

Collective power is key to social change. We may belong to a small, local campaign or community group, or a larger national or faith-based movement. And the activities campaigning groups do are different. Our group may take direct action risking arrest to highlight the injustice our campaign address, or we may do advocacy and reform work facilitating and implementing social change using legal channels like petitions or legislative approaches. Other groups may focus on building alternative and new social structures and institutions. The important thing is that we take action with others, including connecting and respecting the work of those who address different aspects of the issue.

One way activists work together to maximise their contribution and efforts is to organise into affinity groups. Broadly speaking an affinity group is a small group of people (usually no more than 15) who have an appreciation of each other. They trust each other and share a vision and approach to the sort of activism they do. They also know each other's strengths and weaknesses and support each other as they participate (or intend to participate) in a nonviolent campaign together. An activist choir, a group collecting signatures for a petition, direct action activists risking arrest, or a collective providing a special service at a mass mobilisation like legal observing, first aiders, or the cooking team may consider themselves an affinity group. Affinity groups may come together for just one action, or take action together for many years.

Structure

Some affinity groups challenge the prevailing social model of dominance and undue obedience to authority by working in anti-hierarchical ways, meaning they are non-hierarchical, acknowledging informal hierarchies – both helpful and unhealthy ones or a combination – in the group and work these in ways that will maximise the group's influence, effectiveness and skills. This may mean sharing knowledge and skills so that more people are able to take on group roles. It may be noticing when one person seems to be holding influence over the group for no reason other than personal rank and power to the detriment of the collective good. Another reason some campaign groups and social movements strive to be non-hierarchical and seemingly 'leaderless' is protection for people in campaigning groups and the movement, otherwise, the authorities may simply target the 'leaders' hoping to destabilise and disempower the movement.

Other affinity groups may have a hierarchy to provide management of the group's long-term interests, or if the group is large enough to require the delegation of responsibilities to other members or staff. Hierarchy may be a useful part of the culture that the group uses to move them towards their campaign goal, as in the case of cultures with a practice of turning to leaders who use their influence for the greater good. These are leaders trusted and respected by groups and the movement because of their integrity. The key to all of these models, however, is trust in the group, the level of participation among group members and the resulting effectiveness of the group.

Finding an affinity group

How do you find an affinity group that is right for you? The simple answer is you look for people you know and who have similar opinions about the issue(s) in question and the methods of action to be used. They could be people you meet at an educational seminar or nonviolence training, work with, socialise with, or live with. The point to stress however, is that you have something in common other than the issue that is bringing you all together, and that you trust them and they trust you. An important aspect of being part of an affinity group is to learn each others' viewpoints and be willing to make the time and effort to understand each other – you don't have to agree, just accept and allow another point of view to coincide next to your own. Being part of an affinity group may mean setting aside your own personal preference to accept actions, ideas, proposals that are acceptable for the collective.

Effective affinity groups develop a shared idea of what is wanted individually and collectively from the

action/campaign, how it will conceivably go, what support you will need from others, and what you can offer others. It helps if you have agreement on certain basic things: how active, how spiritual, how nonviolent, how deep a relationship, how willing to risk arrest, when you might want to stop an action, your overall political perspective, your action methods, and so on.

In the Global North one use of an affinity group is taking nonviolent direct action to highlight or protest an unjust situation. The sit-ins and occupations of segregated business led by African-Americans during the US civil rights movement aimed to raise to the surface the injustice of that practice, which was invisible or ignored by the white mainstream. Or the purpose may be to slow or stop injustice, like blocking the building of a weapons factory or disarming weaponry through disrupting or stopping its usual operation.

An affinity group planning to take nonviolent direct action will want to carefully plan the action, decide the roles required and with some thought, people choose what they are capable to do. Support roles are vital to the success of an action, and to the safety of the participants. Each action is going to be different and will require different roles, but common roles are things like media contact, legal observer, first aider, people willing to be arrested and support people to look after the well-being of those risking arrest. People risking arrest may be using their body as a tool in the action (locked on to something or in a position which limits their mobility such as sitting down in the road). It is important that these people have support people to ensure they have food, water, and protection from the elements, and to monitor the authorities' response. Sometimes people can take on more than one role, for example. a legal observer might also be a first-aider, or police liaison, or media contact, but be careful about one person taking on too many key responsibilities. The key is to make sure that all necessary roles are covered, that everyone understands the extent of their commitment before the action begins, and no one takes on roles they are unable to carry out (See the list of [roles before, during, and after an action](#)).

There are more types of affinity groups in the world than this handbook can reference, and nonviolent direct action also takes many more forms than can be described here. Consider the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo: these women met while searching for their children disappeared during the Argentine military dictatorship between 1975 and 1983. They first began to meet in order to share information and support each other, and then later began gathering in front of the presidential palace in public defiance of state terrorism intended to silence all opposition. Or it may take the form of people working across boundaries like class, race, gender or nationality to stand in solidarity with others, as was the case with the group Black Sash in Apartheid-era South Africa. Between 1955 and 1994, the Black Sash provided widespread and visible proof of white resistance towards the apartheid system. Its members worked as volunteer advocates to families affected by apartheid laws; held regular street demonstrations; spoke at political meetings; brought cases of injustice to the attention of their Members of Parliament, and kept vigils outside Parliament and government offices. Many members were vilified within their local white communities, and it was not unusual for women wearing the black sash to be physically attacked by supporters of apartheid.

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