

IS THIS REALLY DEMOCRACY?

DEMOCRATIC PROCESS SUBVERTED

CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING is often considered a kind of gold standard in egalitarian collectives because many people feel that it allows for the most autonomy and participation by all members. No one can be outvoted or required to abide by any decisions that she did not explicitly accept. That's a good argument for consensus, but there are also good reasons to choose some form of voting instead of requiring unanimous consent.

Some advocates for voting have explained that they did not feel consensus left enough room for dissent. It is fairly common knowledge that people will occasionally be reluctant to raise objections during the consensus process because they don't want to be responsible for blocking a decision that most people in the group want to reach. But advocates for voting have also pointed out that dissenting opinions are more often and easily recorded during the voting process, exactly because people are able to stick to their opinions without blocking the final decision from being made. With the dissenting opinion left firmly on the record, a group is better prepared to return to the issue for further debate or even at some point in the future. This could be important if circumstances change so that a different decision becomes more likely or applicable.

Both sides on this issue make valid points, and we think that adopting either method is fine, as long as the group sticks to the democratic principles behind the process. Differences in process are not as important as

A Guide to Subverting Collective Process_x

Yay!

Try one of these options:

respect, mutual acceptance, and an open forum for the exchange of ideas. For instance, a group might look to process primarily as a means of deciding on proposals—declaring, as a result, that all decisions have been made fairly and democratically—while it fails to encourage or allow the free expression of opinions. In that situation, genuine democracy has been subverted. Rather than being a means to ensure that everyone's

the genuine effort to make sure that everyone gets an equal say.

Sometimes, collectives that claim to operate democratically have really only adopted aspects of the democratic process while overlooking the fundamental qualities at its core: equality,

1-pretend not to scowl when anyone raises objections to your proposal_x



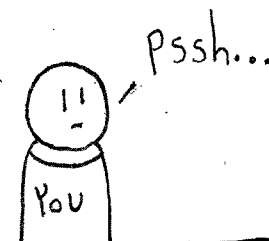
voice is heard, the decision-making process becomes an ineffectual tool that leaves members feeling frustrated and confused. In a worst-case scenario, it can become a coercive tactic to shore up the power of a self-appointed elite.

Collectives sometimes rely on the assumption that the group's process is intuitively understood by the members. A group might function reasonably well without studying the process too closely, until a problem occurs, and then the group's ability to work together suddenly falls apart. Attention to process is never more important than in times of crisis, but by the time a rift has occurred, it's usually too late to cobble together a set of procedures for the collective to follow. In most cases, the unequal group dynamics that derail a collective during difficult circumstances have been at play since long before the problems became obvious.

A CLOSER LOOK AT CONSENSUS

GENERALLY, A COLLECTIVE that operates by consensus holds regular meetings at which proposals are submitted and discussed. At the end of each discussion, the facilitator will call for objections; if none are made, the proposal will be said to have passed by consensus. But this process doesn't always guarantee that there really is consensus: a lot depends on the power dynamics that come into play. For instance, if members are individually approached ahead of time and persuaded on the merits of the proposal, that's a manipulation of the process, as it bypasses the open forum, which

2-scoff at proposals made by other people_x

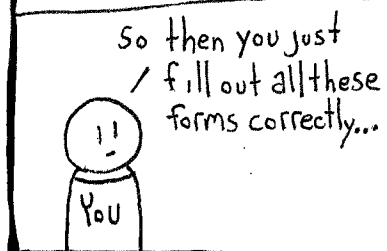


is at the heart of consensus. Or, if an influential or intimidating member voices strong support for the proposal and exhibits annoyance or impatience with anyone who raises concerns, his attitude can restrict the free exchange of ideas and influence the final outcome. When that happens, the resulting decision will not have been made by consensus.

If some members do not have access to the information needed to make an educated choice but have to rely on the assurances of the proponents that their plan is sound, that, too, will essentially invalidate the consensus.

The issue is even thornier when proposals do not pass. In many instances, consensus is not deliberately abused but simply falls prey to vagueness and misunderstanding. For example, group members might believe that if everyone cannot agree on a particular outcome for a given situation, then the proposal that was made to deal with that situation should simply be dropped, and the issue will remain unaddressed. Consensus requires that all members declare the outcome of a discussion to

3. pretend to teach people things, but gloss over details!



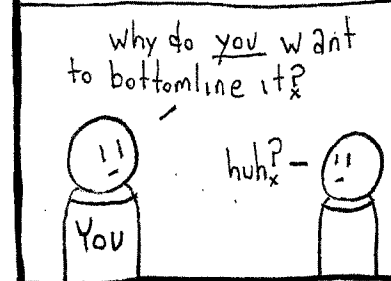
be at least marginally acceptable: it should encourage a resolution to which all members can consent, not a form of resignation, for lack of unanimity, that leaves the status quo intact. If someone proposes a change because she perceives a problem that needs

addressing, that person cannot simply be overruled for the sake of group agreement.

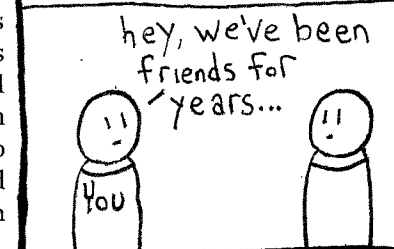
Blocking, the prerogative by one or more people to stop a decision that everyone else would choose to pass, is the one aspect of consensus that seems to be universally embraced.

It does not mean, however, that one person can hold the collective hostage to his or her whims. Blocking must be used judiciously and not as a power play. More often, however, pressure is applied by the more domineering members of the group to urge someone *not* to block and not to voice dissent. Blocking puts one in the spotlight and easily casts one as a troublemaker, particularly when it means defying powerful members who have already privately persuaded the others to go along with their agenda. Members who have established themselves as de facto leaders (yes, this happens all the time in egalitarian collectives) and who may have attracted a following within

4. accuse others of power-hoarding!



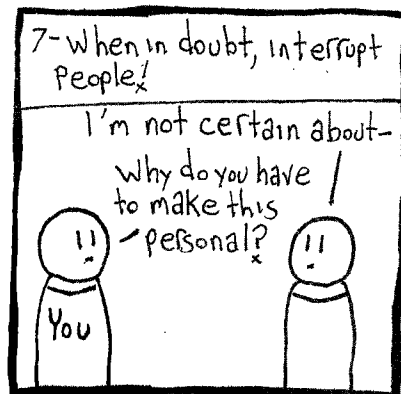
5. get a head start by "lobbying" for your proposal before meetings!





the group through charisma or persuasiveness, or by scoring impressive achievements for the organization, don't have to resort to blocking to kill a proposal. It's enough for them to display annoyance, irritation, or agitation with the suggested action, generating distrust among others. A persuasive (or feared) individual could destroy a proposal simply by frowning at the right times, sighing in exasperation, or laughing sarcastically. Clearly, this is not consensus.

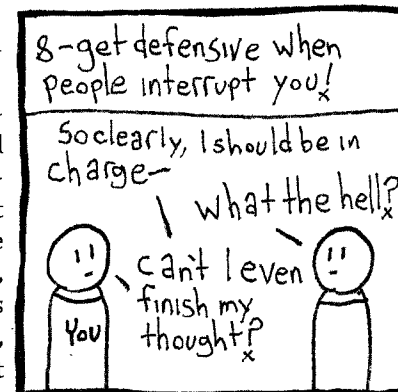
Consensus is not just the end result of the group's decision-making process, or the part where a vote is taken and the vote is unanimous, barring any blocks or stand-asides. The consensus process has to be built



into the entire structure of the group or organization and form the basis for all of its activities and basic operation. This is true for all egalitarian collectives, even those who accept some form of majority vote in their decision-making and are therefore not

strictly defined as operating by consensus.

The basic premise of consensus, and indeed of any egalitarian group, is that all members of the group are valuable, everyone's opinions deserve consideration, and everyone's input is necessary for the



group's efforts to proceed, in a spirit of collaboration. It's different from the group process used by conventional organizations in that it does not set up an adversarial relationship where one side wins (often the majority, but just as often the side backed up by the most authority) and the other side loses. In consensus, the collective does not hold discussions in order to defend a particular position but, rather, to arrive at solutions that everyone can consent to. In order for everyone to give consent freely, there must be no coercion or unequal power. Thus the absence of hierarchy and authority is not an added stipulation to the structure of egalitarian collectives but is essential to the consensus process.

THE BAGGAGE OF COLLECTIVE MEMBERS

MOST OF US did not grow up in egalitarian settings. Whether at school, work, or home, we each learned in our own way to navigate unequal power relationships. Some of us learned to get what we want by working the system. Others became adept at cajoling and currying favor. Some



same personal styles that each of us adopted to cope with the outside world carry over into the collective.

If we join a collective with the optimistic assumption that egalitarians can be counted on deal with their fellow collective members fairly, and always with openness, kindness, and trust, we can be blindsided by the same bad behaviors we've had to deal with in other areas of our lives, where we at least knew to expect



concluded that it's less risky to let someone else take charge than it is to assert oneself and possibly make waves. Some learned to trust, others to mistrust. These habits of mind are not somehow magically shed when a person joins an egalitarian collective. The

them. Collectives are not immune from underhanded tactics, grandstanding, bullying, or the willingness of some to remain silent as small and big injustices go unremarked. Sometimes the bad behavior that surprises us can even be our own.

