

Project Silence in Organizations

Why silence is still golden : The power and role of silence in organizational life

– Jeroen van Lawick & Robin Groeneveld

One rainy afternoon a year or so ago *Robin Groeneveld* and *Jeroen van Lawick* sat down together to discuss what they were doing professionally, and some opportunities for collaborative work. Their conversation soon shifted to the topic of silence, both in general and regarding the important role it plays in their personal lives, and, most significantly, in their work.

Jeroen van Lawick has extensive experience working internationally for large companies in the fields of innovation, research and business development. He spoke about how when people make space for silence in organizational life, good communication and better connection follows, creating in turn more opportunities for 'breakthrough' thinking.

Robin Groeneveld described how in his work as an international trainer and executive coach, silence seemed to open people up to their intuition, enabling them to get in contact with their authentic self. In his experience, leaders who are able to incorporate moments of silence and reflection in their daily working lives, can take huge developmental strides towards truly strategic and inspirational leadership. They also reported making better decisions and having a much higher energy level at the end of the working week.

That rainy day conversation led *Robin* and *Jeroen* to realize the impact of their shared view and experience: that silence can play an extremely important role in organizations in many different ways. Yet, in reality, its use is still highly limited – few individuals consciously practise silence as a means to improve their performance and satisfaction with their work and personal lives.

Inspired by these observations, *Groeneveld* and *Van Lawick* wanted to take their reflections further, to organize something that would move the idea of silence a step forward by supporting organizations and society in general to make use of it on a much larger, more institutionalized scale. After further discussion, they decided to set up an initiative focusing specifically on the value and impact of silence. Within a short space of time, '**Project Silence in Organizations**' came into being.

A year of creative thinking, research and development followed, exploring practical applications for silence, and involving (of course) plenty of long moments of silence for them both. Then, their first opportunity to share

their ideas arose: *Groeneveld* and *Van Lawick* were asked to present their ideas on silence at the ALIA (Authentic Leadership in Action) conference from 7-12 March 2011 in The Netherlands.

The opportunity to present and discuss their ideas with conference participants underlined what they both already knew: that the overload of information and speed of communication that characterizes contemporary professional life gives silence an even more vital role for high-performing organizations and individuals to achieve authentic leadership. Yet there were challenges - although the participants of the conference agreed on the importance of silence in organizations, they also felt that silence is still a controversial subject in many organizations and that there is plenty of work to be done in bringing its value to the attention of major social and corporate institutions.

Why is this? There are numerous explanations. *Groeneveld* and *Van Lawick* believe that silence, for individuals, groups or organizations, is often regarded as a 'difficult' subject, which is most commonly connected with deep spiritual reflection, religious contemplation or self-analysis. For that reason, its practical applications and benefits among groups, teams, networks of people is, at first sight, far less obvious.

In this extremely private, contemplative context where silence can bring individual enlightenment or spiritual solace, it becomes a precious gift, one which people do not share at all easily or comfortably in their work environment. Yet, *Groeneveld* and *Van Lawick* consider that silence used with positive intent and planfulness in corporate settings has always had enormous, transformative power – and there are numerous examples of how this works in different domains, including sales negotiations of all kinds, influential communications, and product development processes.

But there is perhaps a more compelling reason why the idea of silence at corporate level can generate serious unease. As *Groeneveld* describes it, our professional lives are increasingly dominated by the ticking clock, the multiple pressures of reacting and responding endlessly to numerous tasks and requests, to a massive body of information reaching us daily in snippets and chunks through an ever-greater array of digital and other channels.



How to make sense of all that, to work out what is important and what can be ignored, to decide which tasks and pieces of information are inter-related? In Groeneveld and Van Lawick's view, corporate professionals are learning to respond even faster to an ever-increasing body of demands, and there is plenty of research into stress and time management activities to suggest that this 'quickfire' reaction, although sometimes useful and appropriate, often turns out to be unproductive and ineffective in the longer-term for organizations, just as it is draining and unsatisfying for the individual involved.

Of course there are many reasons why those pressures have developed, and are now a routine part of life in organizations of all kinds. In developing Project Silence in Organizations,

Groeneveld and Van Lawick want to explore how silence can helpfully punctuate the extreme pressures of a highly-charged professional routine, and to inspire organizations to learn more about the different ways of using silence occasionally and powerfully for positive outcomes in groups, teams and organizations.

Following their presentation at ALIA, Groeneveld and Van Lawick developed a practical working model that identifies different ways of using silence for specific purposes and in a variety of settings. No specific hierarchy is intended between the four uses identified; what is important is the intended outcome and the context in which the silence may be useful.



Functional Silence	Concentration Focus Ideas Overview	<i>Inform about role of silence to set agenda Teach and help implement routines for practising silence e.g. workshop 'Silence management or personal coaching' Help set-up silence working area's (physical & behavioral)</i>
Silence for Vitality	Dealing effectively with emotions: Stress management	<i>Workshop 'Silence and emotion management' Personal coaching Silence gathering</i>
Silence for Communication	Deeper listening Dialogue i.s.o. discussion Problem solving & Decision making	<i>Workshop 'Silence and communication' Team coaching for better communication Team retreat business case solution Silence gathering</i>
Contemplative Silence	Insight and essence in work and life	<i>Personal Silence retreat & personal coaching Team retreat</i>

Jeroen and Robin's vision

"Our vision is to make silence a part of the daily routine of organizations all around the world. We want to achieve that by inspiring organizations and their employees to deal with silence in a practical way, so that they will function more effectively and with greater work/ life satisfaction".

"We want to build (virtual) communities all around the world to help us build our vision. Together with the people of these communities we want to develop practical knowledge, tools and services to support organizations to deal with silence. We want to support these communities to find people who can deliver information, support and services to organizations in their own country or region".

Groeneveld and Van Lawick see the creation of practical 'silence' services as a subject open to a whole range of approaches, ripe for development by organizations and communities of all kinds. In their own professional work their services with silence now include:

Silent workshops in which people can find out for themselves if they build in enough moments of silence and reflection, and how to incorporate silence in their daily work;

Team retreats in which teams experience how to use silence to reach better team results, with more understanding of the qualities and abilities of all team members;

Training 'Ambassadors in Silence', developing and training advocates or ambassadors who can spread the word about the value and benefits of the use of silence in organizational life;

Designing 'Silent areas', in which people can work in silence and areas in which people can take time to pause and reflect; Silent gatherings, where employees can experience moments of silence in their organization.

At the moment we are looking to make contact with people who are interested in the **Project Silence in Organizations** and want to share knowledge, inspiration or ideas to build this project to the next phase. If you have anything to share, have questions about the Project Silence in Organizations, or you are interested in joining the community around this project, you are very welcome to get in touch with us:

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