

INFRASTRUCTURE, PART 1: GOOD BONES, STRONG MUSCLES [2 HOURS]

OVERVIEW

This section is a feminist intervention around “what organizing is.” It supports folks to be proactive about greasing the wheels of internal operations so they can do what they set out to do. It’s also intended to prevent folks from getting spun-out or stalled-out by common organizational hiccups like delegation, roles, and coordination.

In this culture, many of us aren’t taught how to collaborate, share, or coordinate effectively; we have to learn, practice, and overcome bad habits. We know that this is necessary because our mandate as organizers is to work with others to build power. Alone, we are just activists acting on our passions.

All roles within a political organization are political, whether you are in the front of the house or behind the scenes. Everyone in a formation is therefore accountable to the vision and goals of the organization. This means that as cooks, childcare providers, and administrators we are accountable to the politics of our formations, and as strategy heads, communications folks, and march leaders we are accountable to the infrastructure systems that hold our work together.

Infrastructure is a big topic, so we’re offering it in two parts. Part 1 is about assessing the overall values and systems in place in your group, and Part 2 tackles the question of roles and coordination.

GOALS

- To offer time for individual and collective reflection on people’s experiences working in groups
- To explore values, practices, weaknesses, and opportunities for growth in your group’s internal ecosystem
- To use interactive exercises to assess your group’s needs around coordination, roles, and systems

TIME NEEDED

2 hours

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Flip chart, markers, tape, writing tools for participants. Prepare **values** cards and **strong core** lists.
- Handouts: **Where Do I Go**, **Where do we need Coordination**, and **Information & Decision Flows**

READINGS/RESOURCES

- *Tyranny of Structurelessness* by Jo Freeman
- *Keeping Your Group Alive and Kicking* (Rural Organizing Project)
- *Database and communication systems* (Rural Organizing Project)

WHERE DO I GO?

INFRASTRUCTURE SELF-ASSESSMENT WORKSHEET

WHAT WORK
COMES EASY
TO YOU?

WHAT ARE YOU GOOD
AT THAT YOU DON'T
PARTICULARLY LIKE
TO DO?

WHAT DO YOU LIKE
TO DO THAT YOU
ARE ALSO GOOD AT?

WHAT ARE THINGS
YOU ARE WILLING TO
DO THAT YOU DON'T
NECESSARILY ENJOY?

WHAT ARE YOU
ABSOLUTELY NOT WILLING
TO DO IN THE CONTEXT
OF A GROUP OR A TEAM?

IN GROUP
PROJECTS,
WHERE DO YOU
GRAVITATE?

HOW DID YOU COME
TO OCCUPY THE ROLES
YOU OFTEN TAKE ON?

HOW DOES YOUR GENDER,
RACE, AND HOW YOU LIVE
IN THIS SOCIETY INFORM
WHAT WORK YOU GO
TOWARDS?

PREP WORK

Have folks come to this session having already completed the worksheet **Where Do I Go? Infrastructure Self-Assessment Worksheet** (p. 71).

FRAMING

The “infrastructure” of our groups is a way of talking about **the systems and structures people set up and maintain to work collectively**. Infrastructure is the way we live our values, and it has everything to do with power, informed decision-making, strategy, and our effectiveness. The dictionary defines infrastructure as:

- *the underlying foundation or basic framework (as of a system or organization)*
- *the basic physical and organizational structures and facilities (e.g., buildings, roads, power supplies) needed for the operation of a society or enterprise*

STORYTELLING

Ask people to get into pairs. Set the scene by reminding folks that in different scenarios, relationships, and contexts, we all play different roles.

1. Ask folks to think about a time when they ***had to be a maintainer***: someone holding the relational continuity necessary to get things done. *Was this in a household? Or a PTA or political organization?* Invite them to describe the experience in their pair.
 - *What resources did you have, and what did you need?*
 - *What did you do to maintain continuity?*
 - *Where did you struggle?*
2. Then ask people to respond in their pairs to one of the following questions about that group:
 - *How comfortable was the group with chaos? With order?*
 - *What rules were spoken in this group, and what rules were unspoken?*
 - *Did the group have any specific beliefs, dogmas, or ideologies, and were they articulated?*

Alternatively, you can ask folks to reflect more generally:

- *What has been your experience personally and in groups?*
- *In groups that broke down: Why did they break down? What happened?*

TAKING STOCK OF OUR GROUP

In the next section, you’ll be inviting folks to look closely at **this** group through the lens of infrastructure. Based on everyone’s prior experience, you’ll discuss what’s feeling strong and what’s a struggle. Give people a minute or two to think or write some notes, and then invite folks to share out: ***What are some strengths or struggles you have observed or participated in with this group?***

Consider:

- We’re drowning in tools, data, emails, and information
- We’re overstimulated, overwhelmed, distracted, and flakey
- We’re hyper-individualized, and struggling to think and work collectively. We’re siloed.

