Consensus

A New Handbook for Grassroots Social, Political and Environmental Groups

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Introduction

Making the shift to the consensus decision-making process might be the most important thing that we can do to build a democratic society. Consensus can give us the power we need to focus our society's attention on improving education, making peace, providing universal healthcare and creating the world we desire.

Consensus creates true democracy—not the democracy in name only that sickens any aware person. Consensus empowers all who participate in it. In-name-only democracy disempowers all who participate in it (who dutifully trudge to the polls every few years to select new masters). True democracy might be a large part of the solution to our most pressing problems. In-name-only democracy is little more than a smokescreen for domination and an excuse for war. Thus, this book addresses one of the most important topics of our time.

It's ironic that at the time when in-name-only democracy in the United States may be nearing its end, with the congress and courts allowing the executive branch to seize their powers, an interest in a more powerful system of democratic decision making is emerging. Many prominent Americans, such as former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, former Vice President Al Gore and former senator Gerry Hart, are expressing concern about the possibility of a Bush dictatorship. Yet for all the words of alarm, relatively few people are talking about solutions. It is self-evident that representative democracy has failed to express the dreams of most of the people it supposedly represents—both here and abroad. Iraq is merely the latest example of such failure.

At the same time the U.S. government is promoting "democracy" in the Middle East via bombs, guns, and torture, movements around the world are enthusiastically embarking on the search for real democracy. Consensus decision making is used around the world by indigenous people in resistance, who have used it for millennia—groups like the Zapatistas, and organizations in the United States such as Earth First!, Indymedia, and some Green Party chapters.

One of the most prominent groups using consensus is Food Not Bombs (FNB), which now has over 300 chapters worldwide. Food Not Bombs' members adopted formal consensus as FNB's decision-making process because it reflects FNB members' values. Consensus has also been an effective way to encourage commitment to the tasks and goals of Food Not Bombs, and has made it more difficult for the authorities to infiltrate Food Not Bombs groups and disrupt FNB actions.

In fact, the use of consensus by Food Not Bombs and Indymedia may be one reason the FBI in Texas placed both groups on its "Terrorist Watch List." Examples of effective, nonviolent, truly democratic groups are a clear threat to a "democratic" government based on hierarchy, coercion, intimidation, and violence. Lest others see and imitate the truly democratic practices of Indymedia and Food Not Bombs, the government attacks and smears those embodying the values it supposedly represents.

Why is consensus decision making so revolutionary? Consensus is on the cutting edge of global social change because it reflects the core values that every truly progressive political and social group is working towards. Consensus encourages its participants to express their interests directly to their group, and it ensures that all are heard. It is cooperative, not adversarial. It gives

everyone affected by a decision the power to consent to (or block) that decision. Because all are heard and all have an equal Say, consensus is an ideal way for groups and organizations to discover the true desires of their participants and to reach decisions that best reflect the goals and values of those participants.

So, it's no accident that groups that use consensus well tend to be strong and effective. Consensus often results in a synthesis of ideas that is better than the original "competing" ideas. And consensing on decisions usually produces greater commitment to those decisions than would be the case if a voting process was used, with "winning" and "losing" sides, and with the "losers" grudgingly acquiescing to decisions they dislike.

Consensus decision making is one of the most revolutionary practices any group can adopt. For me, consensus decision making zs the revolution. Consensus provides the democracy that the world is searching for, and this book is a means of discovering how to make that democracy a reality.

—Keith McHenry Co-founder of Food Not Bombs

Decision-Making Types
Pluses and Minuses

	Representation	Autonomous Action	Spontaneous Consensus	Consensus Process
Large groups	+	-	-	
Across distances	+		-	-
Prevents hierarchy	-	+		+
Leads to individual growth	-	+		+
Leads to collective growth	-		+	+
Expedient		+	+	

+ Decision-making type is effective
- Decision-making type is ineffective
no mark Neutral or mixed

Preface

The Radical Importance of Decision Making

The historical evolution of government has involved an increasing consolidation of decision-making power in the hands of bureaucrats, technocrats, and public officials. Simultaneously, progressive or radical elements have struggled for greater access to power, often as part of a greater movement for decentralization and democracy. Power structures have responded to these pressures by adopting more democratic forms on the one hand, and on the other by removing ever more decision-making power from the public sphere.

In modern democracies, voting rights are considered universal (though in actuality they exclude people younger than eighteen, non-citizen immigrants, a percentage of ethnic, racial, and political minorities intimidated away from the voting booths, and in some countries, convicted law-breakers); however individuals and communities enjoy less and less autonomy, as schools and other institutions are subjected to increasing government oversight, laws governing ever more minutiae proliferate, the economy is centralized and globalized, media are consolidated, and commercialism invades and appropriates public spaces.

Many people have heard the truism about means determining ends, about being the change we wish to see in the world. Leaving aside the implicit oversimplification regarding tactics of resistance, this truism actually is important in regard to decision-making methods. Throughout history, human groups have demonstrated an almost infinite variety in social organization and political strategies. An anti-hierarchical society, and the attendant decision-making strategies, are certainly within our reach if we look past the economic structures, military and police forces, and popular culture that currently stand in the way of the necessary changes. In addition to overcoming the organized barriers of economic and state violence, we need to relearn how to be social animals, and become practiced and comfortable with new models of decision making.

In building our resistance, we need to resist our own authoritarian habits. In empowering ourselves, we need to become familiar with social power that is based on equality, not exploitation. We need to learn consensus.

The Benefits of Leadership?

Part of our education as subjects of an authoritarian society is indoctrination in all the supposed benefits of hierarchy and leadership. It is an article of faith. Yes, dictatorships, including those kinds that allow general participation through majoritarian voting, are expedient in one sense, but this expedience masks a more profound inefficiency. Hierarchy developed to allow group activities to be controlled and exploited by a central leadership, not because hierarchy increases the possibility of realizing human potential. Quite the contrary: authoritarian systems suffocate the individual. Because hierarchies must limit the number of people who rise to po-

sitions of leadership, more people must be followers than leaders, and they are thus prevented from developing their potential for thinking and acting autonomously, or establishing voluntary relationships with peers—their activities, and their relationships, are dictated by their position in the hierarchy. Everyone must work for the singular initiative of the person or people at the top of the pyramid. In contrast, in a horizontal society, everyone is free to pursue their own initiatives and, through cooperation, accomplish more.

Non-hierarchical organizing and decision making is also more efficient than traditional hierarchy because it frees up a great deal of energy and resources that would otherwise go to enforcing the party line and keeping people passive and obedient. In fact, authoritarian decision making only appears to be more expedient because in our society it is the type people have the most practice with. With time, radical organizations can learn to organize and make decisions at least as quickly and efficiently as they might using authoritarian methods.

Perhaps the most important disadvantage of authoritarian organizing and decision making is that it preserves the oppressive power dynamics that exist in society at large. In a racist, sexist, capitalist society, white people, males, and those with a college education hold power that they do not deserve over people of color, women, queers, and trans people, and those without a diploma. This generalization even holds true in many radical groups. It is not at all unusual to see progressive and radical organizations with a leadership (official or unofficial) consisting entirely or mostly of white, college-educated males. Even in hierarchical groups with a diverse leadership, oppressive dynamics are likely to persist. A hierarchy preserves an elite culture, so women or people of color who climb the ladder often do so by adopting that elite culture and disowning their solidarity with those they've left behind at the bottom of the hierarchy—we see this all the time when conservatives appoint a token woman or person of color to a powerful government post. Efforts by group members to challenge these oppressive dynamics are seriously hampered when power is concentrated in the hands of a privileged authority. Not only are oppressive dynamics harder to change, they are encouraged. The existence of a hierarchy isolates group members from one another, so feelings of hostility are more likely to develop than feelings of solidarity.

This tendency is compounded by the fact that the goal of authoritarian decision making is not to come up with the best solution for everyone, but to win. Majoritarian voting is especially good at fostering competition and creating minorities within a group. This method makes sense in a world where people have to exploit one another to survive. It does not make sense in a world based on mutual aid, freedom, and cooperation, and it does not make sense if we are trying to build solidarity to create that world. Hierarchy and authoritarian decision making were developed so that elites could control the collective power of a society. We must develop anti-authoritarian decision-making methods that keep power in the hands of all, to free society from that legacy.

Representation

Authoritarian states that call themselves "democratic," after the slave-driven Greek polities, have given us the idea of representation as a means of achieving equality. The masses have power to elect and recall representatives, and the representatives have the power to work in an efficiently small group to manage the details of everyone's lives. Such a system purports to

overcome the authoritarianism of leadership, without descending into the presumed chaos of leaderless social organization. Efficiency is the ultimate justification, and in truth it would be inefficient to bring everyone from a massive nation or multiregional organization together in a huge meeting to make decisions. But that proposition itself demands scrutiny. Under what circumstances do human groups become too large for horizontal consensus decision making to be practical? The nation, in the Western sense, is not any naturally arising unit: it is a manufactured identity designed to achieve political unity within the territory conquered and controlled by a central leadership. Absent the attempt to subordinate large numbers of people to a hierarchy, human polities will be only as large as they can be to accommodate horizontal, leaderless decision making. Hierarchy did not evolve to answer questions of efficiency. Hierarchy developed to impose control, and to use that control to expand the group, to specialize and alienate daily activities, and to centralize power, until society could not run without hierarchy. Leaders were not needed originally, but once in power they imposed the economic, social, and political changes that made them "necessary."

In the present mass societies, activists may often have a need to communicate and coordinate across distances or among huge groups of people. This need, and our socialization, may influence us to adopt the same representational forms of organization as those employed in the institutions we are fighting. The idea is that activists need as large an organization as possible to direct a unified effort to organize the masses. But groups of individuals are turned into masses in order to be controlled. Activists not wishing to be the vanguard of some new authoritarianism need to break themselves and their communities out of the disempowered, alienated "mass." Communities can work together in a spirit of solidarity and mutual aid without centralizing decision-making power. Activists in Virginia can communicate with activists in California to share information so that each group can make the best decision on how to effectively overcome a common enemy, but there is no need for different groups to come to the same decision: what works for one may not work for another.

Organizations or federations that for whatever reason join groups from multiple communities should be structured in a way that makes it impossible to forget that power flows from the level of the community and the individual. The spokescouncil model used at a number of major protests by the antiglobalization movement is an effective alternative to a permanent body of formal representatives who have assumed full decision-making authority for their constituency.

A large number of affinity groups with a common aim each send spokespersons to meet and discuss the action that all are planning to participate in. They may just share the potential plans, targets, or capabilities of their affinity groups, so that the spokespersons can go back and communicate the broad picture to their groups, and then each group can have better information to help formulate their specific plans. The spokescouncil can also take a more active role. Spokespersons can communicate the desires, limitations, and general goals expressed by their affinity groups, and using that information as a starting point, the spokescouncil can create a structure or framework that assists each affinity group in pursuing its desired ends, and allows each affinity group to work together without ever relinquishing the ability to decide its own course. Examples of how a spokescouncil can create a useful structure rather than dictating the contributions of each member group include providing tactical information (maps, surveillance, etc.) and resources (bicycle locks, PVC pipe, legal and medical aid, etc.) for affinity groups to set up road blockades during a protest, or by setting up days of action and sharing useful information for a campaign to simultaneously target multiple locations of a particular corporation or other institution.

Just as political hierarchies exist to control a society, an activist organization may use hierarchy to try and control a movement. Leadership is not about efficiency, it is about control. People can struggle without being told how to do so. History shows that when governments face an enemy without a leader, whether mutinous workers or an indigenous society, they appoint one, and then negotiate, co-opt, assimilate, and control. A leaderless opposition is the hardest to defeat.

Individual Autonomous Action

In the absence of formal leadership, there is an array of horizontal decision-making strategies. There are forms of decision making other than group consensus that would have a place in a free society, and can also play an important role in consensus-based organizations. At a very basic level, the individual should not be subordinated to the group to the extent that individual, autonomous action is discouraged. Such action, performed by lone individuals or small groups of individuals, is vital in a number of circumstances: when security concerns prohibit discussion of an action in a larger group; when people need to act out of the possibly stagnating confines of a group, and act without broader approval in order to stir things up or spark initiative; or when the project at hand is of a creative or personal nature that could not brook a potentially homogenizing or stifling group process. However, the potential of individual action is limited, because it fails to foster social growth in dominant and submissive people, and other people who need to learn to work as part of a group, and it fails to build the strong relationships that are the backbone of a serious revolutionary movement. Ultimately, individual actions must exist with consideration of group decisions, just as individuals exist within the context of larger human groups.

Spontaneous Consensus

Once a group decides to use consensus, there are countless varieties from which to choose. The kind most people are familiar with is spontaneous, or informal, consensus. It's the kind of decision making you use with good friends and in other healthy relationships. No articulated process is needed, and no leadership, because of a strong foundation of trust and intimacy. This is what consensus looks like when we've had a lifetime of practice. Needless to say, it is an unrealistic goal to use spontaneous consensus for political organizing, unless your organization consists of a small group of close friends.

A look beyond the often insular confines of Euro/ American activist circles reveals numerous indigenous societies that are non-authoritarian and use consensus decision making. (Indigenous and Afro-Colombians in the Choco area, for example, use consensus for the decisions of entire communities, and for decisions in regional councils that include as many as 50 communities.) Each society's model was/is a little different, and best suited to people of a particular cultural background. Many of these societies first had authoritarian decision-making models imposed upon them during the colonization process.

In any case, the historical abundance of cooperative, consensual groups gives lie to the claim that competition and authoritarian leadership are simply parts of human nature. However, indigenous models of consensus exist within a specific cultural and historical context. The consensus

model described in this book is the model I have learned among the North American queer activists, anarchists, anti-racists, and anti-capitalists with whom I organize. Most of these activists have grown up white and middle class. The model they use is most practical and helpful for people from a similar background. It is important to recognize that culture is inherent in every human act; the form of consensus described in this book is a cultural artifact. It is not the single correct way to make decisions, and it is a process that should be open to change, especially when your organization consists of people from varied backgrounds.

These pages describe a very detailed, organized process. I include exhaustive discussion of process because process is an effective crutch or bridge for people not used to anti-authoritarian decision making. With practice, the process can be set aside, like any tool that is no longer useful.

Consensus Process

Adopting a conscious consensus process is significant in a number of ways. Commitment to the ideal of consensus signifies a bold rejection of society's dominant values of order, hierarchy, competition, and formalized leadership. In this way, embracing consensus rejects the generally unspoken Western assumption that dictatorship is efficient; that people need leaders to recognize and pursue their own interests; that life, evolution, and progress must be fueled by a brutal competition between individuals rather than by the mutual aid and voluntary cooperation of human groups. The idea of consensus also pushes anti-authoritarian resistance to develop and demand an even more fundamental understanding of freedom. The notion that freedom is a legal concept that can be guaranteed on paper is rejected; this new freedom only comes when po__ aspect of our lives can be dictated to us—in other words, it means that our involvement is crucial to the decisions that will affect our lives.

Adopting an explicit process to facilitate consensus decision making signifies a new understanding of human potential. It acknowledges that we are not the slaves of "human nature" or any other tragic flaw, but that we can learn an almost unlimited range of behaviours.

An explicit consensus process serves as a crutch or bridge which intentionally reinforces the learning of consensus until a new, cooperative, anti-authoritarian society provides that reinforcement as a matter of course. The process also recognizes that the oppressive systems of our society deeply affect our own behaviours, and that people who are typically silenced by our society can also be marginalized within ostensibly anti-authoritarian groups unless there is an intentional structure that helps expose and overcome these power dynamics.

Reaching Consensus

Agenda item → Introduce and explain item → Share additional info and perspectives → Brainstorm ideas → Feedback, commenting, criticizing, questioning → Is group support behind a particular idea?

Is group support behind a particular idea? — No → Brainstorm ideas

Is group support behind a particular idea? — Yes → Brainstorm how idea will take shape → Make proposal to synthesize everyone's input → Is it supported?

Is it supported? — Yes → Answer clarifying questions → Address concerns → Friendly amendments → Is proposal supported?

Is it supported? — No → Brainstorm how idea will take shape

Is proposal supported? — No → Address concerns

Is proposal supported? — Yes → Restate proposal, call vote → stand asides? → Have they been addressed?

Have they been addressed? — Yes → Any blocks? — No → All in favor? — Yes → Consensus!

Have they been addressed? — No → Brainstorm how idea will take shape

Any blocks? — Yes → Discuss why → Stop for now

All in favor? — No → Discuss why → Try again → Brainstorm ideas

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Consensus Process

Group Meetings

Trying to change the world often means engaging in tedious work, but even so, meetings tend to be more painful experiences than they need to be. People who attend a consensus meeting and come away with a bad impression frequently report one of two complaints. Sometimes they feel like they have entered a tight-knit social club with rules that are secret and inscrutable and power dynamics that are cliqueish and impenetrable. At other times, newcomers get the impression that a particular consensus-based group is hyper organized to the point of inefficiency, and almost bureaucratic in its rules and procedures. Both extremes are disempowering. But unlike authoritarian organizations or governments, for which public meetings simply provide a rubber stamp to the decisions already made behind closed doors, consensus-based groups need meetings to organize group activities openly and fairly. People cannot be empowered members of the group if they do not know how to effectively participate in meetings. A shared understanding of how the meetings are to run will help keep everyone on equal footing.

Structure and Structurelessness

One of the hardest skills in consensus decision making is knowing when to be formal and when to be informal, and how to transition between the two. Structureless groups are likely to turn into social cliques with informal leaders perpetuating many of the same power dynamics we are fighting against in society at large. On the other hand, groups that are too heavily structured can be inefficient, heavy-handed, and unwelcoming to outsiders.

Finding a comfortable middle ground for your group can require a constant effort. Often, groups will be flexible, using different levels of organization and different processes at different times. Many consensus-based groups that meet regularly will spend most of their meetings discussing topics that only require simple decisions, or no decisions at all. Sharing updates about an ongoing campaign, announcing upcoming events, deciding if you want to host a particular workshop at your radical community space, organizing publicity for an event—many conversations can take place informally, without an explicit process. Group discussions that require a more formal process, such as solving problems and deciding strategies and actions, will probably come up less frequently, but are of huge importance. These types of discussions in particular are difficult, both in their own right and because of our upbringing in an authoritarian society that rarely lets us make such decisions.

Process of Discussion

Who has not had the excruciating experience of sitting through meetings in which discussion goes through endless, tail-biting circles with no progress or development? A decision implies both a question and a resolution. Therefore, the principle of effective discussion goes from general to specific, from inquiry to explanation to suggestion to solution. You can't come up with a solution before you know what the problem is, and you can't come up with a good solution until all the relevant questions have been answered, and group members have the information they need.

First, a group needs to express the problem. Doing this clearly and plainly can help everyone focus on the problem, and begin to think strategically. Second, those who lack important information need to ask questions and to receive answers. Then it is important, before talking about specific actions in response to the problem, to define success. What does the group want or hope to accomplish? What is the best solution to the problem at hand, and what is an acceptable intermediate solution? For complex or difficult problems, it can help to identify primary and secondary goals, long-term and short-term goals, ideal goals and compromise goals.

Only after all these steps have been articulated will it be useful to talk about and decide specific actions the group can take in response to the problem. Again, in discussing tactics, people should proceed from general to specific. Don't start working out the logistical details of a tactic until you've made sure group members approve of the tactic and have decided that the tactic will help achieve the group's chosen strategy. To properly consider the tactical questions in front of you, you may need to ask clarifying questions about one individual option, or even establish if it is logistically possible, but don't get tied up in unnecessary specifics until you have defined the options and then agreed as a group on a definite choice.