This book looks at the less attractive underbelly of collectives. Much of what we write may seem to imply that people who scheme and intimidate to get their way do so intentionally, but that may not always be the case. People tend to act in

ways that they have become accustomed to, sometimes without even realizing it. Some people are used to taking charge and getting what they want. Others might be afraid to stick their necks out to call out bad acts when they see them, or they may genuinely not perceive that there's anything wrong with someone else assuming leadership.

Because everyone in the collective is an equal, there isn't an authority figure tasked with keeping bad behaviors in check. It's the shared responsibility of all collective members to look out for the health and integrity of the group. If we look the other way when someone grabs power, attempts to unfairly discredit or denigrate others, or uses manipulative ploys, we are endangering the collective's wellbeing as much as the person whose ugly behaviors we're trying to ignore.

It's not a matter of assigning blame, especially since the individual(s) acting badly may be doing so without even realizing it. But it is essential that everyone work to correct power imbalances, fear, or mistrust in the group.

11- never ever ever talk through your problems with other collective members, inside or outside of meetings. That would make you look weak.

POWER SHARING

The Formation of a Ruling Elite

WHENEVER A CORE group forms within a collective that takes on the work of managing its day-to-day affairs, like paying the rent, keeping the books, orienting new members, representing the organization to outsiders—the press, for instance—and ultimately deciding the direction of the organization without consulting the collective, members should become very concerned.

If the core faction scoffs at adherence to established procedures or ridicules people who are concerned about process, claiming that they, the hard-working, indispensable backbone of the organization, are more interested in getting things done than going to meetings, there is no collectivism at work in the group.

Domineering people often seek to disparage or discourage sticking to a written code of procedures. This allows them to act without the group's consent but without having clearly violated any rule, or even to claim that they alone know the rules and have in fact followed

12- unless, of course, by doing so you can sway the person into ceasing their vendetta against you and your righteous planning!

them. Worse, they may force someone else to act according to their wishes, again claiming that the procedural code, which no one has ever seen, requires it.

More often, however, a lack of process allows self-appointed leaders to control the collective by attrition

and default. The issues they don't favor are allowed to fall by the wayside, quietly. If anybody complains, these self-appointed leaders can simply say they haven't gotten around to a given item yet because, since they are running the organization, they are swamped with work. Or, they can claim that those matters that didn't get done simply didn't work out logistically. How can the other members, who have been kept out of the loop of any logistics, claim it to be otherwise?

Whenever a small elite has been allowed to take over, the remaining members are left to function only as worker bees. The ruling clique may seek to consolidate its power by fragmenting the organization, so that no one knows what anybody else is doing except those at the top, who have to be consulted every time something needs to be done that could affect another subgroup or the broader infrastructure of the organization.

In some cases, members who have been cut off from the leadership may simply work independently on their own projects, using the group only for the resources it is able to offer. If that happens, the group has ceased to function collectively.

Except in organizations whose sheer size would make it impossible, egalitarian collectives require a maximum of transparency. (And even some of those larger

Remember, kids:

collective process
is the war of
one against all!
Never let down
your guard!

organizations might be able to foster greater transparency by offering meetings and information sessions through smaller assemblies or sub-groups.)

Ideally, each member should be informed about how the organization functions from day to day. Each member should be able to perform the key tasks required for the group's daily work. (In an ideal situation, members should learn how to perform *all* the tasks.) This might seem like a tedious process, but without it, there's no power sharing.

The Responsibilities of Collective Members

A collective requires the active and vigilant participation of all members in order to function equitably and collectively. Just as those who take on positions of power subvert group process, so do the people who relinquish authority and lose interest in the workings of the group. Because a collective has no bosses to enforce the rules, everyone involved in the communal effort has to take responsibility to see to it that the operating guidelines are adhered to by all. If somebody acts in a domineering manner, it is everyone else's role to call that person to task and ask him to change his behavior. If the group fails to do this, then it is failing to follow the principles of collectivism.

Domineering members may strive to encourage apathy and lack of participation, usually by keeping people uninformed or clueless about what's going on in the group. This is an authoritarian strategy (which could be unintentional) to concentrate power within one individual or small faction. When the majority loses interest in making decisions, the few will take that role upon themselves.

It is absolutely crucial, in order for the group to function collectively, that all members take an active role and keep themselves fully informed. Whenever we throw away power, there's usually someone around who's perfectly happy to scoop it up.

RED FLAGS TO GUARD AGAINST

THE FOLLOWING IS a by-no-means-exhaustive list of behaviors that should send up red flags among collective members that the group's dynamics need to be reexamined to ensure equal participation (and to stop divas and egomaniacs in their tracks).

These behaviors can crop up for a variety of reasons. Some might be undertaken deliberately to create particular outcomes, but many are simply the result of habit, frustration, or plain-old burnout. The very individuals who are responsible for planting these flags might be the ones least aware that their actions could be having a damaging effect on the collective.

The reason we list these red flags is not so that people who identify them in their own groups can point fingers or find fault, but so that they might become aware that the dynamics of their group need attending to. Intentional or not, these are behaviors that can undermine the group's ability to function openly and inclusively.

Group Behaviors:

1. Meetings are poorly attended and those who do attend appear to be sullen and bored, letting a self-appointed leader set the agenda and do most of the talking. This is a sure sign that people have given up on the possibility of having meaningful input into the group's direction.

2. Meetings are not held at all, or not for months, because of lack of interest. (Note: some groups get together on a regular basis to work on projects. These may count as informal meetings if decisions and issues are discussed in the course of the work. That's okay: it doesn't signal lack of participation.)
3. Someone or a faction denigrates meetings (boring, take up too much time, people have better things to do, meetings are for people who are only interested in process and not in actually getting things done) so that they are rarely held, are hurried, or are badly attended. As a result, one small group or individual can make decisions on his/her/their own without having to consult anyone else.
4. People walk on eggs for fear of upsetting the "leader." People chastise others for having upset the "leader."
5. Someone or a faction derides the idea of using a facilitator or an agreed-upon process, implying that "our group" is above needing all that.
6. Unsubstantiated rumors and gossip, especially attacking someone for being racist or sexist (hard to defend against) or for unspecific offenses, such as being "uncooperative," "unreasonable," or "disruptive" (hard to prove or disprove).
7. A sustained campaign to discredit someone, with accusations such as "thief," "liar," and "control freak" being tossed about without substantiation or clearly

trumped up (i.e., a person who borrows or loses something is declared a thief and a ban is called for).

8. A petition being circulated for members' signatures that vilifies someone. People signing such a petition without any first-hand knowledge of the accusations, often in an attempt to be helpful: "I don't want that person to destroy the group!" (Or to avoid angering the accusers and becoming themselves the subjects of the next petition.)
9. Constant shit-talking about people formerly associated with the group, even in a humorous vein.
10. Calls for banning cropping up whenever there's a problem.

Individual Behaviors:

1. Acting exasperated that someone would waste the group's time with trivialities.
2. Crushing dissent by fabricating distracting excuses or creating a smokescreen.
3. Trying to create a feud by consistently slandering someone behind his back or baiting him to his face. (For instance: is there someone who takes every opportunity to complain about the same person? "He/she is a stalker/a sexual harasser/a sexist/crazy/out to get me, etc.")
4. Using outright intimidation such as staring down, yelling, histrionics, or acting as if one is (barely) suppressing indignant rage.

5. Acting wounded or victimized when one is actually the aggressor.
6. Acting wounded or outraged whenever someone makes a reasonable request, like asking for accountability of an expenditure. (Extra-red flag: does this person consider herself to be so far above the rules that govern the group that she might actually be appropriating the group's funds or other resources?)
7. Making oneself indispensable by not allowing anyone to help or have access to the information they would need in order to help.
8. Suggesting (or insisting!) that fundamental principles should be set aside to deal with a crisis (or to appeal to important constituencies, like sources of funding).
9. Having no patience for fundamental principles (implying that they, or ideals in general, are childish).
10. Relishing verbal arguments with those less knowledgeable or more vulnerable just for the glee of crushing them.
11. Demonstrating contempt for other people's ideas or their right to express them (i.e., by scoffing, ridiculing, or belittling). Not to be confused with honest debate, which engages. Contempt only silences.

12. Controlling situations with fear by flying into a histrionic rage at insignificant provocations (i.e., a group didn't put away chairs after a meeting, people working on a project didn't call before stopping by).
13. Controlling situations with fear by predicting dire consequences. People who are worried or perceive an impending crisis are much more likely to succumb to manipulation.
14. Creating and spreading doomsday scenarios while setting oneself up as the lightning rod to deflect them.
15. Paranoia. Ascribing nefarious underlying motives to someone whose actions are merely uninformed or apparently innocent. Going on the attack is often the most effective way to avoid having to answer for one's own behavior (e.g., someone who borrows without asking the right person is a "thief" and should be banned; someone who adopts a dog and moves it into the space must think that the group's space is his own private home).
16. Creating self-fulfilling prophecies that serve one's goals. (For example: repeatedly stating that the neighbors are becoming less and less tolerant of loud punk rock shows.)
17. Flaunting one's knowledge (esp. of anarchism, collectivism, radicalism) to set oneself up as the go-to person for advice on how to proceed.