- We know nonprofits aren't the answer, so we're drawn towards horizontality and collective structures, but we don't really know how to work together in that way. Things just spin.
- We think structure is white, so we don't have any and our work suffers.
- We're way too rigid in our structures. Too many policies and protocols. We're not agile.
- We're not nearly rigid enough. We're spontaneous and pumped, but we're a mess.
- Conflict is tearing us apart! (You can remind folks that there's a session beginning on page 114 devoted to exploring relationships and conflict in our work, and of course it's all connected.)

A DEEPER DIVE: OUR CORE BELIEFS ABOUT INFRASTRUCTURE

- It's critical to have and apply a **strong power analysis** to all parts of our work.
- Attentiveness to shaping and sharing power is **everyone's business**, and everyone's responsibility.
- Internal organizational questions around group patterns and behavior are **structural and political**. They are not one person's individual fault or responsibility.
- **Information is power**. Having a clear place for notes, decisions, lists, and spreadsheets is critical for democratic groups. This does not mean that every random person off the street gets access to your list, but rather that for long term and emerging leaders there are formal and clear ways for people to access your organization's material. These are not one person's "property."
- **It is easier - though not good - to underdevelop this when we are in small collectives**, informal groupings, friend groups, or doing small projects. But as organizers working to bring in new people, we need many hands to work across culture, class, race, and experience, and for that we need infrastructure.
- When systems aren't clear, or are overreliant on the consolidated power of a few people, **the consequences for our movements are devastating**. This is where we get bottlenecks (everything must pass through a few people and can't scale or move with agility), broken trust and relationships, ineffectiveness, and an inability for the organization to nourish itself with energy and to grow.
- **Some activist culture is averse to building infrastructure** because it is narrowly perceived as 'corporate' or white. While it can absolutely be true that white people particularly can get extra around structure (especially in the absence of knowing how to address the external problems at hand), it is narrow and simplistic to say unilaterally that systems, operations, or infrastructure are only for some people.
- In reality, all groups have a culture, a style, and a way of working together. The tone can be more casual or more buttoned up, but the key question is **whether your methods are clear, agreed upon, and can be explained to people coming in**.
- **Lots of us are personally struggling to maintain our life systems**. We struggle to keep up with our emails, our calendars, our commitments, our families, and our communications. The pace of information tracking in 2020 is extreme (see *Being Present in an Age of Distraction* session, p. 90), and this bleeds over into sloppy organizational practices. We need to be intentional about shifting this culture in our work, while not blaming and shaming people for a condition of capitalism.
- We can draw inspiration for getting ourselves together from Ella Baker and Anne Braden, who each had a meticulous system of filing, correspondence, and tracking donations ... all in a time before Google Docs.

LIVING INTO OUR VALUES

Ask people to break into groups of 3 or more. Print or write up each of the following ways of being on a single piece of paper, and give each group one paper to discuss: ***What would it take for our group or organization to move and make decisions from this value, this way of being?***

- **We organize ourselves and others: people are our power.** We strike a balance, and avoid either focusing entirely on internal dynamics and structure (like having 50 internal working groups) or totally neglecting internal process and being action junkies.
- **We watch the margins to widen the margins.** Without systems and structures to bring people in, we default to who our friends are, who is closest to us, and who we like, which enables cliquishness.
- **We are anti-individualist.** Relationships are personal but they are also being developed on behalf of the group, and we are attentive to this.
- **We orient towards movement-building.** In order to build a mass movement, we will need a mega constellation of groups, federations, alliances, collectives, and institutions.
- **We build trust by making commitments and following through.** This includes transparency in shared decision-making and pro-actively communicating when things are not happening on a certain timeline or have shifted.

Discussion: *Based on our values, where do we want to be? What do we need to do or learn how to do?* People can pair or small group share, then discuss in full group. When you return, ask folks what came up in their small groups.

BREAK: Set up the room for the next activity.

