Collective Organisation

by John Englart

WORKING IN COLLECTIVES

The small group can create free space where each individual can question submission and obedience to authority, sex role conditioning, and power relationships. It provides an opportunity for individuals to analyse power and domination from shared experiences, and to develop new skills, new behaviour, non-hierarchical and non-exploitative lifestyles. The small group can empower the individual members.

Small size of the group gives the opportunity for adopting new values based on personal power, but does not guarantee these values will be adopted. Hierarchical organisation can just as easily function in a small group, either through formal or informal structures. Where you find hierarchy in human organisation, you are likely to find a form of domination.

WHAT IS THE BEST SIZE FOR A COLLECTIVE?

The optimal size for a collective will vary according to the project and the skills of the members. The larger the group gets, the more complicated the decision making process can become, and the more coordination required.

Certainly a collective of up to 10 or 12 under most circumstances, would be quite workable and effective. If members have good conflict resolution and communication skills, larger numbers in a collective should be possible without losing any of the benefits of working collectively, or establishing a hierarchy.

> From my own experience I have worked in structured collectives from 2 to 12 people. The collective which had 12 people had a structure which could have encompassed more members. The members of this collective had developed their meeting and conflict resolution skills to a high degree. The collective shared a set of underlying values which ensured an ongoing commitment to the project. I believe this collective had the capacity of from 16 to 20 members without setting up a hierarchy and suffering other disadvantages.

HOW MUCH STRUCTURE?

All groups of people have structure, both open and hidden. Structure in small groups determines how information flows and how power is shared. Informal friendship networks tend to spread information inefficiently. In a group where not everyone is in the same network, or especially with new people joining the group, structures such as regular meetings and rostered working together may be necessary to ensure information and tasks are shared equitably.

The extent of structure necessary for sharing power in a small group will depend upon the purpose the group sets itself, and the size of the group. For example, a consciousness raising group may need very little formal structure to engage its purpose, while a collective focused on an ongoing project - such as a newspaper, bookshop, running a refuge, radio program, cafe, etc - will need much more explicit structure to coordinate activity and involve all members in sharing power.

THE DANGERS OF TOO LITTLE OR TOO MUCH STRUCTURE

One of the major dangers for collectives is determining the right amount of structure to have. Too little structure and you run into the problems expounded in [The Tyranny of Structurelessness](). Too much structure will result in problems of bureaucratic power.

To not introduce some explicit structure into the functioning of a group can result in an elite forming, or one dominant person, and the small group will become a 'tyranny of structurelessness'. A tyranny of structurelessness is the absence of explicit structures for sharing power enabling one or more individuals to exercise power over the group. This process is described by Jo Freeman in an essay called [The Tyranny of Structurelessness](), first published in the context of the feminist movement in 1970. This essay still has a great deal to say to people working in collectives today.

There is a danger in having too much structure in a group, in which some members, through their knowledge of structure, have power over other members who may lack this knowledge. A form of bureaucratic power (or domination) is the result.

Formal structure should have a functional reason for existence and the reason behind and how to use the structure should be understood by all individuals in the group.

WHAT SORT OF STRUCTURES?

Structures should not be seen as fixed and immutable. They should be flexible and responsive to the needs of the group and individual members. The introduction, use, modification, and discarding of explicit structures should be under the control of the group. Democratic structuring within a collective could include any or all of the following basic structures:

1. Defined decision making process.
2. Regular Meetings.
3. Defined joining and training procedure for new people.
4. Defining a level of commitment for working in the group.
5. Delegation of specific responsibility.
6. Rotation of all tasks.
7. Regular social events.
8. Rosters for tasks to be undertaken.
9. Evaluations and Clearness Meetings.

Your group could decide to use any or all of the above structures, plus several others which the group may formulate for its own particular needs.

DECISION MAKING STRUCTURE

The options for democratic decision making revolve around either a majority system (voting) or consensus decision making. Some collectives use a combination of these systems to suit particular needs. Rules for expulsion, in particular, generally use the majority principle. Quite often in a small group most decisions will be made using an informal consensual approach. Majority voting is also sometimes used as a backup method if consensus fails.

A common mistake small groups sometimes make when they start is in not formulating how they make decisions, and what method to use in what circumstances. This can exacerbate other disputes further on, when the group has no agreed method of resolving conflict.

One of the collectives I was in paid lip service to using consensus, but in reality had no agreed decision making method. Often, when conflicts arose, the decision was made by voting. When a major conflict over organisational practices surfaced, the collective found it had two factions with no agreed method of decision making. The collective was eventually dissolved, and two new collectives started with a division of the resources of the old collective.

MAJORITY DECISION MAKING

The advantage of Majority decision making is it can be used in any size group, and is relatively quick. The disadvantages are that a win/lose mentality can be generated which can cause factions to form. There can also be a lack of commitment to carrying out the decision by the losers. If all the members are not consulted or debate is gagged, decisions can be made which alienate and disempowers members.

Many collectives use this form of decision making for its ease of use. In a small group, there is often adequate debate and consensus reached on best solutions so that a vote is just a ratification of a decision already made.

PROPORTIONAL OUTCOME DECISIONS

Some decisions can be made which reflect the relative support of members. This falls far short of consensus, but gives minority groups some rights, and does not have the dualistic win/lose overtones of majority vote. Not all decisions will be amenable to this style of decision making.