TACTICS USED TO SUBVERT DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

THE FOLLOWING ARE some common behaviors that can come into play at collective meetings and within the group whenever influential or domineering personalities attempt to steer decision-making. They are not necessarily ploys calculated deliberately to shore up power or push through an agenda, but they could be. People who engage in these tactics might genuinely believe that their methods, even if a little (or a lot) underhanded, are the most effective way to serve the group's needs. Or, as we stated earlier, they could simply be acting out of habit.

At Meetings:

1. Expressing annoyance or exasperation with a member's concerns, implying the person is wasting the group's time, is overly concerned with nitpicking over proper procedure, or is bringing up subjects that are not relevant. Equality requires that all members be heard and all issues addressed. No one person or faction can determine what is or is not important.
2. Insinuating (or stating outright) that bringing up problem areas or voicing dissenting concerns is disruptive to the work of the organization or disloyal to those working hard on the collective's behalf.
3. Expressing reservations with a proposal before it has been fully explained by the proponent, in an attempt to stir up misgivings among the attendees. The focus then shifts to a discussion of the group's anxieties, and the proposal dies without the collective ever getting back to studying the plan itself. (A good facilitator

should prevent this from happening. What usually occurs, however, is that the facilitator will simply let people speak in the order in which they raise their hands, thereby making any discussion, which requires back-and-forth exchange, impossible. The person making the proposal may not get a chance to speak until well after a string of misunderstandings, passed on from speaker to speaker, has killed any hope of clarification. The facilitator needs to allow two people who are thrashing out their mutual understanding of an issue to finish before moving on.)

4. Objecting to something that was never proposed. For instance, A says attendance at meetings should be encouraged by publicizing them more widely. B, who prefers low turnouts in order to exercise more weight in decisions, responds that people should not be required to go to meetings. Clamor ensues against the anti-democratic suggestion of coerced participation. A's proposal dies.
5. Allowing the group to reach a decision and appearing to support it, then quietly steering them to the next agenda item before they've had a chance to agree on a plan for carrying out the decision. Similarly, volunteering to make something happen without getting too specific, then letting it drop when the time comes to act.
6. Stating that favored projects can be carried out by only a few committed members, but then, when it comes to projects not so favored, insisting that these require broad participation, thereby ensuring that they will

become bogged down in the logistics of coordinating a large number of people and will likely not come to pass. Similarly, insisting that some decisions require broad support, rather than just an absence of objections, and may therefore have to be postponed until more opinions are heard, which usually results in an indefinite (i.e., permanent) postponement.

7. Scoffing, scowling, staring down, yelling down, sighing loudly, acting wounded, worried, impatient, or put upon, and walking out.

Within the Group's Larger Dynamic:

1. Setting oneself or one's faction up as the de facto leader by taking on the lion's share of administrative tasks, thereby appearing to be indispensable, and refusing offers of help, particularly when that help would make the helper privy to key knowledge about running the organization.
2. Hoarding information, especially details that are crucial to the organization's functioning or its compliance with important issues (like paying taxes, for instance).
3. Setting oneself up as the sole coordinator of the collective's various committees or activities, thereby becoming the only individual (or faction) to have control over the organization as a whole.
4. Setting oneself up as the sole person(s) who can act as an outside contact by virtue of being the only one(s) with access to all the organization's subgroups or projects.

5. Acting as spokesperson for the group to outside interests.
6. Making decisions without consulting the collective, usually by beginning with trivial matters (like ordering supplies), which gradually grows into deciding single-handedly about larger issues (like the direction that should be followed by the collective).
7. Scoffing at adherence to process, implying or claiming that only do-nothings are concerned about following procedures while there's real work to be done.
8. Treating meetings as pedantic and tiresome (perhaps never getting around to drafting or agreeing to a schedule for meetings).
9. Claiming there is no need for rotating tasks because the most competent people should do what they're best suited for. (Note that task rotation ensures power sharing—something that domineering members usually don't want.)
10. Claiming to know the organization's protocol (which is unwritten) in dealing with any given situation. Pulling rank (seniority, experience, or special knowledge) if anyone finds reason to object.
11. Insisting that those who do the most work in the organization have more say in decision making. Equality does not recognize merit or status: all members are truly equal.

12. Stating that in times of crisis there is not the time or energy to adhere to consensus or due process because the pressing matters at hand have to be dealt with posthaste. The domineering faction may then appoint itself ad hoc leader, doing away not only with collective participation but also with transparency in decision making.
13. Using the oldest manipulations in the book: going on the attack so as not to have to defend one's actions and creating a smokescreen of accusations to deflect attention from the issues.
14. Creating scapegoats or pariahs to take the focus off the manipulator.
15. Bullying, threatening, or cajoling.
16. Martyrdom: "After everything I've done for this collective, how could you question me?"

THE PARTICULAR VULNERABILITY OF COLLECTIVES

EGALITARIANISM IS BASED on the assumption that all members of the collective are making a good faith effort to work cooperatively, honestly, and in support of one another to achieve the mutually agreed-upon ends of the group. However, this expectation of good will can leave a collective particularly vulnerable to manipulation by individuals who might seek to use their participation in the group to steer it in a direction that better suits them or as a means to further their own sense of importance or control.

We are familiar with the coercive tactics of pushy salesmen: gaining our trust by empathizing with our concerns and assuring us that they are on our side, promising to help us by providing us—ostensibly at great sacrifice to themselves—with something we want and need. When we fail to appreciate their sincere and hard-won efforts on our behalf, they act deeply hurt and betrayed.

Most of us are wary of salesmen and may not fall for their pitches. But when we are dealing with a fellow collective member—i.e., someone who is committed to the same cause and who embraces our shared belief in equality and fairness—we are not likely to suspect him or her of ulterior motives. Moreover, if one were to express reservations about the motivations of a fellow collective member, one might be accused of undermining the mutual trust that is essential to the collective process.

Unfortunately, we have seen such ugly power plays and underhanded manipulation of the group's loyalties happen in egalitarian collectives again and again.

Exhibiting stress, anxiety, or grave worry is a common way for manipulators to exert influence, since most of us are conditioned to want to help someone in distress, and we may be so eager to do so that we will overlook other priorities just to ease the discomfort as quickly as possible. By appearing fretful at the possibility that something might not get done or put upon by having to do so much himself, a de facto leader can galvanize people to act without attention to previously agreed-upon parameters. Similarly, such an individual might quickly silence dissent by acting hurt or shocked or by giving the appearance that he is seething with righteous indignation in the face of a concern that has been raised.

The group's most common reaction to a faction or individual who seeks to sway the collective's will is not, as one would hope, calling the authoritarian manipulators to task, but gratitude that someone is taking on the difficult work of running the group and its activities. These members become complicit in the power-grabbing tactics of the self-appointed leader(s). Oftentimes, collective members actually offer these self-appointed elites their loyal support and become openly distrustful or disdainful of those who question the actions or authority of the leadership. At this point, the group has ceased to operate collectively. It has become, in effect, a private club.

THE PROBLEM WITH POLITENESS

POLITENESS, WHICH SHOULD not be confused with respect, consideration, and common decency (all good things), has always been used as a tool of oppression—for instance, to discredit political dissenters and protesters, who are characterized as unseemly and gauche by those against whom the loud slogans and street blockades are directed. The same tactic is employed within collectives to silence dissenters.

Collectivism requires respect, which means honest listening and consideration for another's differences and feelings, but not conventional politeness, which is just a veneer of agreeableness, often used deceitfully to conceal one's true opinions or motives. Politeness is anathema to building consensus.

The traditional Anglo-Saxon Protestant niceties, such as not saying anything if one doesn't have anything nice to say, never expressing negative criticism, and rushing to smooth over disagreements, are incompatible with

working collectively. Conflict is absolutely essential to the process of hashing out concepts and plans. Ideas have to be thoroughly and honestly considered. Conversely, making nice when one doesn't really mean it only breeds mistrust. A habit of straightforward, up-front truth-telling encourages the group to focus on the content of statements made rather than feeding the constant need to try to ferret out the subtext of people's remarks: "Did she say that just to make me look stupid?" "What does he really mean by bringing that up?" And so forth.

An absence of conflict is almost always a sign that dissent, or even honest input, is being suppressed, usually by an atmosphere that disapproves of making waves.

A manipulative person will invoke social niceties when it's convenient, accusing anybody who raises questions of being disrespectful or disruptive as means to silence them.

