COMMON NEEDS OF DEMOCRATIC GROUPS [1-2 HOURS]

OVERVIEW

This session contains tools for groups to use to uncover common patterns in group building. It also brings us down to the fundamentals of working together: decision-making, meetings, power, and roles. While these things are basic, they are also where we often get stuck. As developers of this curriculum, we are not neutral; we take a political position that organizations, groups, and collectives need more people to bring about transformation, and that we cannot win with just "networks." If our people are our power and there is power in numbers, then we need organizations, and people in relationship and in motion together. We need to be in formation. We need containers. Organizations doesn't mean non-profits; street tribes are organizations, Alcoholics Anonymous is an organization, sports teams are organizations. We need teams to do anything. Nothing has ever been accomplished alone.

GOALS

- To identify and confront assumptions and challenges that arise when working in democratic groups
- To discuss and agree on common needs for democratic groups
- To identify agreements and practices for meetings and decision-making that will strengthen the group and reflect the group's values

TIME NEEDED

1-2 hours

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Flip charts, tape, markers for mapping, writing tools for participants
- Handouts: **Collective Plagues (pp. 60-61), Facilitation Tools (p. 69), Decision-Making Structures (p. 66), Morale-Killing/-Supporting Meetings (p. 63), Leveraging Resources & Radical Hospitality (p. 69)**

READINGS/RESOURCES

- *Tyranny of Structurelessness* by Jo Freeman
- *Ethical Communication* handout by Vanessa Jackson
- *Organizational Culture Chart* by Dean Spade

FRAMING

Working together is hard. It is also fundamental to our values around community organizing, popular education, and sovereignty. In an era of profound isolation, cynicism, and hyper-individualism, there are new and increased challenges. **Without collective self-awareness and organizational attentiveness, many groups fall into similar dysfunctional pitfalls around power.** To begin, use flip charts to write up the following quotations (p. 58):

"We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice"

– *Combahee River Collective Statement*

"Governing is the process of making decisions that impact groups of people. How are we governing in our organizations and communities?" Charlene Carruthers, *Unapologetic* (p. 109)

As we fight to reshape the power of institutions and systems, we are also in struggle across the board around power inside of our organizations. It gets real funky real quick. Because we live in a culture of such intense hierarchy and domination (not to mention the non-profitization or professionalization of 'organizing'), we sometimes see knee-jerk reactions inside of ourselves and our groups. That knee jerk often sounds like 'all structure or hierarchy is oppressive,' 'all decisions need to be made together,' 'we all need to be best friends to be able to work together,' or 'you silenced me by not doing my idea even though I only came to that one meeting!' It keeps us stuck in internal battles that harm our collective morale, alienate people, confuse us, and **detract from our ability to build trust through shared work and shared risks**. Power is tricky, our pain is real, we are deeply flawed and damaged, *and yet* we must build containers within which we can tend to our internal team dynamics and keep our eyes on the prize: **bringing about big change for the many, not the few.**

Often in SONG, we have found that the **over-emphasis on internal team dynamics obscures deeper pain,** confusion, cynicism, or despair that people in the group are battling with: we dont know what to do 'out there' so we eat each other alive internally.

Opening pair share:
- *What's the best team you have been a part of? What made it so?*
- *What's a team you have been a part of that fell apart, and what caused that to happen?*
- *What's your diagnosis about what happened (not just your feelings, but your felt assessment)?*

Invite each pair to share back one thing from their conversation with the full group.

IDENTIFYING COMMON NEEDS

- Sharing power and resources is one of the common needs of all democratic, participatory groups. Remember, democratic does not necessarily mean horizontal.
- Dean Spade talks about the common needs being:
  - **Transparency and participation**
  - **Accountability**
  - **Planning and Clarity**
- *Do we agree with this? Why or why not?*
- *What do we think are the common needs of democratic groups? Are there others to add?*
- Discuss common needs and key highlights from Jo Freeman's article.