One of the ways unscrupulous people pushing their own agenda can manipulate consensus process is by getting the group to delve into the details of a specific decision before that decision has been consensed on. In such cases, the people in your group will soon be too involved in formulating a certain course of action to remember that they were considering several other courses of action as well. Although real discussions are fluid and organic, thinking of the discussion as something that unfolds in stages can help your group openly and effectively consider all options, and prevent you from getting sidetracked.

NOTE: Work out a general framework before dealing with specific details of any one element of that framework. Express the problem. Ask questions. Answer those questions. Define success. Decide specific actions.

Process of Decision Making

It's helpful to have a clear outline or flow chart of how decisions will be made in your group. Few things are more frustrating than to have a long discussion on a problem, only to find at the next meeting that some group members think a decision has been made, and others do not. Often this happens when some group members are more vocal than others, and interpret the others' silence as agreement.

This brings up the problem of leadership. In a hierarchical society, an informal decision-making process allows informal leadership. Although informal leadership may be more flexible

than formalized leadership, it is also less accountable, because it exists behind a facade of equality. Worse, it can and will accentuate unequal power dynamics already existing in the group.

How can we avoid this? To start out, the group as a whole formulates an agenda, and proceeding item by item, shares all the information at hand, discusses the topic with an eye to expressing goals and agreeing on a strategy, proposes a solution, reviews the proposal, and decides on the proposal. It repeats these steps for each new topic, until all agenda items are dealt with and the meeting is over. As long as all group members are made aware of this process, they will know exactly how decisions are made and can participate. Making decisions in this way does not require attending secret meetings, paying membership dues, knowing and being friends with the inner core of influential group members, or being able to talk more loudly or articulately than others. If would-be leaders attempt to manipulate or disregard an open and visible process, their actions will be more apparent than if they tried to do the same in a closed, informal, or hidden process.

Agenda

An agenda is simply a list of what your group will talk about at a meeting. Anyone who is a group member should be able to add a topic of discussion to the agenda. Naturally, the group should come up with an agenda at the very beginning of a meeting, if not before. Some people like to draw up the agenda before the meeting, so group members can decide how important their participation at that meeting will be, and start preparing for the discussions in advance. However, making the agenda in advance usually means that a handful of more involved group members create the agenda with little or no input from less-involved group members. This can and often does aggravate the problem of inequality within a group.

A good compromise is to create and publicize a preliminary agenda before the meeting, and then rewrite the agenda with new suggestions at the beginning of the meeting. A good way to generate a preliminary agenda is, at the end of a meeting, for the group as a whole to make a list of unresolved business to discuss at the next meeting. The preliminary agenda is then passed around by e-mail, telephone, word of mouth, or however the group communicates. Finally, it's modified at the start of the next meeting.

At that next meeting, the preliminary agenda should be made visible by putting it on a poster or chalkboard, so that it can be easily modified. After your group decides on a final agenda, that agenda should also be posted so that, during the meeting, everyone can see where the group is and how much remains to be done.

Some agenda items will be problems that require decisions (these are the hardest, and will receive the most attention in this manual), but other agenda items do not require substantial discussion and decision. These include announcements (fundraiser at so-and-so's house), complex announcements that require more question and answer before everyone fully understands (there's a big protest in New York, this is what's happening…), routine decisions with limited, well-established outcomes (where are we going to have our next meeting?), and autonomous actions that simply need the group's yea or nay ("I'm organizing a radical movie night and I want to know if I can do it in the group's name?").

If the meeting is expected to be easy or routine, the order of agenda items can be left in the random order in which group members shout them out, as someone writes them down. However, if the meeting might be difficult, it can help to order the agenda items in a strategic way. Don't

leave the difficult topics for the very end, or everyone will be too tired or frustrated to discuss them effectively. Start out with an easy decision to get people warmed up for the hard ones. If you have more than one difficult topic, it helps to break them up with easy topics or other activities.

Announcements usually work best at the beginning of a meeting. Tedious discussion topics should not be scheduled at the beginning of a meeting, when people tend to be long winded; but such topics also should not be at the end, when no one will have the energy to deal with them. Decisions that are not urgent and can be put off for another meeting should go towards the end of the meeting, so that if the group runs out of time, you will at least have covered the topics of immediate importance.

Discussion

The group should discuss one agenda item at a time, until everyone agrees to go on to the next topic. Each time the group turns to a specific agenda item, the person who suggested the topic, or the people who know most about it, should give a quick background so everyone knows what is being discussed. Then everyone who knows something about the topic should go around and share information until all the general, relevant information has been covered. Depending on how much time the group has to talk about this agenda item, you may also bring up specific details, or instead mention resources where people can research the specific details on their own. Remember: relevance is important! No one wants to sit through a long meeting, so thoroughness should be balanced with conciseness.

As people volunteer information, group members should also ask questions until they are satisfied that they know enough to proceed. You don't have to be an expert on the topic at hand, just competent to discuss it. Next, the group needs to decide its goals.

(The more diverse the group members are in their politics, visions, and worldviews, the more difficult it will be to agree on a goal. There sometimes comes a point when it is no longer effective for people to be working together in a group, because their desires are irreconcilable. For example, do we just want to raise awareness, or stop these trees from being cut down? Do we want to push the government to accept more public input and accountability in making logging decisions, or do we want to empower people to take direct action to physically prevent the logging? It is almost normal, in our alienated culture, for people to put substantial energies into a campaign without ever defining success.)

Once you have a goal, you need to decide upon a strategy to implement that goal. If a goal is a destination, a strategy is the path to reach that destination. We will raise awareness by teaching people the importance and uniqueness of this forest ecosystem/by showing how corporations hold influence over the political process at the expense of the public. Or alternately: We will stop these trees from being cut using civil disobedience to obstruct the logging operations and raise the political costs incurred by the decision-makers/ using sabotage and harassment to disable logging machinery and equipment, and to dissuade people from participating in the logging.

If a group knows what its goal is, and group members have a consistent and shared morality (do they favor civic duty or autonomy? Reform or revolution?), the basic strategy will follow on its own. A more complex strategy will take more thought, but simplicity can increase a strategy's feasibility.

Tactics are the concrete steps and actions that are carried out as part of a larger strategy. Putting out a pamphlet, organizing a demonstration, blockading a road, setting up a free clinic, all of these can be tactics within particular strategies.

Too often, activists will carry out certain tactics, especially protests, as an empty habit or ritual, without understanding how that action will help achieve a goal, or even what that goal is. The point of a discussion is to make sure that everyone knows enough to address the topic strategically, and then move from a general understanding towards making a specific plan. Usually, people will disagree about the best way to confront the problem at hand. Discussion allows group members to evaluate one another's thoughts, synthesize different ideas into a richer, more complete whole, and move towards a point of agreement that can be expressed as a concrete proposal.

Some decision topics are simple enough that the progression from goal to strategy to tactic is self-evident, and the only points requiring group decision are the logistical specifics. For example, if a group member announces that the group is out of funds, and there is a need for funds, and if neither of these bits of information are controversial, then the goal is quite obviously to raise some funds, and unless this group is the kind that engages in expropriations, you can skip discussions of strategy and go straight to talking about the tactic—what kind of fund-raising event you want to organize. Other topics are complex enough that articulating the goal, strategy, and tactics are essential. Again, depending on the complexity of the issue, the group may be able to incorporate goal, strategy, and tactics all into one decision, or you may need to go through entirely separate discussions, proposals, and decisions for each step.

NOTE: Some tactics are complex and ambitious enough to become goals in their own right, requiring a new set of strategies and tactics to implement them successfully. Most things can be viewed as one of three—as a goal, a strategy, or a tactic, depending on whether it is looked at in the context of long-term goals, short-term goals, or immediate projects.

Proposals

A proposal is a clearly articulated plan put before the group as a possible solution to the problem you are discussing. Both the timing and content of the proposal are crucial. Don't make a proposal too early in a discussion, before all group members have gotten to speak their minds and consider the different ideas sufficiently, and also don't wait until people have tired themselves out agreeing, saying the same things over and over again. It's extremely important not to make a proposal when there are still serious disagreements, as this will only divide the group. The purpose is to synthesize everyone's wants and needs; consensus is cooperative, not competitive like voting. With practice, you can begin to feel the perfect time for making a proposal—after disagreements have been discovered and amended, and group members are starting to agree on suggestions for a solution.

Not every discussion will lead to a proposal. Sometimes it becomes apparent that group members need to learn more before they make a decision, and the topic should be put off for a future meeting. At other times, disagreements are too serious to allow an effective synthesis, and group members will need more time to consider their positions and think about new solutions. A good consensus process ensures that the group is not forced into making decisions before it is ready.

If the group is ready to decide on a course of action, the proposal should be precise, inclusive, and fair. It needs to be stated clearly, and ideally restated by someone else in the group, so everyone has the same understanding of the proposal. Too often, a group goes through all the effort of a consensus decision only to find that there are multiple, conflicting interpretations of the decision. The proposal also needs to include as many group members' wants, needs, and ideas as possible. It should be an expression of the agreements that culminate from the group discussion.

Once a proposal has been made, group discussion has to focus on that proposal until it has been voted on or withdrawn.

Changing the topic or making other proposals once a proposal is already on the table is distracting and makes progress difficult.

Questions

The first step after someone makes a proposal is to ask clarifying questions, to make sure everyone has the same understanding of the proposal, and to confirm background information that can help group members assess whether the proposal is a good one.

Concerns

After clarifying questions, group members should bring up concerns they have with the proposal at hand. Group discussion can help assess whether these concerns illuminate valid problems.

Friendly Amendments

If group members' concerns with the proposals are focused on a small detail or a larger component, but are not disagreements with the entire proposal itself, either the proposer or anyone else in the group can suggest a friendly amendment. A friendly amendment is a mild modification of the proposal to address people's concerns. If anyone disagrees with the friendly amendment, the proposal and any amendments need to undergo further discussion.

Withdrawals

If it becomes obvious that a proposal, or a friendly amendment for that matter, has serious shortcomings or disapproval, the proposer can withdraw it. A withdrawal means the proposal is no longer under discussion, and the group can return to brainstorming a better proposal. The point of a proposal is to come up with a decision the whole group can own, and if it's clear that a number of other group members don't like your proposal, you should withdraw it.

Voting

Once the proposal has been discussed to everyone's satisfaction and no one appears to be staunchly opposed to it, anyone can call a vote, and as long as no one objects, the group should

then vote. Someone should restate the proposal, especially if it has been amended or changed during the discussion, and field any last clarifying questions. Then you should ask if there are any blocks or any stand asides, and then ask who is in favor. As with the proposal, timing is important in taking a vote. Don't call a vote if the room is tense or divided, and don't call a vote before everyone has gotten a chance to discuss the proposal fully.

Blocks

The block is a very powerful action, and one of the things that makes consensus unique. Any one person in the group can veto a decision. Just give a thumbs down during the vote, and the group cannot adopt that proposal. Consensus is based on voluntary association. You cannot be forced to be a member of a consensual group, like you can be forced to be the subject of a democratic government. Because the rest of the group is associating with you by choice, they can't force you to do anything you don't want to do, and the group, with you as an integral part, cannot do anything you do not approve of.

Because the block is a serious power, it comes with serious responsibilities. Firstly, you have the responsibility to explain your reason for blocking the decision, and you have the responsibility to express your serious disagreement during the group discussion, before the proposal ever comes to a vote. If people are surprised when you block a decision, something did not happen the way it was supposed to.

Because of the tremendous impact of a block, you shouldn't block unless you have a good reason. Consensus decision making cannot exist in a competitive, individualistic culture. You shouldn't block a decision just because you didn't like the proposal or thought your idea was better. You should block a proposal when you think it is a bad thing for the group as a whole to do. Consider it this way: if in your local Cop Watch group you want to publicize an instance of police brutality using a graffiti campaign, and everyone else wants to make flyers, the contradiction is simply a disagreement of preference. Ideally, your idea may be the better one, but practically you should recognize your idea won't work out well if you're the only one who is enthusiastic about it. The critical question should be, what is best for the group to do? The group can't stop you from doing your graffiti campaign on your own ume, as long as it's not in the group's name, and if you're not stoked about it you don't have to help with the group's flyering campaign. The point is that a large enough majority of the group wants to do it that it can be an effective action. You certainly can't dictate to other people what is the best way for them to spend their time.

On the other hand, if you feel like a proposed decision would hurt the group, hurt people in the group, alienate the group from its base of support, or something like that, it is your responsibility to block the decision. You should also block the decision if you think that people in the group have seriously or intentionally manipulated the process to silence disagreement, or push their proposals through without legitimately addressing concerns. One person standing alone can halt the momentum of the other group members, who may have stopped considering other opinions simply because they're in the majority. Our society certainly teaches people that might makes right. An effective block can give the rest of the group time to think about the situation from another angle.

If someone does block a decision, the group then needs to discuss whether to go back to the drawing board and work out another proposal, or drop the topic at hand, until another meeting

or for good. Some may call this a disadvantage, but I consider it one of the unique strengths of consensus decision making: it allows the group to make no decision at all. With consensus, the highest priority is the health of the group, and allowing the group to not make a decision prevents minorities from having to go along with decisions they oppose. The failure to make a decision should not be stigmatized—it should be appreciated as a signal that the group needs to work more on finding common ground.

In some cases, a healthy group using consensus will never have a block, because group members communicate so well that no one will call a vote until all major disagreements have been worked out. On the flipside, other consensus groups never see anyone block a decision because less-involved group members are afraid to cause an inconvenience or contradict the group's informal leaders.

If, on the other hand, people repeatedly block decisions, making it difficult for the group to accomplish anything, there are two possible problems. Perhaps certain members are still operating in an individualistic, competitive mode, and need to be confronted with this fact so they can decide whether to improve their behavior or find a group that better fits their beliefs. Another possibility is that yours is simply not a feasible group. An effective group needs to have common ground and good reason to work together. Can different group members even agree on a common purpose for the group? If not, it's time for the group to break up, and its members to form more effective groups with people of shared interests. Likewise, if you find yourself at odds with everyone else in your group in terms of morality and worldview, perhaps the group isn't the right one for you.

Stand Asides

If nobody blocks a decision, you should then see if anyone in the group chooses to stand aside. Signal a stand aside by putting your thumb out to the side, neither up nor down. If you personally don't feel like the proposal on the table represents the best decision, or have other disagreements with parts of the proposal, but you still think it would be better for the group to use that proposal than to do nothing at all, you can stand aside. Also, if you don't care to support the plan of action but you don't mind if other people do, you can stand aside. If anyone does indicate a stand aside during the vote, you should find out why. It's best to ask them if they feel like their concerns have been heard and addressed, and double-check that they are okay with the group accepting the proposal. If one or two people stand aside and those people feel like their concerns have been treated fairly, you're doing fine! If a large portion of the group is standing aside, that's a good indication that more involved group members have pushed a decision through without the participation or support of everyone else.

Thumbs Up

Once you have asked if anyone blocks or stands aside, even though that means that everyone else is technically in favor of the proposal, you should still go ahead and ask for thumbs up. Make sure that everyone votes one way or another. If you notice that someone did not vote, you ask why—and give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they felt intimidated.

If your consensus process is working well, you should know how everyone is going to vote before the vote is called. A major purpose of the vote is to allow formal group recognition of the proposal, and to require every single group member to personally express what they feel about the proposal before the decision is made. In groups with informal leadership in which a few more-involved people do all the talking and decision making while everyone else just sits and watches, the lack of enthusiasm and involvement by less-involved group members will be obvious—often they won't even bother giving a thumbs up to indicate their approval.

For a consensus decision to be really valid, an overwhelming majority should be actively in favor of the decision. If a substantial number of people are standing aside, you may want to bring this up after the vote, and look towards improving group dynamics.

No Decision

If, after the end of discussion and voting, you don't have a decision, don't worry: it's not the end of the world. It just means that in this case, making no decision was the best option available. What do you do now? If some people still want to take action on the issue, they can proceed autonomously in smaller groups, as long as they don't go behind anyone's back, use the group's name, or do anything that could be counterproductive to the group's other efforts. It's not a dictatorship: we don't have to get all our actions approved by the Central Committee. But at the same time it shouldn't be a competition, so don't do anything that will screw over your friends and allies.

Decision

So, the group has consensed on a decision! If it was a long and difficult process, everyone may feel stressed and worn out, but as long as the decision was made fairly, you should also feel accomplished and triumphant. But you're not done yet: make sure to write down the decision that was consensed on, and make these records available to everyone through group notes or notes sent out over an e-mail list. It's important to remember and keep a clear record of what the group consenses on, so you haven't gone through all that work for nothing.

Why is Consensus so Difficult?

Consensus is not inherently more difficult than other forms of group decision making. It's just a question of what we're used to. In this society, very few decisions are up to us. The economy, the government, the media, schools and universities are all managed from above by secretive, exclusive groups of experts and specialists. The vast majority of decisions that are left up to us, mostly simple leisure and consumer choices, are highly individualistic, and don't require any group process. Problem solving is mostly monopolized by the government, through courts, cops, politicians and social workers. Situations in which people do exist as part of a group are usually mediated by the government or some other hierarchy. There is always a boss, always a leader, always someone in charge, except in a few private settings, like interactions with friends.

In a society that treats us like incompetent, antisocial citizens/consumers/employees, our social skills atrophy like an unused muscle. Acting once again like competent, social beings requires

a lot of tiring exercise. Rather than following orders or giving orders, in consensus you're forming voluntary groups to decide new and flexible ways of organizing your lives and harmonizing your activities so that everyone's needs can be met in a manner of their choosing. With enough practice, though, consensus begins to feel like second nature. Considering how empowering it can be to work with others as equals and begin reclaiming control of all the commodified, co-opted aspects of your life, the effort is well worth it.

NOTE: Your group does not need to formally consense on every decision. Some decisions can be made informally, without going through the whole voting process. The group has to make many minor decisions throughout the discussion itself as you proceed towards consensus. For example, everyone has to agree whether they're ready to vote on a proposal, but it would be horribly inefficient to hold a vote on whether people are ready to vote on a proposal. Routine decisions, like when to hold the next meeting, can also do without full process. A good rule of thumb is this: If a decision is minor enough that the length of discussion will probably not take longer than going through a vote, than just consense informally by making a suggestion, looking for approval, asking if there are any objections, and moving along. If an issue is complex or controversial enough that the discussion will definitely take longer than the process of making a proposal and voting on it, it makes sense to use a formal, explicit consensus process. Otherwise, you may have to do it all over again if it turns out that there were objections or conflicting understandings of the informal decision.

Decision-Making Tools

	Low energy	High energy (hyper)	Too many ideas	No ideas	Group tension or conflict	Unequal participation
Step forward, step back	−			−		+
Moment of Reflection	−	+		+	+	
Go Around	+	−			−	+
Partnering	−		+	+	+	
Exercise	+	+			+	
Straw polls			+		−	+
Feelings check	+				+	+
Release valve					+	+

+ Discussion tool is helpful for this situation.
- Discussion tool is counterproductive in this situation.
no mark Discussion tool is ineffective or may have a mixed effect

Making Consensus Easier

Assigning Positions

Fortunately, there are plenty of tools to make consensus process easier. One crucial step is to assign important roles to different group members at the beginning of a meeting, to make sure the different critical tasks necessary to the process get done. Once someone volunteers for a role, they are not the sole authority on those tasks. Anyone else can choose to help out as well, but the person who volunteers is personally accountable for making sure those tasks get done. If you've volunteered for a specific job, it's easier to remember to keep an eye on your responsibilities.