Politeness gives bullies free rein, since the social compact says we should respond with quiet composure to someone who attempts to intimidate us by shouting us down. Anyone who responds in kind to verbal attacks is subjected to the group's censure for escalating rather than defusing the hostilities, yet the original attacker, if he or she is a habitual bully who has earned a position of power and deference in the collective through domineering behavior, will get off scot-free. People may even come to his or her defense for being so put upon and vilify whoever dared to confront such a beloved and respected member. This behavior is more characteristic of a club led by a charismatic personality than an egalitarian collective, yet something very similar to this happens time and time again in groups that say they operate by the principles of egalitarianism.

It is essential for members to hear and consider the content of a grievance, even if it is delivered in a flash of anger. In a collective where there is an atmosphere of intimidation, which can be expressed as an insistence on social niceties and decorum, members who may have concerns will routinely keep their mouths shut. Issues might rise to the surface only when someone has been pushed to the limit and blurts out his reservations by yelling. When that happens, it's very easy for the domineering person(s) to paint the complainer as "crazy" or "out to get me." In fact, a particularly sneaky control freak may intentionally bait the person whom she sees as a threat to her power just to get a heated reaction, which she can then sell to the group as a reason to expel the dissenter.

Speaking honestly will oftentimes raise someone's hackles. The group has to create a safe and open environment in which this is okay.

There is a misconception that because collectivism is based on honesty, equality, and shared ideals, group dynamics will always be loving and supportive.

The opposite is true. Collectivism actually allows people to give voice to their dissent, which can sometimes happen in ways that are not pretty.

A collective that indulges in bland expressions of insincere



affection or empathy and frowns on displays of grumpiness, anger, or dislike of another person or idea is not operating by the basic premise of mutual respect. Egalitarianism requires that everyone be given room to vent, for better or worse. Otherwise, there's an authoritarian premise at work in the group.

People get angry. People get frustrated, fed up, confused, defeated, vindictive, resentful, spiteful, and so on. The collective must let them be, give them the chance to blow off steam, and, if appropriate, allow them to apologize later.

Collectives in the U.S. often voice concern for respecting the values and priorities of oppressed groups and other cultures, yet when it comes to the personal interactions of group members, in and out of meetings, they often judge and condemn individual behavior by the most White-Anglo-Saxon standard of all: don't show emotion, don't raise your voice, don't lose control of your temper. And if you do any of those things, then you lose your ability to be heard or listened to. That is not a respectful or egalitarian premise.

Angry outbursts are only a passing storm, not an indication that someone is unacceptable or fundamentally bad in some way.

A single bad act or angry invective can become a tool wielded as proof of someone's lack of fitness to participate



in the group. Even some slight loss of composure can become blown out of proportion through re-telling, and sometimes outright lying, about what happened. It's important to guard against the notion that some isolated action or event is somehow indicative of a person's entire character. This is a common ploy: seize upon a molehill and turn it into a mountain to prove a personal agenda.

There is, however, a very important caveat to this issue. It's crucial to distinguish between an angry outburst that spills out from frustration and strong emotions, on the one hand, and, on the other, yelling and histrionics that are used as an authoritarian ploy to frighten potential dissenters.

It might not always be easy to tell the difference, but there is one critical consideration: does the person doing the yelling have any power? If the group's de facto leader habitually shouts people down, or appears to seethe with disapproval or suppressed rage when something is brought up that is not to her liking, that should raise red flags. On the other hand, when a member who is not particularly popular loses his temper, it's unlikely that he is intentionally trying to sway the group. Someone whose ideas are frequently dismissed and who doesn't carry much weight in the group knows that he isn't likely to persuade anyone with an angry outburst. Anger from a person in his position is only going to be met with scorn and eye-rolling, at best, or even expulsion as an undesirable element.

Collective members have a responsibility to determine whether anger is being deliberately used as a tool of intimidation, and if so, then the person engaging in intimidation should be called to task. That, however, is

not easily done if the individual in question is deferred to by the group and considered indispensable. Anyone who publicly questions his or her actions is likely to find himself alone and ostracized for having dared to offend such a venerated member.

THE NEED FOR KINDNESS

ALTHOUGH COLLECTIVE MEMBERS should not subject one another to fake sentimentality and cloying praise, the shared effort of being in a collective presupposes good will and genuine consideration for each person involved. If the basis for interactions among the group is not kindness, tolerance, and acceptance in spite of unavoidable flaws, then there is a dynamic at work which does not support egalitarianism. The basis for egalitarianism is not shared decision making (that's an outcome), but fundamental respect for the concerns of each member and for the person herself or himself. Whenever there is bullying, ridiculing, or grandstanding, there is no equality.

In "The Problem with Politeness" we stress the need to allow members to express anger and other unpleasant or difficult emotions and opinions. It's okay for a member to be angry, annoyed, or wrong. People make mistakes; the collective should consider that a normal part of functioning. Those who commit blunders should strive to correct them and then move on. What is not okay is bad behavior that is intentional: that is, it has been devised to create a particular outcome, whether it's to intimidate dissenters, prove a point, or demonstrate one's supremacy in a given area. It's also not okay to upset other people just to amuse oneself.

Even those of us who elect to participate in egalitarian collectives have been living in a society that places people in positions of authority and submission with respect to one another. Most of us understand that equality means neither giving nor taking orders and rejecting any form of established hierarchy, but when it comes to informal hierarchies, collective members sometimes fall back onto what they've been accustomed to by mainstream culture. For instance, if someone seems particularly knowledgeable in a given area and willing to take on high-visibility tasks, he is sometimes allowed to attain a position of informal leadership. What makes this possible (in addition to garden-variety laziness) is the mainstream notion—especially difficult to shake among those of us who took pride in doing well in school and being recognized for it—that people should be praised and acknowledged for their talents and successes. In a truly egalitarian group, everybody contributes according to his or her ability and availability, and no one expects to get or take credit for his achievements. Hero worship is incompatible with egalitarianism. All accomplishments are built on someone else's shoulders.

Loyalty, which on its face might seem like a good thing, has no place in egalitarian collectives that strive to be fair to all members. Loyalty is what causes us to stick up for someone close to us, even to the detriment of another, when we know our crony is wrong. Or to overlook facts and forego investigating a matter even when it would mean clearing an innocent person of wrongdoing. Fairness requires that we listen to all and consider all possibilities before arriving at an opinion.

CREATING PARIAS

ONE OF THE ugliest and most reprehensible tendencies that we've seen in egalitarian collectives is the creation of pariahs: a small group decides that some individual is undesirable, then he is singled out for vilification and possible expulsion. This practice might seem odd for groups supposedly founded on equality, mutual respect, and acceptance, but it happens remarkably often.

The basis for collectives founded on equality is that people have the right to be themselves, regardless of whether their attitudes make them popular or not. That is not to say that members have to accept being mistreated by boors. If somebody is bothered, she should let the offender know that such behavior is bothersome and ask that it change. It may not, in fact, change, in which case these two people simply must find a way to put up with each other. Human interactions are rarely perfect. It's normal for people sometimes to be obnoxious or awkward.

What so often happens, however, is that one or both people will make a huge case of the issue, start slinging accusations fast and loose, and demand that the collective intervene to remove the supposed culprit. It is not uncommon for members to be sleazily manipulated so that one side might gain advantage over the other. A hapless person who wouldn't think of devising strategies or masterminding plots may suddenly find that she is universally hated, perhaps without even knowing why. Sometimes secret meetings are held, without the knowledge of the accused, at which the attendees will hatch a plan to ostracize her. Usually, this is done for no other reason than that the complainants are too cowardly to

confront the person directly and simply ask her to alter her demeanor.

Many times a person who is expelled does not even know what he has done wrong and might very well have corrected himself if only he'd been told about the offending behavior. Too often groups gang up against someone only because he has awkward social skills and unwittingly comes off as impolite or bossy. Do we need to say that this does not constitute egalitarianism? We've seen junior high students who behave more maturely.

An uglier form of creating pariahs occurs when a domineering member or faction intentionally seeks to discredit and eject someone whom they consider a threat to their hegemony. Sometimes, someone is targeted this way after she has been outspoken in condemning the control that the self-appointed elite has wrested from the collective. In other cases, however, the targeted person may have merely insisted that the group follow proper democratic procedure. If taken seriously, that recommendation might have the potential of removing power from the leading faction—therefore, it must be suppressed.

The easiest way to impeach the credibility of a dissenter is to accuse him of having a personal grudge against the person he is calling to task. The manipulator can then bait the dissenter with personal insults, and if the poor soul is ruffled and responds in kind, our Machiavelli will have proven her case: "See? He is just out to get revenge on me—that's what all of this has been about!"

There is never a wrong time to call into question someone's actions as they relate to the integrity of the collective's process. In fact, it is every member's responsibility to do

so if and when he feels the situation calls for it. Unfortunately, few people ever do. People find it easier not to stick their necks out to speak out on what they think is right. They may even join in the condemnation of a dissenter, because they don't like to have their little bubble jostled. They may readily agree that the troublemaker is not raising an issue but making a personal attack. An egalitarian group cannot operate in such an atmosphere. It's likely that anyone who makes waves under these circumstances will find himself out the door.