Types of FACILITATION TOOLS

REFLECTIVE
- SLOW THINGS DOWN
- SUPPORT INTROVERTS
- CEMENT LEARNING

ELICITIVE
- HEART-CENTERED
- SUPPORT FOLKS TO SHARE
- DRAW PEOPLE OUT
- MAKE INFORMATION AVAILABLE TO ALL

DIAGNOSTIC
- TAKE THE TEMPERATURE OF THE GROUP
- SHARE WHAT WE KNOW
- ASKS: WHAT'S GOING ON?

ENERGIZING
- GET WHOLE SELVES ENGAGED
- EMBODIMENT

GENERATIVE
- ARTS-BASED
- MEDIA MAKING
- CONNECT WITH SPIRIT

DISCUSSION SUPPORTING
- BALANCE EQUITY & EFFICIENCY
- PREVENT SPINNING
- STAY ON TASK
- BUILD TRUST, MORALE & CULTURE

INTEGRATING/ DECISION-MAKING
- MOVE TOWARDS CLARITY
- MOVE TOWARDS ACTION
- ASKS: HOW ARE WE IN ALIGNMENT? WHAT WILL WE DO?

DIFFERENTIATION
- NAME & EXPRESS DISAGREEMENT OR DIFFERENCE
- EXPLORE OPTIONS
- PARALLEL TRACKS
- ASKS: WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT WISDOMS INFORMING THIS GROUP?

COLLECTIVE PLAGUES AND
...AND THE MEDICINE WE NEED...

Through discussions at SONG, we identified these four patterns plaguing our organizations and our movements.

FRAGILITY: We leave or divest from processes at first sign of discomfort; we misname discomfort as trauma or violence; we expect movement and organizations to be perfect and/or provide everything and be everything for us; we assume our pain is the only pain.

INFIGHTING: Afraid of taking on the real enemies that are systematically attacking our people and confused about how to even do that, we instead turn on each other; we pick fights; we refuse to set conflict down or move on after conflict; we harbor grudges; we gossip; we are ego driven.

MEDICINE: We can exercise the habit of self-critique so we don't become defensive when someone offers a grounded assessment; we can practice patting ourselves on the back and giving each other praise when we do good work, as this builds confidence through a culture of appreciation within our teams; we can build resiliency and self-work practices in order to unplug our triggers; we welcome discomfort and difference as a chance to grow; we can process with people outside the group; we can check our assumptions, either internally or literally with others on our teams; we can remember that impact is different than intention and people's intentions matter; we can manage our expectations by asking: What is reasonable for this team to provide?

MEDICINE: 'Let It Go': sing the *Frozen* song! We can ask: what is underneath our habits around infighting and constant conflict? If we want something different, we must be willing to be something different; we can get in our bodies; we can take or keep conflict offline; we can say **NO** to Facebook drags; we can intervene; we can practice courage in naming what we are losing when we just keep fighting and fighting; we can all do our work on our own egos; we can set an expiration date for when conflict expires.

AFFLICTIONS OF OUR TIME
...TO HEAL AND TRANSFORM THEM

CYNICISM: This plague walks with loneliness and fragility; it often shows up because we are overwhelmed, and often covers up nihilism and despair; we are hypercritical; we over-critique.

CLIQUISHNESS: We engage in gatekeeping; we are suspicious of new people; we refuse to expand the circle; we only want to work with our friends.

MEDICINE: We can cultivate flexibility; we can take a break from the work sometimes; we can identify collective ways to build and flex our hope and vision muscles; we can find ways to add fun to our days; we can hold good boundaries to prevent exhaustion; we can have clarity on roles and a culture of proposals instead of critique.

MEDICINE: We can allow people the opportunity to build trust by doing what they say they will do through taking action and being consistent and honest; we can understand that not everyone has to be a friend in order to organize with them, but that is an extra treat; we can cultivate curiosity; we can remind ourselves and each other that we need more people; we can name cliquishness to increase self-awareness; we can identify shared practices to build new habits; we can build a culture of 1-on-1s and hospitality.

To use this framework as a popular education tool, move people into breakouts to discuss one or more of the plagues: how they show up or manifest, and the medicine we have or need to transform them. Share back and scribe visually, placing plagues in the middle of the page (represented as poison) and medicinal plants all around them, containing and healing them. *This tool was developed at Southerners On New Ground.*

MEETINGS

Let's talk about the lifeblood and downfall of most democratic groups, the place where it all happens: **meetings**.

