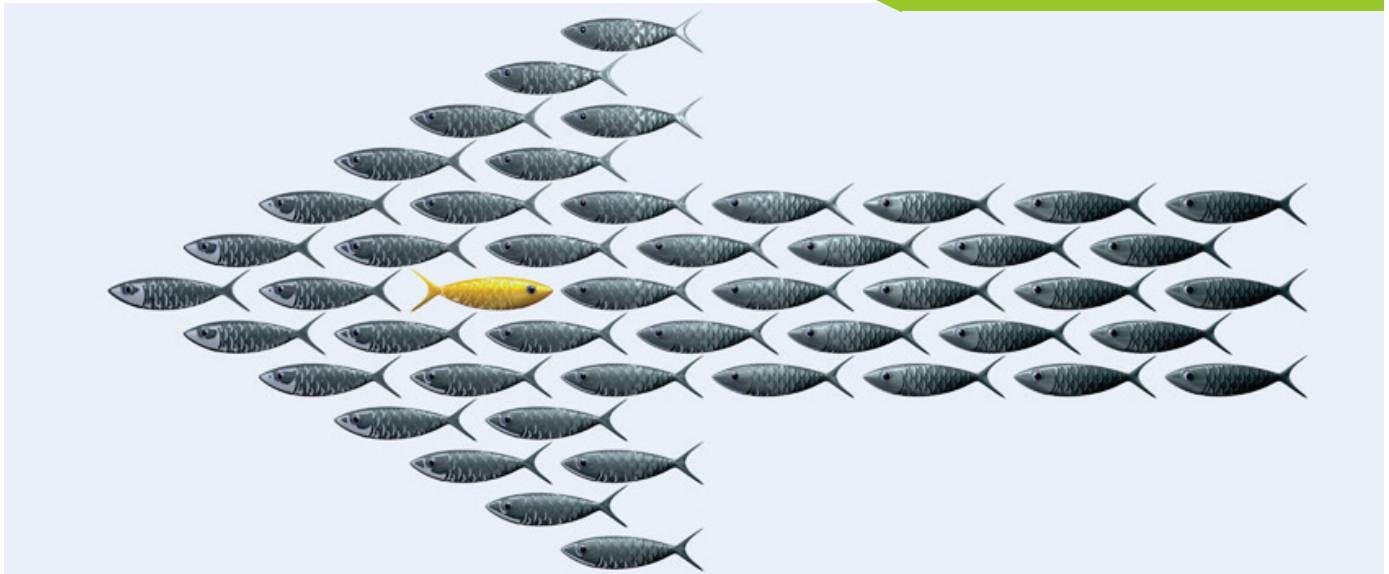


## Introduction to Mainstream and Margins



The concepts of mainstream and margins are key to understanding team dynamics and supporting groups to thrive. They originate from Process Work and have been further developed by Training for Change. Today, they are an important approach that underpins Rhizome's work.

The mainstream and margins are integral parts of all groups. The mainstream, though not necessarily the majority, is the part of the group that sets the tone, communication-style and way of working. It is usually done unconsciously. The margins might express other behaviours, but if it doesn't become the new norm of the group, they remain in the periphery.

Every group, team and organisation marginalises certain behaviours or characteristics. Sometimes it's more obvious what or who is pushed to the edges, and at other times you will need to observe closely. What is marginalised will vary between groups and will change over time, but it's often a reproduction of the power structures in wider society. People carry their rank into a group, based on things like ethnicity, gender, and class.

If we want a team to thrive, then negotiating these dynamics is absolutely crucial. When we are aware of this dynamic, we can choose to go with the flow of the mainstream norm-setting, or we can bring it to the attention of the group and support everyone to explore with curiosity what impact it has on the group and its members.

Change is generally instigated by the margins, who will usually have more awareness of the dynamics. However, if the relationship between mainstream and margins doesn't change, the group will not thrive. For this to happen, people from the margins need to step into their own power; once one person from the margins does so, people from other margins will tend to follow.

An example that illustrates the complex dynamics is whether a group takes turns to speak or speaks up as and when. If the mainstream is to take turns to speak, people who are used to a more spontaneous flow will be asked to refrain and stick to taking turns. In this way, the mainstream keeps the people with those behaviours on the edge of the group. Eventually, people in the margins may seek to change the dynamic.

### What can we do?

What's unique about this approach is that it explicitly aims at empowering people in the margins to go further than challenging the mainstream, through supporting change and the re-negotiation of the power relationships within the group. The aim with this is to ensure that there is space for everyone to thrive, to hold differences, and for the group to be at the top of its game. As such, sometimes it's appropriate to work directly with the dynamics. At others simply understanding what is going on provides clues on how best to support the group.

As a facilitator or as a participant-facilitator, you can:

- identify in advance diagnostic tools that you can use in the meeting or workshop
  - explore and empathise with your own mainstream and margin experiences beforehand
  - practice self-awareness about your mainstream/ margin status right now and how that affects your behaviours
  - act with multi-partiality, supporting both the mainstream and the margins
  - support others to become more self-aware about their own and the group's mainstream and margins
  - ask with curiosity what is going on in the group right now
- use an elicitive approach to support people to 'unfold' the dynamics just below the surface
  - support margins to step in to their own power through:
    - catching their eye, so they know that they are not only seen but supported and invited into the space
    - using your body language to show openness and empathy to what they are almost saying, and understanding of the dynamics in the space
    - mirroring their body language
    - talking to them in a break
    - occasionally gently saying to them that it looks like they might have something to add.
  - support mainstream and margins to notice the dynamics between them at that moment, to stay with the process despite strong feelings, and to try to renegotiate their relationship

### Some ways to spot when people are in the mainstream or margins

Mainstream	Margins
talking on behalf of the group, e.g. "of course we all think...", "everyone knows that..."	talking together on the edge of meetings and events
not noticing that other people have different experiences, beliefs or expressions on their faces	speaking up but that not being taken seriously or emulated
staying in their comfort zone and/or requiring 'safety' in the group before engaging	having a clearer sense of the group dynamics at play
reacting to margins' feedback or naming dynamics as personal attacks	occasionally seeking 'revenge'
not taking what is said on board	disengagement with the life of the group and not taking on actions
engaged with life of group	taking on roles that are undervalued or not seen
'policing' what or how things are said or calling-out things as off-topic	saying things others say are deemed irrelevant or off-topic
surprised or confused when the dynamics rear their head	leaving part of their identity 'at the door'
sense of freedom as they set the group's norms	sense of freedom as the group does not depend on them