Where You Sit Speaks Volumes

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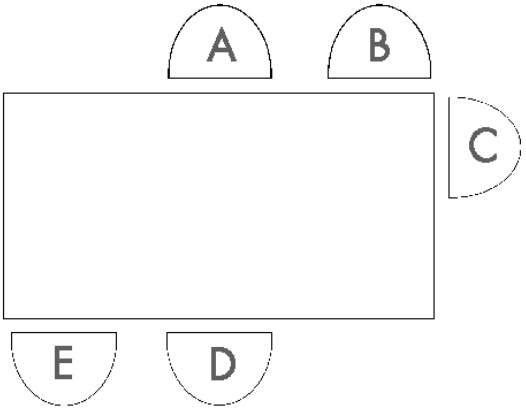
There is a "seating" language. If you, like many people are not aware of it, read on. You can create the illusion of power or equality in your relationship-building efforts by where you sit and where you seat others at meetings, conferences and after-hours events. The choice is often yours to make!

Power Position

The power position in a meeting being held at a rectangular table is always in the center facing the door, where the person can see who is coming and going. On television clips, you'll notice it's where the president of the United States sits. The second most important position is to the person's right, the third to his/her left.



Cooperative

Let's assume in our illustration that person A is calling the meeting. The most cooperative position is next to him/her (B) because there are no barriers between them. People who already know each other frequently assume this position in business and social situations. While it is acceptable and recommended, business people meeting each other for the first time rarely use this position.

The next most cooperative position is C. Business people often use this arrangement at a first meeting or until they get better acquainted. It is recommended for a job interview. It allows two people to be close while still having the corner of the table as a safety zone.

Competitive

The most competitive position to A is D. The table is a barrier between them, and people may become competitive and defensive when seated across from each other. If you have a choice, like in a restaurant, sit in the corner position or ask for a booth. Don't set up a competitive situation unnecessarily. It can hamper an otherwise potentially positive relationship-building situation. When seated in the competitive position, a person also becomes defensive about his/her personal territory (or half of the table). Don't accidentally push items into someone else's space, as it is as much an invasion at dinner as if you had reached into their space and touched them.

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Autonomous

A fourth position (E) is autonomous. It's across the table, and in the position next to competitive. It is where you sit when you need to share a table, and you do not want to be involved with the other person. You might choose it at a library or in a self-serve restaurant. You may have to share space, but not necessarily conversation.

Meetings

You can direct or control responses in a meeting through seating arrangements. Putting chairs in a circle encourages equal contributions. A horseshoe or "T" will recognize and emphasize people at the head of the table. Theater seating or side-by-side says, "You are here to listen, not to talk."

In a training situation, you can use circles for small group discussions, a horseshoe for workshops led by internal or external experts and theater seating for a keynote presentation. When you add a raised speaking platform, you are giving special status to the speaker, as well as setting up more of a barrier between him/her and the audience. Interaction is reduced; in fact, people usually wait to be called upon.

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Lillian D. Bjorseth helps you build high-value relationships by honing your business networking, business development and communication skills. She's the author of *Breakthrough Networking: Building Relationships That Last, 52 Ways to Break the Ice & Target Your Market* and the *Nothing Happens Until We Communicate* CD and workbook series. She's a contributing author to *Masters of Networking.* Lillian is an Inscape Publishing certified DiSC® trainer and a member of National Speakers Assn. She spent 11 years at AT&T where she trained top executives in media and communication skills. Contact her at lillianspeaks@duoforce.com, www.duoforce.com, or 630-983-5308.

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