It is the responsibility of all collective members to listen carefully and consider every matter that is brought to their attention, and to hear from all sides. Members should assume that every concern is sincere and treat it as such, but, particularly when one person's concern involves condemning another individual, everyone in the collective has to make every effort to get to the bottom of the issue without jumping to conclusions. Ask questions. Investigate. Look to possible motives to help you ferret out the truth. This is almost never done. People are usually all too happy to jump on a bandwagon of character assassination and are unlikely to be dissuaded from whatever stance they have chosen.

In cases of outright nastiness or bullying, it's appropriate for the collective to help address the behavior (although it still does not mean the offender should be summarily expelled!). Rarely, however, does the group come to the defense of an aggrieved member. As long as group censure consists of dumping on an unpopular person, especially if it's by e-mail or out of the individual's earshot, then people gleefully jump in. But when it comes to confronting a bully, then—poof!—everyone

disappears. Even if the bully has been, until that point, generally acknowledged as such, when somebody actually asks for help in calling her to task, suddenly nobody remembers having had any problems with her.

Too often, ugly banishments happen because the collective has no guidelines for dealing with disagreement or dissent. In the absence of a grievance procedure or a forum in which differences of opinion may be openly discussed, the only options for the group are either trudging along in some unstructured, undefined manner, with everybody swallowing whatever concerns they may have and silently suffering any insults, or forcibly expelling whoever brings up a problem. In such situations, the promise of inclusion and openness intrinsic to an egalitarian group has been subverted and narrowed down to Shut Up or Get Out.

Sometimes, however, even when it seems that the right rules and guidelines are in place, these can be ignored or rendered useless. Especially in a smaller group, it is not all that uncommon for the rules to be overtly disregarded as members decide that those regulations are nothing more than technical trivialities. Thus, regardless of the rules, the individual who has been vilified or ousted has little recourse when the whole small gang (which might call itself a collective) has simply turned against her. Almost inevitably, she will end up giving up the struggle because it just doesn't seem worth it to dredge up rules that nobody cares about, simply to remain among people who obviously don't want her around.

Established rules can also be easily subverted through the usual techniques of manipulation, as described in other chapters. A group might earnestly intend to follow

the established procedures for exploring grievances or granting due process, yet those procedures will become irrelevant if the whole collective has already been convinced of the accused person's guilt. Unchecked binges of character assassination and rumor mongering can psychologically nullify many "fair trials" before they ever happen.

Ironically, some people use the belief in anarchism as their excuse to flagrantly ignore rules that were designed to ensure fairness and democracy. Anarchists who break the rules might go on the defensive by saying that they don't always have to follow the law, because they are anarchists. Yet, while it may be true that anarchists can reserve the right to reject laws that they think are unjust or are the product of an unjust system, anarchists must also reach a collective understanding about basic democratic principles.

Rules can become very important, not simply because they are the rules, but because they can serve as guidelines for achieving democracy. Those guidelines might be very much needed during harsh or complex conflicts, when people are more easily confused or misled into forgetting the most basic principles or even basic logic.

Perhaps someday, everyone will have a strong enough conviction in—and knowledge of—true democratic principles never to be misled (or to do the misleading, for that matter). In some future golden age, perhaps, everybody will be so psychologically and socially advanced that it will simply be unthinkable—and impossible—for them to contribute to the creation of pariahs or other acts of collective injustice. Yet, in the here and now, we probably should do everything we can to keep those tendencies in check.

GOOD-FAITH AND BAD-FAITH CHARACTER ASSASSINATIONS

A CAMPAIGN OF character assassination aimed at distancing and ultimately removing someone from the collective can be undertaken in either good faith or bad faith. We're not suggesting that a good-faith character assassination is somehow good, of course. Both kinds are awful, but the differences bear describing.

The important distinction lies in the underlying motive. When a group targets someone for removal in good faith, they are doing so because they are so fed up, and have become so convinced of the offender's irredeemable undesirability, that they have come to believe that removing her is the only option. In a bad-faith character assassination, a faction or person intentionally seeks to get rid of a perceived rival or threat, who may not in fact have done anything wrong. The instigator(s) will deliberately scheme to paint her as "crazy" or harmful to the collective in some way, and will work tirelessly, and usually effectively, to convince the membership that she simply has to go.

In the case of a bad-faith witch hunt, only the original schemer or his close associates are acting in bad faith. The rest of the group is simply deceived into believing that the accused is harming the collective, and they join in to tar and feather that person for what they believe to be the good of the group.

In a good-faith instance of character assassination, people typically feel they have reached the end of their rope. Someone has tried their patience, or they perceive that he has tried someone else's patience, to such an extent that they don't know what else to do. Sometimes,

there are only a few who have borne the brunt of dealing with a difficult personality or situation, maybe with little or no help from the rest of the membership. When things have come to a head and the beleaguered few want the perceived culprit gone, they may be appalled or outraged at anyone who does not instantly support them. They may see themselves as the hardworking and uncomplaining backbone, which deserves a little consideration now and then. And many of the members may agree, perhaps out of guilt. But should they go along with a personal vilification and expulsion just to be supportive? Ultimately, that sort of strategy will prove to be much more destructive than supportive, assuming people are still concerned about the integrity of the group.

Another, slightly worse, form of good-faith effort to remove a member of the collective happens when a small group, usually a faction having some degree of power, cannot accept a viewpoint other than their own. Anyone who disagrees with their chosen course is seen as a deliberate obstacle or saboteur. If efforts to control and direct that person fail, then the person becomes unwanted, and the complaints against him may soon reach such a shrill pitch that the whole group finds they can no longer stand having him around.

In a typical bad-faith character assassination, on the other hand, a domineering member or faction intentionally cracks down on a person they consider an obstacle to their agenda or a threat to their power. Someone may be targeted precisely because he has made some mild attempt to point out that a self-appointed cabal has wrested control from the collective. Or the reviled person could simply have been singled out for obtusely

insisting on democratic process—which, if carried out, would have the effect of stripping the self-appointed leadership of its authority.

This type of situation is especially tangled and difficult to come to grips with. The majority of the members are, in this case, victims of the instigator's deception, but they are not without fault. If they were being vigilant about not jumping to conclusions, or if they refused to accept nasty allegations about another person on faith, they might be in a position to put and end to the injustice, or at the very least see through it. Just because a powerful or influential person in the group is telling you that something is so, you cannot assume it's the truth: you still have a responsibility to look into it and verify what she is saying by *talking to the accused directly*. And if you have not yet had the opportunity to find out for yourself, your responsibility is to reserve judgment until you can be sure of the facts.

If you are asked to join in malicious gossip or sign a petition that makes statements against someone or calls for his expulsion or some other limitation of his freedoms, it is your responsibility to say no until you can be sure in your knowledge of the situation. Especially if the issue is expulsion, it is better to err in pursuit of fairness. This may not always be easy, because the pressure might be great, especially if the person making the accusations has a de facto leadership position and is not often crossed.

One of the especially difficult aspects of recognizing a bad-faith character assassination is that people might be disinclined to believe that the instigator could be so nefarious. Ironically, the more underhanded someone's behavior, the more likely she is to get away with

it, because people will simply not believe that she would sink so low or could be acting so maliciously.

On the plus side, the way to address either bad-faith or good-faith character assassinations is essentially the same, so it may not entirely matter whether they are identified as one or the other. There's no substitute for the painstaking work of finding out the truth and urging everyone to withhold judgment until all sides have been heard. We are not suggesting, though, that if someone is identified as stirring up a witch hunt or participating in one, she should then become the target of the group's condemnation. Whenever a problem behavior exists or is perceived within the group, it simply needs to be addressed. This might amount to nothing more than discussing the issue(s) or grievance(s) and reaching solutions that everyone can agree on. Rarely is expulsion the only viable solution.

It's worth noting that not everyone who is driven out of a group is forcibly expelled. Many more merely leave on their own, tired of the abuse or simply disillusioned. When a group allows that to happen, it is no less reprehensible than an outright expulsion. For most purposes, it's the same thing. The difference is that the conniving leadership—and the complicit collective—are even less likely to be exposed for what they truly represent: the corruption of egalitarianism and the creation of coercive hierarchy.

BANNING

PEOPLE IN THE activist community are often very committed to anti-authoritarianism, at least in the broader, ideological sense. Unfortunately, they may falter when

applying this ideology at a more basic level, in their own groups. When actual difficulties arise within our own circles, many people want to find a quick exit route, some strategy for efficiently dealing with intractable or impossible people and situations. As soon as the collective trust fails, people tend to fall back into good old authoritarianism. When that starts to happen, the swing of the pendulum can be severe. Suddenly, a community based on reaching out to one another in solidarity can become a circus of Machiavellian maneuverings or outright collective viciousness. (We realize this may sound extreme, but it does happen, and it's not even all that rare.)

A group that pays lip service to egalitarianism but does not in its collective gut trust the basic principles of equality, democracy or consensus will reserve for itself a clause that allows it to avoid dwelling on such high principles during a difficult conflict. This clause usually involves suppressing disruptive behaviors or even expelling people.

