

COLLECTIVE PROCESS

THIS IS A HANDBOOK ON GROUP PROCESS
FOR EGALITARIAN COLLECTIVES. ITS FOCUS IS
ON THE OFTEN UNRECOGNIZED NEGATIVE
DYNAMICS THAT CAN OCCUR WHEN PEOPLE
TRY TO WORK COLLECTIVELY.

OVERCOMING
POWER



how to proceed, especially in a difficult or trying situation. What's important is not the work of the group nor effecting political change: it's the fact that we care about and value one another, as we do all people. That's why we're in the struggle for social justice, after all.

Some groups may have no patience for tending to the weak and the whiny. They may feel that those who do not contribute or are slowing or bringing the rest of the collective down need to move on and get out of the way. Any group can choose that path, of course. But if they do, they have a responsibility to do so honestly and openly. Such an enterprise can no longer call itself consensus-based nor egalitarian. The premise of consensus and equality rests firmly on the belief that everyone in the group is valued and necessary to maintain the integrity of the whole. It presupposes a shared effort and mutuality which cannot be undermined by picking and choosing who is valuable and who is not.

Despotism by the collective, which rests on groupthink, whereby everybody has to agree, no one can dissent, and those who dissent or who simply are not well liked are outta here, does not equal consensus.

Introduction To Consensus

Generally, a collective that operates by consensus holds regular facilitated 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. Yet, this process doesn't always guarantee that there really is consensus, as 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 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, thereby restricting the free exchange of ideas and possibly influencing the final outcome, the 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, if unanimity cannot be reached, the issue will simply be dropped and the group will revert to the status quo. That means that the matter the proposal was designed to address will remain unresolved. That is not consensus. Consensus requires that all members declare the outcome of a discussion to be at least marginally acceptable. If someone proposes a change because he or 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 persons 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 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. The right 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 may therefore not strictly be 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 differs 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, argument is not engaged in to defend a position but to arrive at solutions that everyone can consent to. In order for everyone to freely give consent, 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.

There's Hope

It is our belief and hope that virtually all problems in collectives can be overcome by applying compassion, tolerance, and patience, and by being thorough and even-handed in our thinking.

Recognize that some people are a big pain in the ass, but that doesn't mean that they are agent provocateurs. And even if they are, the best way to deal with disruptors in either case is probably to give them a certain amount of leeway to be themselves, to let them carry on instead of demanding that they cease. Provocation can be defused simply by not engaging it.

If the level of annoyance is such that it cannot simply be tolerated, then talk it over with the person: let him know what behaviors of his are causing problems for you and help him find ways to change them. Actions that we may see as negative usually arise from a need on the part of the person engaging in them: whether it's the need to be listened to, to get to the bottom of issues, etc. Our job is to help find a way for the person to still be able to have his need met if he agrees to drop the offending behavior. The only way to do that is to talk to him. People who are being a nuisance don't see themselves that way. They have a reason for what they're doing. Try to learn their perspective. Some people act in bad faith. Learn their perspective too, so you can expose it for what it is.

If we care, genuinely, about mutuality and inclusion, if we believe this to be one of the basic reasons why we want to work for a better, more just world, then we need to ask ourselves a simple question: if this person whom we cannot stand were a member of our family, would we turn her out into the street? Or would we put our hearts ahead of our frayed nerves and learn to deal with her annoying character traits? Likewise, if a member of our family spoke frankly and unkindly to us ("Look, you're driving me nuts: could you please just shut up?"), would we demand that the whole family intervene to sanction her?

Because most of us tend to throw caution or our sense of fairness to the wind whenever someone has made us very angry, we recommend having clear and concrete protocols in place that can be called upon whenever conflicts, differences in approach, or hurt feelings crop up. Rules, however, though they can help us keep our priorities in order, cannot take the place of basic human qualities: compassion, patience, tolerance, and the desire to seek out the truth. Without our humanity as our foremost guiding principle, no set of guidelines can come to our rescue. We need to always keep referring back to what's important when striving to make decisions on

It has been suggested that rather than going it alone one should set out to build a coalition, persuading each person individually, through private conversation, before making one's concerns public. This is classic political strategizing. We feel very ambivalent about this. On the one hand, it might work, and it could be preferable to exposing oneself as a sole target to a verbal battering. On the other hand, it's a manipulative tactic that could be characterized as sleazy, depending on the amount and quality of the persuading involved.

