

Less Dictator, More Responsibility

By Ali Wong

My friends and family share an inside joke about me. After I say anything controlling, they'll whisper "dictator" or "dictadore." My sixth grade teacher once told me that I had "Napoleonic syndrome." But despite these humorously critical remarks, my general assertiveness, confidence and ability to think ahead have always placed me in leadership positions. I possess the very leadership qualities U.S. society emphasizes, which conform with top-down leadership. So this concept of "shared leadership" is extremely new and difficult to truly accept. Working with the storybook committee is my first experience with "shared leadership."

As an experienced student activist and public speaker, I initially felt the need to hold back more. On Allan's political tour through Chinatown, I wanted to ask some of the Latino workers questions in Spanish. But I was afraid of stealing Allan's thunder and appearing to show off my Spanish-speaking skills. However, I realized that we, as a group, could have gotten a lot more information and therefore benefited as a whole if I had conducted mini-interviews in Spanish. If I had asked, maybe they would have been more candid because they would have felt more comfortable speaking in their native tongue, known that I was a person who could be trusted because I already demonstrated an interest in the Latino community by learning how to speak Spanish, and would not have to worry about their bosses understanding.

I went to my first CAPSA meeting last Monday for the Cindy Cho presentation. I was already familiar with the fact that CAPSA was a non-hierarchical collective with no offices. On Monday, I finally seized the opportunity to see how this Communist-esque organization functions. Members of CAPSA took turns leading meetings every week, taking time, and writing down notes. Members volunteered to do these tasks very fast because they all want to be there, all care about the Asian-American political issues and all know that taking initiative is everyone's responsibility. After attending a meeting that directly reflected successful shared leadership, I was confident that I too could participate in shared leadership.

After the Chinatown political tour, CAPSA experience and reading the course reader articles, I learned more about the significance of doing "mass work." At the last children's book committee meeting, I was careful not to take on too much responsibility or assume too much leadership. However, I did set the official location and time of the meeting through email. I facilitated the meeting, beginning with a group-made agenda and following through with a discussion about the budget, storyline ideas and general committee organization. While I essentially mediated the discussion, the group collectively contributed ideas and responsibilities working towards the success of our project. For example, I asked everyone to brainstorm any animals for potential characters to represent the Korean and Latino workers. One person came up with the Korean workers as squirrels, and another person suggested the Latino workers be pigeons. Then we kept running with those animals characters to brainstorm storylines. We concluded with a combination of the individual proposed storylines, and assigned ourselves the task

of each coming to Friday's class with actual written text following our storyline backbone.

Sarah volunteered to lead the next meeting, which demonstrated a great sense of "shared leadership." In the meeting, she contributed a lot of great creative ideas without imposing them on the group. For example, she shared that the pigeons and squirrels should help each other store food in some sort of secret place, and work together to fight the big bad oppressive squirrel. Sarah stated and offered her strengths: drawing and organizing, which reflects a great awareness of her personal contribution to the group. She also suggested that we meet twice a week, expressing a great commitment to the group and our class project.

I felt great after that meeting with the children's book committee because I used my strengths and talents to flesh out my group member's strengths and talents. As in improv performer, I follow two very important guidelines: One, never ever negate your partner. Two, your goal is to make your partner on stage look as good as possible. Some members labeled other people's storylines as "confusing" or "too complicated for little kids." I encouraged everyone not to negate ideas, especially in the brainstorming process but instead to just build on ideas that inspired them. Encouraging and applying my improv guidelines to my "shared leadership" development in the class are crucial towards my growth and exploration of this important, historical concept of "shared responsibility."