This is a rewrite of several pieces: Roles in an action, Group Process, Affinity Groups, and Decision Making. The original pieces can still be accessed.

This chapter covers several aspects on working in groups. It introduces the concept of affinity groups, looks at our group process, describes the theory and process of consensus decision making, and finally looks at different roles in an action.

Introduction
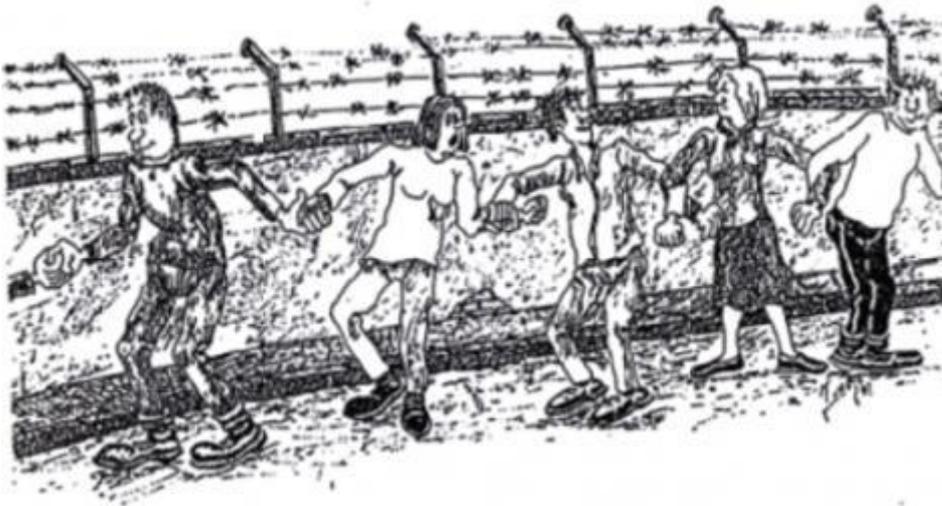
A challenge for any nonviolent movement is how to prepare its actions. Since the 1976 occupation of the Seabrook nuclear power site, in New Hampshire, USA, a number of Western nonviolent campaigns have favoured using an affinity group model of action coupled with consensus decision-making. This section offers an introduction to that style.

Affinity Groups

"Affinity groups" are autonomous groups of 5-15 persons. An affinity group in this sense is a group of people who not only have an affinity for each other, but who know each other's strengths and weaknesses and support each other as they participate (or intend to participate) in a nonviolent campaign together. Affinity groups and spokescouncils (see description below) challenge top-down power-over decision-making and organizing, and empower those involved to take creative direct action. They allow people to act together in a decentralized and non-hierarchical way by giving decision-making power to the affinity group. (Reference Seabrook-Wyhl-Marckolsheim story on page...) Affinity groups have been used constructively in mass anti-globalization actions in the USA (Seattle 1997), anti-nuclear protests in Europe and North America (beginning in the 1970s), and other large and small nonviolent protest actions in many countries.

With whom does one create an affinity group?

The simple answer to this is: 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, work with, socialize 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 standpoints regarding the campaign or issue and your preferred methods of action.

This can involve sharing time together, discussing the issues and methods of action, or doing some form of activist related training together (like attending a workshop), working out how to deal with the opponent's or the police's tactics (eg. counter demonstrations, misinformation campaigns, agents provocateurs, etc.). You should develop a shared idea of what you want 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 bail-out of the action, your overall political perspective, your action methods, etc.

Group process

Working in groups, whether in our own families, at workshops, or in continuing organisations, is one of the most basic social activities and is a large part of work for social change. Therefore, it is important that groups working for change develop effective, satisfying, democratic methods of doing necessary tasks, both for their own use and to share with others.

The elimination of authoritarian and hierarchical structures a form of democratising groups, but does not mean rejecting all structures. A good group needs to facilitate creativity, community and effectiveness, in a combination that encourages the nonviolence to flourish in our selves and our society. Good group functioning is a product of cooperative structures and the intelligent, responsible participation of the groups members.