WHAT ARE MEETINGS FOR?
- Coordination
- Updates across teams
- Relational decisions that need the full team.

WHAT ARE MEETINGS NOT FOR?
- Only relationship building
- Only orienting new people
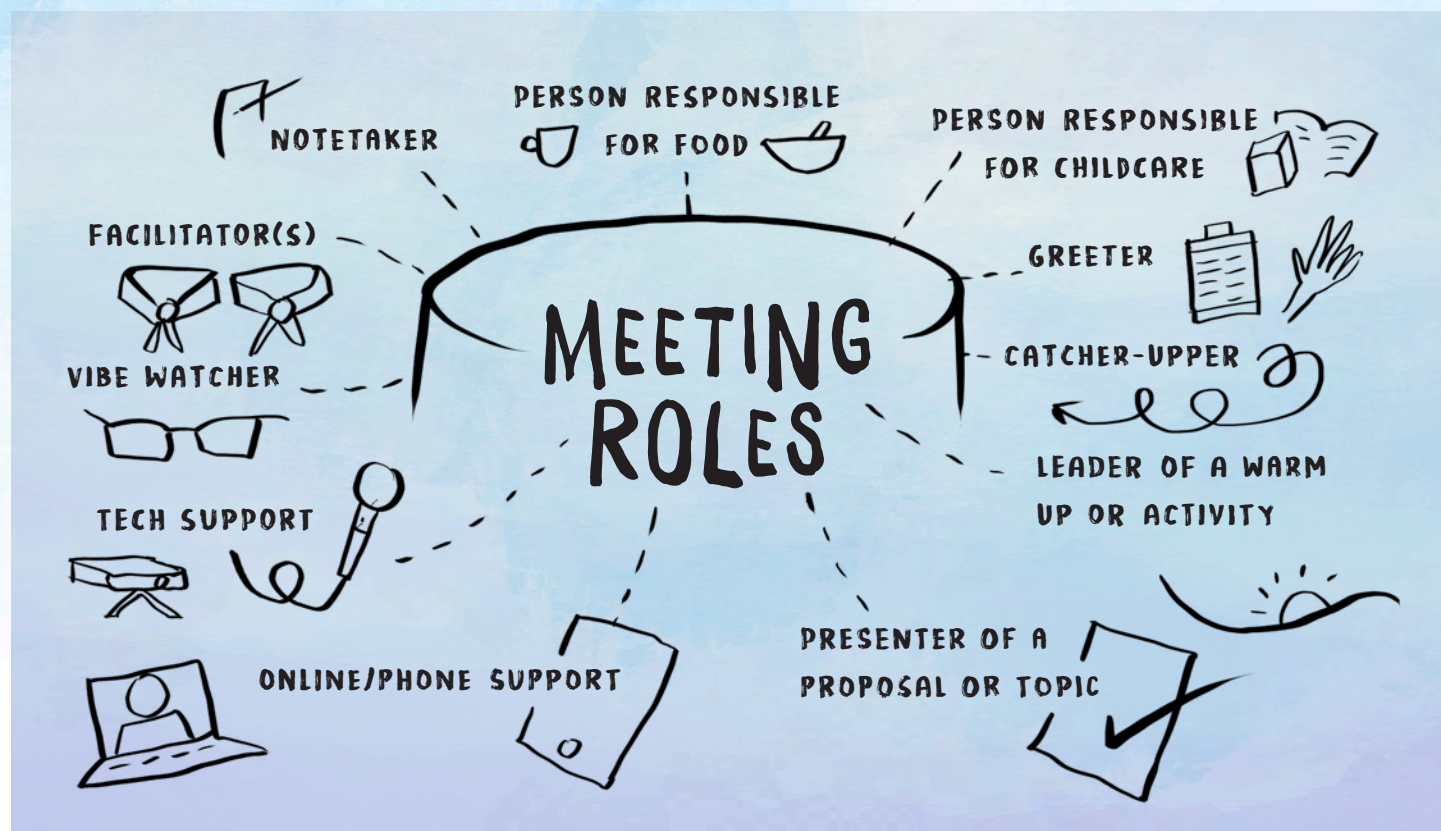- Only brainstorming

Of this list, what are we doing? Can we stop?

