up an overview OHT with words.

### **Keep up support**

- Induction
- Buddy
- Check-in
- Training opportunities

- Networking opportunities

It was really sad to hear stories from participants of how they had participated in committees for a number of years and felt so unclear about what was expected of them. It seems such a waste of human potential, let alone of time, energy and commitment. We are often so busy with our work on a committee that we don't take enough time out to induct new members, or to review how things are going. A simple use of coloured "post-its" (for individual feedback) or a group brainstorm for 5 minutes at the end of each meeting could so easily review what's gone well and what could be improved. A buddy for each new member can so easily provide a person to ask – before, during or after the meeting – about the things that are puzzling. A simple check-in question about "How is it going for you?" can also invite important feedback and two-way learning. The groups we have trained are very keen for followup networking and training opportunities.

Naming the barriers to effective participation in committee meetings was a critical first step for the NESB trainees to changing the potential for their future participation. Facilitating active participation within a group that were sharing these experiences was itself part of the process of overcoming these barriers. The content of the training programme differed little from any regular committee training session. However the manner in which that content was delivered was crucial to the success of the training.

The feedback from the training workshops has been fantastic. Participants left feeling much clearer about their role, more confident to participate in meetings and with the beginnings of a support network. Local ESOL committees have reported more active participation – (apart from the ones that left the country!) – and indeed in some instances learnt some useful things about committee work from the report back about this training.

Three of the women involved in the training programme spoke at our recent national ESOL Home Tutor Scheme conference. One from Eastern Europe who who has been a learner, a volunteer tutor, a committee member and is now the paid coordinator of her scheme, said. "You have changed my life!" and her excitement is not containable. She went back from our workshop and decided to embark on management training at her local Polytechnic and can hardly believe she is now in paid employment, bringing the best expertise we could wish for managing a local scheme.

Another woman from Turkey is also studying extramurally and is actively involved in her child's primary school as well as her local ESOL scheme. Another woman from India is also a mother of young children, active in her local scheme, her local Ethnic Council and more recently in training as a women's refuge volunteer. To speak to the full conference of their experience within our organisation, was in itself a further step in their growing confidence to participate fully in the life of our organisation.

Nevertheless, our national association recognises that true participation in an organisation must be reflected at all levels. To get elected to our national executive committee is extremely difficult for NESB committee members. The national constitution clearly sets down the make-up of our executive – it must be representative of small and large schemes, urban and rural schemes, north and south islands, have members with appropriate skills plus NESB representation. By the time all of these criteria are fulfilled, NESB representatives might number one on a committee of eight. Yet it is crucial for the integrity of the organisation that stakeholder participation be more than at the “show and tell” level. Whilst we had strengthened the capability of NESB members at local scheme level, the challenge of strengthening stakeholder strategic input at our national level remained. To this end we were fortunate in recently securing funding to form a national advisory group of NESB participants, which will be the next step in strengthening this network and building a stronger voice for refugees and migrants in our service planning and direction.

This year we are also taking the same training workshop out to other refugees and migrants involved in community organisation committees in Hamilton and Auckland, in partnership with the Auckland Refugees as Survivors Centre.

The learning from this work is very much a two-way process. We have the opportunity to hear from a diverse group of people about their cultural experience and where it sits – comfortably or not – alongside our ways of running community organisations. We are building a group of leaders who can not only inform our organisation’s development but increasingly lead and manage it. They in turn are enjoying the wider exposure to information, networks and skills that enhance opportunities for full participation in Aotearoa communities.

There will continue to be an important place for kiwi volunteers and staff in our organisation, even though we encourage more refugee and migrant participation at all levels of our organisation. There is a vital connection for new settlers to have kiwi friends and knowledge of kiwi culture. This partnership across a diversity of cultures offers an exciting future for our organisation as we continue to pursue our community development vision of strong communities that welcome new settlers and enjoy cultural diversity.

What we are doing through this training initiative is very similar to what has worked so well in our core service. Create an environment for mutual learning, respect and friendship. Inspire growing self-confidence in refugee and migrants’ own leadership abilities. And build increasingly strong, diverse multicultural community organisations and communities.