A compromising attitude is important for proportional outcome decisions to work. This style of decision making will tend to entrench factions in a collective. There is also the danger of the group going in to many directions at once, dissipating energy which could have more usefully been used in implementing one solution made by either majority vote or consensus.

A collective of 10 people take it in turns to cook a weekly public dinner. Seven people argue that all meals should be vegetarian. Three people argue strongly that there should be meat dishes available for those who like to eat meat.

The group may come to a decision that every dinner should adequately cater for vegetarians. Every third week there would also be meat dishes offered, prepared by those people who want this option. Everyone is relatively happy with this compromise solution which tries to reflect the opinions of all members in proportion to their support in the collective.

CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

The method most effective for sharing power when used by small groups is consensus. Consensus decision making is not always an easy process and can sometimes involve a lot of energy, time, and commitment to each other. On the positive side, this method of decision making encourages the participation of all members in formulating all decisions. This builds group cohesion and trust. It also tends to make for better quality decisions.

Using consensus group members learn to practice values of cooperation and respect, to share power and learn skills which foster better communication and relationships on both interpersonal and community levels. Consensus demands that members of the group be more caring, responsible and fair with each other.

For larger groups: consensus decision making can become more difficult to achieve. Not everyone will be interested in every decision, so perhaps some delegation to smaller groups can occur for their discussion and recommendation back to the large group.

There may be times when a consensus decision can not be reached, or is being obstructed by one or two people. In highly committed collectives, these instances do not occur frequently. When they do occur, the group must assess how important the decision is, how strongly the members feel about a majority or minority decision being implemented, and if some agreement can be reached with individual members non participation in the implementation of a decision.

The Black Rose Bookshop collective had a Right of Dissent from a decision. This was a mechanism where if one person objected to a decision, which could not be resolved otherwise in the time available, the person could record their dissent while allowing a decision to be made by the rest of the members. From the collective statement on Consensus:

> *While this is a departure from consensus, it is not going as far as voting. Provided that this remains a last resort and is used infrequently, employing this method will not endanger the ongoing consensus of the group.*

If consensus cannot be reached on many different issues, after all alternatives have been exhausted, this may mean the goals of the group and individuals need to be reassessed. If this is the case, fundamental disagreements may be present and the group may need to disband or members leave the group.

HOW DOES THE CONSENSUS PROCESS WORK?

The nature of consensus is based on the non-ownership of ideas. When ideas are owned, the owner assumes they have a monopoly on truth. When these ideas are rejected in part or total by the group, a loss is felt by the individual owner. This typifies a static and dualistic view of reality composed of good versus bad, and right versus wrong solutions, of any change being a loss.

With consensus all ideas, the truth of each member, contributes to the process of finding a solution. It is a dialectical and creative process for problem solving, in which a new view of truth emerges from the conflict of ideas. In this process individuals grow towards a new view of reality where the original problem is seen in a new perspective, and a new group solution can be formulated. This is a process of continuous self development for the individuals and the group.

For consensus to work well you need:

1. a certain amount of basic agreement on fundamental attitudes and issues.
2. all members to communicate their ideas and feelings clearly.
3. a non dogmatic and flexible approach to new ideas
4. patience in listening
5. to attempt to understand the truth of others.
6. the courage to speak your own idea of the truth as you see it.

MEETING STRUCTURE

Meetings and their structure are very important for group projects. Regular meetings enable all individuals to participate in the sharing of information, distribution of authority, the sharing of responsibility, and the exercise of power and decision making involved in the group activity. The time and place for each meeting should be decided by all, and made known to those members absent.

Meetings do not guarantee that power will be shared. Elite groups and people with strong personalities may be present. Personal politics, sex roles and power relationships need to be acknowledged and discussed, and sometimes confronted and changed by the individual and group.

Once the power dynamics in the group and in the meeting are out in the open, structures and techniques to regulate and share power can be formulated. These techniques may include giving some type of emphasis to the less assertive people in the group.

One useful technique which can be easily used when making a decision is to quickly go around the group eliciting from each person what they think. This technique can serve to empower those individuals less assertive, and for the group enhance the diversity of ideas and possible solutions to problems. This technique may be used two or three times in formulating a decision, or as much as is needed.

If Consensus decision making is being used by the group, then it is vital that the views of all are made known while a decision is being formulated.

> As a relatively shy and quiet person, other members of a collective got infuriated when they reached a decision among themselves but found I disagreed and was blocking consensus. This wasted time and resulted in feelings of frustration by myself and anger by those present who were more articulate and assertive.
>
> The problem was a group responsibility, in not periodically checking with everybody through every stage of the decision making. It was also recognised that I needed to be more assertive in participating in discussion, and others needed to encourage my participation in all aspects of decision making.

Using a consultative technique makes the small group more efficient.

> My household has adopted as part of our consensus definition that any proposals put to the meeting must be checked for agreement by all members. That is, we must all indicate a clear yes or no before proceeding. This helps to avoids ambiguous decisions and the meeting making decisions by default.

MEETING ROLES AND PROCESS FUNCTIONS

Several formal roles or functions can be delegated to individuals for the efficient functioning of a meeting. These roles ideally should rotate among all members to share the skills and responsibility in the group. Sometimes these roles may be handled by the group as a whole rather than delegated to an individual. These formal roles may include: facilitator, minutes keeper, timekeeper, vibes watcher.