Agreements/ground rules

Even if it's an informal group and everyone is relaxed, a group agreement about ground rules is wise. A group contract or a set of rules for the workshop or group, which everyone agrees to, is a very useful guide for the process of a group. It can be referred to if difficulties should arise within the group. And it can, of course, be adapted or changed. The group decides what to include. For example a group might agree: to start meetings on time, to encourage equal participation, to make decisions with consensus, to take turns facilitating group work, only one person speaking at a time, speaking for yourself only, confidentiality, no question is barred or too stupid, no put downs, only volunteer yourself, etc. Many people are now familiar with this so the facilitator might draw up a suggested list that can be adapted by the group. It is important to have active agreement from everyone in the group in order to make a "contract" with each other.

One issue which might require clarification is the meaning of 'confidentiality' for this group. Does it mean not sharing anything from the workshop or does it mean that broad themes can be shared and what was done but no quotes are given or attributed directly to anyone, or only not repeating personal stories of group members. The longer the workshop or the more intense or personal the issue, the less experienced people are in group work, or the more sensitive the topic, the more time you may need to spend on clarifying and agreeing to ground rules. Do remember, if the group's situation changes they may review the "contract" and if they so decide change the "rules". This is an important difference between rules that are imposed upon a group and rules that a group contracts to follow of their own free will.

Facilitation of group meetings

Affinity groups often decide to have facilitators to help the group meet its needs, members of the group taking turns to play this role. A facilitator accepts responsibility to help the group accomplish a common task, for example: to move through the agenda in the time available and to make necessary decisions and plans for implementation. A facilitator makes no decisions for the group, but suggests ways that will help the group to move forward. He or she works in such a way that the people present at the meeting are aware that they are in charge, that it is their business that is being conducted, and that each person has a role to play.

It is important to emphasize that the responsibility of the facilitator is to the group and its work rather than to the individuals within the group. Furthermore, a person with a high stake in the issues discussed will have a more difficult task functioning as a good facilitator. For more detailed information about group facilitation see "Meeting Facilitation – The No-Magic Method" by Berit Lakey (
http://www.reclaiming.org/resources/consensus/blakey.html)

Special roles in a group meeting

(adapted from "Tri-denting It Handbook" 3rd edition)

Taking turns at the various roles helps individuals experience different facets of the group's behaviour and strengthens the affinity group. Besides the meeting facilitator, who helps the group through its agenda, there are other roles that support the work of the group. These special roles become very useful if the group is larger or if it wants to pay special attention to improving the group process on specific issues.

- A co-facilitator to aid the facilitator.

- A note-taker who records your decisions and makes sure everyone has a copy so you all know what decisions you have taken!

- A time-keeper to help keep the group informed about how well they are following their time plan so that they can complete their agenda.

Other roles may be useful at times, especially if the group has recurring problems. For instance, a "process watcher" might observe patterns of participation in meetings and have suggestions to improve the dynamics, or to raise issues about oppressive behaviour in the group, power games or issues of discrimination (race, gender, class, age). A "vibes" watcher might pay special attention to emotional undercurrents, non-verbacl communication (including conflict behaviour) or simply energy levels in the group - making suggestions about to improve the group atmosphere before something becomes a problem.

