

This Handbook is written for groups, perhaps a group that has come together for a specific cause or with a specific theme, perhaps a group based on friendship or affinity in what you feel about the world, perhaps even a group formed for one occasion. Even an individual stand usually requires on some group support. The campaigns section of the Handbook (Section Three) is more useful for groups who plan to stay together for the long-term, while the section on preparing for action (Section Four) might be more appropriate for those joining together for a specific event.

Strong groups of people who stay together, who work well together and strengthen each other, give a movement strength. Groups come together in many different ways, and those that are most effective and enjoyable tend to have something distinctive, some mark of their own creativity, some characteristic that makes them flourish. This arises from the special combinations that happen within a group and the particular balance the group arrives at between the various desires and talents of its members.

This section offers some perspectives that you might think about as a member of the group, some of which the group will discuss and make a conscious decision on, some of which will evolve.

Strengthening a Group

The first point is how much importance people attach to the way the group itself functions and its attitudes. This itself can be a never-ending source of conflict! There are balances to be struck, such as between those impatient with discussion who urgently want to be out 'there' and 'doing', and those who want more clarity, be it about goals, about being prepared to argue a case in public, about who the group should try to reach and the forms of action it should consider, or about how the group organises itself and functions. Somehow a new group has to do its best to find its own way and overall direction, some happy medium between people pulling in different directions. If the group has a lot of energy and initiative, sub-groups may take up particular themes. If the group involves people with conflicting political philosophies or attitudes, that needs to be acknowledged and made a source of strength rather than a block on creativity.

Whether your group is large and open or small and limited by affinity (see ['Affinity Groups'](#)) you want new people to feel welcome, and you want everyone to feel able to contribute. This raises issues of cultural diversity, of oppressive behaviour, of class, race and gender dynamics, and of power within the group. Dealing with these issues can itself be a source of tension, although not dealing with them can be even worse. You'll need to find ways to tackle these questions in a supportive atmosphere. Section Two on gender offers some examples.

In general, it is useful for a group that plans to stay together to organise some special sessions in addition to the usual meetings, or to set aside a slot in the regular meetings for something a bit different. At times, this might have a practical focus, such as skill-sharing, campaign development, or even a more detailed look at a particular campaign topic. At times, this might be more group-directed, such as activities that build rapport (banner-making, singing) or ways to improve group functioning.

Exploring Differences

A nonviolent action group will also at some point benefit from considering some of the issues attached to the term nonviolence—including forms of nonviolence and their repercussions, values, attitudes, and goals. Any issue that touches on group members' deeply held convictions must be handled with respect for differences, aiming less to establish a group position than to share perceptions and perspectives. Simply understanding each other better will deepen what you're trying to do together.

Take the question of nonviolence itself. A commitment to nonviolence can be a unifying factor for a group,

but is not necessarily so; there are often divisions, especially between those prepared to use nonviolence for specific purposes and those who hold it as a far-reaching philosophy. We suggest that some issues might be dealt with by a collective declaration of principles (see ['Principles of Nonviolent Action'](#), and ['Nonviolence Guidelines'](#)), but even a group that expresses a commitment to nonviolent action will have different preconceptions about other aspects, both positive and negative of nonviolence. A good discussion around the issues might be stimulating, even inspiring, but a not-so-good one can exacerbate tensions and frustration.

A relatively safe way of exploring differences is a 'barometer' of values, also known as a 'spectrum' exercise. Someone develops a set of questions to explore different attitudes, actions, and factors. The questions are posed to the group, and people move on two axes: one, it is or isn't nonviolent, and two, I would or wouldn't do it myself. This can later develop into 'I would or would not want to be part of a group doing this'. (See ['Spectrum or Barometer'](#))

A question like 'what is your group trying to achieve'? can have one simple answer, but each person in the group may have additional goals. Many different lines of thought or feeling can lead people to be involved in a group. Something as simple as a paired introductions exercise can be a good start in giving people space to explain what brought them.

In general, this Handbook does not much explore the perspective from which you engage in action, beyond a fairly loose idea of social transformation. Such perspectives will vary greatly from group to group and in different contexts. The point is not to establish uniformity, but to understand and even appreciate people's different ways of looking at things. In particular, if your group is considering something risky, you need to take the time to prepare properly, understanding the distinct attitudes each of you brings to the action and your preferences for how to respond to the risk.

How you understand the context in which you act affects your choice of methods. Commentators sometimes distinguish between 'conventional' and 'unconventional' forms of action. However, context can change all that. In a closed society, simply 'saying the unsayable' or 'breaking the silence' by quite conventional means can have an enormous, perhaps explosive, perhaps catalytic, impact. However, in other contexts, 'non-conventional' action—such as civil disobedience or strikes—might have become contained or normalised. Either because non-participants ignore it as 'oh, it's just them doing their thing again', or because the participants themselves have gotten stuck in a routinised form of action. Some social movement theorists (see Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 7-9) have suggested that 'transgressive' and 'contained' action is a more useful distinction than 'conventional'/non-conventional' action because it acknowledges the different impact various forms of action can have in different contexts. Some of the differences within your group (for instance, in attitudes to illegal activity) might stem from different analyses of the context for your action. (For more on contexts, see ['Sending the Protest Message'](#), and ['Coping with the Stress and Strain of Taking a Stand'](#))

What Do You Want?

As an activist, you need to think about what you want from a group. Do you want a group that attracts a wide range of people? Do you want a group with people who share a lot of attitudes and convictions and that will make a strong statement of those? Is there a way of combining the two? For instance, could you be part of an affinity group promoting nonviolence in the context of a broader campaign?

Until your group starts to take action, you don't know how much impact you could have. Groups usually don't sense the possibilities they can open until they actually go public. Just 14 women took part in the first demonstration of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires; some other powerful movements began even smaller. Some simple, small actions have had far greater consequences than anyone could imagine. However, you also have to recognise that plenty of actions have much smaller consequences. A nonviolent action group needs to be aware of its full repertoire of action, have a strong sense of purpose, and be capable of analysing the context it is working in. This Handbook therefore includes material about preparing for action, about building up a campaign and about evaluating what you've done.

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