PROCESS FUNCTIONS

Facilitative functions which may be employed in a meeting are described in Resource Manual for a Living Revolution and in Building United Judgment. A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making. These functions

may be employed by the facilitator and other members of a group, and may be employed to different effect according to the abilities each person has. If your group has a timekeeper or vibes watcher, specific functions below will be performed by these roles.

- Guiding the Agenda
    - May include allocation of roles, assigning time to items, set priorities to be put to the meeting. Tracks the agenda through the meeting and advises the group accordingly.
- Keeping the discussion on Topic
    - Remind members of the topic on hand when the meeting wanders.
- Clarifying and Rephrasing
    - Clarify or rephrase when there is misunderstanding arising from a discussion.
- Equalising Participation
    - Create space by inviting silent members to speak . Use Round robins, brainstorms.
- Pacing
    - Moving the meeting along when it is dragging, slowing a heated meeting down, e.g. asking for a minutes silence.
- Reformulating
    - Reformulate by separating the areas of agreement and disagreement, then clarify the areas of disagreement.
- Identifying Interpersonal Communication Problems
    - Point out or ask members to paraphrase when communication appears to be a problem.
- Summarising
    - Providing the meeting with a concise description of the discussion/topic. Helps to pace a meeting.
- Aiding the Group's emotional climate
    - Being aware of emotions and calling the groups attention to destructive emotions. Maintaining a positive group atmosphere, eg suggesting a break, energising activity, or silence as appropriate.
- Identifying Individual Emotions as they arise
    - Identify and respond to individual emotions when they interfere with the group decision making process.
- Conflict Management
    - Identify the problem, then identify all possible solutions. Keep the focus on issues not people.
- Testing for Agreement
    - Put a proposal before the group to test whether everyone agrees.
- Soliciting Feedback
    - Get the group to comment on use of these meeting functions, whether use of a function is appropriate or not.
- Decision Identification and Implementation
    - Identify what decision is made, who is going to do it, what information they need to do it, when it will be done and How it will be reported back to the group.

FACILITATOR

The role of a facilitator is to ensure the meeting stays focused on the issues being discussed, and discussion runs smoothly. The facilitator may also mediate to resolve conflicts, provide summaries for long discussions, check for agreement, be aware of power imbalances, and encouraging the participation of all members in discussions.

The facilitator should be attentive to the group and should not involve themselves in the topic being discussed. If the facilitator has strong feelings on a subject, the facilitator should step out of their role temporarily or pass it onto someone else.

MINUTES KEEPER

The minutes keeper is delegated with writing an accurate record of the meeting - which may include only the decisions taken, major discussion points, or much of the discussion as well, depending upon the guidelines set by the group. Minutes give the meeting continuity from the past into the future. This role is particularly important for more permanent collective projects.

TIME KEEPER

Time Keeping enables the group to evaluate its progress through the meeting, and further ensures discussion is kept to the relevant point.

To give direction to the timekeeper the group should evaluate at the start of a meeting how much there is to be discussed or decided. Decide a finishing time, and then allocate times to each item, and prioritise the items. When an item uses its allocated time, the facilitator can ask the meeting whether it is worthwhile to extend time on the item or not.

VIBES WATCHER

Monitoring the emotions and energy of the group is sometimes called vibes watching. Often this role can be non-delegated and performed by the group as a whole. When there are strong emotions affecting the process of the group, monitoring the vibes entails bringing this fact to the attention of the group.

Several things might then be done by the group including: calling a short break in the meeting; perhaps playing a cooperative game or some other re- energising and trust building group activity; and/or a discussion of the emotions or tensions in the group and how they are affecting the process of the discussion or meeting. It can be useful to deal with emotions or tensions affecting the group process as they occur, thus clearing the air and allowing the remainder of the meeting to run more smoothly.

OTHER STRUCTURES

MEMBERSHIP DEFINITION AND JOINING PROCEDURE

Many groups have a clear membership definition. It is useful to know who is a member and who is not a member of your group at any particular time. Groups with an unclear membership definition are open to manipulation by other organisations.

During lengthy conflict or disputes in a collective, it is frustrating to try to resolve who is a member of the collective. Working out a membership definition ahead of time, can save time and eliminate a possible issue of contention.

As part of Membership, a joining procedure acts as a training period for individuals joining a group. The existence of a clear joining procedure provides a space for clarification by the prospective member and the group of expectations and needs. It is a learning period for the person joining, and an acclimatisation period for the members of the group. At the end of a joining period, the use of a clearness meeting may resolve any problems the new member or existing members may have, before the new member has their membership fully accepted.

Learning the work of a small group or collective does not stop once a new member is accepted, but is a continuous process.

Shelley Rogers - in a paper circulated around a Sydney refuge, titled 'Collectives, the tyranny of Hidden Structure' - outlines 4 stages or levels of involvement by members of a collective. These are:

1. New or trainee members who are learning basic collective skills and processes.
2. Relatively new members who have some knowledge of skills and process but are still learning to function on a collective level.
3. Members skilled in the routine work and process of the collective.
4. Members skilled in the routine work and process plus possess an understanding of the politics of the collective, as well as being creative, imaginative and initiating in the context of the collective project.

Shelley Rogers also points out that there is a vast disparity in skills and abilities which individuals bring to a group. These are often environmentally and socially determined by sexual identity, race, age, education, gender, or class background. These differences all need to be taken into account when a person joins a small group.