Roles in an affinity group during an action

During a nonviolent action, an affinity group decides which roles the action requires and people choose what they will do. Support roles are vital to the success of an action, and to the safety of the participants. The roles listed here are common but shouldn't be regarded as a blueprint for all actions. Different actions will need different roles. As a group, you should think about tasks you'll need doing and how to ensure they're done early in the planning stage. Sometimes people can take on more than one role, e.g. a legal observer might also be a first-aider, or police liaison, or even media contact. The key is to make sure that all necessary roles are covered, that everyone understands the extent of their commitment before you begin, and no one takes on tasks (support or otherwise) which they are unable to carry out. (Source: http://www.scotland4peace.org/Peace%20Education/Handout%20Six%20-%20Roles,%20Safety%20and%20Afinity%20Groups.pdf

Exercises

- Signs of Mature Group Process: *A check list of an ideal model for voluntary, political and community groups.*

- Task and Maintenance: What makes groups work?: *This tool is a quick, easy tool that is effective at helping groups understand the different roles in making groups work: different leadership skills. It requires facilitators to have the theory of task/maintenance internalized fairly well (since they will have to rapidly identify which comments from people belongs where).*

- Facilitating meetings: *This briefing has tips and advice on facilitating meetings and making them worthwhile.*

Decision making

Decision2

Within nonviolent movements, and especially during nonviolent (direct) actions, the question of decision making requires special attention. Nonviolence is more than the absence of violence, and closely linked to issues of power, to the methods of decision making. To avoid new forms of dominance within a group, its discussion and decision-making processes needs to be participatory and empowering. Consensus decision-making aims to encourage all to participate and express their opinions, trying to find support for decisions in the group by involving all of its members. It is likely that group members will give much stronger support to a decision made with the consensus process. Consensus can be used in many different group situations, and is especially useful when a group is preparing to carry out nonviolent actions with each other. Some groups adopt a system where first they try to reach consensus, but if they cannot within a reasonable time limit, then they will vote. However, this is not usually necessary in small affinity groups.

Participating in actions at the Women's Peace Camp in Greenham Common in England in the 1980s, the US feminist writer and nonviolence trainer, Starhawk, found herself in culture shock. "In contrast to our (US) West coast style of consensus, involving facilitators, agendas, plans, and formal processes, their meetings seemed to have no structure at all ... I found a delicious sense of freedom and an electricity in discussions unhampered by formalities. The consensus process I had known and practised seemed, in retrospect, overly controlled and controlling. ... At the same time, the Greenham-style process also has drawbacks. The group's preference for action rather than talk produces an inherent bias toward more extreme and militant actions. With no facilitation, louder and more vocal women tend to dominate discussions. Women who have fears, concerns or alternative plans often felt unheard. Each group needs to develop a decision-making process that fits its unique circumstances. The balance between planning and spontaneity, between formal processes and informal free-for alls, is always alive, dynamic, and changing. No one way will work for every group". Starhawk, Truth or Dare : Encounters with Power, Authority and Mystery (Harper Collins 1987)

What follows is mainly concerned with consensus decision making, but it is as well to heed Starhawk's warnings about when not to use consensus: a) When there is no group mind (When members don't value the group's bonding over their individual desires, consensus becomes an exercise in frustration") b) When there are no good choices ("if the group has to choose between being shot and hung") c) When they can see the whites of your eyes ("appointing a temporary leader might be wisest") d) When the issue is trivial ("flip a coin") e) When the group has insufficient information

Consensus decision-making is a process

Consensus is a process for group decision-making by which an entire group of people can come to a common agreement. It is based upon listening and respect, and participation by everyone. The goal is to find a decision that is consented to by all of the group's members. For consensus everyone in the group is willing to support the final decision. Be clear, however, that full consent does not necessarily mean that everyone must be completely satisfied with the final outcome: in fact total satisfaction or unanimous agreement is rather rare.

Majority decision can lead to a power struggle between different factions within a group who compete rather than respect each other's opinions. They use their brilliance to undermine each other. The consensus process taps into the creativity, insights, experience, and perspectives of the whole group. The differences between people stimulate deeper inquiry and greater wisdom.

So how does cooperative decision-making work? The opinions, ideas and reservations of all participants are listened to and discussed. Differing opinions are brought out and noted. No ideas are lost, each member's input is valued as part of the solution. This open and respectful discussion is vital in enabling the group to reach a decision on the basis of which - in nonviolent action - people will put themselves and their bodies "on the line".

