

By Starhawk

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(taken from <http://www.starhawk.org/activism/trainer-resources/affinitygroups.html>)

Organize in clusters! Form a group with your friends! Be loud! Look exiting! Have fun!

What is an affinity group?

An affinity group is a group of people who have an affinity for each other, know each others strengths and weaknesses, support each other, and do (or intend to do) political/campaign work together. Most of us will have had some childhood/formative experience of being part of a group whether informally, as in a group of kids that are the same age and live in the same street, suburb or town, or formally, as in being involved in a sports team. However, affinity groups differ from these for numerous reasons, as explained below, (hierarchy, trust, responsibility to each other etc).

The concept of 'affinity groups' has a long history. They developed as an organising structure during the Spanish Civil war and have been used with amazing success over the last thirty years of feminist, anti-nuclear, environmental and social justice movements around the world. They were first used as a structure for a large scale nonviolent blockade during the 30,000 strong occupation of the Ruhr nuclear power station in Germany in 1969, and then in the United States occupations / blockades of the Seabrook nuclear power station in '71 when 10,000 were arrested and again many times in the highly successful US anti-nuclear movement during the '70's and '80's. Their use in sustaining activists through high levels of police repression has been borne out time and again. More recently, they have been used constructively in the mass protest actions in Seattle and Washington.

We don't have to use the word 'affinity group' - blockade teams, action groups, cells, action collectives etc. have all been used to describe the same concept. It would be best to find the most relevant name depending on when and where the structure is used. Also, each affinity group can choose their own name. For example, at the AIDEX protest, there was a 'Perseverance Affinity Group' named after the Fitzroy pub where it's members had their first meeting. Other names range across a whole gamut of political sensibilities (or the lack thereof); from the "Screaming Trees", the "Alcoholics against the Bomb", to the "Buckrabendinni Action Tribe"

With whom do I form an an affinity group?

The simple answer to this is the people that you know, and that feel the same way about the issue(s) in question. They could be people you see in a tutorial, work with, go out 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 to being part of an affinity group is to get to know where each other is at regarding the campaign or issue. This can involve having a meal together, and you all discussing it after you have eaten, or doing some form of activist related training together, like attending a nonviolence, conflict resolution or facilitation workshop, developing de-arresting strategies if needed, working out how to deal with certain police tactics ie. snatch squads, police horses.

You should all have a shared idea of what you want individually & 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 touchy-feely,

how spiky, how willing to risk arrest, when you'll bail-out, your overall political perspective etc. But then again, you may all just work together at a job, play music or hike together etc.

Organization

Within an affinity group, there are a whole range of different roles that its members can perform. A lot of these roles will be determined by the aim or raison d'être of the AG, but could include a Media Spokesperson, to either talk to / deal with news media, a Quick decision facilitator, 1st Aid to take care of people that are hurt, a Spokesperson to convey the affinity group's ideas and decisions to other AG's, a Legal Observer, and Arrest support.

As well as these roles within itself the AG can take on a specialised role in the way it interacts with other AGs, or operates within the breadth of the protest or campaign. There can be affinity groups specialising in copwatching, countering "protest highjackers", legal observation, catering, communication & cluster liaison, medical., clowning, or good old common garden variety blockading. With this role focus, each AG can do its job and support the work of other affinity groups. In this way, many affinity groups form an interdependent network that achieves so much more than a large group of individual activists.

Within the context of a demonstration, as important as the aspect of the AG that is out on the street, is the support crew. They do all the mundane stuff, and regrettably don't get the recognition that they deserve. They can walk/feed pets, water plants, childcare, call employers and freaked out parents/children, pay rent etc. As a consequence, more people can participate (and risk more) because they have help with these things. The emotional support is not to be underestimated; apart from the offers of hugs, kisses, and phone calls, people feel safe enough to risk themselves when they know that they have emotional support. Support crew can also indirectly support direct action by supplying information to news media and interested community groups, raising funds and providing logistical support, like food, water and accommodation. The street aspect of an AG, and its support crew can (and should) swap round, so that there is a clear understanding within it as to the importance of all roles in the group's effectiveness.

The aim at the end of the day is to look after yourself and each other, have fun, and work towards a maximised degree of constructive social change.

Rough notes for affinity group facilitators

Intro - 15 mins ?

- What is an affinity group ?
- Potentialities of affinity groups _ a couple of examples. (possibly imaginative, successful, inspiring)
- Importance for this:

o TRUST

o SOLIDARITY

o SELF-SUFFICIENCY

o SAFETY _ comfort zone when shit hits the fan

o mutual aid

o OPEN AND CLOSED

- Count off, 1-4 around the big circle
- breakdown into 4 groups
- name go around if need be
- questions
- GAME _ Scarecrow Tiggy 4 _ way (inside or outside)

Throw people together as affinity groups. Assign one group as cops. Target of game is to keep your affinity group from being tagged / arrested. Arrested person can be released by person going through legs. Try a few times to see how different ideas can be used to keep groups together, make discussions, identify each other, watch out for themselves, others and other groups. Code words.

- Reform groups, de-brief
- re-iterate the following in terms of this action and others:

o TRUST

o SOLIDARITY

o SELF-SUFFICIENCY

o SAFETY _ comfort zone when shit hits the fan

o mutual aid

o OPEN AND CLOSED

- talk about experiences of action with no solid affinity, encourage experience of others.
- brainstorm on cluster co-ordination, etc.
- Examples of positive use, what we will need for the day, other campaigns, transposable skills

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