COMMITMENT LEVEL AND GROUP GOALS

Defining a commitment level for individuals joining a collective makes clear how much is expected in terms of time, money, and energy. Defining the goals and the purpose of the group is equally important in clarifying what new members are committing themselves to.

Not everyone will be interested in participating in the groups activity, or will have the commitment demanded by the group for sharing power and responsibility of the project. Although unable to participate in the group, for whatever reason, these people may fulfil an important role as part of the friendship networks and supportive community around the project. They can provide vital informal links to other collectives and affinity groups.

Some of the friends of the collective may participate in the collective's work based upon a specific negotiated agreement between the person and the collective. The danger in allowing a person to take on collective responsibilities without being a member, is that they may not have all the information available as a member, and they cannot be held fully accountable to the group.

To alleviate this danger, agreements should specify the exact responsibilities, and be for a set period of time, and be specific to an individual. Obviously, a member who has recently left the collective may have an agreement with the collective involving more responsibility, than someone who occasionally comes to social events and wants to help out.

> In two collectives I have been a member of, their has been negotiated agreements with non-members for their assistance with the project at hand. These arrangements have been effective for the project and for building trust and friendship between members and non-members.

DELEGATION OF TASKS

The delegation of specific responsibility to individuals within the group builds individual confidence in the exercise of power on behalf of the group. Although each individual may exercise power for their specific tasks, they are responsible to the group which should have ultimate control. The collective may decide to set guidelines on some tasks to focus an activity.

Individuals can be congratulated on tasks which have been undertaken successfully, or criticised for poor decision making or work. Criticism should try to stress possible improvements and more effective methods of undertaking the tasks. Criticism should also take into account an individual's ability and skill level. No one likes just being criticised, so try to always offer encouragement and positve advise whenever criticism is warranted.

Abusing an individual for a poor job when they have not got sufficient skill or ability to undertake a task, alienates that person and achieves nothing. Perhaps the person needed more training, or perhaps the expectation of the group for that task is set to high. Affirmation for tasks and responsibility undertaken can be very important in building a person's confidence and ability.

When all members are given a task, responsibility for the group project is shared. This serves to increase individual confidence, and commitment and trust between group members.

ROTATION OF TASKS

To further ensure that power, information and skills are shared, all tasks should be rotated among the group. Rotating tasks at first glance seems inefficient, as each member has to learn every task.

However, job rotation provides many advantages: such as the ability for one member to quickly take over another member's job in case of illness, injury or other emergency. Also, each individual has a better understanding of all the work and can make more informed decisions as part of the collective decision making process. Rotation of tasks can also relieve boredom, and gives everybody a chance to enjoy the interesting jobs.

Tasks which are held too long by one person come to be seen as that person's property, and a mystique about the task can be established preventing others from challenging or controlling this person's power. If a task is held for too short a period, the satisfaction of learning and doing a job properly will be lost. A suitable rotation period could vary according to what feels right for the individuals and the group.

> In the Jura Bookshop Collective, one person had spent a number of years doing the accounts and preparing the monthly budgets. This person effectively determined when new orders were to be placed. As no one else had recently been involved in any accounts or budget preparation, it was thought to be a difficult and involving job by most collective members. No one was prepared to ask that the job be rotated, seeing the job as belonging to a particular person. Although the collective had a policy of job rotation, in actual fact jobs usually only changed hands when a person left the collective, or a new person demanded a job (which was infrequent).

> Black Rose Bookshop Collective had a rotation period of nine months. This length of time was long enough to allow members to learn their jobs and be creative in their tasks. Some jobs, such as overseas ordering, required 3 months just to see the results of an order. Job rotation resulted in sharing the skills around more people. When a more charismatic and skilled member resigned at one point, their was a loss to the collective, but not in terms of the skills available to the group.

SOCIAL EVENTS

Having social events as a collective can be an important activity. Not all groups choose this: worker cooperatives may decide to have very few or no social events. But most collectives will choose to celebrate

socially at least a few important times: anniversaries of establishment, birthdays, events of importance to the members.

Regular social events build our feeling of trust and community with each other and the friendship networks we are each a part of. They also allow us to enjoy the fun side of working together and participating in each others lives.

Social events may be done entirely informally or might be structured slightly in various ways - as for example a regular social dinner, or celebrations at special times in the life of the group and the individuals. Sharing part of our social lives together can reinvigorate our energy for the group project.

> One collective I was a member of celebrated its anniversary of establishment in two parts: a private dinner for collective members and close friends; and a public dinner or barbecue open to anybody.

> My household chooses to celebrate the equinoxes and solstices with feasts, to which we invite our close friends. May Day and International Women's Day are also celebrated by my household by joining public picnics and demonstrations. Birthdays are celebrated both as household rituals, and sometimes with a party.

Enjoy the party. As the infamous feminist and anarchist, Emma Goldman, once said:

"If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution"

ROSTERS

Rosters are a method of delegating responsibility for basic tasks to individuals. They can be used to ensure routine work is divided equally and fairly among all. When a person is avoiding a particular task, or taking responsibility for too many tasks, the roster should show this and the group can discuss the reasons why this may be so, and work out a solution agreed to by all. Rosters are particularly useful for examining our socially conditioned roles, such as those roles based on gender, class or age.

> One collective I was in utilised a voluntary cleaning roster, in which members volunteered their names beside tasks. The cleaning mostly got done, but most of the work was done by the female members. In comparison, most of the ordering, inventory, and accounting tasks were done by the men in the collective. The issue of rosters later became a part of a conflict over organisational practice in this collective.

