

Using Key Communication Tools Effectively

By The Rev. Dr. John Beck

Have you ever had the experience of beginning to play a game when you suddenly realize the people you are playing with use a different set of rules? My dad played Scrabble believing that it was normal to have nine tiles, while other families used seven.

I have had a similar experience when it comes to the elegant processes that Eric Law established for developing community, sometimes identified as the Kaleidoscope Toolkit: RESPECT communication guidelines; Mutual Invitation; and the Kaleidoscope Bible Sharing process (KBS). I'll discuss just the RESPECT communication guidelines and Mutual Invitation (MI) here. The Bible Sharing process makes use of both the guidelines and Mutual Invitation.

When I talked about this with Eric Law a few weeks ago, he told me that many years ago he led a team onto a university campus where there had been significant turmoil due to racist behaviors. His team trained leaders to use the Kaleidoscope tools mentioned above to promote dialog and deeper listening. This led to good outcomes. Effective work was done and the team got high marks for the help they provided in this crisis. Five years later Eric returned to that campus and now heard students describe angry resentment toward Mutual Invitation. He discovered that the tool was being used (actually misused) manipulatively to force people to talk about things in groups.

I have had similar experience as a faculty member with the Interim Ministry Network. In each of the classes I have led in the last couple of years I have asked participants if they have used Mutual Invitation somewhere along the way in their ministry or training. Many participants indicate they have experienced it. When I further inquire if they have heard the background and guidelines that are meant to accompany it, almost no one knew or had heard the MI guidelines clearly explained.

In one recent IMN class, after I provided such a historical and deeper explanation of MI and its use, one seasoned pastor from Ohio said that this was the first time she actually understood how to use it and the difference it made for promoting safe and effective group communication.

Better listening changes things

R.E.S.P.E.C.T. The RESPECT communication guidelines were developed to help participants in any conversation be non-judgmental with one another and more aware of how their behavior benefits or detracts from communication. Using the guidelines effectively creates norms that encourage greater self-awareness and self-regulation and can lead to better listening. (*see bibliographic citations below*)

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Mutual Invitation (MI) Mutual invitation is a process most effectively used in groups of a dozen or less with the specific goal of enhancing deeper listening. Providing participants with the following orientation establishes the purpose of the process.

Invitational: The mood of MI is gracious and invitational. Participants invite one another to speak with gentle inviting words, which is different than “calling on” someone or saying, “It is your turn now.” Instead, say, “I invite [name] to share next.” Inviting someone who is not directly next to the speaker promotes careful attention and derails the tendency to “just go around the circle.” Inviting someone by name, if possible, develops a community.

Structured: When someone is invited to share, that participant has three options: 1) to share; 2) to pass for now; or 3) to pass.

Sequential: Regardless of their choice, the invited participant has the responsibility to invite the next person to share. If people have “passed for now,” the last person invited comes back to (one of) them and invites them to share now; then that person invites the next until all have been invited. If someone has “passed,” they are not invited again.

Individuals refrain from interrupting: If someone wishes to respond to something that is being said, they are invited to make note of it but not break in, because that removes the focus of the conversation from the person speaking. People are asked to not “cross talk” by breaking in.

Timing is everything: The group leader identifies how much time each person will have to respond. A gentle hand signal or someone watching a clock can help manage the time available.

Leader models: In groups just learning the MI process the leader often begins sharing to model the length and tone of sharing, often reminding participants that it is normal to not immediately remember they get to invite the next person to share.

MI Origin Story after the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles in 1992, community leaders were invited to help rebuild the devastated South Los Angeles neighborhoods. This involved bringing people of various racial and ethnic groups into dialog through multiple series of community conversations. Because there were such a lack of trust and often such gaping power differentials between groups, Eric Law (then an Episcopal campus pastor at a local university) began experimenting with group processes that might build trust. This led him to create the Mutual Invitation process where all three of the options had significant implications for individuals and among different cultural norms that held differing levels of power:

- First, extroverts and people with power were invited to speak when invited, not when they wished to.

- Second, quieter, less powerful, sometimes introverted people were given time (via “pass for now”) to collect their thoughts, knowing they would get a chance to speak later.
- Third, people were able to pass and could **choose** not to speak. This became a way for people to participate by listening, choosing, and inviting, yet not entering the conversation more fully until it felt safe enough to engage.

Implications for transitional leaders - The tools discussed above are powerful examples of gently inviting new behaviors in congregations we serve. Eric Law once even commented to me, “I am hoping to rewire people’s awareness, so they begin to think communally as well as individually.”

- Re: RESPECT communication guidelines. For the last 20 years I have utilized the RESPECT guidelines at nearly every meeting I was involved in.
 - It is important to have the group explicitly affirm the guidelines before the meeting continues.
 - It is also important to return to the RESPECT guidelines within the meeting if one or more are ignored or forgotten. The facilitator or any participant can notice or wonder if a guideline has been disregarded and invite the speaker(s) to make a greater effort to observe the guidelines that all have agreed on.
 - If the group is ongoing and people are familiar with the guidelines, the reference to them can be a briefer check-in, such as: “As we again remember our RESPECT guidelines, please turn to your neighbor and share which guideline is easiest for you (or most challenging, etc.)” We bring the guidelines to our awareness briefly and then have them in our midst when we need to be reminded of how we talk and listen together.
- Re: Mutual invitation. MI is an indispensable tool. It should never be introduced as a game or novelty process; it is a serious inclusive technique that will hopefully become part of the discipline or spirituality of the group. But it can be used when it is most needed and most helpful, not as the standard form for every part of a group conversation.

Resources and bibliographic citations:

[Kaleidoscope Institute](#) – [Respectful Communication Guidelines & Mutual Invitation](#) with Rev. Dr. Eric Law

(For a fuller version of the story of Mutual Invitation, please see Eric H. F. Law, [The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb](#) [Chalice Press, 1993], especially “Chapter 9: Mutual Invitation as Mutual Empowerment,” pages 79-88.

(For more about the RESPECT communication guidelines, please see Eric H. F. Law, [The Bush Was Blazing But Not Consumed](#) [Chalice Press, 1996], especially “Chapter 10: Lighting, Sanctifying, and Maintaining the Holy Fire Through Dialogue,” pages 80-99 and particularly pages 83-89.)

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