In collectives that base their ideology on anarchist principles like autonomy and anti-authoritarianism

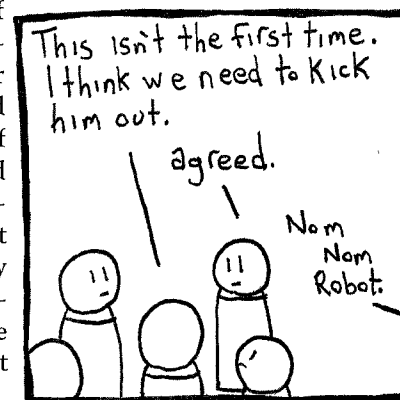
(whether they do this somewhat loosely or more specifically), the idea of expulsion is often justified by reference to the anarchist notion of "banning."

In a common anarchist vision of society, people would live or operate in groups with no leaders, making all



community decisions by means of direct democracy. (In other words, everyone should be able to participate in such decisions and, ideally, consent to them.) If somebody somehow sabotages the community or otherwise causes or threatens serious harm, there are no police or other authoritarian forms of enforcement to handle the matter; therefore, the best way for the community to deal with the offender is to democratically banish her. This practice is believed to be less authoritarian than the conventional methods of criminal justice and attendant imprisonment, since the person is still free to seek out association with other communities. The crucial factor that is often overlooked by present-day collectives is that banning is meant to be reserved for extreme, dangerous, or criminal behavior, not as a way to get rid of someone whom some group members simply find unpleasant or inconvenient.

Out of curiosity, we searched classic anarchist texts looking for the origin of the concept of banning. While there are many references to voluntary association and the corollary notion of voluntary disassociation, they usually refer to the association (and the disassociation) of various groups. (And not to the all-too-common leap that "disassociation" simply means giving someone a swift kick in the pants, all the way out



the door.) We haven't found any explicit endorsement of expelling individuals for the good of the collective. The closest reference that we could find was in Malatesta's "A Talk about Anarchist-Communism," where he writes that the majority cannot be held hostage to the whims of the minority: "These malcontents cannot fairly demand that the wishes of many others should be sacrificed for their sakes." But the assumption here is that the minority, or an individual, could somehow force the group to accede to its wishes, and that's the scenario that concerns Malatesta. In today's activist groups, it's hard to imagine how one person could somehow make the group abide by her wishes.

And if someone is making unreasonable demands, wouldn't it be more humane simply to overrule her than to ban her? Or are we to conclude that overruling someone is not democratic but showing them the door is?

Bakunin writes that "vicious and parasitic individuals" who don't contribute to society with their labor can be stripped of their rights, but they have a choice to get

those rights back "as soon as they begin to live by their own labor." This isn't an issue that is closely relevant to activist collectives, because members don't depend on the collective for survival. He also writes that those "who violate voluntary agreements, steal,



inflict bodily harm, or above all, violate the freedom of any individual, will be penalized according to the laws of society," but that they retain "the right to escape punishment by declaring that they wish to resign from that association." In both cases, individuals can choose not to be expelled if they agree to accept the group's sanctions, and in both examples, the case is being made for how to deal with serious criminal or antisocial behavior, not as a means to deal with a member of a community who is simply an annoyance.

We are not suggesting that the writings of Bakunin, Malatesta, or any other influential anarchist should be taken as gospel (so to speak!). Yet, when people talk about the right of expulsion as a built-in tenet in anarchism, they are implying that there is some justifying gospel, which does not exist.

Most of the time, the dreary scenario unfolds something like this: an all-around annoyance with a given person or situation has reached critical mass, and everybody is now steamed. The group is more than ready to take supposedly effective action against the supposed culprit. Soon enough, either the poor accused sap will flee, unable to tolerate the abuse that has ensued, or a ban will be called for, and it will probably succeed. If the ban does not succeed, the outcome



can be even messier: two factions will form, one in support of the ban and the other against it. Unless one side is strong enough to crush the other, the collective will break apart. Both outcomes are regrettable. At best, a human being has been vilified and humiliated. At worst, the group will have dissolved, amidst rancor, hurt feelings, and recriminations.

This unfortunate pattern can have irreparably painful and discouraging consequences for the accused or ostracized individual, dampening or eliminating a once enthusiastic desire to be involved in activism. In fact, the most disillusioned activists whom we have encountered did not become disillusioned for the typically cited reasons of state oppression, loss of basic ideals, or an increase in "adult" responsibility. Mostly, these activists got discouraged by the things that they saw and experienced within their own activist groups. The issues that their experiences bring up obviously extend far beyond personal injury suffered by isolated, "difficult" individuals. These problems actually raise fundamental questions about whether egalitarian collectives can be sustainable. Even when a collective survives such conflicts and ugliness, we're left wondering whether it survived with its principles and integrity intact.

RESPECT FOR DIFFERENCES

MANY COLLECTIVES ARE aware that they need to do better in addressing racism, sexism, homophobia, and other societal prejudices within their own ranks, but too many fail to address the reality that lack of respect for differences does not start with its ugliest and most glaring manifestations but is present whenever room is

not made for another person's viewpoint, situation, or life experience.

The hand-wringing and self-blame that collectives engage in as an attempt to address their own internal problems with insensitivity are unlikely to yield useful results. Prejudice does not come in separate compartments. It's not okay to be against racism, sexism, and homophobia while being indifferent to the myriad other ways in which people are discriminatory toward one another or fail to understand one another's perspective or experience. If we want to be inclusive, it's not enough merely to identify particular historically oppressed groups whom we want to include and accept; we also need to be aware that differences come in a lot of varieties and packages. A dissimilarity as slight as an awkward social manner, imperfect language skills, or a reticent, or even obnoxious personality can be enough to cast someone as weird or tiresome, and her opinions therefore pre-judged as unimportant.

Tolerance begins with the acknowledgement that people other than ourselves may see things differently, and is shown when we suspend judgment while those with whom we may disagree or whose ideas we may not understand are given a forum to explain their perspective and are actively listened to. No one can presume to know how someone's life has shaped him or her. When the group makes such assumptions about someone, it is failing to respect differences.

Collectives that are built around a particular issue are often quite homogenous. Members would like to embrace differences, in theory, but when they're actually confronted with someone whose life is unlike theirs, they

many find it difficult to see beyond their own limited experience. When we do poorly even at accepting personal differences and quirks, how can we expect to reach out to one another across broader differences that arise from race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and gender?

In a collective that is, for example, made up primarily of young students or recent graduates, an older person with a day job and/or a family to take care of might be shut out of the group's work simply because most members of the collective didn't give a second thought to scheduling meetings late at night. Members' disabilities or health issues are also often unacknowledged by healthy people: it's not easy to put oneself in someone else's shoes and realize it may be hard for a person to attend regular planning for events or work long hours. When a member cannot contribute fully to a group's activities, he may be left out merely due to careless disregard for his difficulties: "Well, you weren't there so we decided to do it this way." Or, worse, groups may consciously and deliberately marginalize those who don't do as much work or are not present as often, without giving any consideration to the individuals' circumstances. Illness, family, work commitments, and financial situations are all differences that an egalitarian collective must attend to if it is truly to operate democratically.

Members of any group who don't have a computer are often rendered into nonentities because they cannot participate in email discussions. Many times no one even bothers to keep them apprised of events and meeting times. If you assume that everyone in a group should be able to afford a computer, that is completely at odds with the realities that social activism exists to

address. Likewise, it is exclusionary to assume that even those who have computers will always be internet-savvy. A collective cannot function equitably when some of its members are systematically or carelessly excluded from its activities.

On a related matter...

It is reprehensible to use ugly social ills like racism and sexism as a pretext to assassinate the character of perceived enemies. When a fellow collective member has acted inappropriately, his particular actions should be addressed by the complainant, rather than jumping to broad character assassination. Calling him a sexist, even when it's arguably true, is unhelpful in resolving conflicts. Such charges are impossible to defend against: being sexist is too ugly to be excused (therefore no one can come to the person's defense without appearing to condone sexism) and too unspecific to be refuted.

Sometimes statements that no one would even think of considering as racist or sexist when said in isolation are read as such depending on the identity of the participants. A good example of this problem once occurred when a white male member of our collective was admonished at a coalition meeting for asking a woman of color to provide a more rational argument for the position that she was taking. He was told, subsequent to the debate, that his request for rational argument was both racist and sexist. The reason given was that white men throughout history have dismissed the opinions of women and people of color as not being sufficiently rational, and that rationality itself is a concept repeatedly used to reinforce patriarchy—which is, as a point of fact, demonstrably true. Yet in the situation that

existed, this member of our collective was honestly unable to understand the other party's point and was making a good-faith effort to ask for clarification. The collective needs to ensure that people are able to ask questions and participate fully in discussions without having to face accusations of ignorance or insensitivity when they genuinely intend no offense.

An allegation of sexism or racism can also sometimes be used as a ploy to silence dialogue and force group censure or ostracism against an individual. If, instead, an offender is confronted with complaints about specific behaviors, the possibility exists that he will understand his mistakes and work to rectify them. After that hurdle has been crossed, it may well be appropriate to address broader issues.