Obviously, a voluntary roster can be useful in ensuring the work gets done, but it can also indicate a bias, such as the gender role bias as exemplified above.

Rosters which all members participate in, can force members out of socially conditioned roles, and provide an opportunity to pick up new skills, and broaden our experience.

> I have seen a number of male friends broaden their cooking skills through a roster for preparing a weekly public dinner. Similarly, women have been empowered by the opportunity to do jobs entailing initiative and responsibility like budgeting, ordering, or group publicity.

EVALUATIONS AND CLEARNESS MEETINGS

Evaluating a meeting is an important learning process for the individuals and the group. It allows us to reflect on our meeting process and interactions. We can then formulate methods for refining our meetings and make them more efficient.

If meetings tend to run over time, the evaluation should pick this up and provide a space for formulating a structure to keep more accurate timekeeping for following meetings. Similarly, the evaluation should also look at the roles of facilitating, minute keeping and vibes watching to refine these tasks.

Sometimes it is helpful for groups to have a general evaluation of aims, goals, processes and directions. These meetings are sometimes termed Clearness Meetings as they can assist in clearing problems and seeing clearly into the future.

The Jura bookshop collective I was a member of held half yearly direction meetings, which most collective members attended plus many friends of the collective, to help sort out major problems and future directions. The Anarres Book collective aims to have a clearness meeting every 6 months. From the Anarres Collective Policies:

> Clearness meetings are self-contained structures, usually focusing on a particular theme or issue. It provides a firm boundary (start/end point) for a process or change of circumstance. A clearness meeting provides:
>
> - a free space for reflection and evaluation.
> - a focus on a particular issue or theme.
> - an exchange of mutual expectations.
> - a chance to give and receive feedback.
> - an opportunity for clarity of thought, reason and emotion.
> - an atmosphere conducive for making consensus decisions.
>
> The structure of a clearness meeting is particularly suited to collective evaluations, and people joining or leaving the collective. The structure may also be used to resolve conflict over important issues. In these situations, a clearness meeting can provide valuable time and space for resolving the conflict by addressing the fundamental problems in a non judgemental atmosphere.
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> The sample agenda for an Anarres Books clearness meeting is:
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> 1. Brainstorm -
>   o list achievements.
>   o list failures.
> 2. Discussion and clarification of points raised in brainstorm.
>   o Classification of points into subject areas.
>   o Evaluation of issues raised by the brainstorm.
> 3. Group Building Activity
>   o e.g. game, inventory of stock, prepare a book order.
>   o For relief of tension, and to provide a positive group activity focus.
> 4. Where to from here.
>   Evaluate what tasks/processes can be improved or need to be done. Analysis of the collective situation and possible future directions.
> 5. Evaluation of clearness.

CONFLICT AND PROBLEMS

DEALING WITH CONFLICT

Conflict is bound to occur in a group of people and particularly during the decision making process. Conflict is natural and may be approached as a constructive or destructive process. Similarly, the actions the small group decides to take may bring it into conflict with the local community, or a company or other organisation in wider society. The individuals and the group help to determine whether this conflict will be a positive learning process, or destructive and polarising for the group and the protagonists.

Conflicts can occur around issues, personalities, or values. For example, Ian may object to the way I write up a sale in the day book, which would be issue oriented. This conflict may be fairly easy to resolve by formulating some simple agreements. If, however, Ian has trouble working with me, and he dislikes the way I write up sales, then there could be a personality conflict. Personality conflicts can cause more issue and value conflicts.

Working on developing a personal relationship may help to resolve issue and value conflicts between us. Value conflicts are more difficult to resolve.

> An example would be where I object to Ian's demand for a high level of accuracy in recording sales details, which I think is obsessive behaviour based on capitalist values of materialism and consumerism, rather than stressing the importance of communication and relating to customers outside of the commercial transaction.

Resolving differences in values entails much deeper enquires into how each of our value systems are created. In some value centred conflicts we may have to agree to disagree, and work out procedures and ways of working around the different values.

When there is a conflict, the use of "I Messages" can give valuable feedback of feelings, and can make criticism seem easier to hear. "I Messages" are when the person making the criticism, owns their feelings.

> For example, "When you write up a sale untidily, I feel frustrated and angry because I have to decipher your sales for updating the stock inventory." This form of criticism explains the unacceptable behaviour (writing up sales untidily) , the feeling/s of the person criticising (frustration and anger, in this case), and the consequences of the offending behaviour (adding difficulty to performing a job, stock inventory).

Guidelines for responding to conflict and problem solving are outlined excellently in Building United Judgment. A Handbook for Consensus Decision Making. Briefly, these guidelines state:

1. Accept that conflict is natural.
2. Bring hidden conflicts out in the open.
3. Disagree with ideas, not people.
4. Define issues or problems as shared by the group or community.
5. Try to identify and focus on the central issues.
6. Attempt to not polarise conflicting positions.
7. Allow enough time to adequately explore the problem and all potential solutions.

8. Try not to take sides quickly, if your not directly involved in a conflict.
9. Be aware of feelings, opinions and emotions during a conflict, particularly if their your own.
10. Be prepared to ask for a little quiet time for thinking and reflection.
11. If normal meeting time and structure is insufficient for working through the conflict, consider setting up a special time and structured process to deal with the conflict.