WHAT MAKES A MEETING GOOD OR BAD?

As people talk about their experiences with meeting, fill in a two-column chart contrasting **morale-killing meetings** with **morale-supporting meetings**. Consider sharing some items from the list opposite.

MEETINGS WRAP-UP

A big weak spot of many meetings is spotty facilitation, underdeveloped facilitation skills, or lack of rotation in facilitation. This often goes unacknowledged. Many of us know this; we just don't always do anything about it. But to truly step into feminist leadership and build a world worthy of our people, we need to stop being spectators or participant-observers in our own lives and groups. Meetings aren't rocket science, but they do take time, attention, and consistency.

MEETING ROLES

NOTETAKER · PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR FOOD · PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR CHILDCARE · FACILITATOR(S) · GREETER · VIBE WATCHER · CATCHER-UPPER · LEADER OF A WARM UP OR ACTIVITY · TECH SUPPORT · ONLINE/PHONE SUPPORT · PRESENTER OF A PROPOSAL OR TOPIC

MORALE-KILLING MEETINGS:

- Have no clear purpose
- Have no agenda
- Have weak facilitation (loud mouths or rabbit-hole lovers not redirected) or no facilitation
- Are so insular you feel like people are speaking a different language or shared shorthand
- Result in too few or no clear decisions
- Result in too few or no action items
- Happen when people haven't done their action items from last time
- Don't remind people of previous decisions
- Result in notes that no one ever looks at again, verbatim notes, or notes no one can find later
- Have rigid agenda reliance with no flexibility (This often shows up as out of touch with the experiences of people in the room. If this is a problem for you or in your group, encourage facilitators to practice balancing where folks are at with where the group needs to go.)
- Rely too heavily on movement practices that are actually stale or unused in the group, such as agreements that are symbolic, a parking lot folks don't use, a vibe watcher who only worries about individuals' feelings and is conflict avoidant, etc.
- Are too long for the task at hand or too short to feel connected and human
- Fail to balance the need for authenticity and presence with the realities of people's lives and other commitments

MORALE-SUPPORTING MEETINGS:

- Have prepared facilitators. Kai Lumumba Barrow often says that for bigger trainings, you need to spend just as much if not more time preparing for the meeting as in it.
- Have agendas shared with participants beforehand. Facilitators have reminded people of their parts or action items.
- Have stuff written up; are visual and verbal
- Include a check-in. Alternate silly and real so people can get to know each other.
- Rotate who is responsible for food, childcare, agenda prep, facilitation, and presentation
- Use a consistent agenda format (with action items from last time highlighted each time so it's easier to rotate facilitation)
- Result in notes that are always stored in the same place and reviewed by the facilitators before each meeting
- Are fun!
- Have an ethic that team members are all responsible for the success of the meeting
- Have facilitators with awareness to step out of the role if necessary, because they need to briefly participate or because they need to fully tap out
- Have a tone that encourages a sense of joy, hospitality, and belonging for all
- Are transparent about facilitator rank and power while inviting more folks into leadership
- Have defined roles for meeting (see chart p. 62)

Bad HABiTS Self-Assessment

MOST OF US HAVE SOME BAD HABITS WE STRUGGLE TO BREAK.
INTERRUPTING, SCROLLING THE PHONE, ENGAGING CONFLICT OVER TEXT,
NOT READING MEETING NOTES, TALKING TO OUR FRIENDS BUT NOT THOSE
WE NEED TO HEAR FROM, LACK OF RIGOR ABOUT TIME, BEING NOSY,
AND BEING UNAVAILABLE THEN WEIGHING IN HARD ARE SOME CLASSIC
EXAMPLES!

What bad habits do you KNOW you need to break?

BAD HABIT   INTERVENTION

FOR EACH HABIT, MAKE ONE COMMITMENT TO AN INTERVENTION,
THEN TELL SOMEONE ELSE IN THE GROUP YOUR PLAN.