The following is a list of good roles that help to keep the group working smoothly. If your group is small, or well practiced at consensus, you may want to skip some of these roles. It's also important, meeting to meeting, to make sure that different people are volunteering to take on different tasks. (You don't want one person doing the same thing over and over—it tends to make the group dependent on that person, and it impedes others from learning the task in question.)

Note Taker

At any meeting, taking notes is a task you probably don't want to skip. You need to be able to record group decisions, and inform people who missed the meeting about what was discussed. There's no need to go into exhaustive details in the notes, but at a minimum you should record all the topics that were discussed, the announcements made, major concerns or criticisms raised, and decisions consensed on. If your group is engaged in potentially illegal actions or anything that may warrant legal sanctions, the note taker should be aware of the appropriate security practice, especially in terms of what never to write down, (and in more extreme circumstances whether to take any notes at all).

The note taker may be in charge of keeping the agenda, though in some groups this is the responsibility of the facilitator. The note taker is also responsible for making the notes available to the rest of the group sometime after the meeting, via copies or e-mail or whatever your group decides is best.

Timekeeper

If your group only has a limited amount of time for meetings, or wants to keep meetings from dragging on, you can agree on a certain number of minutes per agenda item when you're writing up the agenda. A timekeeper is someone who uses a watch to let the group know when the time for a discussion topic is expired—it's also good to give a heads-up a minute or two before the time is up, and to give periodic time checks during agenda items allotted more than fifteen minutes. When the time is up, the group moves on to the next agenda item, to ensure that everything can

be covered before the meeting is over. If the group is still in the middle of a decision when the time runs out, someone can suggest an extension of another few minutes, and if no one objects discussion on the subject can continue.

Vibes Watcher

A vibes watcher is someone responsible for keeping an eye on power dynamics and vibes—emotional energy—within the group. This is an extremely important role in keeping the group healthy and functional. In majoritarian decision making, you win or you lose; your feelings don't matter. With consensus, it's the opposite. If people are feeling ignored, if someone is being domineering or manipulative, if people do not feel empowered within the group, their frustrations or submissiveness will become apparent, and it is up to the vibes watcher to interject and point this out so the group can deal with it in the open. It's important for the vibes watcher to be sensitive enough to notice and interpret nonverbal emotional cues, and fair-minded enough not to take sides.

Authoritarian behavior, cliqueishness, oppressive dynamics like sexism or racism, frustration, sadness, confusion, disempowerment, or anger evidenced by several people or an individual, tension and hostility between different factions within the group—all of these are dynamics that the vibes watcher should point out, so the group can acknowledge them and deal with them. The vibes watcher is not interested in laying blame, or singling people out. It's better to say "I'm noticing some frustration" than "So-and-so seems frustrated."

Facilitator

The facilitator plays an extremely crucial role in any meeting that includes a substantial number of people not experienced with consensus process, or in meetings that bring together people from different backgrounds or people not used to working with one another. Groups with more experience working together gradually absorb the role of facilitator until each group member participates equally in facilitating the decision-making process.

The facilitator's job is to make sure the group sticks to the agreed-upon decision-making process. This means striking a tricky balance between allowing plenty of flexibility and ensuring group efficiency. No one wants to have to follow a strict set of rules in a conversation, nor does anyone want to sit through a two-hour meeting in which discussion goes in circles, people keep changing the topic, and nothing gets accomplished. The facilitator isn't there to make the trains run on time; a little chaos helps people relax and increases group creativity, but too much prevents the group from getting anything done.

As a facilitator, you're given a certain amount of power. Don't abuse it and impose your decisions on the group or favor the people you agree with. Before you decide a comment is "off topic," make sure you don't think so just because you disagree with what the person is saying. If you can't be fair, or are too worn out to keep a clear head, step down and let someone else facilitate for the rest of the meeting. It is also the responsibility of the rest of the group to keep the facilitator in check, and give the facilitator feedback or criticism.

If a group isn't having any problems coming to decisions on its own, the facilitator won't have to do anything. If there are problems, the facilitator may need to step in. The following forms of

intervention in the group discussion are appropriate: If no one in the group takes the initiative to start forming an agenda, the facilitator should ask for agenda items, and also ask if people have a preference for the order of the agenda items. If the group is discussing an agenda item, and one person starts talking about a completely different topic, the facilitator can bring the decision back to the topic at hand, or point out that the topic has changed and ask if the whole group wants to change topics, or finish discussing the first topic. If, during the discussion, someone starts bringing up tactics or action plans while other people are still asking questions and trying to get general information about the topic, the facilitator can suggest that not everyone is ready to begin discussing possible decisions. If someone interrupts another person in the group, the facilitator should point this out. If one group member makes a suggestion and everyone ignores it, the facilitator should encourage discussion of that person's suggestion. If group discussion is going in circles, the facilitator should suggest moving forward. Sometimes it helps if the facilitator expresses an apparent consensus, when everyone seems to be saying similar things. If no one else in the group does so, the facilitator should make proposals, and conduct voting, when the time is ripe. The facilitator can also suggest go arounds, straw polls, or other discussion tools (which will be discussed later).

It is inappropriate for the facilitator to impose a discussion process that people disagree with. Any disagreement should be discussed before a decision is made. It is also inappropriate for the facilitator to provide an interpretation of how the group feels without giving group members the chance to agree or disagree. A good mantra to keep yourself in line, if you are facilitating a meeting, is "Open doors for equal participation. Help synthesize different ideas. Move towards a decision that everybody can own."

To keep from strong-arming the group, it's often best if the facilitator phrases comments about process as questions. Rather than saying: "That's off-topic, so we can't talk about it," say "Do we want to move onto this topic, or finish what we were already discussing?" Don't tell the group what to do, ask them what they want to do. This encourages group members to think more strategically and efficiently about the discussion, and returns power over the course of the discussion back to the group as a whole, away from the facilitator, and away from any individual who may try to change the topic or otherwise manipulate the discussion. Also, if the facilitator misses the relevance of a comment, or misinterprets what the group wants, using a question rather than an accusation can avoid undue tension.

Another effective tool of communication you can use as a facilitator is simply to express what you see happening. Oftentimes, people do not realize when they are being manipulative or counter-productive. Our society does not teach us to be effective and fair at communicating. Hearing other people describe our communication techniques helps us think about them. It can also be helpful to sum up what seems to be the common opinion, or to suggest a compromise or synthesis, when group members are just repeating one another or butting heads without having an actual disagreement.

There are a number of factors that can influence the role of facilitator. A major distinction is whether your group wants to use an involved or an uninvolved facilitator. An involved facilitator is a group member who participates in discussion and decision making, as well as fulfilling the facilitator role. An uninvolved facilitator is usually someone from outside the group who does not take part in discussion or decision making except to help the rest of the group make a decision.

Preferably, your group will not need outside help to facilitate meetings. However, some meetings are very difficult, and some groups too temporary, too large, or too inexperienced to have

the necessary cohesion to come to decisions organically. With difficult meetings or incohesive groups, it can help to bring in an experienced, outside facilitator, someone who is not self-interested in what gets decided, only interested in making sure that consensus flows smoothly, and that the whole group is happy with the decisions.

Obviously, if one person facilitates meeting after meeting, that person will become an authority figure. Still, the need to rotate facilitators should be balanced with the need to have competent facilitators. Someone who is not ready to facilitate a group meeting, but does so because he thinks it's a minor task or has been pressured into taking on the role because "it's his turn," will lose confidence in his abilities, and will also hurt group dynamics, as the others fall back into informal leadership patterns as an easier alternative to confronting the poor facilitation and helping the facilitator better learn his role. Your group should make a definite effort towards helping everyone become experienced facilitators (at which point no one facilitator is needed, and spontaneous or informal consensus becomes practical). Break in less-experienced facilitators with easier meetings, reserve time to give newer facilitators helpful feedback, provide workshops and discussions on good facilitation techniques, and in the meantime let the better facilitators pick up some of the slack, as long as they understand that their role is to fade back into the group as quickly as possible. Their experience is only helpful to the group if they pass it on, rather than hold onto it for themselves.

Stack Taker

A stack is simply a list of people who are next in line to speak. Sometimes there is no need for a stack, but when you have multiple people trying to speak at once, it helps if the facilitator asks people to raise their hands. The person who volunteered at the beginning of the meeting to be stack taker then begins making a list, writing people's names down in order of who raised their hand first. When one person is done speaking, the stack taker then says whose turn is next. Small, informal, well acquainted groups do not need a stack anymore than do groups of friends, but a group wishing to expand beyond a clique can make room for equal participation with a stack.

At certain points in a meeting, like brainstorming sessions, the group may explicitly wish to do away with the stack. At other times, there are many options for how exactly the group uses a stack. Should you use a straight stack or give priority to the less vocal? For example, some groups create a gendered speakers' list, meaning that every time a man is added to the stack, a woman must be next. Gender-balanced stacks can help groups with pronounced sexist dynamics be more mindful of male domination or unequal participation, but they can entrench gender binary or otherwise rigid segregation of people with different gender identities. Gender-balanced stacks can also be mistaken as a solution to gender inequality in meetings, and allow group members to avoid thinking about, and fail to solve, the underlying causes of unequal participation. The ultimate goal should be a group in which people notice and equalize gender dynamics on their own.

Groups that have problems with run-on speakers can impose time limits for each person on the stack, but this is also a temporary solution that can create the same problems as gender-balanced stacks. Other groups may decide that no one can get on the stack a second time until everyone has been on once, or more flexibly, that no one can speak three times until everyone has

spoken. A helpful tactic to increase the group's awareness of unequal dynamics without imposing any rules is for the stack taker to read every name on the stack at the end of the meeting. If a particular individual is speaking more often than everyone else, this will become quite apparent when the stack is read off. The stack taker should be able to conduct the stack in whatever way the group decides is best.

Hand Signals

To "affirm," extend one or both hands and wiggle all your fingers up and down (sometimes referred to as "twinkling"), give a "thumbs up," or visibly nod. Affirming means you agree with what someone is saying. It takes the role of clapping or snapping your fingers, which can make it hard to hear and encourages speechifying. Affirming is very helpful, because it lets everyone know when an idea is popular, and can proceed towards consensus. No one wants to sit around and listen to a whole line of people say "I agree with what so-and-so says," but on the other hand, consensus means that everyone's opinions are essential to the process. Affirming allows people to express supportive opinions without wasting time on duplicate comments.

There should be no complementary gesture of disagreement, for two reasons. First, it can be very intimidating to someone if they start talking and everyone starts shaking their heads or giving a thumbs down—it's almost as bad as being interrupted, and less-confident people especially will stop sharing their idea if they see signs of disapproval. Secondly, if you disagree with a comment, you need to explain to the group why you disagree. There is no comparable negative hand gesture, because people who disagree should just raise their hand and get on the stack.

Process Point

You signal a process point by making a triangle with the thumb and index finger of each hand. The process point is one of two hand signals that can bump you to the top of the stack. Even if five people are waiting to speak when you signal a process point, you are the next one to speak. This means that you need to be very careful about using process points. Process points must be substantive comments about discussion process, not personal opinions, announcements, or discussion topics. Important comments about group vibes (e.g., "So-and-so just got interrupted" or "There's a lot of hostility here we should deal with") or time limits (e.g., "We're over the agreed time for this topic"), whether or not they are made by the assigned vibes watcher or timekeeper, can be process points.

Comments correcting the discussion process can also be made as process points. For instance, if one person makes a proposal and another person changes the subject or continues discussing the topic without acknowledging the proposal; or if people keep changing the topic; or if someone makes a decision for the whole group without allowing a vote, make a process point and express what happened. If you are the facilitator, it's your job to make comments like that, so you can speak up without making the hand signal, unless your group has decided that they want the facilitator to act like any other group member.

Direct Response

Signal a direct response by making a gun with your hand and pointing at the person you wish to respond to. A direct response is the other hand signal that bumps you to the top of the stack, so use it responsibly. Again, no opinions. Use a direct response to offer corrections, in case someone reports some information that is not true. Make sure you're offering a correction only if it is a matter of solid facts, and not just a differing interpretation of facts. You can also give a direct response to offer clarifying information. It's best to do this only when someone else has asked a question, and you have more relevant information about it than other group members. It is also acceptable to use a direct response if someone says something you don't understand and want to ask a clarifying question.

Other Signals

There are also hand signals for voting: thumbs up, thumbs down, and stand aside, which have already been discussed. Your group can come up with other hand signals as needed. Be prepared to come up with back-up signals for people who are not able to use their hands, or do not have hands.

Nonverbal Language

It's important to remember that not all language comes in words. Nonverbal language—body posture, hand signals, facial expressions, expressive sounds like sighs or laughter— can have a critical impact on the collective mood and the effectiveness of the group. It would be absurd to suggest we should try to be "positive" all the time. Never try to hide your feelings, just express them in a constructive way that makes it easy for problems to be dealt with. If you are frustrated, or don't like what someone is saying, don't do things that could increase hostility or make people feel stupid, like rolling your eyes, groaning, fidgeting impatiently, yelling, et cetera. Expressing discontent should be encouraged, but don't do it in a bullying way.

Changing the Format of Discussion

No two people communicate in the exact same way. While some forms of communication are counterproductive or hurtful, there is no single right way to communicate. But there are good ways and bad ways. Your group can embrace multiple healthy styles of communication by using multiple discussion formats within a meeting. You can't find one compromised style that suits everyone, so change up! Here are some discussion formats that your group can incorporate in addition to the linear, goal-oriented format that has been described so far. The linear style can help your group progress towards an effective decision, and these other styles can be used along the way to encourage greater participation and new ways of thinking.

Step Forward, Step Back

Especially when a discussion is being dominated by more assertive group members, the facilitator, or anyone else, can ask people to step forward and step back. What this means is that people should honestly assess whether they are someone who is comfortable speaking or if they are someone who does not contribute much to group discussions. People who identify themselves as more talkative should then hold their tongues and think twice before they decide to take up the group's time with a comment. Less talkative people are responsible for trying to contribute more to the discussion. Calling for a step forward, step back reminds people of their responsibilities and allows them to improve their own behavior. It also increases awareness of unequal participation in the group. If you can't honestly admit, for example, that you take an unequal amount of space during discussions, and you continue to talk disproportionately after someone has called for a step forward, step back, then your inability to make yourself accountable to the group will become more obvious to those around you. Alternately, if you continue to be quiet during group discussions, other group members may be encouraged to look for more entrenched dynamics that keep you silent, or to try to get to know you better and find out if you're not just someone who would choose to be quiet even in a perfectly egalitarian society.

Moment of Reflection

Guess what? Not everyone can think of things to say at the drop of a hat. Often, silence is fertile ground for new thoughts. Especially in difficult, fast-paced meetings, you can call for a moment of silence. This helps to relieve stress, give slower people more time to think (and thus participate), and allow clarity in a tense or confused moment. And just like counting to ten after someone insults you, a moment of silence can defuse strife and prevent an argument.

Even when your group isn't using a moment of silence, silence can be helpful. For example, if you're a quick thinker and speaker, try to leave a second or two of silence after someone finishes speaking before you start speaking. Hold on to your thought, make sure it is important, look around and see if anyone else is also about to speak. A rapid-fire conversation with no pauses can be very intimidating for people who are less assertive.

Go Around

On the other hand, too much silence can be suffocating! Sometimes, no one has any ideas they want to share. At other times, the more assertive people in a group might feel guilty for talking all the time, so they keep quiet. But if the people who are usually responsible for keeping discussions moving stop talking, less-assertive group members may feel even more uncomfortable speaking up. In any of these situations, you can suggest a go around. One person, usually the one who suggested it, starts by sharing their thoughts and feelings for a few seconds to a minute. Then the next person shares, and the next person, until everyone has spoken. A go around helps break the ice, bring out new ideas, or reveal how the entire group feels about an issue.

In other situations, doing a go around can be counterproductive. If the group is divided on an issue, facing high tensions or a possible argument, a go around may only draw party lines and encourage majoritarian competition, especially in larger groups.

Partnering

In situations of tension or conflict, a good tactic can be partnering. Simply call for partnering, and if no one objects, group members split up into small groups of two or three to talk. The fewer people there are, the more each person gets to talk. Partnering helps explore complex ideas or controversies, and allows you to see other points of view and work out a compromise. It's easier to get in a fight with someone the farther away from you they are—being face to face encourages cooperation. At the end of the partnering, it may be a good idea for each pair to report back to the whole group the highlights of what they discussed.

Fishbowl

A fishbowl allows a group to explore a contentious topic that has divided the group into multiple sides or opposing camps. The different sides choose representatives to advocate their positions. The larger group remains on the outside, in a circle, observing as the representatives of the two or more opposing sides meet in the middle to work out the disagreement. They may come to a compromise themselves, or they may debate until the group as a whole is won over to one side or the other. The fishbowl has the advantage of allowing for greater detail and continuity than is usually possible in large group discussions, which can be helpful in evaluating solutions to difficult questions. The fishbowl also recognizes that a group may factionalize during certain disagreements, despite efforts to maintain a constant air of reconciliation, unity, and consensus. On the downside, fishbowls can be highly competitive, and can increase the influence of more articulate group members while disempowering those who are not confident debaters. Fishbowls can elevate debate above mutual understanding, and they can give more importance to the effectiveness of someone's rhetoric than to the merits of the position they are advocating.

Brainstorming

If your group is stumped on a particular problem, or wants to encourage a highly creative solution, it can help to put the linear discussion on hold and do some brainstorming. It works best when everyone gathers close together around a sheet of paper or chalkboard, on which someone will write down every idea that gets tossed out. For simple decisions, like picking a name or the wording for a banner, just do a "shout-out" or a "popcorn." As soon as you think of something, shout it out, until the group's creative energies crescendo and everyone is tossing out ideas, like popcorn. Ideally, when you're all done a suggestion that everyone likes will be right there, written down on the piece of paper.

More complex decisions require more interaction. If you have an idea or an example, , just start talking about it to the whole group or the person next to you. Try to listen to everyone at once, and plagiarize everything you hear in your next suggestion. If you see someone isn't participating, make them comfortable by asking what they think. Everyone should be participating all at once. The more chaotic, the more creative. Hopefully, all the input will coagulate into one dynamic, solid plan or idea. In the end, no one will know whose idea it is, and it will belong to everyone.

Exercise

If group energy is flagging, or if the meeting has been dragging on for a long time, it can be a good idea to ask for a minute to stretch, do jumping jacks, take a break, or go to the bathroom. Moving around can break the monotony, and give people more energy when they come back together.

Straw Polls

During a discussion about a possible decision, it may be helpful to know how everyone feels. For example, you may raise a concern you have with someone's proposal. It's not a serious problem, and you'll stand aside if no one else agrees with you. You want to know if you are the only one who feels that way, or if other people do too and they just haven't spoken. Or maybe someone raises a possible objection as a hypothetical, to play devil's advocate, and then the entire group discussion starts to revolve around that objection. You may wish to know if anyone personally has an objection, or if everyone just thinks that someone else does. Call for a straw poll and ask people to raise their hands if they agree/disagree. "Raise your hand if you think we need to do a fundraiser in the next month." "Raise your hand if you think that blocking the street for our May Day party will alienate us from the community." Straw polls are good to get a feel for everyone's opinions, but be careful: by possibly expressing a majority, it's a potential intimidation tactic. Consensus means that everyone counts, but if someone sees that they are outnumbered, they may silence themselves. Don't use straw polls when dealing with controversial or divisive topics. Use more discussion instead.