Thomas Gordon, author of Parent Effectiveness Training, referred to a six step process of resolving conflicts:

- 1. Identify and define the conflict or problem.
- 2. Brainstorm all the possible solutions.
- 3. Eliminate Unacceptable solutions.
- 4. Find the best acceptable solution, given the time and resources available.
- 5. Plan to Put the Solution into Action.
- 6. Follow up and Evaluation.

Not all problems or conflicts need to be resolved immediately. Assess if a quick resolution is needed, if not, the problem can be discussed and worked through over several meetings. Or perhaps a temporary solution can be implemented while a more permanent solution is being discussed.

DEALING WITH EMOTIONS

As with conflict, emotions need to be accepted as a natural part of ourselves and our interactions with others. By acknowledging our emotions and feelings in the way we work, and interact, we help to make ourselves whole as individuals. Communicating our feelings can help reduce tensions in group situations and build group trust.

Within group meetings it is important that both a special space be set aside for expression of feelings, and that strong feelings be dealt with during the course of a meeting. It is important that members "own" their feelings rather than blame the group or another individual for the way they are feeling. "I Messages" are particularly useful in this regard.

Special spaces for expression of feelings may include a ritual sharing at the start of a meeting in which each person can express their feelings, emotions and energy level they bring to a meeting. This can act to forewarn others if one person has had a lousy day, or invigorate the group if one person is bubbling with energy and excitement. The completion of the meeting is also an appropriate time to express feelings about the meeting process and interactions.

> A bookstall collective I am involved with does not have any formal structures for sharing emotions or feelings as part of the meeting. However, we have stipulated that we will arrive for meetings 15 minutes before the set time for starting to allow for social interaction, expression of feelings, and swapping the latest news in our lives. At the end of the meeting, we go out and eat dinner together, which allows us time to unwind, discuss directions, strategies, processes and ideas more informally.

> My present communal household starts our weekly meeting with a "Gripes and Good Things" session. Each of us in turn explains to the group those actions, events or emotions which are bugging them and those which are positive and uplifting. This allows the group to understand where each of us is coming from emotionally during the meeting, so we can make suitable allowances in the structure of our meeting and in interactions.

During meetings, understanding feelings and emotions expressed can help make problems clearer, and help in the resolution of conflicts.

At the close of the meeting, it is useful to end on a positive note.

> The Black Rose Bookshop Collective used two techniques. The first was an affirmation exercise in which each member affirmed one other member, changing every meeting. The second involved a brief statement by every member of something they were looking forward to in the near future. My present household, on the other hand, does not invoke any formal structure for closing our meetings on a positive note. On occasions of difficult or long meetings we have sometimes had a group hug to close the meeting.

GENDER DYNAMICS

OLD BAGGAGE FROM THE PAST

We live in a society where male values and culture are dominant and have been dominant for at least the last 2000 years. It is a patriarchal society that oppresses women in many different ways. Even our languages are patricentric. Growing up in western society we have absorbed unconsciously much of the dominant patriarchal values.

So it is not surprising that we bring many patriarchal and anti social values and gender stereotypes into our day to day lives and relationships. Although gender dynamics are discussed here, the problems may also be applied to other causes of power imbalance, such as age or class background.

In the mixed collectives I have experience in, and in several other small groups I know about, gender dynamics is an important issue, even if it is unacknowledged within the group. Within groups where it is considered irrelevant and not discussed, the following results:

- alienation of the women members
- the women members leave, or
- the women remain subservient to the men in the group.

It is possible to let go of old baggage we bring with us into our relationships. Although it may take much effort and practice to do so. Some common problems and possible solutions of gender dynamics are discussed below.

WHO SPEAKS...

Commonly in mixed gender groups, the male members will speak more often and longer than women. Why does this happen? because of old baggage, a patricentric language, and gender roles. If this is a consistent pattern it indicates a gender problem, and thus a power problem within the group.

> At a recent meeting where members from several disparate groups attended, although women made up half the meeting, most group reports were delivered by men, and much of the discussion was dominated by men. After the meeting, in a small group discussing the gender dynamics, one woman pointed out the difference in the level of confidence of men and women speaking about their group. Men spoke far more confidently and assertively, despite in at least one instance, of the man being a much newer member of his group.

An easy way to find out who is speaking the most in your group, is for one member to keep a rough count in a meeting of who speaks, and how often they speak. This will give an indication about who speaks the most and who speaks the least. If a speaking count is done consciously by a decision of the meeting, this may encourage a more even pattern of speakers.

When it is indicated that there is a large disparity in who is speaking, the facilitator could ask that those who had not spoken, or spoken least, to contribute to the discussion. Or the facilitator may initiate a 'Round Robin' on an issue, in which every person would have a chance to say what they thought without fear of interruption. Round Robins can encourage those with less confidence or articulateness to contribute to the discussion at hand.

> The Black Rose Collective used Round Robins during discussions to ensure all contributed to the decisions. This was highly important as it served to involve those members who were reticent about contributing to discussions. In situations where two people were in conflict over an issue, a Round Robin, served to broaden the debate and turn a conflict between two people into a group conflict of ideas, which then became more readily resolvable.

An exercise for looking at the speaking pattern in a small group is to use a ball of wool as a 'microphone'. When a person wants to speak, they need to attract the attention of the person already speaking who holds the 'microphone'. When the speaker is finished, the 'microphone' is passed to the next speaker, and the wool is unravelled. At the end of a discussion the wool strand will form a spider web pattern between those who have spoken, with the pattern indicating how often each has spoken, and who their interactions were with during the discussion.