INTERNAL SYSTEMS SPECTROGRAM

To set up for this activity during the break, clear the space so people can move around. Mark one wall or area 'agree' and the opposite side of the room 'disagree,' with 'don't know' and 'mix of both' verbally explained to be in the middle, along a spectrum. Offer the full group a series of intentionally provocative questions and invite people to answer by moving to the part of the room that represents their perspective (an accessibility modification is hand raising: high means agree, in your lap means disagree). Once they have stopped moving, either ask them to discuss their thoughts with the people near them or invite folks across the spectrum to share with the whole group why they are where they are, and engage people with follow-up questions.

As the facilitator, you can also come up with different spectogram questions tailored to the patterns and themes in your group. Questions that are provocative and polarizing and that force people to take a position are excellent here. Since this is a tool for assessment, but not for decision-making, it's ok to take and try on bold positions.

- ***I think our internal systems are functioning really well.*** (Why? Why not? Which ones?)
- ***Our internal systems are holding us back from success.*** (Give an example. Share your thoughts.)
- ***I feel appreciated inside this team.*** (When was a time you felt appreciated? Appreciated someone else?)
- ***I'm doing what I can to support and grease the wheels to make this team work.*** (For those that disagree:

What is getting in the way of doing what you can? What are the internal and external obstacles?)

- **I have some ideas for how to make our internal systems better.** (For those who agree: like what? For those who disagree: are you willing to get with the program that others design?!)
- **Structures are for corporations.** (Tease out what folks fear about too much structure. Just naming this can help the structure-phobic trust more in structure-building work).

Wrap up: What does this information mean for how we work together?

A FEMINIST LENS ON LABOR

Though internal structures are essential to our ability to maintain and grow our teams, **the contributions of operations and administrative folks can be undervalued and less visible in organizing.** It is the responsibility of the larger group to figure out meaningful ways to acknowledge and celebrate the internal work, much like we (should) do for external victories and fights, while supporting methods of sharing responsibilities and delegating tasks when it makes sense. **Combat low morale by:**

- Acknowledging labor and offering gratitude
- Clocking and tracking who is doing maintenance work and administration
- Rotating roles
- Asking where people want to grow in their organizing, regardless of their current role
- Building relationships outside of tasks and across spheres of work
- If you're pushy about deadlines and shared agreements, be gracious *and* firm.

BUILDING - OR TONING - A STRONG CORE

Have examples of the components of a **strong core** pre-written on butcher paper or index cards. Ask people to take a look, review, and determine what they would add. **The goal here is baseline shared work agreements**, not teasing out every tiny thing.

Consider:

- **Shared contact list** among leadership
- **Shared core documents** that are used often (sign-up sheet, flyer, meeting notes, budget)
- **Consistent forms of communication**, and clarity about what methods fit what purpose (a 1-on-1 text versus a full group email)
- **Consistent meeting time**
- **Consistent notes with decisions tracked**
- **Clarity on roles and decision-making practices**

CLOSING

Invite people to use the remainder of the time to work through the questions on the following pages, using page 77 for mapping the flow of information and decision making. As time allows, give folks time to discuss in pairs, small groups, or the full group, or use these worksheets as homework and revisit them before the next infrastructure session.

Where Do We Need COORDINATION?

1. On the worksheet opposite, draw a picture of **HOW INFORMATION AND DECISIONS ARE INTENDED TO FLOW** in a group you are a part of. *How it does it look on paper?* (For example: Clear! Confusing! Quirky, but it works!)
2. Using a different color, make notes of **WHERE THE ACTUAL FLOWS OR CHOICE POINTS ARE DIFFERENT THAN WHAT YOU DREW**. If it makes sense, use a third color to circle up to three key breakdown points. *How does the intended flow compare to how it feels (or actually goes down) in real life?*
3. **BELOW, MAKE TWO LISTS:**
WHAT ARE WE ACCUSTOMED TO? VS. WHAT DO WE NEED TO LEAN INTO?
(What are our habits, formal or informal?) (What new habits would serve us and our work?)
4. **WHAT TOOLS DO WE HAVE AT OUR DISPOSAL TO HELP US MAXIMIZE OUR EFFECTIVENESS?**
How do we (or could we) use them so they help us, not hinder us? (For example: Slack, Drive, Signal, WhatsApp, Mailchimp, text, groups, etc).
5. **HOW DO WE BECOME COLLECTIVELY THOUGHTFUL ABOUT WHO NEEDS TO KNOW WHAT?**
Not everyone needs to know everything! Consider coordination vs. control (and recall that internalized white supremacy and patriarchal conditioning fuels the need for control, order, and universal access).

INFORMATION & DECISION *Flowz*

THE FIRST THING
THAT HAPPENS IS...

THEN...

NEXT...

AFTER THAT...

FINALLY...