Feelings Check

At some point at every meeting, it's a good idea to have a feelings check. A feelings check is a go around in which everyone in the group tells how they are feeling, what they think is going well, what they think is going poorly. A group can't improve without feedback, and the feelings check gives everyone an opportunity to make constructive criticisms. In a society based on domination and unfairness, confronting problems is discouraged—we're supposed to just shut up and mind our own business, or call the cops and they'll take care of things for us. To make a good revolution, we need to be able to confront our problems. It can be difficult to call out your friends and fellow activists when they screw up. People think they're being attacked, and get defensive. It's important for your group to create a safe space for people to bring up criticisms.

Expressing feelings is also crucial in a consensus-based group. Living in a patriarchal society, we are taught to minimize feelings. In activist circles, people value analytical communication and political intelligence, but don't value social or emotional intelligence. If anything, we need more of the latter! It doesn't require a sophisticated analysis to organize a good tree sit or provide health care in an impoverished community. You don't have to be able to articulate the difference between CNT anarchists and Tolstoy's anarchists to trash an army recruiting office. Good analysis is necessary for creating an effective strategy, but building cohesive groups and a strong movement requires a great deal of social skills and emotional intelligence. Activists lack these skills because we don't even recognize their importance.

Release Valve

If someone does something during a meeting that hurts you, or if over time an atmosphere builds up that makes it impossible for you to function as an equal member of the group, you can call for a release valve. Because in a consensus based group, the most important thing is group unity, and because group unity can only be ensured by keeping group members happy (there is no central power to force you to remain a part of the group), a serious conflict takes precedence over political discussions, plans of action, or other activist business.
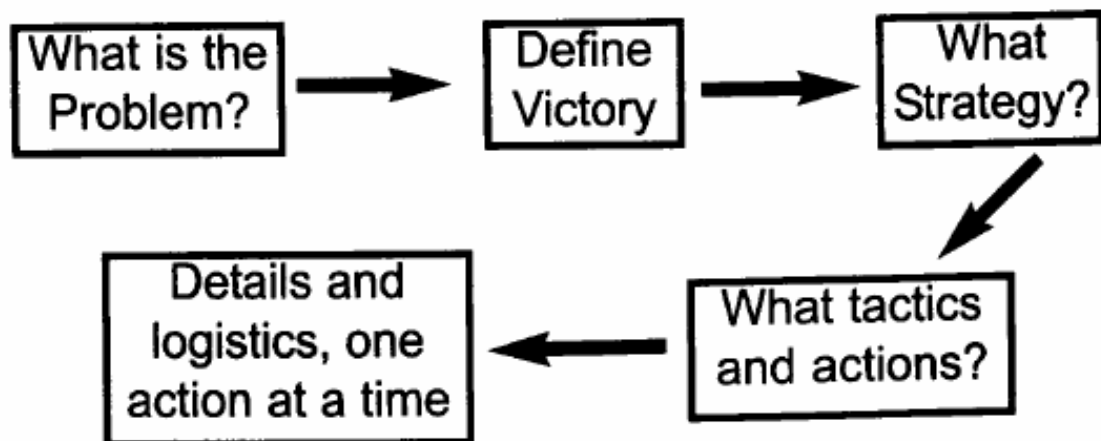
If you call for a release valve, other discussions are put on hold and you tell the group about the problem you are having. Other people in the group should try to address the problem. If you can't solve it with a single discussion, set up a way to continue communicating about it. If everyone agrees, you can continue with business in the meantime, and try to finish the meeting while remaining sensitive to the problem. If not, people can take autonomous action, where action is needed, in the group's ongoing campaigns, until the group manages to heal its problems.

For example, one group planning a campaign against a nearby clear-cut began experiencing serious problems with communication during meetings. There were major conflicts, and group members could not agree on how to communicate and make decisions. Some people did not even want to talk about the problem, while others felt that failure to agree on a clear form of acceptable communication would lead to a rule of "might makes right" in which the more assertive people would be able to dominate everyone else. The group halted work on its campaign and focused energies on finding common ground and building a new foundation. Meanwhile, individuals within the group were free to take autonomous actions to prepare for a campaign against the clear cut, or try to stop the clear cut themselves, on their own or in small groups.

Because in a free, anti-authoritarian group, you don't need permission to take action, group-building work should never be set in contradiction with outward activism. Both can be done simultaneously. If you claim that focusing on group problems makes your group less effective, you are ensuring both that the group creates more and more problems and that it becomes less and less effective at solving those problems. Government got to be where it is today in part because of a similar mechanism.

Discussion Process
Formulating Solutions and Strategizing

What is the Problem?	→	Define Victory	→	What Strategy?

Details and logistics, one action at a time	←	What tactics and actions?

Updates and Simple Decisions

Share Information	→	Address questions, concerns	→	Brainstorm suggestions

Logistics: who, when, how?	←	Summarize and synthesize
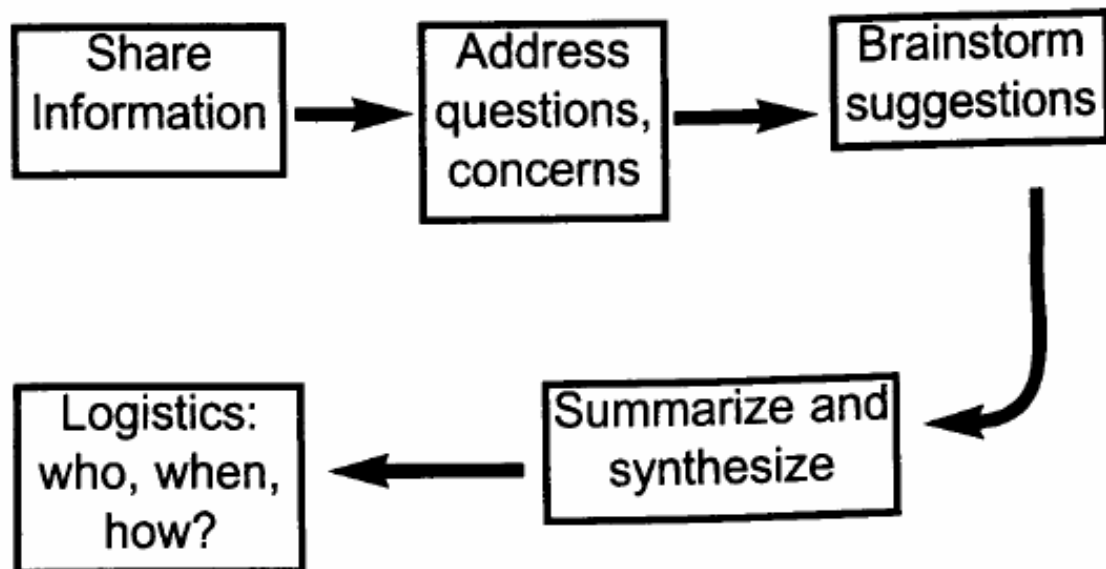
Meeting Structure

Consensus is meant to be an organic, not mechanical, process. Flexibly adapting to changing circumstances is more important than adhering to some rigid script. Activists have developed many different tools to use with consensus process. It's important to learn how specific characteristics of a meeting or of your group determine whether using a certain tool will be effective.

The type of meeting has a major impact on how formal or "process heavy" the meeting should be. If the meeting is going to be long, it can be smoother and less painstaking if everyone closely follows the discussion process, one item at a time, of inform-discuss-propose-decide. A strong facilitator can help keep people on track. Alternately, if a meeting needs to occur in a very short time frame, it helps to have a strong facilitator, especially an uninvolved one. Also, if urgency dictates it, people can consense verbally, without going through all the voting signals. If a meeting is attended by a large number of people, it also helps to be more formal. Carefully taking stack and having a good vibes watcher are very important in large meetings. Consider using a priority stack, rather than a straight stack, to ensure broader participation and prevent monopolization by the more vocal people. The vibes watcher should especially watch out for people feeling excluded or uninvolved. If a meeting is attended by different groups of people who do not know each other very well, it helps to use icebreakers, partnering, and feelings checks. If a meeting consists of an old core of experienced group members and a number of new participants, it is vital to be very open about the process being used, and to explain all the different discussion tools that are available. Don't be afraid to ask newcomers to observe for a while to figure out how the process works before they jump in as equal participants, but make sure to answer any questions they might have.

Making Decisions without the Whole Group

Is it still consensus if some group members are not present at a meeting? A group has to make decisions, and it is rare that everyone in a group can attend every meeting. Ultimately, if you miss a meeting, you miss out on the decisions made in that meeting. There are still things a group can do to ensure maximal participation. Firstly, make sure that everyone in the group knows about every meeting. Don't wait until the night before to send out an announcement over e-mail, and don't rely exclusively on e-mail unless you know everyone in the group is a computer junkie. Also, don't hold a three-hour-long meeting and make all the decisions at the very end when most people have left already. If a decision is particularly monumental, make the decision over the course of several meetings, to allow for multiple opportunities for people to give input and to participate in the process.

Your group may wish to remain flexible about when decisions can be made. If meeting attendance is low, the group can decide at the very beginning whether they feel comfortable making certain decisions, based on the importance and urgency of the decisions, the number of people in attendance, and whether people who have been crucially involved in a particular project are

in attendance. Just be open about the reasons for postponing a decision. An easy way to set up unofficial leaders in a group is to avoid decision-making when group members seen as more influential are not present.

If your group is membership based, like a worker-owned cooperative, and roughly equal participation by all members is assumed, you may wish to decide on a quorum, or the minimum number of members necessary for the group to be able to make decisions of varying importance.

Alternative Voting

It is important to recognize that people cannot, and should not, agree on everything. We can be expected to consense on common expectations and responsibilities as members of a group, or on group strategies. Groups in many societies have used consensus to answer these questions as long as humans have existed. We cannot be expected to all agree on matters of personal taste, artistic creation, or other individualized matters that may intersect with group activities. In some cases, there is no need to agree: consensus-based groups should not enforce conformity or micromanage the preferences and tastes of individuals. For example, if you are making signs for a protest outside the local slumlord's office, you don't need to consense on each and every placard. Everyone can make their own signs, exercising their own judgment and artistic sensibilities.

Sometimes, matters of preference and artistic creation must be decided by the group. Cooperation in art usually blunts each person's artistic creativity. If your group is making a zine about DIY healthcare, for example, compile a list as a group of what questions the zine should answer, then allow everyone to volunteer to take personal responsibility for a particular section. Use compilations to express the diversity of voices in your group. If a group project requires a compositional unity—say you're painting a mural about gentrification on the wall of an abandoned building—don't be afraid to consense as a group on adopting one person's vision.

Another tool that can help is alternative voting. Your group can agree by consensus to use a form of majoritarian voting to make a particular decision. This exception should take place within an overall consensus framework, and the decision reached by the vote should still be subject to a block, if anyone strongly disagrees with the outcome. In one example, a newly formed community organization was trying to decide on a name. There were at least five contenders for people's favorite name suggestions. Discussion couldn't change people's minds as to what their favorites were, so they decided to vote on the name. The purpose was to find a name that no one was unhappy with, not to find a name that was everyone's favorite, and not to find the most popular name. So the group adopted a complex form of voting, in which each person wrote down their favorite choice, their second favorite choice, and their third favorite choice. First choices got three points, second favorite choices got two points, and third favorite choices got one point. After the point total for each choice was tallied, the least popular suggestions were eliminated, and group members talked about how they felt about the remaining choices. Then a run-off vote was held. In the end, the group decided on a name that was basically everyone's second choice; it was no one's favorite, so no one "won" the vote, but it was also a name that everyone was satisfied with. After the voting process, the group used consensus to establish that they were happy with the decision, and everyone thought that the results were fair.

You can use your creativity to come up with other forms of alternative voting. Another good method is to give people a certain number of points that they can use as negative votes or posi-

tive votes. This can help weed out choices that are favored by a majority, but strongly opposed by a minority. It's also a good idea, with alternative voting, to allow a gradual process of elimination through multiple rounds of voting. With just one round of voting, the outcome may be an unpleasant surprise to many group members. Multiple rounds allow group members to affirm the best choice more thoroughly.

There is another type of situation in which alternative voting can be useful within a consensus framework. In very large groups, especially when people do not know one another very well, consensus process can be a cumbersome way to come up with effective strategies. This situation often arises among groups that come together to plan a large action or mobilization. Often, a large group in such a situation can come up with a general theme to the action, and then clusters and affinity groups within the coalition can make detailed plans in small groups about their own participation. However, sometimes a large group needs to come up with a more detailed decision. Such a large group can easily dumb down individuals' ideas (each person has less time to express themselves) and prevent the adoption of detailed or complex strategies. In these situations, it could be helpful for the large group to use consensus process to agree on an overall theme or set of parameters, and then agree to use a voting system to select a detailed strategy. In such a situation, after individuals or groups within the coalition have had time to formulate specific plans, the group discusses and revises the plans, and votes on their favorite one. If done well, this method will not violate the spirit of consensus, because each specific plan should adhere to the group's parameters and any concerns people might have should not be fundamental enough to require a block.

Using consensus process is also counterproductive in the middle of actions, say during a protest, when decisions need to be made quickly. A cohesive group should consense on a strategy or goal beforehand, and come up with an effective way for the particulars to be decided during the action, when group communication becomes difficult. It usually works to assign clearly defined roles to trusted individuals within the group. During a street action this could include scouts, communications people, and a movement leader. Anti-authoritarian groups should not be afraid of leadership in this context: the positions are temporary, they only exist in pursuit of a goal consensed on by the group, and no coercive powers are given to the "leader"—meaning that at any point someone in a leadership role betrays the group's trust, every single person in the group still has the power of the "block," because they can refuse, break off, or demand that new roles be assigned. A group engaged in direct action or confrontational protest simply cannot conduct a meeting while being chased by the cops, though sadly quite a few times in the past anarchists have done so, rather than using a decision-making process, in the spirit of consensus, specifically adapted to the situation at hand. This is no different than using delegates at spokescouncils or assigning coordinators to manage specific tasks (e.g., publicity, fundraising) during a campaign. The group consenses on a goal, and individuals are entrusted to oversee the particulars in achieving that goal.

A good way for your group to decide how best to employ consensus in a particular situation is to be clear on whether you want to privilege action or inaction. Consensus process as described through most of this book privileges inaction, meaning that without consensus, the group takes no action. In many situations this is helpful because it preserves group unity, but in many situations—whether you're counteracting a police assault at a protest or responding to a major group conflict—not taking action is simply not an acceptable option. In these situations, your group should formulate a way to privilege action over inaction.

Consensus Minus One?

Some groups like to use "consensus minus one," which means it takes two people, not just one, to block a decision. Full consensus is not needed or attempted. This practice may reflect the belief that one person objecting alone against the entire group is probably being obstinate, but another person being in agreement validates the objection. You may or may not agree with this belief. However, the reason most often stated by proponents for using consensus minus one is that this format prevents a single person from sabotaging the entire group, be that person a government informer, a mentally ill person, a self-righteous and uncooperative activist, a socially maladapted person who just can't get a grasp of the idea of consensus, or just some random jerk. This fear of sabotage is in itself counterproductive. More so than any other decisionmaking process, consensus should be immune to sabotage, unless it is viewed in the legalistic or nonconfrontational mentality that is behind the idea of consensus minus one.

Consensus process should not be viewed as a legalistic process. Consensus process is not kept on track by an effective set of bylaws. It works because of the involvement of a group's members. Trying to solve the fear of group dysfunction by adding a rule (one that significantly limits group members' rights and powers) is an ineffective response, the result of conditioning from an authoritarian, legalistic society. Group dysfunction should be actively confronted by the group, not passively sequestered by a rule. Consensus-based groups are antiauthoritarian. They are based on the principle of voluntary association. If you are functioning poorly within the group and you do not earnestly wish to improve your level of cooperation, there is no reason for you to remain a member, not for your own sake, nor for the sake of the group. If you cannot recognize this yourself, the other group members should be able to confront you, and if necessary, ask you to leave.

By putting a consensus-minus-one rule in the books, your group is abdicating its responsibility to confront dysfunctions within the group, thus ensuring the perpetuation and proliferation of such dysfunctions. Any time several people in your group come to a thorough, balanced conclusion that a particular group member is causing serious problems and dysfunctions, they should discuss their options, preferably with every group member except the problem person, and then confront that person.

If a random jerk has started coming to your meetings, and after being confronted she won't make any attempts to be more sociable, she should be expelled from the group. She has the right to be a jerk, and to accept the consequences of her jerkiness. Your group has the right to make decisions in a jerk-free space. If someone simply can't get the idea of consensus, offer your time and patience to teach him. If he won't make enough effort to learn, let him know he would be better off in a group of like-minded individuals. The same goes with an activist who is obstinate, selfish, or self-righteous. Allowing that person to continue being active in the group without changing her behavior, and simply side-stepping her blocks by using consensus minus one, is a horrible idea. Confront the problem! If your group is joined by a person with a mental illness or disability that causes him to unintentionally disrupt group discussions or prevent consensus, simply ignoring his blocks (and no doubt ignoring his comments as well) is a condescending, disempowering, and unfair way to deal with the problem. Talk to this person, see that he gets the help he needs, and try to find activities he can be involved with in a constructive way.

In the worst case scenario, if government provocateurs infiltrate your group with the intent to disrupt it, consensus minus one is a useless way to address the problem. There is nothing to stop

the government from planting more than one infiltrator, if all they want to do is block decisions. You probably will not know for sure if someone is a government infiltrator, and it doesn't actually matter very much. Particularly among white, internet-savvy activists, more harm has been done by accusations of infiltration (all of them probably made by legitimate, though paranoid, activists) than by bona fide infiltrators. A key rule of security consciousness is that you don't have to be a cop to do a cop's work. If someone is causing problems, regardless of whether you think she's a cop, confront her, and if she fails to cooperate, expel her from the group. An emotionally healthy and communicative group is the best defense against infiltration. Infiltrators will be unable to disrupt the group, and they will not be able to gather information about illegal activities as long as you never plan or discuss such activities with people you don't know and trust completely, and avoid areas where eavesdropping or wiretapping is a possibility.

Mission Statements and Principles of Unity

A good tool for an effective group is to have a mission statement or principles of unity. You can't make consensus decisions if you can't agree on basic values. If everyone has a common understanding of the structure, purpose, and goals of the group, as well as principles of communication (e.g., be open to criticism, be respectful of others, etc.) and principles of activism (anti-racism, anti-sexism, being queer friendly, etc.) you have a strong basis for reaching consensus in your various projects, actions, and campaigns.

Working Groups

If your group has a large amount of work to do—say you're planning a conference—it can help to break into working groups. A working group is a subset of the major group that gets together to discuss and plan a particular task or responsibility. Working groups for an organization planning a conference may include Publicity, Housing, Fundraising, Venues, and so on. Working groups allow you to free up time in general meetings for matters of general importance; they allow the different tasks to be planned simultaneously and thoroughly; and they allow group members to work on the projects they are most interested in. Your group may want to give working groups differing levels of autonomy, in terms of how they meet and how much they can do. Working groups might all meet at the same time: one selected time during general meetings. Or working groups can arrange meetings separate from general group meetings, to allow them as much time as they need, and so that everyone in the working group can attend. As for decision-making authority, there are a number of options. It may be best to allow working groups to make important decisions (strategy decisions, action decisions) on their own, or to allow them to make only less important, logistical decisions. Or your group may decide that working groups should only research, discuss, and then bring proposals for decisions to the whole group. In any case, working groups should report back regularly to the main group so that everyone can stay informed.