Consensus can be an exciting process because the members of the group are actively looking for ways to create a common agreement. It can also often be difficult, because we all need to overcome the attitude that "my idea is the best solution". Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve better solutions, but also to promote the growth of community and trust within the group. Consensus is an ongoing process and not simply a different method of voting.

Positions within a consensus

Since the goal is not a unanimous decision, there must be a place within the consensus for members of the group who do not totally embrace a proposal. Participants in a decision-making process are more willing to support an idea with which they might have some reservations or objections if the group actively accepts and

hears their concerns. If a person is given only the choice of support, non-support or standing aside, it leaves much less room for being part of the consensus.

Within a group consensus one might find any of the following 5 positions:

- This is a great idea and I support it completely. (Full agreement)

- I have some reservations, but will support it. (Support)

- I have serious reservations, but can accept it. (Acceptance)

- I have objections, but I can live with this. (Tolerance)

- I cannot do this, but will not stop the group from doing this. (Standing aside)

Of course, if there is a large number of persons who do not support or accept the decision, or who stand aside, then it is a weak consensus, and will probably end up with weak results.

In any case, the group should encourage people to express their reservations and objections, and should try to address these opinions - perhaps by modifying the proposal, perhaps by offering reassurance on certain points. At the same time, individuals who do not totally agree with the item under discussion should examine their opinion to see if they could either support, accept, or tolerate the proposed decision or if they might perhaps even stand aside.

It is possible for individual group members to have strong objections or disagreements but at the same time participate in and consent to the decision that a large number of the groups members can support. This is a key awareness and is an important part of coming to consensus. There is a big difference between disagreement with others in the group and blocking consensus. Disagreement is part of the discussion process.

Blocking consensus

The individual's decision to block a consensus should not be lightly taken. If you block a decision that has strong support by the rest of the group, you are essentially saying to them that this decision is so seriously wrong, that you do not want to permit them to proceed. If after discussion the group comes close to a common agreement, but one or more individuals has such a very strong objection that they cannot be part of the consensus, then they have one of the following opinions:

- This is a totally unacceptable or immoral or inhumane decision. I cannot support this in any way and I cannot allow the group to proceed with this decision. (Blocking)

- I am completely opposed to this and can no longer work together with this group. (Withdrawing from the group)

If you have strong objections, and especially if you decide to block a consensus, it is important that you can carefully and clearly express the specifics about your objections and the reasons for blocking consensus. In fact you should feel obliged to make a better suggestion, one that you think can be accepted by all, including yourself. This will help others to understand your point of view and may lead to a clarification of the differences.

In any case, it is very important that you review your objections and concerns and see if you can withdraw your blocking and just stand aside for this decision, allowing the group to accept the decision but without your support.

Minuting a consensus decisions

After the group comes to a consensus decision it can be useful to ask everyone who did not take the position of "full agreement" to express his/her concerns, reservations or objections that lead to their position. The fact that these concerns, reservations or objections are being recorded in the minutes together with the decision itself demonstrates clearly that the group values the diversity of opinions and encourages everyone to be aware of these concerns in future discussions or follow-up to the decision. Groups that take minority opinions seriously in this way usually enjoy an increased cohesiveness in their activities and actions that are based upon consensus decisions.

If the group cannot come to a consensual agreement

Maybe the group does not have enough information to make a decision. Perhaps more discussion time is needed? Should the decision be postponed? Does the group want to ask for a new proposal? Would it help for a smaller committee to draw up some alternative proposals?

Important aspects when using consensus

There are many different formats and ways of building consensus, and there is a wide range of experience, which shows that it can work. There are however a few conditions that have to be met for consensus building to be possible:

- Common Goal or Interest: All members of the group/meeting need to be united in a common goal or common interest, whether it is an action, living communally or greening the neighbourhood. It helps to clearly establish what this overall goal of the group is and to write it down as well. In situations where consensus seems difficult to achieve, it helps to come back to this common goal and to remember what the group is all about.