It's important to recognize that within a relatively small group, which many collectives tend to be, unequal power dynamics are not usually limited to, nor at times even the result of, individuals' identification as members of either an oppressed or privileged societal group. A domineering versus a timid personality, a person's personal charisma or lack thereof, and whether or not one has allies or is well-liked within the group can play just as large a role in determining who has any power within the collective and can affect who will exercise the most influence and who will be marginalized or shut out.

PERSONAL VS. GROUP ISSUES

SOMETIMES, TWO PEOPLE caught up in a personal and emotional kind of war will insist on dragging the whole collective into their squabble, each (or sometimes only one) person demanding that the group censure the other.

The person who has greater power within the group, a stronger personality, or the ability to make the best case for being the most aggrieved might then very well succeed in gathering an indignant, angry mob to rally against the other party.

It is sometimes helpful for a small number of collective members, perhaps one to three, to intervene as intermediaries between the warring parties and help them find an appropriate means to resolve the conflict, at least to an extent that will allow them to continue functioning as collective members. For instance, it may be useful to find neutral mediators outside the group. But it is altogether inconsistent with the spirit of consensus and egalitarianism, which presupposes equal respect for each individual and his or her contribution to the group, for the collective to act as judge and jury (or bloodthirsty villagers carrying torches) in a situation that is emotionally painful for those involved and about which the collective cannot and should not know all the details.

Public conflict resolution, while certainly a better alternative than jumping to collective conclusions and decisions based on rumors and innuendo, puts the parties in the embarrassing position of having to explain private choices (of which they may not be particularly proud) in front of everybody. This tactic is likely only to lead to defensiveness, refusal to yield one's ground for fear of losing face, and further hurt feelings.

A collective may come up with the argument that internal disputes harm the image of the group to potential outside supporters and must therefore be suppressed by distancing one of the parties from its activities. Yet, this idea is highly authoritarian, and it is likely to do greater

damage to the collective by breaking it apart rather than working to bring it together. Moreover, it leads to the logical conclusion that the best way to preserve harmony in the group is to simply not tolerate conflict.

A converse sort of problem also occurs fairly often: someone raises a legitimate grievance about the inappropriate way another member is conducting herself within the sphere of the collective's activities, then finds himself being accused of bringing the complaint up to the collective merely because of a personal dislike.

This instance involves an abuse of the collective process, usually by a self-appointed leader who does not wish to answer for her actions—who will therefore seek to distract from any criticism by claiming that the complainant has a personal problem rather than a legitimate concern. And soon, the poor soul who had the audacity to call the leader to task might find himself slandered, vilified, or attacked with verbal invectives meant to frighten him into submission.

At this point, some well-meaning collective members might respond to all the interpersonal tension by urging everyone to chill. They might even spout a bunch of well-meaning platitudes such as, "What's important is the group's work" (which should not be sidelined by "petty bickering," of course). And to uninformed passersby, this might seem like a good assessment, a reasonable answer given in the interest of peace. In truth, however, such a reaction is simply callous and insensitive. It's symptomatic of the kind of thoughtlessness that results when gullible people allow their leader to manipulate them. (Although, that's not to say that it can't also sometimes be used as a deliberate tactic as well....)

We believe that in this kind of situation, the collective must simply encourage the dissenter to speak up. The group should not allow a dissenting opinion to be stifled simply so that they can avoid further conflict. That is a false kind of peace, a perpetuation of injustice that does not suit a group that's (supposedly) seeking to create a more democratic society.

MICRO-MANAGING OTHER PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOR

IN A WELL-INTENTIONED attempt to establish guidelines to prevent disrespect of one another and abuse of process, some collectives fall into the authoritarian trap of dictating which specific, often minute, behaviors collective members may or may not display. Those who do not strictly adhere to the regulations, perhaps even unwittingly, may be frowned upon, smarmily chastised, or rendered into undesirables.

Self-appointed leaders who are adept at working the group's process can use strict adherence to nit-picking rules as a way to put themselves up as role models (since they always follow the letter, though not the spirit, of the rules). Then, they can paint those who may not be so versed in the minutia of the guidelines, or so slick about appearing to follow them, as saboteurs. The hapless or gauche, who might commit blunders like using inappropriate terminology or speaking out of turn, thus become easy victims for the "process tyrants."

Behavioral guidelines cannot substitute for basic respect, decency, common sense, or an honest attempt to listen, understand, and strive for fairness. Any attempt to narrowly codify and restrict normal human interactions

and ordinary faux-pas can create a tightly wound atmosphere of coercion and disapproval.

Interrupting

A lot has been made in activist circles about the inappropriateness of interrupting someone when he or she is talking. Interrupting is almost always obnoxious and can be used, sometimes intentionally, to dominate, but it is also a common human fallacy. Some people are chronic interrupters: they may be so brimming with exciting ideas or information that they just can't contain themselves. Such individuals can usually be handled with joking, light-handed rebukes or by simply interrupting them in return. Others are long-winded droners. While everyone should be given their space to speak, it's not necessarily wrong to gently interrupt those who have been boring the collective with endless, repetitive speeches. They should not be silenced, of course, but they can be made aware of the effects of their verbosity.

Not everybody has the same skill at navigating interpersonal exchanges. Some people are not good at



recognizing that split second when someone has finished talking and it's okay to jump in. They are the ones who are most likely to interrupt, and be reprimanded for it, while they also, ironically, are the least likely to get a word out and have their opinions heard.

While facilitation and hand-raising should prevent this, there will always be circumstances when people are engaging in informal conversations, whether in or out of meetings.

It's also fairly normal, in everyday speech, to interrupt someone to nip a misunderstanding in the bud: "Oh, no, no. I'm sorry I made it sound that way. What I meant was...." Collective process needs to take ordinary interaction into account. We should not try to dictate actions that are awkward and artificial and then frown on people who don't immediately take to them.

Stacking

Prohibiting any and all interruptions can become a problem at meetings when added to the strict stipulation that members can only speak in the order in which they raise their hands. Hand-raising is a good idea, since it stops people from merely shouting over each other to be heard, as is making a list, or stack, that determines whose fair turn it is to talk. Yet, these practices, if applied too rigidly, can easily stifle discussion or facilitate abuses.

For instance, someone may intentionally make untrue and damaging statements about a proposed project in an attempt to denigrate it. The person who made the original proposal may be desperate to say something, but



he can't because he mustn't interrupt, and there are others in line to speak. If the proposal maker speaks up out of order he will, in all likelihood, be looked at with opprobrium, only adding to the denigrator's case that his project is suspect. If he waits until it's his rightful turn to talk, it may be too late to undo other members' already-solidifying inaccurate perceptions. It makes no sense to use hand-raising merely to make a list without allowing for the fact that discussions require an exchange. When questions go unanswered or falsehoods unchallenged, there can be no discourse.

What often happens is that someone will raise his hand to respond to something that has just been said; by the time it's his turn to speak, there may have been another ten comments made on other matters, and what the person had raised his hand to say is no longer on point. Since it will be his only chance to talk, however, he will still take his turn. Multiply this by the number of people in the meeting, and you have a random list of utterances and no semblance of a discussion or healthy debate.

The door is opened to speech-making by the self-important while the meek or shy may only get a few words out and not receive another opportunity to explain themselves more fully.

There has to be some way for people to be allowed to clarify points when necessary without exposing themselves to outraged censure.

Prioritizing

Many collectives have made rules that require facilitators to give priority to members of traditionally oppressed

groups. While the intention is commendable, in practice it's not an easy task to determine which individuals in a particular group are more or less likely to be overlooked or silenced. Power inequities within a small group of people can stem from a great many factors that are not easily reduced, for example, to race or gender. Thus, anyone who attempts to combat injustice by applying overly broad criteria might actually perpetuate even more injustice.

It is important to make sure that those who have been quiet get a chance to be heard. But, once again, the rule must not be applied in the absence of common sense. Anyone should feel free to say, "I have no comment." In addition, people who are directly involved in a given issue, or are themselves raising a matter for the group to consider, are likely to have more to say when it comes up for discussion and may even be questioned by the group to elucidate and clarify relevant points. They should not be silenced because someone else has not said as much on the topic. It makes no sense for someone who brings up a concern to be prohibited from participating in the ensuing discussion simply because he or she has used up the allotted speaking time.

SKEPTICISM IS HEALTHY

BEING SKEPTICAL IS not the same as being distrustful or suspicious, both of which can undermine a collective's honest interactions, as well as play tricks with one's own judgment. It simply means not jumping to conclusions, neither positive nor negative, before having investigated an issue.

Coming to a hasty, negative opinion of another person, as many of us know, is often ugly and can turn out to be

grossly unfair. Furthermore, since most of us don't like to admit it when we're wrong, the bad reputation can actually persist even after the facts have proven the condemnation to be unwarranted. But a thoughtless positive judgment can be damaging too. We might give somebody's words too much importance, because she gives the impression of being exceptionally knowledgeable or effective, for instance, and unwittingly follow unwise advice or even turn over control of the group (always a bad idea).

Some of the most despicable injustices that happen in collectives are perpetrated by those of us who were only trying to help. A fellow collective member comes up to you, clearly upset and outraged, and tells you about someone who's been making his or her life hell. As a good friend, your reaction is probably to sympathize, listen, and ask what you can do. You may even take it upon yourself to alert others of the problem. Thus, the wheels of a rumor, or worse, a baseless character assassination, have just been set in motion. By you.