Autonomous Action

At times, you may want to act autonomously (by yourself or in a small group without approval from the main group). It is vital for people to be able to do this in any anti-authoritarian community. Autonomous actions may be more effective, or more secure for illegal actions. They may spark initiative in your group or larger activist community, or they may just be what you need to do at a particular time. Autonomous actions should not be problematic unless they sabotage a group campaign, specifically put fellow activists at risk, use group resources, or are done in the name of the group.

Informal Consensus

In many meetings or other group functions, there aren't actually any major decisions to make. Often, the agenda will only include announcements, people giving updates on what they've been working on, and maybe deciding logistical details of a project that is already underway. In such cases, there is no need for many of these decision-making tools or process structures. But it's still a good idea to use the same basic frameworks, for a number of reasons. Using the same basic process can make it easier to plug in more tools when they become necessary, and it also helps you to stay in practice. Otherwise, needing to use formal process after several months of

lax meetings can be awkward and difficult. Some consensus groups have remained informal for so long that they lose their self-identity, develop runaway problems with unaccountable group members, or bring in new members who, it turns out, don't even support the idea of consensus and never really knew the group was consensus-based.

It also helps to constantly use mechanisms that encourage feedback and help people express problems that might be swept under the rug in an informal setting. And when new people come to your meetings, being able to see the basic skeleton of consensus process demystifies it for them and makes it less intimidating or confusing when a major decision requires the use of tools or processes they might not have encountered before. For example, you should have a facilitator, vibes watcher, and note taker at every meeting, and the individuals who volunteer can decide how active a role they need to take based on the situation. If a meeting proves more difficult than anticipated, it helps to already have people filling these roles, ready to step forward. Also, you should make some forms of encouraging feedback a tradition for your group.

One activist organization, regardless of how loose or informal a meeting is, always has a feelings check at the end of meetings. This tool gives people the opportunity to say if they thought the meeting needed to be better organized, or to express other problems. Also, it is one of the easier consensus process tools for new people to participate in. A feelings check can make new group members feel valued and comfortable, and allows them to give feedback to the group process, which can be invaluable to other group members.

As always, you need to use your best judgment in deciding the appropriate degree of formality. Using more process than you need can feel stifling and bureaucratic. Using too little allows the meeting to be dominated by more vocal people, and can lead to decisions that exclude many group members' opinions. It is not at all infrequent in overly informal meetings that one person can leave thinking the group agreed on a certain decision, while another person might have a different understanding of the decision, or think that no decision was agreed on.

Example Speaker's List
(by gender)

of people in Meeting

Men
卌

Women
卌 ||

All comments

Men
卌 卌
卌 卌
卌 ||||

Women
卌 卌
卌 卌||

Raised hand before speaking

M
卌 卌
卌 |

W
卌 卌
卌

Interruptions

M
卌 ||

W
||

Lengthy comments / Run-ons

M
卌 卌
|

W
||||

Asked a question

M
卌

W
卌 卌
卌 ||

NOTE: If men and women participate unequally in your group, keeping track of participation during a meeting and sharing the results at its end can help illuminate the problem and can make people aware of how they participate.

Awareness of Group Dynamics

What Do We Mean by Dynamics

The dynamics of a group are its patterns of interaction, communication, power, and responsibility. Is anyone condescending, aggressive, or paternalistic? Who talks more, and who less? Who asks questions and who makes statements? Whose ideas does the group adopt and act on, and whom does the group ignore? Who does the grunt-work to turn a plan into a reality, and who gets the credit? Being aware of these patterns helps your group stay healthy.

An Unforgivably Quick Rundown of Common Power Dynamics

Noticing the power dynamics in your group takes a combination of sensitivity and practice. Ultimately, individual personalities and specifics within your group have more weight (in terms of how exactly your group interacts) than generalized patterns of social oppression, but being aware of oppressive dynamics can help keep those dynamics out of your group. Here are some basics:

Gender

A bad gender dynamic might include men being responsible for decision making and high-profile, rewarding actions, while women are responsible for thankless logistics and grunt work. Men's ideas are more highly valued, as are "masculine" skills like analysis and political intelligence, while social skills and emotional intelligence are undervalued. Queer people will either be marginalized or forced to conform to binary gender dynamics, acting in either a masculine or feminine role. A good gender dynamic will allow an unlimited range of gender expression. Rather than being polarized into one of two categories, everyone will able to develop their personal strengths and work on their weaknesses, while also giving one another a safe space to heal from patriarchal dynamics in the outside world.

Age

A bad age dynamic could include old people devaluing or patronizing young people, and young people dismissing or marginalizing old people. A good age dynamic will allow group members to de-emphasize age, and learn together without ego, without assumptions that age grants either wisdom or obsolescence. Everyone will recognize that they are at different places in learning about different things, and that their personal experiences are not necessarily applicable to others.

Class

A bad class dynamic could include college-educated people talking down to poor activists, or using academic jargon to "talk over" them or otherwise exclude them. It is not uncommon for college-educated activists to get angry with people from poorer backgrounds when they are contradicted; often such activists have specific ideas about how poor people should be "helped." A good class dynamic would allow everyone to comfortably own up to their personal class background, whether rich or poor, and respect and learn from everyone else despite class differences. People from any background would be able to acknowledge the depravities of their particular socio-economic context (because capitalism is depraved universally), though people from wealthier backgrounds would have to especially acknowledge that their privileges were built on the backs of poor people.

Race

A bad race dynamic may include white people tokenizing or excluding people of color, or forcing people of color to conform to white cultural expectations. Also common is for white people to act like all racism is the fault of government and corporations, and get defensive when white activists are called out for racism. Instead, many white activists pass off racism as class oppression. A good race dynamic will allow for cultural flexibility, constructive criticism, and healthy discussions of race and racism. And ina good dynamic, white activists will not be afraid to give up control and let activists of color change their opinions and their conceptions of activism.

Frequent Problem Characteristics

Being aware of common behaviors that impede group consensus can help you prevent those behaviors in yourself, and recognize and confront them in other people. Here's a quick list:

Over-talkative

Being able to talk with ease is great, but talking so much that no one else can get a word in edgewise isn't fair. Also, many over-talkative people are rambling and irrelevant. The tighter a meeting is, the more you should think twice: is it really necessary for me to say this to the group? Remember that every time you talk is one less time that someone else gets to talk. Try sitting through a meeting without saying anything at all. Notice how it feels, and see whether people who usually talk less are now able to talk more.

Quiet and uncommunicative

You may have good reasons for not feeling comfortable opening up, but the group can't be healthy unless everyone steps forward and makes efforts to communicate. In consensus process, everyone's input is essential. Often, people won't say anything in a discussion because they feel like they don't have some original, brilliant idea. But as a member of an anti-authoritarian, consensus-based group, you are not needed only for either leadership or grunt work. You are needed as a present and participating member of the group. Even simply saying how you feel will help the group be more effective.

The lone gun

It's great to be your own person, but if you're going to be part of a group, you have to learn how to cooperate. The benefits of working with other people come with the responsibilities of learning from other people and listening to other people. If you can't learn to be a team player, well, it's called "lone gun" for a reason. No one is stopping you from going it alone.

Insensitive

How can we change the world if we can't even take care of one another? Yes, we may have "more important" things on our minds, but feelings are important too, both in their own right and for ensuring the health and effectiveness of the group. People who are bluntly honest and confrontational can be great additions to a group. But people who actively ignore and disdain others' feelings are just going to be a pain in the ass. If you keep hurting other people's feelings, you may be bitter about a personal inability to deal with your own emotions. Work on it.

Over-sensitive

The flip side of the coin is that we all need to have thick skins. This is especially important for people with privilege to recognize. Oppressed peoples grow up with thick skins as a necessity of survival. Privileged people need to toughen up so we can effectively deal with the criticisms and potential anger our privileges may cause. Getting all teary eyed when someone calls you on your shit makes the person brave enough to make a criticism look like an ass, it shifts attention away from the original problem to your own emotional well-being, and it just isn't fair. Changing the world isn't going to be all fun and games. Hell, even meetings won't be all fun and games. Don't let your emotions disable you—learn to roll with it.

Over-assertive

This is an easy one. If someone doesn't agree with you, don't get in their face. You can try and convince someone, but first and foremost learn their point of view. If you keep talking until someone is silent, it doesn't mean that they agree with you. Probably you just talked them into submission. Learn how to listen, learn when to back off.

Over-involved

Some people have more time to devote to activism than other people, but that doesn't mean that people with more time should be in control of every project, policing other group members to make sure they're doing what they volunteered for. If you do have more time than others in the group, consider doing some of the grunt work that disinclines busier people from getting involved.

Inattentive

When other people are talking, are you just waiting to have your own say? Do you interrupt people because you think you already know what they're going to say? Here's a news flash, in

case you're listening: most people like this rarely have anything intelligent or interesting to say. How could they? They never let themselves listen and learn.

Cliqueish

Do you tell inside jokes that only a few other people at the meeting will understand? Are you that celebrity activist who has been to all the greatest protests, even been arrested for "CD" or "DA" (at A16 protesting the IMF perhaps)? Maybe you' re just insecure and you want other people to value you. If you sincerely want to work on it, cliqueishness can be an easy fault to fix. Otherwise, the other people in the group have work to do, and you're not helping. There's nothing worse than a party scene pretending to be revolutionary.

Defensive

This is one of the worst, and also one of the most common. Perhaps the surest way to keep a group from growing is to get defensive when people criticize you for something. All the other faults can be worked on, as long as you listen when people call you on it. The main thing to realize is that everybody screws up. Drop your ego, and learn to hear the criticism and deal with it. It's not a court of law. No one should be looking to prove guilt or innocence. Whether the person is "right" or "wrong" in their criticism isn't even the most important thing. If a person thinks there is a problem, there is one, and it is the responsibility of the group to work on it.

There are a million things we can do wrong when we're acting as part of an anti-authoritarian group, so we might as well accept that mistakes are inevitable. We shouldn't be in a competition to be the best, most faultless activist, because in such a competition the group as a whole will lose. Don't get mired down in your faults either. We're surrounded by pathologies resulting from capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, gerontocracy, and imperialism, and still we manage to come together to foster equality and autonomy. And what's more, we can do even better.

(Want to record the dynamics in your group's meetings? Make a speakers list. Sometimes a speakers list helps you notice problematic dynamics you didn't even know were there. Here's how it works: pick a category. It could be gender, race, age, whatever you want. Then pick a certain number of actions—like speaking, raising your hand, interrupting, asking a question, making a run-on statement—whatever you want to record. Then every time in a meeting that someone does one of those actions, tally it down in the appropriate box. For example, if a white person interrupts someone, mark it under the "w" column under "interruptions." (Make sure you record the total number of people in each category, so when you have all your statistics you know how they compare.) You can even record individual group members instead of dividing everyone into categories, if you think your group's problems may be more personal. Make sure to share the results of the speakers list at the end of the meeting!)

Getting Back on Track

During the course of any meeting, your group may stray from its agenda or from ideal communication patterns multiple times. Often, this can be harmless, and can even help the group relax. Sometimes during or after difficult discussions, people may start joking around to relieve stress. Other times, however, getting off track can make the discussion more difficult and can

even silence less assertive group members. Stay sensitive to the group's mood and know when to get the group back on track with a process point or vibes comment. Even if you are not facilitator or vibes watcher, you should feel comfortable making such contributions to the meeting. If someone changes the topic or stalls the discussion process by bringing up a part of the problem the group has not yet begun to address, wait your turn to speak or bring up a process point immediately after the person is done, and voice your concern: "I think we should finish talking about this before we move on to that." Don't interrupt the person you think is changing the topic, because in the end what they are saying may relate to the discussion at hand. If one group member interrupts another, you can bring it up immediately, or wait to speak. If someone has interrupted other people twice or more, or if one person has been interrupted multiple times, interrupt the interrupter, and point out what has occurred: "Hey Jill, I think Jack was trying to speak."

Addressing Problems

Sometimes, problems will be protracted or complex. Every group will encounter such problems. It is both one of the most important and most difficult duties of your group to address these problems. Ignoring a problem will cause it to grow. There are different types of problems: problems with the group culture; problems between multiple people within the group; problems one or several people have with one particular group member; and problems between two people within the group.

If you have a problem with the group culture, bring it up. At an appropriate time in a group meeting, let everyone know: "I'm worried that the only thing we can organize is a party." "I think we're having problems sharing responsibility and leadership." "I don't feel like we can deal with problems or bring up emotions in this group." It may be that other people agree with your concern. If so, it is imperative that the group schedule a special meeting, or more friendly get-together, to discuss the problem and its possible solutions. If no one else shares your concern, don't be intimidated, and insist that everyone hear you out and consider your feelings. At the heart of consensus is the principle that one_persons Concemis are no-less valid than many people's concerns. at is preventing other people from empathizing with you? Are dynamics of race, gender, class or age at work? I have seen situations where one person of color brought up an insightful and valid criticism, and all the white members in the group could not understand. If none of these dynamics are at play, and the other group members have listened to you fairly, but still cannot agree with your point of view, it may be that this group is the wrong one for you. If that's the case, you may be happier working in a group with which you have more common ground.

Problems between multiple members in the group often manifest as two opposing teams centered around differing points of view. In reality, people's personal opinions and inclinations are much more complex than this, but people often respond to conflict by seeking out allies, to counter feelings of insecurity or disapproval, and to feel stronger in their own position. Such factionalism may blur the particularities that are the key to solving the dispute in a consensual manner. Once it has become apparent that a broad disagreement has divided your group, bring attention to the problem in as non-threatening, comforting a manner as you can. Focus on the need to heal, not on casting blame. Insist that the group sets aside time as soon as possible to discuss the problem. When you do, discourage the division of the group into the two oppos-

ing camps. One good method is to have everyone partner up with someone they disagree with. Person-to-person, practice listening and trying to understand the other person's point of view, and then discuss ideas for a solution. Allow plenty of time for the pairs to reconnect, and then have a go around for each pair to share their insights and ideas. If the problem requires a long-term effort to fix it, allocate group energy towards the problem, but also find actions your group can continue performing. Remaining active preserves social bonding and allows you to try out the solutions your group is gradually developing. Carrying out actions can also help prevent the frustrations some people may have that working on communication sabotages the group's other activities.

If you are having persistent problems with one other group member, approach that person outside of the group and ask to talk. If the other person agrees to talk with you, express your problems candidly, but focus on restoring healthy communication, not on blame. If the person refuses to talk with you or dismisses what you say, then approach other group members and ask them to intervene and pressure the person to talk with you. At this point, you may want an experienced person, from inside or outside the group depending on your preference, to mediate the conflict.

Be aware that anyone can mess up, and you might become a source of frustration or discomfort for someone else in the group. If someone approaches you with a problem, never be defensive, and always hear them out. Ask questions and make sure you understand their criticism, and give yourself time to think, before you respond. If you still don't feel that their criticism is valid, it is okay to share your opinion, but you should still be focused on restoring communication. If someone in your group thinks there is a problem, then your group has a problem, regardless of whether their criticism is right on the money or off by a mile.

If two other people in the group are having a problem serious enough to impact the group, discuss it privately with other group members who are well acquainted with the two people having problems. Come up with a strategy for dealing with it. In many cases it helps for a friend of each person involved to approach that person separately, find out what's wrong, and offer help and support. See if they can solve it on their own. If it is a major problem, like sexual assault or emotional abuse, take it seriously, and offer whatever help you can give in a non-threatening, respectful way.

In cases where there is clearly a survivor and an abuser, respect the wishes of the survivor, and prioritize helping that person receive what they need in order to heal. At the same time, do not alienate the abuser, or cause them to run away and become a problem in another community. Help them feel safe and supported while demanding they be accountable, or else the emotional problems that caused them to do wrong could worsen.

The Importance of Culture

Much of how you view your group's problems and how you deal with them, how you view your goals and how you take action, stems from culture. Culture is worldview, and it is implicit in every human activity. Because there is no single correct way to do anything, different human groups do things in different ways. Things that seem natural to us will seem peculiar to outsiders. (Why do we raise our hands if we want to speak, instead of interrupting or waiting for the talking stick to be passed around? Why do we write down notes rather than record things orally? Why

do we speak of things as being a "process"? Do we send out announcements by e-mail, telephone, or word of mouth? Do we prioritize orderliness or emotional expression? Do we communicate in a personal voice or an academic tone?) This is especially true of communication. Being aware of the things we do that are particular to our culture is important if we want to work with people from different cultural backgrounds. This doesn't only apply to people from different countries; cultural divisions are also pervasive across lines of race, class, age, and region.

Every activist group will have its own culture. That culture may be a blending of pre-existing cultures, and it may contain elements that are new or peculiar to everyone in the group. Activists have yet to discover if "multiculturalism" is possible or even desirable. We cannot create a space where all cultures will be comfortable because some aspects of some cultures are diametrically opposed. Can we create a space where a selected set of cultures may coexist harmoniously? Even the idea of "multiculturalism" is peculiar to a very specific culture. A potential mistake of multiculturalism, even radical, non-liberal varieties, is the idea that all cultures are equal, which they are not, neither in the sense of being interchangeable nor in the sense of one being just as good for its members as another. Cultures arise from and in tandem with economic, political and geographic contexts. They are rational within those contexts, and irrational, even pathological, when they are removed from those contexts (if the context is itself irrational or pathological, the culture will reflect this dis-ease). A culture that favors interrupting and speaking up over others makes sense in a political context that silences and disempowers members of that culture. When the same behaviors are transferred into a context in which everyone is encouraged to participate and develop their potential (and people express this, for example, by raising their hands and waiting their turn), those behaviors become counterproductive. Neither culture is superior, they simply arise from different circumstances, and make sense in different situations.

In using consensus, we are developing a cultural tool that makes the most sense in our situation as radical activists fighting an authoritarian system. How you use consensus within your meetings reflects and affects the culture of your group. Being aware of that culture, keeping it open and flexible, ensures that people from different backgrounds can be better included in, and can better influence, this new culture, and ensures that your group process will remain effective in achieving your chosen ends.

Community Building

When the meetings are all over and all the issues consensed on, the work of the group is far from done. The ideals of consensus—mutual aid, voluntary association, autonomy—can thrive in a healthy, anti-authoritarian community. An important way to increase the health of your group is to build that sense of community. This can establish common ties and trust between group members, and help newcomers feel welcome and gain fluency in your group's particular culture. Don't become another group of burnt-out activists. In between meetings and actions, get together and have some fun. But don't become another clique. Our work is not just about having fun. You should be actively going outside your comfort zone, not just hanging out in the same narrow scene. Keep your community from being isolated and self-referential by actively forging relationships with other communities, until you can't tell where one community ends and the other begins. And when you are having fun, practice different forms of leisure—a music

show one week and a potluck the next. An activist culture that is too narrow and too entrenched quickly becomes a simple fashion statement.

Community must focus on substance, not image. Accordingly, your activist community should strive towards sustaining its members emotionally, physically, socially, and economically. Build strong relationships into strong communities, and strong communities into strong movements. The glue of our struggle and the new world we build will not be authoritarianism or oppression. We will make unity possible by pursuing mutual interests. We will enable diversity by valuing auton -omy. Consensus can be a tool to help achieve this.

Broadening Group Culture

Your group might decide to broaden its culture in order to be welcoming to people from different cultural backgrounds. This takes more than just a few token gestures and artifacts. People growing up in a society that treats culture as a commodity, including some activists who frequently appropriate the cultural symbols of oppressed groups to make themselves seem more "diverse," tend to forget that culture is not something you can just import. This is crucial to remember if you are part of a homogenous group that is attempting to broaden its culture. You can only transmit a culture you are personally fluent in. To broaden your organizing culture, you need to first build relationships with activists in different communities, and learn their priorities and desires, and where your common ground lies. Be equally open to the idea of you joining their group, them joining your group, or forming a new group around a mutually important issue or strategy. If you are only out diversity shopping (most commonly this manifests as white people or middle class people attempting to recruit people of color or poor people into their groups) then you have some unexamined paternalistic assumptions that you can trace back to the root cause of the isolation of your group or the general segregation of society.