Furthermore, you will always be out-sleazed by the other party if she is willing to go further than you are. This is not a competition worth entering into unless you're willing to go over to the dark side. After your fellow collective members have figuratively beaten you up with personal attacks, vilification, and calls for your banishment, we think you will want, at least, to walk away with your integrity.

The Particular Vulnerability of Collectives

The consensus process 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. This expectation of good will can leave a collective particularly vulnerable, however, to manipulation by individuals who may 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—at great sacrifice to themselves, they tell us—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, 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 ugly power plays and underhanded manipulation of the group's loyalties happen again and again in egalitarian collectives.

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, acting hurt, shocked, or giving the appearance that one is seething with righteous indignation in the face of a concern that has been raised is a quick way to silence inconvenient dissent.

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 is not only no longer operating collectively or by consensus, it has effectively become a private club.

What's a Lone Person to Do?

If you're reading this book because you see a problem in your collective that you think should be addressed, you may well be alone in your quest. If you've actually raised your concerns with the group, you may suddenly find yourself the outcast, with the rest of the members possibly either openly hostile or utterly indifferent.

It's all well and good to say that all the people in a collective need to take responsibility for the group's functioning in order to avoid power inequalities and ensure a true spirit of consensus and collectivity, but if you're just one person, and the group is in fact not taking responsibility and is allowing a self-appointed leader or faction to steer decisions (including the newly-arrived-at conclusion that perhaps you are no longer a valued or wanted member), what can you alone do?

We wish we had the answer. (Our own personal solution has been to stagger away, blinded by pain, to tend to our wounds in a dark corner, wondering what hit us and why. We also decided to write a book on collective process.) This chapter is more than anything a cautionary note. Because you have read the contents of this book (and hopefully a number of others) on the topic of collective function and dysfunction, you may consider yourself armed with an arsenal of information and insight on what is going wrong with your group. You may feel confident that you can make a good case to the membership for the need for self-analysis and reassessment of priorities. But that doesn't mean you won't still find yourself alone and the subject of attacks and slander.

Evidence from books is very unconvincing to people who won't make an effort to try to understand the situation or the underlying problems, and even less so to anyone who has already reached a conclusion based on rumors, speculation, and innuendos. There is a saying, which unfortunately is all too often appropriate in collectives that are experiencing conflict: "My mind is made up, don't bother me with facts."

In many cases, people who feel they have carved out their little corner of power are not going to give it up easily, no matter how trivial their sphere of influence may seem. If you threaten the hegemony of someone in a position of some authority, whether his leadership is overt or subtle, (or even if you haven't done anything that could be construed as a threat but he thinks there's the potential that you might, perhaps because you've been outspoken) you may very well see another side of him, one with bared teeth and hissing.

the conflict that she does not want to resolve the problem but merely crush the perceived offender. It is necessary to create an atmosphere where both sides can come back to the group relatively whole; that can only happen when all the issues have been thoroughly addressed and resolved to an extent that both parties can live with.

12. Not assigning blame does not mean not acknowledging the wrongs that have been visited on either side. When people are not made to feel that they are under attack, but that their concerns will be genuinely listened to, they are much more likely to admit their mistakes. Create a means for people who may have acted badly to make amends, so that everybody can move on. (But do not be the judge and jury. People can only honestly make amends for errors that they acknowledge. No one can be forced to admit she was wrong if she does not in fact believe it. It may be that someone who is adamant in her position is in fact correct in her claim that she has been unjustly vilified. A situation that is still in this stage has not been thoroughly dealt with yet.)

13. A conflict between two people who were previously close friends or have been involved in a romantic relationship should never result in the group taking sides against one or the other party. The facts of the conflict that involve the group as a whole should be addressed as such (i.e. s/he has been excluding me from activities; badmouthing me within the group; will not leave me alone when I am doing work for the group, etc.). The group should absolutely not become complicit in eliminating the former friend or partner from the complainant's life by driving him or her out of the collective. It should become especially obvious in such a case why assigning blame is fruitless: people who have been hurt sometimes do stupid or cruel things. There's no need to rub their faces in it.

14. People become involved in conflicts because they have some unaddressed need. Find out what the need is and determine a way to address it, with the collaboration of those who are in disagreement. That is the only way to resolve the conflict: it needs to be addressed, worked through, and straightened out.

15. Anytime someone is kicked out of the group or leaves voluntarily in order to stop a painful conflict, there has been a terrible breakdown, not a conflict resolution.

Red Flags to Guard Against

The following is a by-no-means-exhaustive list of behaviors that should send up a red flag among collective members that the group's dynamics may need to be reexamined to ensure equal participation (and to stop divas and ego-maniacs in their tracks).