...AND WHO IS LISTENED TO

Communication is a two way process: speaking and listening. Just because there is a general equality in who is speaking, does not necessarily mean the decision will reflect that balance. In many instances woman raise issues or problems for discussion and are ignored, or are not taken proper account of by the meeting.

> In a household collective meeting, a woman member made a suggestion to the meeting, which was ignored by the rest of the male members. A little later one of the male members made a similar suggestion which was discussed and adopted by our meeting. In this instance this dynamic was raised for the collective to discuss and reflect upon, but all too often this particular process goes uncommented upon in meetings.

Listening to others is an important part of the communication process. While male members, as part of a masculine gender role, will tend to speak more, female members, as part of a feminine gender role, will tend to listen more actively. In a small group trying to share power equally between members it is important to challenge the speaking/listening gender roles - to empower all members in active listening and speaking.

> An exercise which may assist active listening and speaking is to divide into groups of two people. The first person speaks for a time, say 3 minutes, on a topic. The second person then summarises the first person. Then both people evaluate the speaking and listening roles. Roles are then reversed.

When a group has a high level of awareness and respect, discussions will tend to stay focussed on the person talking, with a minimum of interruption. Each person will be listened to carefully by all members.

GENDER ROLES IN MEETING PROCESS

As part of a female gender role, women are expected to be nurturing and supportive. To maintain the house, maintain the friendship networks, to nurse and give comfort when needed. On the other hand, a male gender role expects men to be initiating, assertive, task orientated.

Within the context of a meeting these gender roles can translate into the men being focussed on task issues, "on getting the job done", rather than how it is done. Women often take on a more invisible, but no less important, role of maintaining the process and cohesion of the group - of making sure all are involved in the decision.

> Within a group with approximately equal numbers of men and women, the women complained about doing too much group maintenance. As the men did not appear to listen to their complaints, the women decided to stop doing any maintenance functions, including informal facilitation, in the groups' meetings. The meetings soon became frustrating for the men, and decisions took far longer to decide and implement.

This example shows how important the informal process functions undertaken by the women were for maintaining good decision making and group cohesion. Often it is informal facilitation by women which resolves problems of the group. Facilitation and group maintenance functions should be shared by all in the group.

It is important in a meeting to share the process functions and the task functions.

SEXUAL DYNAMICS

In any group in which people work together, building trust and feelings for one another, there is a tendency for people to become involved sexually. Sexual relationships within a group can affect the degree of sharing of information and power within the group. Too often sexual feelings and relationships within a group give rise to hidden agendas, never properly acknowledged by the group. This can lead to conflicts which are unsolvable on a superficial level, and may result in members leaving, or even to the break up of the group.

Starhawk, in her book Dreaming the Dark : Magic, Sex and Politics, concludes from her experience in small groups "three laws of small groups". These are:

1. In any small group in which people are involved sexually, sooner or later there will be grave conflicts.
2. In any small group in which people are involved, sooner or later they will be involved sexually, even if only in fantasy.
3. Small groups tend to break up.

These laws demonstrate a perception and honesty not often encountered when talking about small groups. It is important to be aware that our sexuality can affect the dynamics of working collectively. Once this is realised, a choice can be made by the group on how to take into account the sexual dynamics of power. Some of the choices available to a group may include:

1. The group decides to ignore the sexual dynamics in the group altogether (Definitely a head in the sand approach - but one often taken)
2. There is a group agreement to raise for discussion sexual dynamics and relationships when it is seen as part of a problem or conflict within the group. (a commonsense approach, particularly when there are already sexual relationships within the group)

3. There is a group agreement not to engage in sexual relationships within the group. (the banishment approach - sex is banished and if a relationship starts, one of the people is banished from the group)
4. There is a group agreement that each member explores a relationship with all other members. (A challenging approach - especially if you include exploring homosexual and heterosexual feelings and responses)

> The Black Rose Collective spent its initial years with sexual tensions and relationships affecting the dynamics of working together. These dynamics were never adequately discussed, and they remained an underlying issue while there was a sexual relationship in the collective. After a number of resignations and new people joining, there was a situation in which no one in the collective was sleeping with anybody else. At this time a frank discussion of the sexual dynamics and past practices in the collective occurred and it was decided that collective members would not have a sexual relationship with another member.

Some groups may choose to ignore the issue of sexual tensions altogether and never have a problem, while others may self destruct at the first conflict arising from sexual relationships within the group. All of these choices have their own problems and raise questions about how we express our sexuality within our culture. But the foremost problem is overcoming the fear of discussing honestly something as personal as sexuality and how it affects the way we work and live together.

OVER COMMITMENT

One problem to be aware of is over commitment. Collectives and small groups can demand much time, energy and resources. Before joining such a group, find out how much commitment is demanded, and the amount of time and energy you have available to spare.

If you over extend yourself, you damage your own performance and relationships and you also let down those groups you are a member of by spreading yourself too thinly. Trying to do too much will often produce poor results and individual burnout. Try to set a sustainable level of activity, and focus on projects which can be done within that level of activity.

> Too often have I seen friends make commitments to several tasks or projects, only to find they end up rushing around trying to do things at the last minute, or apologising at meetings for not completing assigned tasks, or doing work shoddily or with errors.