If your activism or your desires for a future world are aided by working cooperatively with people across boundaries like race, Class, age, or national origin, then external hierarchies must not be allowed to reproduce themselves within your groups. Everyone must feel equally safe (or equally uncomfortable, which in small doses can be a learning experience). Accordingly, people from different backgrounds need to share power within the group to the extent that there is no dominant culture. Ideally, everyone would talk about how they are most comfortable communicating and organizing, and then you would deliberately blend the variety of preferences into a new, syncretic group culture. A syncretic culture has the advantage of being mostly welcoming to people from its component cultures, but it is not to be confused for a magic passage to diversity. A group culture created through the alliance of traditionalist Lakota activists and young white anarchists from the Midwest will still be confounding to old white New England pacifists or Mexican immigrant laborers.

As a syncretic culture is being forged, your group may feel like it is in limbo, with the unwritten rules of communication we usually rely on intuitively being vague, contradictory, or non-existent. Already having personal relationships with the people in the group from a different cultural background as yourself makes this transition much easier. In one group that works as an alliance between white activists and black activists organizing against police harassment, the group operates without a formal process and for some time had no customary structures or habitual communication patterns, while group members got to know one another and become

comfortable. This culture vacuum left the group with few communication tools, so among other things it was difficult to share leadership or encourage growth and initiative taking among less experienced or less-vocal group members. Fortunately, everyone had plenty to learn from experiences with culture, race, and build ing effective solidarity. Ultimately the strong personal relationships that grew out of the initial unfamiliarity, and the need for everyone to be accountable and self-critical to overcome racerelated discomfort made up for the lack of process and has provided a backbone as a blended culture slowly develops to fill in the spaces.

Multicultural Groups

The term "multicultural" usually exists within a liberal framework. "Multicultural" in this sense refers to groups that project a superficial equality through symbols of diversity. Liberal multiculturalism does not attempt to achieve reconciliation or to challenge the reigning narrative. Rather, a diversity of cultures can be acknowledged and celebrated as a means of ignoring the ongoing exploitation and destruction of most of these cultures by the dominant culture, which can be accurately described as patriarchal, white supremacist, Western, capitalist, statist, and so on. A group that is multicultural in the liberal sense will attempt to recruit people from outside the dominant culture, but the goals and organizing culture of the group must not change, and must be thought of as "neutral." These efforts are accompanied by an absence, or active avoidance, of analysis of how power is shared within the group. In the end, the only evidence of multiculturalism these groups can provide is a colorful membership.

An approach that is literally, not liberally, multicultural can be useful for sharing culture—and power—in groups that for whatever reason will not develop a culture of their own. This need usually arises in coalitions, networks, or umbrella organizations that are comprised of activist groups from different, culturally distinct communities. The larger group alternates between different organizing cultures. One community will host a meeting or event in their preferred fashion, and another community will hold the next meeting in their preferred way, and so on. This method is good for exposing group members to different cultures, and allowing each community the opportunity to work within their culture, without creating a dominant or "neutral" organizing culture. On the downside, it can be difficult to make decisions, or have a common understanding of continuity in what those decisions are, if the rules of the game change from one gathering to the next. Alternating between organizing cultures works best for networks that meet to share information but do not need to make decisions.

Monocultural Groups

Liberal and progressive efforts at anti-racism have led to a misguided emphasis on an appearance of diversity. Not only is the composition of your group not the best indication of power sharing and accountability, but sometimes it helps for groups to be monocultural, in order to provide a safe space or to more effectively work with a community from the same culture. Diversity within your group should not necessarily be a goal in the short term. It is far more important that your group work effectively with the community from which its members come, while creating relationships of accountability and solidarity with activist groups in other communities. For example, trying to recruit people of color into predominantly white groups is far more question-

able a goal than a white group trying to work with the immediate white community to challenge the oppressive systems of which it is a victim, a beneficiary, and in many ways a lynchpin. Anti-racism would be well served by white activists taking responsibility for their communities, and thwarting the racism that encourages poor whites to scapegoat people of color and immigrants.

For another example, latino activists can generally work more effectively with a latino immigrant community than white activists can, so it would not help to have an activist group in such a community to be half-comprised of white activists who probably do not speak Spanish, are not familiar with Latin American cultures, and do not have personal knowledge of immigration and life as a non-citizen.

Latino activists might also lose their ability to work for their community by joining a group of white activists. The best thing for each group of activists might be to focus on their own communities, but to build good communication with one another so they could know when to act together on a particular issue that provides common ground.

Coalitions

A coalition is an organizational structure that allows multiple groups to work together on a particular issue. Coalitions are most effective as temporary alliances built up around a single campaign where multiple activist groups share common ground. After the campaign is completed, the coalition is disbanded. Sometimes, groups that are unable to sustain themselves with their own work will gravitate towards a coalition, and some coalitions, composed entirely of such groups, will become for all effects a new, singular group. Groups within such coalitions have essentially given up on working to meet needs, and instead unify around common ideology; they no longer work for themselves as people, they represent themselves as activists. Forming a coalition is not the answer for groups that are failing to make an impact within their communities, as a coalition will only remove them further.

To function well, a coalition must be comprised of groups that are already working effectively within their communities, and that band together because they have common ground with other groups on a particular issue that has come up as a barrier to their other work. It is likely that not all the groups making up the coalition will use the same decision-making strategy. If you are forming a coalition, you should suggest using consensus process for coalition decisions. On principle, groups remain part of a coalition as long as it fulfills their needs. If the member groups cannot consense on a strategy, the coalition will be counterproductive. A further need for consensus within coalitions comes out of the current political context. Progressives have an almost universal habit of trying to bring everyone into one big organization, or front, and whether they realize it or not tend to exercise control over these coalitions. To keep from being exploited, anti-authoritarian groups might urge that a coalition adopt consensus before they join it.

Federations

A federation is a long-term organizational structure, usually uniting multiple localities across a region. A federation (in the anti-authoritarian sense) is a voluntary association that requires a high degree of similarity among member groups in terms of strategy, culture, and analysis. The similarity is not enforced from above, rather it is the reason that different groups join in the first

place. Federations contain two tiers of structure: local and central. The local structure consists of a number of autonomous groups, each working within their immediate communities, that have decided for various reasons to band together. The central structure manifests in periodic meetings attended by people from each local group within the structure. At these central meetings, people decide matters concerning the entire federation, and create strategies of action that each locality can participate in, for a broader impact. The federation should never dictate to a locality, but should recognize the autonomy and self-directed community work of each local group as the source of its strength.

A federation can ensure its cohesion by adopting welldefined principles of unity when it first forms, and subsequently striking the right balance between coordinating actions among all local groups, and simply communicating the work being carried out independently by local groups. To keep from becoming top heavy, the federation should avoid appointing official representatives in each group, and the groups themselves would do well to identify autonomously, rather than as part of the federation. For example, if your group joins a federation, still keep your local focus: don't change your name from Rocktown Infoshop to Southeast Federation Local 12.

Federations should also recognize that as semi-hierarchical organizations trying to bring active groups across entire regions together under one structure, they are ripe targets for government infiltration and disruption. Governments understand federations better than they understand networks, and any agent knows it is a far better career move to neutralize a subversive federation, no matter how ineffective, that spans half the United States, than to neutralize a dozen subversive community organizations. Accordingly, federations should put the highest emphasis on encouraging open, honest communication, strong social bonding, and healthy conflict resolution. Macho behaviors should be eradicated like the plague, because these are the easiest for provocateurs to manipulate, and they are also the easiest for government agents to comprehend.

Networks

A network is a decentralized structure created to facilitate communication between multiple groups. Each group is autonomous and completely responsible for its own activities, but they communicate to share ideas and pool resources. Two or more groups within a network may decide to work together in a particular effort, but it is rare for every group in the network to coalesce. Networks can be informal, and communicate as needed through social channels, or a network can meet regularly to share information, and establish a process such as a phone tree or e-mail listserve to facilitate communication outside of meetings. At times in the past, when people and groups within networks were effective and energized, in emergency situations networks as a whole mobilized more quickly and effectively than centralized armies.

Teaching Consensus

Learning Consensus

Obviously the best way to learn consensus decision making is by using it. It can help to host a workshop, bring in an experienced, outside facilitator, or read a book like this one so that you are familiar with the basic process and tools. It will be harder to adopt a consensus process if no one in your group has experience with it. If possible, participate in established consensus-based groups before going on to form your own. More so than with any other decision-making method, you need hands-on experience to be able to create and implement consensus decisions yourself.

It is also vital to pool your knowledge. After the inevitably difficult discussions and decisions, share your thoughts with other group members about what went poorly and what went well. The simple act of sharing these thoughts can lead to collective insights. Also look for opportunities to communicate with other groups that use consensus. They may have found an effective way through a problem that your group is currently facing.

Adopting Consensus as a Group

If you are forming a new group, or taking stock of your group's methods, you may decide to adopt a consensus decision-making process. First of all, you need to consense. Does every solid group member (anyone who makes an earnest attempt to be a frequent part of group activities and decision making) want to use consensus? If so, you first need to learn about consensus as a group. Invite an experienced facilitator from outside your group to give a consensus process workshop, or if multiple group members already have good experience using consensus, talk about it as a group. Be aware of what other groups are using, but ultimately you want to adopt a process and tools specifically tailored to your group. Recognize that this will take time.

Your group needs to agree on some basics in order to function. Adopt general meeting guidelines (e.g., we will start with an agenda, and proceed one agenda item at a time, moving from sharing information to formulating a strategy to deciding tactics). Also create a list of positions (e.g., facilitator, note taker, vibes watcher) and tools (e.g., hand signals, go around, stack) your group will use, but keep the list open so you can add more if a need becomes apparent. Your group may want to write out principles of unity or draft a more specific, concrete group process, but be aware that these are more difficult types of decisions, especially for a group that doesn't yet have much practice with consensus. Consider starting with just a common understanding of some basic guidelines and tools, get on with the work your group was formed to accomplish, and allow more specifics to fall in place or be adopted over time. Putting too much effort into a detailed constitution can destroy a group before it has even gotten active. What matters is not what your group writes down on paper, it's the collective experiences and skills of group members, and these take time to accumulate.

Even coming up with basic guidelines and tools can take several meetings, even several months. Be patient, and try and find activities your group can carry out in the meantime to keep up everyone's spirits and illustrate the need for a more effective group. After your group has enough of a common understanding to proceed, practice communicating and coming to a decision for a made-up problem. Good mock decisions can revolve around actions activists may have to take in real life, but in response to humorous problems that will be relaxing and easy for the group to discuss. For example: Some corporation has monopolized the global ice cream market, and now they're only giving ice cream to millionaires. How will your group liberate the local ice cream supply? Practice with mock decisions a few times, and afterwards discuss what went well and what could be improved.

Teaching Consensus to New Members

Either through social networks and friendships, successful publicity, or successful actions, word will get out and new people will come to check out your group and potentially join in your activities. In all likelihood, most of these people will have little or no experience with consensus decision making, and quite a few may have no clue what is meant by that term. How your group will welcome these new people and teach them consensus process will be decisive in whether they stay or go.

When new people arrive during the informal minutes before a meeting begins, don't be shy. Make sure to welcome them on an individual basis, ask about them and get to know them a little. In many cases, people new to a group find themselves in an intimidating social scene, alone and silent while everyone else talks amongst themselves, sharing gossip or recounting events the new people have no knowledge of. In some cases this is because the long-term group members use activism only to feel good about themselves, and on some levels prefer to keep the group restricted to a tight group of friends in a self-defeating scene. But in many instances the long-term group members themselves become shy when new people enter the group, so they avoid their insecurities by reaffirming social bonds with other group members, to the exclusion of the new people.

It's ironic but true that a great many people attempting to build a revolutionary movement often fail to build a working relationship with other people. Alienation is pervasive in our society, but radical activists need to overcome it. The easiest time to begin is when new people come to a meeting or event, and the friendliness you show can go a long way in retaining their interest and helping them become a helpful and inspiring part of your group.

Once the meeting begins, the very first item on the agenda should be explaining the basics of consensus process to the new people, if it turns out they have no experience with it. This explanation should not be exhaustive, or overload the new people with too much information. One or two minutes will do, describing the ideal of consensus, the process of discussion, stacks (if you use them), and basic positions like facilitator and vibes watcher. Encourage them to observe for their first meeting, so they can see how it works, and invite them to ask questions about anything they don't understand. The new members can pick up most of the details just by watching as the meeting progresses, and you can explain some specifics, like hand signals, as you use them throughout the meeting. It may be best to explain how the group comes to consensus on a decision as it is happening, rather than at the beginning of the meeting. Consensus in action tends

to seem much more reasonable and practical than it does hearing someone describe it. If your group does not end up making any formal decisions at the meeting a new person comes to, find the time to explain the basics of how it works, so it does not remain a mystery.

After a meeting is over, make sure to socialize more with the new members, share group history that may have been referenced as background information during discussions, and ask them for feedback. If your group has feelings checks at the end of meetings, make sure to include them. It also helps to have a welcome sheet covering basic information about consensus and the particulars of your group's process to hand to new people, for them to take home at the end of a meeting, or to read before the meeting starts. Never use a welcome sheet as a substitute for a personal welcome or spoken explanations. This is less effective, and tends to feel dismissive. However, a welcome sheet can be a helpful complement to a real welcome.

New group members will mess up from time to time, most frequently by changing the topic before a discussion has been completed, sharing information that may be topical but in no way helps the group come to a decision, or getting bogged down in specifics before the group has formulated a general outline. Don't hesitate to point out the problem. Be friendly and nonjudgmental about it. Usually they are unaware of how their communication method contradicts the group's method —often all you have to do is articulate what they have done, and then describe how the group has agreed to communicate and make decisions. If you tell a new member that she is communicating something at the wrong time in the process, make sure to invite her input when the right time comes around. If you have corrected him for changing the topic completely, ask him to add his new topic to the agenda so he has a chance to talk about it.

In the first two or three meetings, make friendly corrections and suggestions when a new member makes a mistake. After that point, continued oversight becomes condescending. Once a member is no longer brand new, deal with mistakes she might make the same way you would with mistakes made by any other group member. The quicker a new person feels like a respected part of the group, the sooner that person will take on responsibilities, learn new skills, and help the group be more effective. Keep this in mind, and avoid creating hierarchies of seniority within your group.

Sometimes a new group member will be completely unwilling or unable to respect the group process. Maybe he is coming to the group with his own agenda, ignoring the work and priorities the group has already established, and expects the group to work on his projects. Maybe she constantly interrupts other people, and even claims a right to do so. Maybe he takes everything personally, and constantly blocks decisions. Maybe she lacks enough analysis, values, and strategies in common to make it feasible for her to work with the group. If a problem persists after people have addressed their criticisms and concerns to the new member, it is perfectly all right for your group to ask the person to leave.

If a new person works well with your group, a major test of their full inclusion in the group is their first time facilitating. It will take a substantial amount of experience with the group before a person is ready to facilitate. Don't rush them, but don't let them hold back long after they have become an accepted and responsible member of the group. Many people are intimidated by the role of facilitator, but it is a crucial one to learn, and the role, and consensus as a whole, becomes easier as more people within the group become adept facilitators. It helps to give the facilitator feedback at the end of a meeting, especially if it is that person's first time facilitating.

Introducing Consensus to a Group

Many anti-authoritarian activists have to work with groups that do not use consensus. In some areas there are no active political groups that use consensus, and in other circumstances anti-authoritarians choose to work with informal or majoritarian groups when those groups are doing good, important work. You may find yourself in a position to introduce consensus to a new group of people. Different situations require different methods. Has the group decided as a whole that they want to adopt consensus, or are you trying to introduce consensus decision-making methods to an informal or majoritarian group?

If the former, what do you do if you are the person whom the group has asked to show them how to make decisions using consensus? The suggestions in the previous section all apply, but if you are in a situation where a group that may not have put much prior thought into communication methods is asking you to teach them consensus decision making, you should be especially wary of several pitfalls arising from the fact that consensus process cannot be taught so well as learned. You should start by taking the time to explain consensus in depth—how it works, and the tools, values, and analyses that make it work. You should also talk about successful consensus decisions you've experienced in the past. Don't sidestep a leadership role. The people attempting to learn consensus have already given you something of a leadership role by asking you to teach them, and you should not leave them with a vague idea of the goal they're striving towards. However, once you have shared your knowledge you need to be careful that they do not leave you in a position of leadership, expecting you to make consensus for them. Point them to where they can read about the process from other sources, and have them practice using mock decisions. You may need to facilitate the first meeting, but afterwards, or alternately throughout the meeting, demystify the facilitator role by openly articulating everything you did to keep the group on track, so that at the next meeting other group members will be able to try facilitating.

How do you introduce consensus to improve a group's dynamics or expose them to anti-authoritarian communication, if they have not specifically considered or decided on consensus decision making? For example, you may work with a food co-op that does not use consensus process, either because they have no experience with it and think consensus is unrealistic, or because as a group they have never discussed or thought about communication and decision-making processes. Perhaps the group consists of a strong leader and a number of passive members who are unused to functioning as equals within a group. In most of these situations, it helps to introduce the tools of consensus first, on an as-needed basis, before revealing and advocating the overall process, or the adoption of that process in an intentional, formal way. If a meeting can't go anywhere because everyone is interrupting everyone else, suggest using a stack. To smooth out continuing difficulties down the road, gradually introduce hand-signals or formats like partnering and go arounds. Elicit and show the importance of every person's input, even and especially if the group continues to operate on a majoritarian basis that tends to silence the minority. Introducing the tools first allows people to become gradually accustomed to the more horizontal, accountable communication styles required for consensus. Making use of consensus tools without ever having to embrace the whole idea of consensus also helps people shed their misconceptions and realize the practicality and complexity of consensus decision making.

Helping Another Group with Consensus

If one group is having problems using consensus, they may turn to a more experienced or successful group for help. If you are in that more successful group, you may decide to help the group having problems. You could send members of your group to observe their meetings, and invite members of their group to observe your meetings. You could let them borrow a good facilitator from your group for a meeting or two. Or you could all get together informally, outside of any meeting, and talk through the problems the one group is having.

In one such brainstorm, it turned out that the group having problems with consensus was effectively dominated by two or three informal leaders. The leaders were not intentionally authoritarian, and in fact were among the main proponents of using consensus and removing themselves from their positions, but the leadership dynamics seemed unavoidable. The members of that group had internalized authoritarian values enough to think the hierarchy in the group was natural, and it was an unrealistic goal to get rid of it. After all, they said, the people in the informal leadership roles are smarter and more capable as activists; it's natural that they should lead.

A person from the more successful group then asked the members of the other group the following questions. Who are the informal leaders of the group? Two names were mentioned, with a possible third. Who are the people who most often speak for the group? The names offered were the same. Whose ideas are acted on by the group when it comes to planning your campaigns and group activities? Again, the same names. Who sends e-mails, other than meeting notes, out over the group listserve? Two of the leaders, and one or two other people, were mentioned. Who e-mails out the group's meeting notes? This time, an entirely different set of names were offered. Who reserves rooms and venues to host group events? Again, it was the names of other group members that came up. For all the other questions about who did the logistics and grunt work, the informal leaders were mentioned occasionally, but by no means did they top the list. If one only looked at the names mentioned in connection to the performance of the group's vital tasks, it would be impossible to tell who was considered a leader. The only distinction was in who felt free to communicate their ideas and to take initiative—only in these categories did the leaders actually lead the group.