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, hurried, or 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 seemingly 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 their back or baiting them to their face. (For instance: is there someone who takes every opportunity to always 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.

the concern raised will try to persuade the group to squelch it on the grounds that it is a time-waster.

7. If a concern is in fact taking up too much of the group's time, create a subcommittee to look into it. The subcommittee should include the person raising the concern and at least three other people who are neutral or uninvolved in the issue but who are willing to take the time to ferret out the facts and study them thoroughly.

8. Sometimes someone (or a group) can be so controlling or self-involved (often without even realizing it) that he sees any disagreement with his chosen course as sabotage or disruption and will react angrily to what he sees as an unnecessary obstacle being created. This is a very common source of conflict in collectives. The solution is to treat every concern that is raised as legitimate and to address it as such. There are often fundamental differences in the basic values or beliefs of group members that get swept under the rug in a flurry of angry accusations and are only brought to an end by driving out or expelling the weaker faction or individual. This is a terrible breakdown of collectivism and should never be viewed as a successful resolution to a conflict.

9. Be the solution. Volunteer to create a committee to look into a problem and, after thorough study, recommend solutions. Volunteer to seek outside mediators. Talk to both sides to try to understand each point of view.

10. Instead of listening to empty accusations, look for plausible motives for people's behavior. When someone is accused of acting a certain way because he is “crazy,” that just does not hold any water. People usually act badly either because they are upset, insecure, frustrated, or afraid, or because they have something to gain by that behavior. Why would someone who has nothing to gain go around sabotaging or undermining the group's work? Could it be that they in fact have a legitimate concern they feel needs to be raised and are only being painted as saboteurs by someone who in fact has something to gain (such as consolidating his own power) by shutting them up?

11. A solution to a conflict does not have to—and should not—assign blame nor declare a victor. When conflicts arise, emotions often run high. People who feel they have been wronged or mistreated can react badly. Often, one side (or both) has become so overwrought by

Some cardinal points to keep in mind when conflict arises in a group

1. Do not draw any conclusions about an issue without hearing from both sides. Hear each side out to the extent that each feels is necessary (i.e. don't assume you've heard enough just because someone seems tiresome, pedantic, or emotional). Talking to a friend of a person involved in a conflict is not the same as getting the lowdown straight from the horse's mouth.
2. Although you may feel it is your duty to throw your support behind a friend or close ally who is in distress, giving emotional support is possible—and desirable—without having to draw conclusions or take sides.
3. Corollary to #2. Regardless of who you believe is right or wrong on a given issue, give emotional support. It is not okay for the feelings of the people involved to be trampled on, especially if someone is clearly suffering, even when one or both of the parties are acting like jerks. It is especially not okay to jump in and join the faction doing the stomping on someone's hurt feelings.
4. Assume that every concern is legitimate and address its substance, even if the tone or context in which it is delivered seems overblown, emotional, or vindictive.
5. Corollary to #4. Do not dismiss concerns just because the manner in which they are brought up seems strident or out of place. It is one of the shameful practices of the adversarial court system, which we don't want to emulate in our own collectives (at least not in this respect), to discredit complainants who are emotional or enraged. For centuries, women's grievances, in particular, have been successfully shunted aside by overbearing men by claiming that a woman who is outraged to the breaking point by the injustices and abuses she has had to suffer is hysterical. (Keep in mind that men can be very emotional too, and just as readily dismissed for being so.)
6. Never assume that someone who is raising a concern is just wasting the group's time. (That can happen, of course, but, at worst, the outcome of such a situation will simply be a certain amount of time wasted.) Much more often, someone who feels threatened by

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 provocation (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's apparently innocent or merely uninformed actions. 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 obviously thinks 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.

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 consensus. The basis for consensus 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 consensus.

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 or her achievements. Hero-worship is incompatible with consensus. All accomplishments are somehow 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.

egalitarian goals notwithstanding, the opinions of people who have distinguished themselves in some way will naturally carry more weight. Or we may become concerned that the outcome of the group's work will not be of the high caliber that we, ourselves, feel capable of achieving. Others among us may readily accede to individuals who seem knowledgeable and capable of taking on challenging problems, and may even frown on those who don't allow themselves to be molded, further alienating individuals who challenge the leadership.