Commitment to a project or task is a responsibility to other people. Fulfilling your commitments to the best of your ability demonstrates how much you care about the other people in the group.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to give a general outline of the reasons for choosing to work in small groups, some suggested structures for small groups, and some of the dynamics and problems involved. This discussion is by no means exhaustive.

There are infinite ways to work together in a small group. The most important point, is that the structure of the small group meets the needs of the individuals involved, and is chosen democratically by those involved. It may sound like a lot of hard work, but much of it is fun and can be very rewarding.

Collectives offer us a model of decentralised, directly democratic, organisation. Traditional protest movements and political parties are mass organisations which perpetrate the inherent problems of society in the form of hierarchy and domination.

We need to organise ourselves as an anti-mass movement of collectives setting our own agenda, one of direct democracy and decentralisation. The means should be as important to us as the ends we seek. Working in collectives can enrich our everyday lives while providing a glimpse of a new world in the shell of the old.

At its best the collective movement can respond to the deep longings people feel for a better society. Collectives can demonstrate a long-term way of building a society based on the needs of the majority of the people. We can integrate those visions for a better society into our daily lives.

A movement for fundamental change in this country will only succeed if it offers a model of what we are working for, and a consistent way of working for it. This is the contribution of collectives. Closing paragraphs from No Bosses Here! A manual on Working collectively and Cooperatively

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APPENDIX: ON POWER, HIERARCHY AND DOMINATION

When power becomes institutionalised in a hierarchy, individuals do not wield power for themselves but as part of an institution which controls them. This power is based on the objectification and separation of the person wielding power from the object or person being manipulated. It is the power of domination. Domination encourages the formation of hierarchies in all forms of life and culture because it makes the exercise of control easier. Thus we see stratification based upon class, gender, sexual identification, race and age lines.

With the establishment of the nation state and the religious state, we find the excesses of hierarchy: domination and exploitation, brutality and poverty, and increasingly more centralised control of resources and decision making. The epitome of this form of organisation are the states established using fascist, national socialist, communist, or militarist ideologies, or Catholicism during the Inquisition and the witch hunts.

The western democratic tradition of representative democracy is little better. The concepts of hierarchy and domination still pervades this system. The difference is that once every three, four or six years we get to collectively change the people who make the rules. In more ruthless nations, coercion is used to control people, while in our western democracies we are privileged to have our thoughts and desires manipulated by mass media to ensure our submission to hierarchy and capitalism. As the saying goes: No matter who you vote for a politician always gets in.

Hierarchy and domination now pervades our thinking and our culture to a remarkable extent. As the intrinsic goal of economic competition is monopoly, so the goal of hierarchy and institutionalised power is to grow and extend its domination and control over all areas of human society and culture.

You can see the effects of domination in how our western society relates to nature as a resource to be owned, raped and plundered. Similarly, women in western society have been treated as a reproductive resource to be owned, used and disposed of by men. The first and second waves of feminism have done much to reduce patriarchal domination, but domination per se cannot be eliminated without the eradication of all hierarchies. The structural form domination and hierarchy imposes on human society is centralised control, mass organisation, patriarchy, and relationships of domination and submission.

A more ancient and radical view of power asserts that everything has an intrinsic or inherent power and value. This is the power an individual wields and holds by virtue of being alive. Instead of power being a relationship based on separation from 'the other', power is seen as a relationship of connectedness and identification. All things have power through their relationships.

The structural form of this power in human society is diversity and small scale community organisation. Attributes include a respect for those with the greatest experience and wisdom, a closeness to nature, and direct democratic forms of decision making. Tribal societies which have retained much of their culture and traditions often demonstrate this form of power.

This tradition and definition of power can be found in several streams of thought including: anarchism, radical feminism, communalism, radical ecology, and a spiritualism deriving from humans as part of nature. It also exists in many oppositional movements and cultures. In fact, modern society could not function without a high level of cooperation.

If you have ever been in an industrial dispute in which the workers decide to 'work to rule', you realise the importance of cooperative skills and initiative in ensuring hierarchical organisations function normally. When that cooperation is withdrawn, hierarchy cannot functioning efficiently.

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    > A substantial reference manual for working in social change groups. The 'Monster Manual' used to train the trainers for the Franklin River Blockade in 1983!

  - Building United Judgement a handbook for Consensus Decision Making, Centre for Conflict Resolution
    > This book is one of the best handbooksfor people working in small groups using Consensus decision making. Easy to read and very comprehensive.

  - No Bosses Here: A manual on working collectively, Karen Brandow, Jim McDonnell, and Vocations for Social Change, Alyson Publications.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Englart has been a member of collectively run bookshops since 1975, including being a founding member of the Jura Books Collective in Sydney in 1977, and the Black Rose Anarchist Bookshop Collective in 1982. In 1992 John was a co-founder with two other people of the Anarres Books Collective, an anarchist mail order and bookstall collective presently active in Melbourne.

As well as the anarchist movement, John has participated in the movement against uranium mining, and has had some activist involvement with Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace.

As a dedicated cyclist, John has participated and organised several bike rides, including Rides against Uranium from Sydney to Canberra, and Broken Hill to Roxby Downs. John continues to ride his bicycle, commuting to work each day.

Currently John is living in a community called Bread and Roses located in an inner city suburb of Melbourne. The community is purchasing the house based upon a collective ownership agreement, and a form of income sharing.

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