- Commitment to consensus building: The stronger the commitment to using consensus the better it works. It can be very damaging to the groups process if some individuals actually want to return to majority voting, just waiting for the chance to say "I told you it wouldn't work".

- Consensus requires commitment, patience and willingness to put the common goal or interest first.

- Sufficient time: to learn to work in this way. As the group become more proficient in the process, the time needed for consensus decision-making will decrease. If there are divergent strong opinions in the group, more time might be needed to reach a consensus.

- Clear process: Make sure that the group is clear about the process they will use for tackling any given issue. Agree beforehand on processes and guidelines. In most cases this will include having one or more facilitators to help the group move through the process.

Finding consensus includes the following processes

- Subjects for discussion need to be well prepared. There should be a clear statement of what issue is to be decided.

- The different opinions need to be openly expressed. Everyone is given a chance to state his or her opinion or concern.

- Agreed-upon norms may limit the number of times one asks to speak and or the amount of time one

speaks, to ensure that each participant has a chance to be fully heard.

- Discussions involve active listening and sharing of information. Multiple concerns and information are shared until the sense of the group is clear.

- Dissenters' perspectives are not only listened to but are embraced and actively included in the discussion.

- Differences are resolved by discussion. Facilitators aid this by identifying areas of agreement and pointing out disagreements in order to encourage deeper discussion.

- Facilitators help the consensus process by articulating the sense of the discussion, by asking if there are other concerns, by asking for polls of the positions in the group and by proposing a minute of the consensus decision

- Ideas and solutions are shared with the group and do not belong to an individual. The group as a whole is responsible for the decision, and the decision belongs to the group.

Reaching consensus - practical steps

There are lots of consensus models (see flowchart on the right). The following basic procedure is taken from Peace News, a magazine for peace activists, June 1988:
1. The problem, or decision needing to be made, is defined and named. It helps to do this in a way that separates the problems/questions from personalities.

2. Brainstorm possible solutions. Write them all down, even the crazy ones. Keep the energy up for quick, top-of-the head suggestions.

3. Create space for questions or clarification on the situation.

4. Discuss the options written down. Modify some, eliminate others, and develop a short list. Which are the favourites?

5. State the proposal or choice of proposals so that everybody is clear. (Sometimes it might be useful to break into small sub-groups to write up each proposal clearly and succinctly.)

6. Discuss the pros and cons of each proposal - make sure everybody has a chance to contribute.

7. If there is a major objection, return to step 6 (this is the time-consuming bit). Sometimes you may need to return to step 4.

8. If there are no major objections, state the decisions and test for agreement.

9. Acknowledge minor objections and incorporate friendly amendments.

10. Discuss.

11. Check for consensus.

Especially with controversial issues, it may be helpful to take a straw poll of the group's consensus positions at different times during the discussion. For a straw poll of consensus positions it is important that all know that this is just a test of the positions in the group and that it is not the final call for consensus positions. One easy way to do a quick straw poll is ask for a show of hands with 5 fingers showing equal to full agreement, 4 fingers show support, 3 fingers show acceptance, 2 fingers show tolerance, 1 finger show standing aside and a fist shows blocking.

Consensus in large groups - The Spokescouncil

The model of consensus decision making described above works well within one group. However, bigger nonviolent actions require the cooperation of several [affinity groups](#).
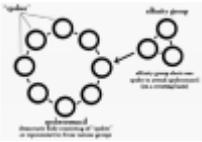
The Spokescouncil is a tool for making consensus decisions in large groups. In a spokescouncil, the spokespersons from smaller groups come together to make shared decisions. Each group is represented by their 'spoke' – they communicate to the meeting through him or her, allowing hundreds of people to be represented in a smaller group discussions. What the spoke is empowered to do is up to their affinity group. Spokes may need to consult with their group before discussing or agreeing on certain subjects.