WE DON'T WANT TO BE STARS

DECISION-MAKING

Everyone on your team is making decisions all the time. Working *is* decision-making. When we consider the matter of decision-making for democratic groups, what we're really asking is a question of discernment, or sorting, different types of decisions:

- *What decisions does the whole group need to weigh in on?*
- *What can we move forward more independently in our roles or working groups?*
- *When are we consulting or notifying each other of decisions, and when do we need consent from each other (or specific others, like a boss or work-area lead) to move forward?*

To aid discernment, consider:

- *Who has experience addressing the question or issue at hand? Who will be impacted by the decision?* **These two categories of folks should be consulted.**
- *Are you starting something new? Who will it impact?*
- *Are you stopping a significant part of your work, or seeking to terminate a formal relationship?*
- In decision-making discussions, facilitators should make sure to identify (and frequently re-state) choice points for people. Conversations can spin forever and expand endlessly, but *what choice are you actually trying to make right now? What can be punted to a future discussion?*
- Cultivate and encourage a **proposal-based organizational culture** that gives space for new ideas to emerge. This develops people's skill in crafting proposals, from identifying a need, to shaping a response, then shopping the proposal around to strengthen it and build enthusiasm, and ultimately pitching it to the group and following through on implementation. Ask folks to consider who in the group is most likely to oppose their proposal, and to make sure to workshop the idea with them before bringing it to the full group. Proposals should at minimum have been shared in writing before meeting time is spent on them.
- Many of these practices are widely known, and **there's often a gap between what we know we should do and what we actually do in practice** when the rubber hits the road. *How do we work to close that gap?*

DECISION MENU MAKING

of Methods & Structures

ONE PERSON CALLS THE SHOTS

EXECUTIVE / LEADERSHIP COMMITTEE

VOTING: MAJORITY, SUPERMAJORITY

INFORMAL ELITE DECIDES

STREET ACTION TACTICAL TEAM

WORKING GROUPS

CONSENSUS, CONSENSUS MINUS ONE

SPOKESCOUNCIL

WHAT ARE OUR METHODS? WHY?

WE DON'T WANT TO BE STARS

DECISION-MAKING KEY POINTS

- In US movements, decision-making is largely misunderstood and full of land mines. **It is perceived as a privilege, and a way to wield power** (in a context where many of us get little say in other areas of our lives). And it's true: decision-making is about power. **But it is also a huge responsibility**. We have to make choices in an often-hostile landscape (with scarcity of resources and profound opposition) in which competing commitments and diverse needs are weighed and compromises are often made, and then we have to own those decisions and their consequences (the good, the bad, and the gnarly). **Many people want to be 'in' on decision-making but are unprepared to take the heat when there's pushback or conditions are poor.**
- In grassroots and progressive groups, we often get '**lost in the sauce,**' debating minutiae and haggling over small choices. Sometimes, we do this to avoid the bigger strategic uncertainties we have in our work, as it's easier to argue about "which paper color is cuter?" than "are we really building any power here?" But building trust means honoring other peoples' calls, and building up each other's skills when needed rather than hovering and micromanaging people. **Let's trust, let go, and keep our eyes on the prize.**
- **If leaders and groups don't trust the people, then the people can become untrustworthy.** Releasing the chokehold on decision-making that doesn't need to be centralized also communicates that we're serious about building to scale, and demonstrates the values of collectivism and leadership development.
- On the flip side, **including everyone on everything, even when they lack sufficient information, context, or experience is unreasonable and liberal,** and an indicator of conflict-avoidant culture.

SCENARIOS

Break people up into small groups to work through a scenario. Use these, or invent your own, tailor-made for your challenges. Using flip chart paper, write up the questions and/or scenarios if that's useful. For each scenario, invite groups to discuss:

- *What's the issue?*
- *What is to be done?*
- *What would prevent them from solving this issue quickly?*
- *Who needs to be involved in the decision-making?*

Then, have folks prepare a skit and present it to the full group.

Scenario 1: People are "empowered" to make decisions, but the long-term leader comes in and overturns it every time!