Why did other group members not feel comfortable stepping forward in these two ways? In part because everyone valued the abilities to speak and take initiative over the many abilities involved in carrying out the group's plans. Except for the leaders, people did not value their own contributions to the group and felt they were not vital, though in fact they were. After exploring these possibilities, some group members still felt that the leaders were just smarter; however, it turned out that the only form of intelligence at issue was political intelligence and the ability to memorize and call up facts. The people involved in this discussion then explored how emotional intelligence could be more useful than political intelligence in helping a group come to a plan that everyone would support. Knowledge of statistics and facts would help to communicate information to the public, but it was not necessary in group meetings—everyone in the group should have felt comfortable suggesting ideas or issues. By sharing their experience of learning to value everyone's contribution, the successful group helped the other group to leave behind the ingrained authoritarian values that make consensus impossible.

In sum, once you have shared your experience, make sure to step back and let the other group figure things out for themselves. Consensus is a form of decision making you can only learn by doing.

Consensus Workshops

A number of people have put together workshops to introduce the idea of consensus or share experiences on making consensus process more effective. Bringing in an outside presenter can spark interest among activist groups in your area about adopting consensus process. If there are any well established groups near you that use consensus, contact them to see

if they or anyone they know offer workshops. If there are not enough consensus trainers near you, and you have experience, consider putting together and facilitating your own workshop.

The Future of Consensus

As activists accumulate and hone their experience with consensus decision making, we may develop better solutions to some of the problems that continue to make consensus difficult. How do we reconcile styles of communication from different cultures, uniquely tailor consensus processes to specific cultural contexts, or create a culturally flexible process, or one that can foster balanced communication across varying cultures? Can we find better ways to overcome society's authoritarian conditioning, helping people transition more smoothly into a culture of consensus?

There are also a number of discoveries that lie on the horizon. With more experience and a more supportive culture, to what extent will everyone share skills and responsibilities? What more can we accomplish when consensus becomes second nature, and how will those skills and values extend to other parts of our lives, our work, and our society? To what extent will people take initiative and develop their own talents once they have stopped relying on leadership?

Consensus decision making has an important place in the future of anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist movements. By allowing more people—ideally everyone—to exercise power and responsibility, the use of consensus helps sustain people's commitment to radical organizing. Rather than entering a situation in which they are pawns in political strategies developed by inaccessible leaders, activists who get involved with well-functioning consensus groups are rewarded with a sense of empowerment, and through that power develop a personal attachment to the struggle. Radical groups that use consensus can also be more welcoming for other reasons.

The consensus process outlined here comes with several tools for revealing the presence of oppressive dynamics that remain invisible in most politically active groups, and in most social interactions throughout society. By acknowledging these dynamics, a group can take concrete steps to overcome them. If it becomes apparent from speakers' lists or feelings checks that women are less likely to speak up, or people of color within the group feel alienated, how will your group create an atmosphere that fosters equality? It is crucial that groups that might otherwise be dominated by privileged people become comfortable spaces for people of color, women, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people, and lower-class people. Over time, such groups using consensus are likely to develop effective ways to deal with internalized oppressions. These new tools will prove invaluable in confronting systems of oppression as in society at large, making us more relevant and our radical organizing more effective.

Anti-authoritarian consensus requires an emphasis on emotional communication. Because everyone recognizes the group as a voluntary association, group cohesion is dependent on people's satisfaction. If someone feels unhappy in the group and his feelings are not addressed, he will leave. A consensus group is not a congress or political party with fixed membership or enforced unity. It is a multitude of individuals who come together for their own gain. What the group decides is no more important than why they came to that decision, and how everyone feels about it, because people will not help implement the decision if they feel unhappy about it. The necessity to communicate emotions has important ramifications for radicals. Social problems that most radicals influenced by the European intellectual tradition have viewed entirely as material and economic in nature have critical emotional, psychological, and other components as well. Capitalism, for instance, is not merely a set of material relationships. It is also a paranoia that you have to exploit other people or they will exploit you; a pathological substitution of material fulfillment for emotional fulfillment; a gender-related indoctrination tying your sense of self-worth to the performance of certain tasks. Systems of oppression abuse people, and abused people tend to abuse others, increasing alienation and making the task of liberation that much harder. These recurring abuses, and a culture that discourages communication of emotions, and thus discourages healing, makes many radical activists ineffective or counterproductive. If the use of consensus can help radicals both to heal themselves and to confront the full spectrum of oppression, we will be more likely to succeed.

The more emotionally healthy a group is, the safer it will be from government repression. "Counter-intelligence" operations used against radical organizations in the United States have prominently featured a number of methods designed to fan personal rivalries or plant distrust between friends and lovers. The anti-authoritarian aspects of consensus make government infiltration and disruption more difficult.

Hierarchies are made to control groups of people. When a more powerful hierarchy encounters a weaker hierarchy, the latter is easily co-opted. By refusing hierarchies and distributing power equally among all members, a consensus group becomes resistant to being co-opted and controlled by the government or authoritarian political movements. Consensus groups are difficult terrain for infiltrators, because the values, goals, and methods of consensus are very alien to the authoritarian mind. Further, consensus-based. radical organizing tends to decentralize power in multiple community organizations rather than in monolithic national organizations. This affinity group structure means that a disruptive government operation would have to neutralize one small group at a time, rather than a single hierarchy. In majoritarian and other authoritarian decision making, power is located behind the scenes, with bargaining, horse-trading, alliances, and so on. With consensus, power should be exposed and accountable, and all decision making should take place in the open, during meetings. Therefore, efforts to sabotage or disrupt a consensus process are often obvious, and the disruptor can be asked to leave.

It is important, however, not to let provocateur paranoia set in. By all means, do not speculate about who might be a government infiltrator, and do not assume that someone who is having problems with consensus and is causing the group problems is a provocateur and not just a slow learner. Creating fear of infiltration, or "bad-jacketing" a legitimate activist as a provocateur, is a tried-and-true tactic used by the government. In the end, it does not matter, because a person does not have to work for the government to disrupt your group. If someone is disruptive, give them the benefit of the doubt and help them improve. If they won't improve, then ask them to leave.

A major strength of consensus decision making, which will increase in benefit as consensus becomes more prevalent, is to demonstrate that anarchy is practical and possible. What better proof that people don't need leaders than leaderless groups confronting authority and effectively helping people with the problems government was supposedly meant to solve? The more we take our work seriously, the more consensus will increase the credibility of the anti-authoritarian ideal. People who see a protest organized through consensus are not likely to be terribly impressed. People who see health clinics, bookstores, childcare collectives, copwatches, and other groups running without leadership might begin to question the need for the bureaucracy and authoritarianism they have to put up with every day.

Finally, consensus decision making has an important place in the future of revolutionary movements because it allows us opportunities to create the alternative structures and relationships that will replace government. Strong personal networks, autonomous spaces, and self-organized groups of people working together to fulfill their needs will make government irrelevant, and will prevent a power vacuum, ripe for some new authority, from emerging after a successful revolutionary struggle. After an anti-authoritarian revolution, we would use some form of consensus to discuss and decide collective daily affairs. We can practice and develop the ability to make those decisions in our organizing today.

Appendix: Sample Dialogues

Discussion Process

A community organization is discussing its opposition to the U.S. occupation of a Middle-East country. The first dialogue illustrates a disorganized discussion, while the second dialogue illustrates a strategically organized discussion, geared towards consensus and action.

Cheryl: So, last meeting it seemed like there was some interest in planning some actions against the war. Are we ready to talk about that now?

Tim: Yeah. I think it's absolutely shameful how this war is going on and you see almost no momentum building to oppose it Duane: —At least not in this city.

Alisha: Even just more protests would help. Interrupt business as usual, keep it fresh in everyone's minds that we're occupying another country.

Cheryl: Oh, I heard about this really great protest idea when I was visiting my cousin. They did a guerrilla street theater right in this busy shopping district. They had about two dozen people, some dressed as American troops and some dressed as Iraqis. Just with simple cardboard props, they staged a street fight right there in the street, without any warning. One minute everyone's shopping, next minute people are running around pretending to shoot each other, falling down dead, screaming out for medics. Apparently, everyone just stopped and stared, and they had some people with flyers and a lot of facts about the occupation walk through and hand them out to everyone.

Alisha: Wow, I bet they got a lot more attention than if they'd just been holding signs.

Vicente: Yeah, but it almost seems too theatrical, you know? Almost like it would be too much fun.

Duane: I think you'd get a different reception with something like that from one neighborhood to another. In poorer neighborhoods, neighborhoods that are actually getting people killed and wounded over there, it could seem a little trivializing. In an upscale shopping district, on the other hand, it would certainly grab people's attention, but are those the people we want to reach out to?

Tim: All I know about reaching out is that the only people in my school talking about the war are the recruiters. They're all over the place, even taking kids out of class, and promising the most unbelievable things—signing bonuses, college, you name it.

Guy: And half the time they don't even get it. My brother was telling me a whole lot of the guys in his company were getting pissed off at how much they're getting jerked around. Extended deployment, coming home and finding out they're not eligible for getting their tuition paid.

Cheryl: Well what about a protest in front of the recruiting offices?

Vicente: Sorry for being pessimistic, but I think protests are so limited. It's the same group of people. They get together, but they never stop anything.

Cheryl: It doesn't have to be that way. I mean, I agree with you in general, but I thought, since we were talking about a protest, why not one that was aimed at disrupting recruiters?

Guy: If we got someone who has served in the war to talk at the protest, that would help us a lot. We're up against a ton of propaganda, and we don't want to come off like hypocritical liberals. Most of the guys I know in the military hate politicians, so we gotta be able to get political without sounding like politicians.

Duane: Do you know of any anti-war soldiers who might want to speak about their experiences?

Guy: Next time I talk to my brother I'll see if he can put me in touch with anybody.

Alisha: Does anyone know where we can get good banner-making material? If we protest at the recruiting office there's that one bridge right near there that would be great for a banner drop.

Tim: We could put information about the realities people face once they enlist, how it's not as good as recruiters make it out to be. Vicente: Also, 1 don't want to focus exclusively on the U.S. troops. A lot of anti-war groups out there—this really frustrates me, they talk about the war as if only U.S. troops were dying. And if they do mention anybody else, it's only the civilians, like the ones fighting back don't count...

In this dialogue, the communication style was very ineffective. People communicated as though it were an informal social setting, sharing opinions and interesting information with no particular goal. They lost opportunities to consider the full range of possible actions, and they did not assess ideas in a critical way. As a result, abstract ideas and preferences guided the discussion more than concrete and practical planning. In the following dialogue, they do a better job at communicating strategically, and the conversation results in ideas that are better thought out.

Cheryl: So, last meeting it seemed like there was some interest in planning some actions against the war. Are we ready to talk about that now?

Tim: Yeah. I think it's absolutely shameful how this war is going on and you see almost no momentum building to oppose it Duane: —At least not in this city.

Vicente: So do we all agree that we want to plan some kind of antiwar action?

Everyone nods.

Alisha: Well, what should we try to accomplish?

Duane: Our group's somewhat limited in resources. Maybe we could brainstorm a goal, something worthwhile, but also within our means?

Other group members nod.

Cheryl: Well, we can't stop the war with just the few of us, but we can organize resistance locally. How can we slow down the war effort in this city?

Alisha: We need to raise awareness. People are so misinformed about it all.

Duane: Honestly, I don't see raising awareness as effectively opposing the war. That assumes the government needs our consent to carry out its policies. It was an unpopular war before it even began, but they went ahead and did it anyway.

Vicente: I agree. We need to move towards taking action.

Cheryl: Well, what do they need to wage the war? Money, propaganda, weapons, supplies, recruits...

Guy: Hmm, no military bases around here to go after.

Vicente: What about counter-recruiting?

Duane: Yeah, I like that idea. Several group members nod.

Cheryl: So do we want to do something around counter-recruiting or should we keep thinking of other options?

Guy: I'm definitely down with counter-recruiting.

Alisha: Depending on how we do it, if it works well we could make a lot of connections that'll be useful for other actions down the road. Tim: How do we make it harder for the recruiters to do their jobs?

Guy: I've been reading about a lot more attacks against recruiting centers across the country, sabotage, that kind of thing. Obviously our group isn't going to plan anything like that, since we're out in the open, but anything we can do in our group to distance the recruiters from the community, and help people think of them as the enemy, is going to make their job a lot harder, and make them more vulnerable to, well, direct action.

Vicente: They got a lot of image on their side. Flashy uniforms, expensive cars, signing bonuses, college. They go to the communities that are the most humiliated, the most ground down, and they promise dignity. Honor. How do we make that a tough sell?

Duane: I think the simple truth of what they'd be getting into if they signed up is enough. For me the question is how do we put this message out there so people actually consider it, instead of just passing it off as more propaganda?

Alisha: What about in the schools? Tim, are there a lot of recruiters in your school?

Tim: Are you kidding? They're crawling all over the place. It's unbelievable how aggressive they are.

Alisha: We could do counter-recruiting in the schools. Think of all the different angles. A lot of the kids are against the war, and if they had something to plug into they could become a lot more active. I know plenty of the parents don't like the idea of recruiters going after their kids so aggressively. It's just mercenary.

Tim: And the schools in the city are falling apart while they're spending millions on recruitment. We got all the crap from No Child Left Behind to put up with and they're even taking kids out of class to try to get them to sign up.

Vicente: Most of the high-schoolers I talk to at my job hate school, and they see the military as a way out, but if we could show it's part of the same system, and give them the opportunity to exert control over their schools Guy: We could take a supporting role, organize literature, find antiwar vets to give presentations, do some of the initial counter-recruiting while we find people in each of the schools to take that over…

Decision-Making Process

The group is working with a coalition formed to address homelessness and housing rights in their city. Some of the people in this group are LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), as are a large number of the homeless people in the city. Lee, a member of another group in the coalition, has acted in a hostile and demeaning way towards the LGBT activists. Lee's group dismissed requests to hold him accountable as "divisive," and has also opposed suggestions within the coalition to address the specific needs of LGBT homeless people, calling it "a side issue." The group in the dialogue is using an effective decision-making process to come to consensus about what to do about their problems with the other group in the coalition. Megan is facilitating, but since the group is experienced at using consensus, she doesn't take a very active role.

Megan: The next item on the agenda is the LGBT issue at the coalition. Pat, you brought this one up?

Pat: Yeah, 1 think most of you have heard bits and pieces of this already. So this one guy, Lee, with Affordable Housing Now, said some really fucked up things to me when we were preparing for the press conference last week. We were just talking about the campaign, and he kept talking about the homeless population like they were all families, talking about homeless mothers and homeless fathers. I just said something like, don't forget all the transgender people and queer youth on the streets. So he rolls his eyes and said he's more concerned about people who are forced out onto the street than people who "choose" to be there. Later when we were putting away the chairs and tables he was just acting really macho and I called him on it, I was polite and all, more than he deserved, and he says: "I thought you were a man, can't you take it like one?" I told him that was really fucked up but he said he was just joking and tried acting real friendly. Tattoo Steve, from Homes Not Jails, was there too. He heard most of it.

Sylvia: Which one is Lee, was he at the last coalition meeting?

Leslie: Yeah, he was the one who kept interrupting the facilitator.

Sylvia: Oh, the one with the glasses, about thirty, clean-shaven and all? He's made me feel really uncomfortable too. Nothing as obvious as this, but a lot of little things.

Pat: Yeah. So on Sunday, Megan, Leslie and I went to talk to the director and some of the other folks at Affordable Housing Now. You wanna tell that one?

Leslie: Sure. So the people at the office hear us out and act real polite and all, and when we ask them to take it seriously and hold Lee accountable, they say we should just go talk to him ourselves. We already told them we had, and we say it again, that he's made people feel uncomfortable for bringing up criticisms, and just ignores them. So then they say they'll "pass on" our concern. At this point I'm getting pretty frustrated and just want to leave, but Megan repeats our demand that they hold him accountable and they say that would be too "divisive."

Gary: That whole group has been opposed to focusing on LGBT issues within the homeless community. They won't acknowledge that different homeless people have different needs.

Earl: 1 think this is really important to respond to. Thanks for calling him on it. Pat, would you feel comfortable taking this up another level and addressing it at the next coalition meeting?

Pat: 1 don't know if I necessarily want to do it at the next meeting, but I definitely want to bring it up to the whole coalition and hold Lee and his whole group accountable.

Megan: Is everyone else interested in taking action on this?

Everyone affirms.

Sheila: Is there anything in the coalition charter about how to hold another group or group member accountable for doing something like this?

Megan: No, nothing that specific. But the Principles of Unity definitely include being opposed to heterosexism.

Sylvia: So do we want to keep this within the groups in the coalition, or do we want to deal with it as a problem in the activist community at large, and focus on Lee specifically, inside or outside the campaign?

Pat: I think we should keep it within the coalition. At least give them a chance to fix it, and hopefully show that dealing with antioppression issues doesn't have to be disruptive.

Gary: I think we'll get more support from other groups in the coalition if this doesn't turn into a scandal that hurts their image. We can count on Homes Not Jails and the Womyn's Health Collective, but it would be great to have all the other groups on our side too.

Earl: What if we talk to Affordable Housing Now one more time, let them know that we're serious?

Sheila: What if we went to one of their meetings, and asked for like five minutes to talk about this? That way, it won't just be the leaders but the whole group, and the director and his friends might be a little embarrassed to be seen as defending this kind of thing? Give them a chance to shake it up internally?

Several people affirm with hand gestures.

Sylvia: I like that idea.

Leslie: What if they don't give us a chance to talk at their meeting? Pat: We could also contact other groups in the coalition and tell them about the situation. Ask them to contact Affordable Housing Now to say they need to acknowledge the problem and work on it?

Gary: That sounds good.

Megan: Ooh, maybe another thing we can do, I have this picture in my head of like an open letter. Everyone's heard all the clichés about hypersensitive feminists sabotaging campaigns with identity politics, distracting everyone with criticisms and side issues, being divisive, all that bullshit. Maybe we should get down into a writing a really concise, strong explanation of why it's essential to address these problems, why Lee is the one being divisive by pulling that shit in the first place.

Several people nod.

Pat: I'd like to write that, if anyone wants to help me. I also want to include some personal stuff, in my own voice, so we can show that people are actually hurt by these behaviors, and it's not just abstract theoretical stuff.

Gary: I can help if you want. Pat: That would be great.

Megan: So we have a lot of ideas here that seem to flow together well. Do we want to brainstorm more or should we state this as a proposal? Everyone looks around, and no one suggests further ideas.

Pat: Okay, so the proposal is that Gary and I write an Open Letter to give to Affordable Housing Now and all the other groups, right? And then some of us go to Affordable Housing's next meeting and ask for five minutes to talk about our complaint and ask them to do something about it so we can continue to work together—meanwhile, other people will be contacting the other groups in the coalition to let them know about the situation, and ask them to pressure Affordable Housing to hold themselves accountable. If they don't come up with some serious suggestions of how to fix the problem, we bring it up at a general meeting.

Megan: Are there any questions? Any concerns? People shake their heads.

Megan: Alright, let's vote. All in favor?

Everyone raises their thumb.

Megan: Great, it's decided. Now let's see who can volunteer to talk to all the other groups over the next week, and who can go to the Affordable Housing meeting…

The Facilitator

An employee at a local Wall-Art megastore was recently fired after trying to organize fellow workers. A local activist group is discussing how to give support. They have finished reviewing

all the facts and background information. Now they are ready to begin discussing a strategy. The following two dialogues illustrate ineffective and effective facilitation techniques.