Here is an outline process for using the spokescouncil method (Note: step 1 and 2 can also take place in advance within the individual small affinity groups).

1. Whole group (all participants of all affinity groups) – Introduce the issue and give all the necessary information

2. Explain both the consensus and the spokescouncil process

3. Form into small groups (the affinity groups) – these could be a random selection of people at the meeting, existing affinity groups, or groups based on where people live or based on a shared language.

4. The small groups discuss the issue, gather ideas and discuss pros and cons - coming up with one or more proposals.

5. Each small groups selects a spoke – a person from their group who will represent the group's view at the spokescouncil. Small groups decide whether the spoke is a messenger for the group – e.g. relays information between the small group and the spokescouncil - or whether the spoke can make decisions on the group's behalf at the spokescouncil.

6. Spokes from all groups come together in the spokes council. They in turn present the view of their small group. The spokes then have a discussion to try and incorporate the various proposals into one workable idea. During this process the spokes may need to call time out to refer with their groups for clarification or to see whether a modified proposal would be acceptable to them. The spoke is supposed to speak on behalf of the small group, not to present their personal point of view.

7. Once the spokescouncil has come up with one or more possible proposals the spokes meet with their groups and check for agreement and objections. Groups can also suggest further modifications of the proposals.

8. Spokes meet back at the spokes council and check whether the groups agree. If not all groups agree, the discussion cycle continues alternating between time for the small groups to meet and spokescouncil meetings.

9. The small groups can and often do change their spoke to give different small group members the change to act as spokes for the group.

Exercises/Resources

- [Consensus for Small Groups](#): *An introduction and worksheets*

- [Consensus decision making](#)

Experiences and problems

During the past 30 years the model of affinity groups and consensus decision making described above has been used in a wide range of small and large scale nonviolent actions. For example the anti-nuclear power actions in the 1970s (Seabrook, New Hampshire, USA; Torness, Scotland), many anti-nuclear energy and disarmament actions in Germany the in the 1980s and the 1990s, the anti-globalisation actions in 1999 (Seattle, Washington, USA). Some of the largest actions using the affinity group / spokescouncil / consensus-decision-making model have grown to 2000 or more participants (eg 1996 in Seabrook, USA; the 1997 protest against nuclear waste transports in Wendland, Germany – see: http://www.castor.de/diskus/gruppen/x1000mal/5rundbri.html#Auswertung%20des%20SprechenInnenrates) to other anti-globalisation and anti-war protests. Many of these experiences point to a changed political environment, eg. a growth of decentralised participation in nonviolent actions and campaigns. This has consequences for the way groups now organise for large-scale actions.

Very few affinity groups work long-term. For example, the German anti-nuclear campaign "X-thousands in the way" has few on-going affinity groups, though they still exist and form the core of the action. Most activists join the actions of this campaign as individuals or in small groups, and only form affinity groups on arrival at the action. Therefore one or two days of preparation are needed before each action to create a community ready and able to act. And even this community is little more than an expanded core of participants. Most activists join spontaneously and without much preparation, and the action has to be planned in a way that makes this possible (Jochen Stay, Preconditions and social-political factors for mass civil disobedience, The Broken Rifle No 69, March 2006 http://wri-irg.org/node/2950). This structure is more appropriate when one of the aims is to integrate a large number of new activists. The action is generally more low-risk, and publicly announced.

Another option is to base larger actions on the autonomy of individual affinity groups, which plan and carry out a variety of small scale actions simultaneously on their own. The "large-scale" is then achieved through the number of parallel actions. This structure is more suited to high-risk actions or when a higher level of repression can be expected.

Although the affinity group / spokescouncil structure has been successfully used for various campaigns and actions, it could still be further developed. Groups who do not yet have experience with this structure could practise its use. There is also a need for further experience and evaluation when using it with even larger groups of people.

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