We are not suggesting that you be stingy with your sympathy and emotional support, only that you keep in mind that every story has two sides, and that it's usually not prudent to act until the matter has been explored a little more thoroughly. In many cases, whenever two sides of a story are clearly divergent and emotions are running high, it's best to begin a formal grievance or conflict resolution proceeding.

It's not uncommon for members who feel they have been aggrieved in some way to circulate a petition, asking other members to sign off on some kind of sanction against the presumed transgressor, whether it's a temporary ban or a demand they seek counseling. In our

experience, people are generally all too happy, in an effort to be supportive and mindful of the best interests of the group, to sign on to an accusation about which they have absolutely no first-hand knowledge, sometimes even excommunicating a person they have never met. Needless to say, this is not a sign of healthy group dynamics. Even if the people jumping on the bandwagon are well-meaning, they are abdicating their responsibilities to the collective by acting without having done their homework. And those circulating the grievance may feel they have been genuinely wronged, but they are circumventing group process when they bypass due process and an open forum for the airing of complaints. Unfortunately, we have also seen instances in which getting rid of someone is an intentional, calculated act, where the group is manipulated into believing it is acting in the collective best interest by participating in an undemocratic ostracism.

Ironically, a converse kind of phenomenon is also not uncommon, where a member who has had to tolerate victimization and abuse by someone in the group seeks help from the collective and is roundly ignored. Personal power politics tend to come into play in these cases: an unpopular or not highly regarded person who complains about someone who is seen as a leader or a more valued member may find himself alone and a target for ridicule. The proper way for the group to proceed in either circumstance (whether they believe the accused or the accuser) is to investigate the situation, call for formal procedures, such as previously agreed-upon conflict resolution protocols, and allow all parties to air their concerns. Regardless of who you believe to be right or wrong—whether it's the defendant or the complainant—making hasty judgments

never serves the interests of fairness. Neither does calling for sanctions (such as ad hoc banning, the popular favorite) which are excessive or unnecessary for resolving a given circumstance.

It may not be possible to know exactly what the truth is in a particular situation, but one can come to an educated judgment based on ascertainable facts and the probable likelihood of certain events having taken place rather than others, for instance by considering the motivation that someone might have to dissemble or stretch the truth.

VAGUENESS LEADS TO AUTHORITARIANISM

OFTEN, THERE IS not enough clarity among members of egalitarian collectives regarding how egalitarianism is supposed to work. Because the individuals involved do not know exactly what to do, there is inaction and frustration, leaving the door wide open for someone or some small cabal to rush in like a knight in shining armor and rescue the collective by taking charge.

A number of people with whom we've spoken about the difficulties of working collectively are not concerned with power inequities, which they do not see as a particular problem of their own group, but with slow meetings and fruitless discussions of trivialities; not knowing who is supposed to do what or how to delegate functions; and either things not getting done or only one or two people doing all the work.

People get tired of waiting around for every issue to come out into the open and get thoroughly discussed at meetings. Sometimes the meetings aren't even held, or the people who have an interest in the particular matter

don't show up, or not enough people show up, which means the discussion has to be postponed once again. Sometimes it simply seems easier to allow decisions to be made by a few, even without asking the rest of the group. At least that way things get done. These common problems, however, create a fertile ground for an authoritarian to take over, to bring order and function to the group—often to everyone's relief and gratitude.

When that happens, there has been a serious breakdown of basic egalitarian principles. There may be one of two dynamics underlying this phenomenon (or, possibly, both occurring at once and reinforcing each other): either someone is manipulating the group to grab power for himself or his little clique (which he might even be doing unconsciously—some people just have bossiness and leadership in their blood); or many (maybe all) of the group's members are afraid to take responsibility for making decisions and doing the work that is needed to move the group forward. When everyone waits for someone else to decide what to do, nothing happens. The result is recriminations and mutual resentment, which can destroy a group. In egalitarian collectives, there are no leaders to light a fire under everyone's collective butt: everyone has to be his and her own motivator, initiator and carry-through-ator.

Common Misunderstandings of Consensus

The most fundamental misunderstanding of consensus is that everybody has to agree. There is often a lot of pressure not to express any disagreements or reservations so as not to appear uncooperative. Proposals pass simply because no one dares to raise an objection. That is not

consensus. What should happen, in a nutshell, is that someone makes a proposal, people ask for explanation and clarification, the merits of the proposal are discussed, and maybe small amendments are made as the discussion proceeds. The final version of the proposal is brought to a vote. (Yes, you still vote in consensus. The difference from processes that we normally call voting is that in consensus, the group has to vote for something unanimously in order for it to pass. We find that actually taking the time to vote makes it clear what people's wishes are, rather than assuming consent if all just keep silent.) If everyone agrees to the proposal as is, it passes. If someone has objections or reservations, the proposal needs to be amended in such a way that it will meet the concerns raised. The crucial element is to ask the person objecting to explain what she objects to so that the group can find a solution for which everyone will give their consent.

Many groups fall into a quagmire of disorganization because they feel that creating a structure for getting things done is somehow authoritarian, especially if it is accomplished primarily by one person. Not so. As long as all actions are transparent and everyone is given a chance to question them, to voice their concerns and see them addressed, and as long as decisions are put to a vote by which everyone consents to them, initiatives that are the brainchild of one person are perfectly acceptable. It's okay for someone who has a knack for keeping things in order to create a schedule, for instance, or a file of useful addresses, as long as she brings it to the group for approval. The thing to look out for is covert intimidation, e.g., if someone acts all hurt if everybody does not

show unmitigated appreciation for her efforts by rubber-stamping whatever she wants to do. And a lack of transparency is also a major red flag: any information that anyone has put together must always be available to the entire collective, and any action a member undertakes on the collective's behalf must be with the collective's knowledge and approval.

On the other hand, when there are small decisions to be made that do not relate to fundamental principles, it's perfectly OK to delegate them to an appropriate committee. For instance, if a planning committee receives general approval from the collective on how much to spend for an event, that committee does not have to get a vote from the whole collective on every type of supply it wishes to order. Nonetheless, it does have to present a list of expenditures and revenues after the fact.

Skill Sharing

Another reason things sometimes get bogged down in inactivity is inadequate skill sharing. Tasks like organizing an event, planning the group's activities, figuring out how to pay for things, and doing outreach all require skills that should be learned by working with someone who already has some experience. "Skills" are not just manual abilities like sewing, woodworking, or cooking. Organizational, technological, and interpersonal skills also must be shared and learned.

Sometimes collectives assume that because everyone in the group is equal, everyone can be counted on to autonomously take over any and all tasks without any prior knowledge and without any assistance. There is often a misconception of what "autonomy" and "DIY" stand for,

which can lead to the belief that everyone should be able to work independently, without ever asking for advice from someone more knowledgeable or experienced. The whole idea that some people may be more experienced than others is looked on as suspect. Indeed, even offering guidance may be seen as paternalistic and hierarchical. That point of view is healthy in some respects, since no one should be looked at as being somehow more important, nor should anyone's opinions carry more weight, but it is self defeating when it leads to denying or ignoring reality. It doesn't make sense for members with no experience to be left on their own to take on responsibilities that are completely new to them. The result is general frustration among members because things are not getting done or getting done poorly, feelings of anxiety and guilt among individuals for having rashly volunteered to take on a project that one is not actually able to bring to fruition, and the all-too-common result that the usual suspects take over and save the day. Or the group's hopeful efforts get lost in mediocrity and ineffectualness.

Clarity is the antidote to muddling through. If a group spells out as clearly as possible how things will be accomplished and how the necessary skills will be passed down, it will avoid problems that could eventually lead to power struggles in the collective. We have actually seen groups in which the more senior members scoffed at the idea of training newer members, claiming they had no time to waste on babysitting. That is a blazing red flag that not even the most basic notion of egalitarianism is operating in the group!

IS THIS THE JUST SOCIETY WE WANT TO MODEL?

A MODEL FOR JUSTICE?

COLLECTIVES WHO CHOOSE to base their organizational structure on equality, direct democracy, and/or consensus usually do so, at least in part, to model the just society we would like to see in the world at large. Social change involves not only campaigning for radical reform in the broader society but also being, or embodying, the better world we hope to bring about through activism. This fundamental belief can and should be used by egalitarian collectives to inform the decisions and actions they take, especially when it comes to how group members treat one another.

It doesn't make any sense for an activist organization to be fighting for justice and social equality while at the same time allowing back-stabbing, nasty rumors, and manipulative power plays to dominate or influence the internal interactions of the group. Yet, this happens all the time. At times it's intentional: one or a few members control the group by creating feuds and distrust; the persons or positions they favor prevail while those they wish to eliminate are made to seem suspect and fall by the wayside. Other times injustice is the result of bungling ineptitude or lack of clarity or knowledge about how egalitarian systems can be expected to work.

Often, an organization insists on using consensus, which in many activist scenes is treated as the only acceptable form of decision making for any group that wants to call itself radical—to the point of