Jon is the facilitator. There are six people at the meeting.

Jon: Alright, I think we have enough information. Let's talk about what we want to do. I think at the very least we should get the WallArt to rehire the person they fired.

Dillon: Definitely.

Gina: Yeah, I agree.

Jon: And we shouldn't negotiate with them. I mean, whatever actions we end up doing, it should put the pressure on them. We don't want to end up in some compromise that could make it harder for the employees there to get their union.

Gina: Right on.

Robin: Maybe

Dillon: —Yeah, it has to be on the workers' terms, not on theirs. Don't forget, this worker got fired because she was organizing. That's the most important thing. Whatever we do should help them organize.

Jon: Exactly. Even if we can't get them to take this one employee back, we can make them afraid to fire anyone else for organizing.

Robin: Maybe we should try to contact her, the woman who got fired, and, you know? See what she needs and make sure we don't do anything that makes her situation worse?

Jon: Sure. And that's always something we could do closer to any action we end up doing. If it's a problem, we can always keep from mentioning her specifically.

Gina: Yeah, and at least for now we can assume she'd appreciate any actions that would help the workers there organize. I mean, that's what she got fired for.

Jon: Exactly. So I think what we have now is a strategy to take action against the Wall-Art, put pressure on them for firing her, and demand they recognize their workers have a right to organize. We try to get them to take back the person they fired, and even if we don't get that, they'll think twice before firing someone else. Do we have consensus?

Jon, Dillon, Gina, and Sam stick up their thumbs.

Jon: Any blocks? No? Good. Now let's talk about tactics.

Jon was an ineffective facilitator. He dominated the conversation, and from the very beginning limited the range of discussion to favor his own opinion. The one time someone (Robin) tried to suggest a different course of action, he ignored her concerns and reinterpreted her suggestions to fit within his own plan. He didn't say anything when Dillon interrupted Robin. He didn't find out why two people didn't participate in the discussion at all, or why two people didn't vote in favor of his proposal.

Let's see the same situation, with Jon being an effective facilitator this time.

Jon: Does anyone feel they need more background information, or can we move on?

Dillon, Gina, and Robin nod.

Jon: Okay, now we need to come up with a strategy. What should our basic goals be?

Dillon: The most important thing is helping them organize.

Whatever we do, we need to put some pressure on Wall-Art, win the workers some breathing room. We've got to let them know they have support.

Gina: Yeah, since Wall-Art can't fire us, we can take more risks. We can make them lose business, be a real big pain in the ass, until they decide it would be easier just to let the workers organize.

Robin: Maybe we should try to contact the workers there, you know? See what their needs are, and make sure we're not doing anything to make their situation worse?

Dillon: Well, what if they say they don't want us to do anything? They could get in trouble if they're seen talking with us. And they don't know us, they can't trust us not to rat on them or something. They get a lot of intimidation from their managers, maybe they'd be afraid to tell us what they wanted. But I don't see how us protesting in the parking lot or whatever is going to make it harder for them.

Jon: Okay, so does anyone have any ideas on how we can work without getting them in trouble?

Addie: I know

Dillon: —Well we have to decide what's more-

Jon: Hold on, Dillon, I think Addie was first.

Dillon: My bad. Go ahead.

Addie: Oh, sorry. Well … one of the people I work with, her sister works at Wall-Art. I could have her ask for us. Or set up a meeting, so we don't have to go into the store, where they might be more afraid to talk with us?

Jon: That's great. And maybe while we're at it we can also try to contact the woman who got fired, and see if she'd want us to pressure Wall-Art to rehire her.

Dillon: Yeah, I think those are both good ideas. I just want to make sure our hands aren't tied just because Wall-Art's got all its employees by the throat. Even more reason for us to act, right?
Jon: Sam, you haven't spoken yet, what do you think?

Sam: Ummm, I guess I agree with everything that's been said already.

Gina: So maybe we should try and find a way to do both? Contact the workers and start taking action to put the heat on Wall-Art.

Robin: I just want to make sure we don't do anything that makes it harder for the workers, or makes it seem like we don't have respect for them. We can't get anything done if we don't have a good relationship with them.

Gina: That's true.

Addie: Yeah, I agree.

Jon: So it sounds like there's disagreement over whether we should contact the workers first or take action first. Can anyone think of a way to solve that?

Dillon: What if we tried to brainstorm actions we could take that wouldn't jeopardize our relationship with the workers, so we could at least do something while we're waiting to contact them?

Gina: I propose that Addie and whoever else wants to help should try and arrange a meeting with any workers who are interested in our support, and Dillon and anyone who wants to help him could start brainstorming actions for us to do in the meantime.

Jon: Okay, a proposal's on the table. Are there any clarifying questions?

Gina: Are Dillon and Addie okay with those roles? I sorta volunteered you…

Dillon and Addie nod.

Robin: The working group that's thinking up actions—are they going to check back with us before doing anything or can they do an action without talking about it with the group?

Gina: I think it would be better if the whole group discussed any actions before they happened. Is that alright? Jon, Gina, Robin, Addie, and Sam give a thumbs up or nod. Jon: Can I add a friendly

amendment? That someone also try to get in touch with the worker who got fired, and see if she has any wants or needs? I can volunteer to do that.

Gina: I'll second that.

Jon: Alright, so can we restate the proposal?

Gina: One working group is going to arrange a meeting with sympathetic workers, Addie will head that up. Another working group is going to brainstorm action plans to bring back to the group, Dillon will be the contact person for that, and Jon and anyone else who wants to help are going to contact the one worker who got fired. Good?

Jon: Alright, are there any more clarifying questions or concerns? No? All in favor?

Everyone but Dillon give thumbs up.

Jon: Any blocks? Any stand asides?

Dillon sticks his thumb out.

Jon: Dillon, do you have any concerns that haven't been addressed? Dillon: No. 1 don't think it's the best plan, but I'm okay with it. Jon: So do we have consensus? Great.

This time, Jon was an effective facilitator. He encouraged participation from all group members, he helped guide discussion around conflicts, and he was still able to voice his own opinions, but without imposing those opinions on the entire group. And by encouraging participation from all group members, the group accessed a wider range of resources (in this case, Addie's connection with a Wall-Art employee) than when the group was being dominated by the more outgoing personalities. The discussion this time took a little longer, but more people were involved and empowered, which means those people will put more energy and inspiration into the group's actions —which is what really counts.

Vibes Watching

A radical environmental group is discussing whether to adopt a nonviolence code in a campaign against urban sprawl in its region. In the first dialogue, the discussion becomes heated and the group loses its cohesion. Jeff is facilitating.

Jeff; Okay, the next item on the agenda … Someone suggested we adopt a nonviolence code for this campaign, other people were opposed to that, so we agreed to discuss it. Who wants to start?

Marco: I think it's essential that we adopt nonviolence guidelines for any action in this campaign. We can't risk alienating anybody. I think we should act now before the media paints us in the wrong light.

Turnip: The media can paint us in a bad light if they want to, whether we're nonviolent or not.

Delia: We can't just go around smashing windows and expect-

Turnip: —I never said-

Jeff; Whoa, hold on! Sorry, maybe we should start taking a stack? Okay, Delia, then Turnip, then Jack, then Marco.

Delia: It's my turn? Okay. Well, I guess what I mean is burning a house down might slow down one new subdivision from going up, but it'll scare people away, and we need a lot of people on our side if we're going to win.

Turnip: I think that's unfair. I'm not suggesting we burn anything down. It would be pretty stupid to talk about that in an open meeting, besides. What I'm saying is nonviolence codes alienate people too. It's self-righteous. We don't have a right to tell people what they can do. Remember that thing that happened last year in Mason County? Guy lost his home to eminent domain for that new shopping center and he took a bulldozer and tried to demolish city hall? Sometimes it really resonates with people when someone stands up like that.

Jack: I agree. I think it would be stupid of us to go on the defensive and restrict ourselves with a nonviolence code just 'cause we're afraid they'll label us the wrong way. It's just bad media strategy. Never let them change the subject. If they ask about violent tactics, we respond that the developers are committing violence against the environment and the community. Always stay on point.

Turnip, Marco, and Delia are all emphatically raising their hands. Abi meekly raises her hand.

Jeff: Alright, this is turning into a lot of back-and-forth arguing, and a lot of people haven't gotten a chance to speak. Maybe we could do a go around?

A few people nod agreement.

Jeff: Okay, I'll start. Personally, I like the idea of a nonviolent campaign, I think it could really work. Civil disobedience, sit-ins in front of the bulldozers, I think a lot of people could really get into that. But maybe we could do it without trying to control how people participate, or without bad-mouthing other people who use different tactics?

Snake: Umm, I don't really like nonviolence codes. I actually think that can be alienating to some people, a lot of people who aren't used to the protest culture. I mean, look at Seattle. That got more people into the movement than any peaceful protest, right?

Delia: Look, this isn't Seattle. Come on, what's going to be more effective in this area? Leading protests that are inspiring and safe, that a lot of people can participate in, putting themselves on the line, taking a stand against the pollution, the traffic, overcrowding, loss of green spaces? Or running around at night with a mask and some gasoline? I want to get a lot of people working together on this, and to do that, we have to promise it'll be peaceful. If the media can call us eco-terrorists and we can't prove them wrong, people will just be afraid of us.

Abi: 1 kind of disagree with this whole discussion. I mean, what's violent and what's non-violent? Breaking windows, or construction equipment, that's violent, but it's not violent to let them cut down trees and pave everything over?

Delia: Who's going to let them? What I'm saying is, we're going to stop them, only peacefully.

Jeff; Actually, maybe we could finish the go around, Delia? Jack was next.

Jack: Thank you. Delia, you keep talking about going and burning houses down. Who here ever suggested burning houses down? You're sounding just like the media with that whole "eco-terrorist" thing. Everyone should be able to decide for themselves what kind of risks they want to take. If someone decides to risk sabotaging construction equipment or gluing the locks at a real estate office, we shouldn't talk bad about those kind of actions. If it happens, that's good publicity. The media will cover it, they'll look for controversy, and they'll ask us about it. We deny personal responsibility for it, and then use the opportunity to talk about how the truly criminal actions are being committed by the developers and the city council, but we have a protest coming up at such-and-such time. Free press.

Turnip: Yeah, I agree with a lot of what Jack said. I think our own actions should be technically legal, since we're organizing them in the open. But our message should be uncompromising. We

should embrace any resistance to this, that way everyone can be involved. People who want to do more might be encouraged to take it further on their own, ya know?

Marco: We need to be strategic. We can't just organize events and expect everything to fall into place spontaneously. We need to have a battle plan, step by step, like chess, keep picking fights we can win until we checkmate them, and they're losing money, they don't get re-elected, et cetera. And our strongest tactic is nonviolence. We can really inspire people, and get enough people on our side until they're outnumbered. We can't risk losing the whole campaign if some hothead decides to do something stupid that gives it all a bad name. We need to have a unified strategy, and we can't get that without a nonviolence code.

Multiple people raise their hands.

Jeff: Okay, where do we go from here? Should I take another stack?

In the second dialogue, Turnip, the vibes watcher, takes an active role in resolving group conflict.

Jeff: Okay, the next item on the agenda … Someone suggested we adopt a nonviolence code for this campaign, other people were opposed to that, so we agreed to discuss it. Who wants to start?

Marco; I think it's essential that we adopt nonviolence guidelines for any action in this campaign. We can't risk alienating anybody. I think we should act now before the media paints us in the wrong light.

Turnip: The media can paint us in a bad light if they want to, whether we're nonviolent or not.

Delia: We can't just go around smashing windows and expect that people aren't going to be turned off by that.

Turnip makes the hand signal for a process point.

Turnip: Yeah, I think I should make a vibes comment, this feels like it's starting to get hostile pretty quickly. Delia, I wasn't done yet when you started, and when you talked about smashing windows, I felt like I was being misrepresented and it made me angry. I had to bite my lip to keep from interrupting you back.

Delia: Oh, I'm sorry.

Turnip: It's okay, I know you didn't do it on purpose. I realize that what I said was kind of argumentative, and I guess I felt defensive by how you started off, Marco, because it seemed like what you were saying was: "This is how it has to be, and everyone else is wrong."

Abi nods.

Marco: My bad.

Turnip: So maybe we could start over, and all try to be more respectful, myself included?

Marco nods.

Marco: Well, I guess ll start again. I'm in favor of a nonviolence code, I think it helps us strategically. Dealing with the media, not alienating anybody, keeping a good reputation, and getting more support.

Jack: Personally, I feel really strongly opposed to the idea of a nonviolence code. I think it hurts us, strategically. It lets the media control the discourse, it puts us on the defensive, it cuts out a lot of tactical options, it lets them divide us. I also think it's wrong, and kind of authoritarian, to try and control how people are allowed to participate, as though it were "our" movement.

Delia: I disagree, I don't think we have to control people. I think a nonviolence code is just a way of saying, this is what to expect in protests and actions we organize. If you don't like it, fine,

you can do something on your own, but we're making it clear that people who do other stuff aren't with us, so we can't get blamed for anything we didn't do.

Jeff: Turnip, you raised your hand, but I want to talk too, so after you I'll start a stack and put myself at the top.

Turnip: Okay. Well, I wanted to respond to what Delia and Marco said, but maybe it's beside the point. We've all had these discussions before outside of meetings, and I don't think we're going to change anyone's mind about the whole nonviolence, diversity of tactics thing in a meeting. Everyone seems calm and respectful, that's great, but the discussion is still just going back and forth, between the same people. A lot of people haven't spoken yet. Sorry, maybe this is premature, but it just seems like we're not going to get anywhere with this.

Jack and Delia nod.

Jeff; Does everyone else agree with that? Maybe we could think of a different way to talk about this? Abi: I agree, I don't think we're going to change anyone's mind right now, but we've been talking ideologically. Some of us believe in nonviolence, some of us believe in a diversity of tactics, and that's okay. Maybe we could talk practically, about what we can do as a group? Turnip: I think that's great. Could I suggest we split up into pairs and talk about this with someone who has a different opinion? That way everyone will get a chance to give their input and help come up with a compromise. Then we could meet back and each of the pairs could share what they came up with? Several people give a thumbs up or nod. Jeff; Okay, so does everyone like the suggestion of partnering for, say, ten minutes, and then coming back as a group? Are there any concerns, any objections? Okay, great. Let's break.

New Members

Rob is attending a meeting of a local anarchist group for the first time. The group runs an infoshop and radical community center that Rob has been to several times, but Rob has never participated in or witnessed group activities or decision making. In Examples A and B, the group makes no effort to welcome him. In Example C, the group welcomes him and attempts to bring him up to speed.

Example A

Rob gets to the infoshop five minutes before the meeting is scheduled to start at 6:00 pm. A number of people are already sitting and talking in the back room. Rob waits as more people arrive, but no one comes over to welcome him. Six o'clock comes and goes, and those already there are talking with people they already know. Ten minutes later no one has talked to Rob, and no one has said anything about starting the meeting. Rob says to himself, "Screw it, I'm not wasting any more time," gets up, and leaves.

Example B

Exactly the same as Example A, but Rob stays until the
meeting finally gets started fifteen minutes late.
Emma: It's 6:15, should we get started?
Ins: Anarchist time.

Most of the people in the room laugh, while everyone moves to form a circle. Rob sits down next to Teddy, a long-time member of the group.

Teddy: What's your name?

Rob: Me? Rob.

Teddy: I'm Teddy.

Emma: So who's facilitating this week?

Christy: I will.

Teddy: I can take notes.

Christy: What about vibes watcher?

Tris: Oh, I guess I will.

Teddy: Are we going to need a stack this week?

Christy: Let's play it by ear. How about coming up with an agenda?

With no one to explain the unwritten customs and rules of the group, Rob feels like a complete outsider. In the first minute of the meeting, he is bombarded by several terms he may not understand—facilitating, vibes watcher, stack, agenda.

His first experience with anarchist organizing will be marked more by feelings of disempowerment and exclusion than by firsthand contact with functioning anti-authoritarian ideals. What happens if the group puts more effort into helping newcomers feel welcome?

Example C

Rob gets to the infoshop five minutes before the meeting is scheduled to start. A number of people are already sitting and talking in the back room. Teddy approaches Rob.

Teddy: Hey, what's your name?

Rob: Rob.

Teddy: I'm Teddy.

Rob: Nice to meet you.

Teddy: It will probably be a few minutes before we get started. Let me introduce you to a few other people.

Rob: Okay, cool.

They walk over to Christy.

Teddy: This is Rob.

Christy: Hey, I'm Christy. Nice to meet you. So is this your first time here?

Rob: Yeah. Christy: How'd you hear about us?

Rob: Oh, I've been to the infoshop before. I just read about the meeting on your bulletin board. It seemed like a cool group, I wanted to get involved.

Christy: That's great!

Emma: It's 6:10, should we get started?

Everyone moves to form a circle. Christy, Teddy, and Iris volunteer for the roles of facilitator, note taker, and vibes watcher.

Christy: Well, before we form an agenda, we have someone new here. Maybe we could all introduce ourselves and then take a moment to explain how the group works?

They introduce themselves.

Christy: Teddy, do you have the welcome cards?

Teddy: Yeah, here you go, Rob. This just explains some of the basics of consensus process, and how our group works, for new members. You can keep that and read it later if you want.

Christy: So who wants to give a quick introduction to the group?

Emma: I can. Well, we're an anarchist group. Basically what that means is we work without leaders. You don't have to follow any ideology, all of us are pretty different in our politics, but our basic principles of unity are that we're against hierarchy, racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, capitalism, ecocide—basically all forms of oppression. So if you want to work with us you should probably be okay with that.

Rob laughs.

Emma: So do you have experience with using consensus?

Rob: Uh, no, not exactly.

Emma: Okay. You'll really have to learn by watching and participating, but a lot of the basics are on that welcome sheet. Every meeting we choose a few different roles—a facilitator to keep things moving, a note taker to, you know, take notes, a vibes watcher to watch everyone's mood and make sure everyone feels like they're being included. If you want to speak, just raise your hand. If a bunch of people want to speak at once, we take a stack, which is just a list of whose turn it is to speak. Once we've talked about something enough and it looks like we're coming to a decision everyone feels good about, and everyone's had a chance to voice their concerns and give suggestions, we state the final idea as a proposal and then vote. Thumbs up means you like it, stand aside means you don't like the idea but you recognize the rest of the group is behind it and you don't want to block. If you think the idea is absolutely counterproductive and bad for the group to do, you can block it, thumbs down, and just one block means the group can't do it.

Rob: Okay. Emma: Don't worry if you can't remember all that. It gets easier over time.

Christy: Yeah, and I'd also like to add that you should feel free to ask questions any time if you don't understand what we're doing. Don't feel like you have to participate right away. It's okay if you just watch for your first meeting.

Teddy: And we'll all be around afterwards so you can ask us any questions.

Rob: Thanks.

Christy: Alright, so let's make an agenda. What do we have to talk about this week?

Please note that in all three examples above, the meeting did not start on time. The author and publisher of this book in no way wish to encourage you to start your meetings late. But god knows we anarchists are late a lot—hell, we should have had the revolution a century ago! Come on, ya bums! Get organized! Needless to say, we also do not want a world ruled by the clock. So, as you strike a balance between being prompt and being laid back, just make sure to keep new people clued in.

Peter Gelderloos
Consensus
A New Handbook for Grassroots Social, Political and Environmental Groups
2006

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