Scenario 2: People come in and out of meetings and process, but then weigh in really hard at key decision-making moments.

Scenario 3: The team can't make a decision to save their lives! Discussions are lengthy, and decisions are consistently punted to the next meeting.

Scenario 4: A person with large amounts of information and interpersonal power refuses to delegate, share key information, or share the relationships necessary to move group forward.

BAKING IN RADICAL HOSPITALITY

Part of our work is to build teams, groups, and formations that give people meaningful opportunities to be welcomed, developed, and move up into their own leadership and support others. If people don't feel welcomed at the start, they fade away or don't show up again, and we don't have a chance to build them – or our groups – up.

When we fail to welcome new people authentically, it can be for many reasons. It can look like:

* Forgetting to welcome new people formally at a meeting
* Failing to make meetings accessible (Is there food? Childcare? Can you get there by bus?)
* Defaulting to jargon or inside talk, so new people can't follow
* Not following up with people after they come to a meeting, event, or action
* Having no entry-points for people other than business meetings

So how do you bake radical hospitality into your practice? How do you approach strangers, and how to you relate to them once you get them in the door? How can you better visibilize the warmth you want to offer?

Break into small groups, and invite people to consider these questions. It can help to remember when we were new to something (even the first day of school).

Invite folks to think about examples from their own lives (like, *Who is that cake lady or covered-dish person in your world who is so good at making people feel cared for and welcomed?*)

Then, have groups develop a recipe for ways to welcome new people and create a shared culture where we look out for each others' belonging.

What are the ingredients that we have and that we need to make our special recipe for radical hospitality?

Example:
1 part real uninterrupted **listening**, with eye contact
10 cups of **patience**
2 sticks of **copal**
1 speaker with a nice **playlist**
25 **tamales**
Mix with weekly practice of checking in on someone on the team, and bake!

CLOSING

Give folks copies of the **Leveraging Resources and Radical Hospitality** worksheet (opposite) to fill in on their own, and invite them to review their answers with one other person as part of check-out conversation

Leveraging RESOURCES and RADICAL Hospitality

Q: WHERE CAN WE GET WHAT WE NEED? HOW DO WE HUSTLE TO GET OUR NEEDS MET AS A NON-STAFFED GROUP?

A: BE A HUSTLER!

AND IF YOU WERE RAISED WITH A SILVER SPOON IN YOUR MOUTH, BE DECENT AND AWAKE!

WHAT RESOURCES DO YOU HAVE AT YOUR DISPOSAL?

MAP YOUR ASSETS OF ACCESS! EVERYONE HAS ASSETS. YOURS COULD INCLUDE:

ACCESS TO SPACES: FOR MEETINGS, RETREATS, AND EVENTS

ACCESS TO CHURCHES: MANY HAVE CHILDCARE FACILITIES AND HUGE INDUSTRIAL KITCHENS

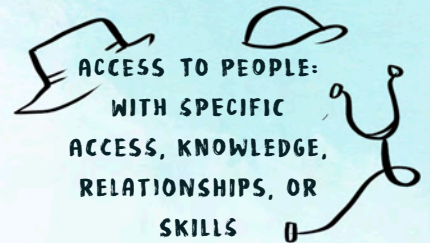**ACCESS TO FOOD:** FOR EXAMPLE, A COUSIN THAT HAS A RESTAURANT OR GETTING DONATIONS FROM A SUPERMARKET

ACCESS TO MONEY: FOR EXAMPLE, A ROTARY CLUB $500 ANNUAL AWARD

ACCESS TO SUPPLIES AND TOOLS: LIKE A PHOTOCOPIER OR EXTRA HOUSEPAINT

ACCESS TO PEOPLE: WITH SPECIFIC ACCESS, KNOWLEDGE, RELATIONSHIPS, OR SKILLS

EVEN IF WE'RE IN HARD TIMES, WE HAVE A LOT AT OUR FINGERTIPS BECAUSE OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS...
IF WE'RE WILLING TO DEEPEN OUR RELATIONSHIPS AND ASK FOLKS INTO THE WORK!

BUILDING THE TEAM OF THE WILLING