

Tool 30: Power Ranking

Aim of the tool

To help participants experience how every person has different kinds of rank and privileges, and to see how this influences group power dynamics.

When to use it?

Divergence stage, to sensitize groups about how rank affects power positions. Only to be used if there is basic trust within the group. The exercise generates lots of energy in groups.

What is Power Ranking?

In this exercise, the participants experience themselves that every person has different kinds of rank, or 'the sum of a person's privileges'.

About the concept of rank

As explained by Arnold Mindell, rank describes how influential someone is in the hierarchy of a group. In other words, it is the level of an individual's social or personal power. People derive their rank from various sources:

- Situational rank: for example, position in an organisation
- Social rank: for example, gender, educational level, age, race
- Personal rank: for example, charismatic, insecure, avoiding conflict
- Spiritual rank: for example, feeling connected to something transcendental, knowing your calling in life.

Interestingly, people often do not know that they have a particular rank. We tend to focus on ways of decreasing the rank of those with more power instead of focusing on ways to increase our own rank. Becoming aware of how rank affects you and others is the first step in understanding the subtle power dynamics operating among stakeholders in an MSP.

Rank is relational. It influences our interactions, whether we are aware of it or not, because its influence is as much in how others see us as in how we experience ourselves. The sense of power can change quite rapidly between people from moment to moment, as different types of power dynamics are experienced. Furthermore, most people have the tendency to be sensitive to how the rank of others is affecting them, while remaining less aware of how their own rank affects others.

Power Ranking - Step by step

This group exercise requires careful preparation. You will need slips of paper describing different ranks. For the sake of the exercise, we leave out the 4th type of rank (spiritual rank). Make sure you have a similar amount of ranks as you have participants (if you have a large group, you can split the group – ensure that you have double sets of paper slips in that case). Time management is critical with this exercise, as discussions tend to proliferate and spin out of control.

Explain to the group that this exercise is all about reflecting on who has the most decision making power in the specific situation, considering the local issues at stake. For example: “Who has most decision making power in starting oil exploitation activities in Kenya?”

Ask all participants to stand up and form a line. Then hand each person in the line one slip from the pile ‘Situational rank’ (see table), and ask them to take 10 minutes to rank themselves: stand in a line from the person with most decision-making power, to the person with least decision-making power.

In the context of deciding about oil in Kenya one can think of the following ranks:

Situational Rank	Social Rank	Personal Rank
1. Staff member NGO (project manager)	1. Man	1. High self-esteem
2. Director INGO	2. Woman	2. Charismatic
3. Director local NGO	3. Young (25)	3. Insecure
4. Human rights activist	4. Older (55)	4. Difficulties influencing others
5. Minister of Economic Affairs	5. PhD	5. Very effective in influencing others
6. Director multinational	6. Very attractive	6. Avoids conflict
7. Researcher Knowledge Institute	7. Minority Group	7. Limited communication skills
8. Director Financial institute (bank)	8. Very influential family	8. High emotional intelligence
9. Journalist from BBC	9. Single	9. Very competitive
10. Community leader	10. Twelve children	10. Very courageous
11. Local authority	11. Disabled	11. Very communicative
12. Miner	12. Poor family	12. Very shy
13. Donor (World Bank)	13. Rich family	13. Natural leader

When the line is formed, the facilitator asks those who were considered most/least powerful, the following question: “How does it feel to stand where you are now?” Besides exchanging some arguments about the political/economic system, it is important to give space to expression of feelings.

After this first round, the facilitator gives each participant a second rank (NB: on top of their first assigned rank), from the ‘social rank’ pile. The assignment is to take 10 minutes to reform the line and see how the order of persons is changing, if any. Again, if there have been shifts the facilitator enquires about feelings of those who went up or down the row.

A third round follows where participants are given a third rank (from the pile ‘personal rank’). Make sure that you make combinations which are counterintuitive or less logical – so make the ‘local authority’ a ‘natural leader’, or the ‘Donor from the World Bank’ a ‘very insecure’ person. This will lead to some shifts in the row. After 5 or 10 minutes, ask reactions from several participants (ensure you include some people who have not spoken yet).

Learn more

CDI course materials

Mindell, Arnold (1995) *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation using Conflict and Diversity*, Portland: Lao Tse Press.