Many conflicts arise out of the desire to control other people's behavior and to control the output of the group's activities. Whenever an attempt is made to manage or direct another member of the group, no matter how well meaning (to preserve harmony, end disruption, make time to tend to the work of the group, ensure high quality, etc.), that person will inevitably feel resentful, and possibly very hurt or angry. If he or she reacts, conflict begins. Many conflicts that drag down collectives for months, often resulting in indelible feuds, could have been prevented if the collective's members were more willing to tolerate the coexistence of different opinions, approaches or strategies, objecting only when a fundamental principle was at stake.

The end result of a project that has been produced collectively is an uneven patchwork of viewpoints and ability levels. Making room for everybody to contribute, even when ability is not equal, is a strength, not a weakness; so is letting the process show. We are accustomed to valuing a slick, polished presentation, but if we let the seams show, this will empower others with information about how something was put together. If we accept a heterogeneous, bumpy outcome as a given, before the work even begins, we will avoid a lot of head-butting further down the road.

Because groups based on consensus and equality presuppose mutual trust and a shared sense of mission, many of us may expect solidarity, harmony, and kindness to permeate such groups. To the contrary, adhering to egalitarian, anti-authoritarian principles means applying minimal interference to one another, or letting people be who they are—including the annoying, the trying, and the obnoxious—and accepting the outcomes as well.

Relinquishing Control of Projects and People

The egalitarian group affords its members little opportunity to control other members or the group itself. Because there are no leaders, no one is in a position to force another person to act or refrain from acting in a given situation; only the collective as a whole can intervene to limit unprincipled behavior. Since the entire collective has to become involved in order to restrict someone's autonomy, such a measure should be undertaken only if the behavior in question is extreme. (We have seen many instances in which small gaffes are trumped up into serious charges as a way of exercising control, but that's another topic.) In many collectives, we are likely to encounter some people who have annoying quirks, others who are chatterboxes, and others who just don't think before proposing stupid ideas. But these are not the egregious kinds of behavior that require official control; galling as they may seem at times, they must be allowed to exist.

When collective members try to force a desired outcome according to personal desires, taste, or style, they are basically violating the principles of maximum autonomy and free choice. This tendency will almost always lead to arguments and ruffled feelings. (The corollary to this is that group members have a profound responsibility not to make themselves a nuisance to others.) A truly egalitarian collective will likely not be smooth or harmonious (though it may be loving and collegial), but highly heterogeneous, rife with rough spots and bumps.

In an egalitarian group, not everybody has to agree or like each other or approve of the work that is being done; they merely have to consent to it. This means that unless something is really important or central to the values of the organization, the wisest course is often just to let things be. That can be hard to accept when we have been accustomed to value results over all other considerations.

Almost all people who come to the movement for social justice were brought up and have been functioning in conventional society, which presupposes supremacy of one person over another according to status or perceived superior ability. Whether we mean to or not, we bring these biases and expectations with us when we agree to join groups that operate according to equality and collectivism.

Those of us who are accustomed to emerging as natural leaders (for instance, those who've been successful in academia) may have an unacknowledged belief that others will readily recognize our wisdom and defer to it as a matter of course. We may assume that,

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 Pariahs

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 expulsion. This practice might seem odd for groups supposedly founded on equality, mutual respect, and acceptance, but it happens remarkably often. In fact, this matter deserves a much more thorough treatment than it will receive in this brief chapter.

Often this process of expulsion is justified by reference to the anarchist notion of "banning." According to a typical anarchist vision, people will live or operate in small groups with no leadership, 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 simply, democratically banish her. This practice is said 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 annoying or inconvenient.

It's normal for people sometimes to be obnoxious or awkward. 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, he or 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.

What so often happens, however, is that one or both people will make a federal 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,

intimidation, and violence (psychological or physical violence) are resorted to if the group's majority or most vocal members do not get their way.

It is not possible, in our view, for the person who feels pushed out or abused to simply be mistaken in perceiving a sustained campaign of attacks and vilification by the group (or a faction of the group) against him/herself. The hurt that is expressed over and over in situation after situation is undoubtedly real, and it should not be dismissed, regardless of whether or not the person experiencing it was originally (or continues to be) at fault.

Regardless of the merits or faults present in each situation, it's not okay for us to inflict emotional pain on one another. That should be a basic tenet.

A commitment to compassion and justice and against cruelty (yes, that's what it is) needs to be overtly stated as the basis for how an egalitarian group operates.

We only need to look at the current political situation to see the wages of indifference and casual acceptance of cruelty. Once we have relinquished our moral compass, we can condone both small and huge moral insults with logical arguments and pragmatism. Where is the outrage of the American public at the thousands of deaths and injuries of Iraqi civilians? Even for those who believe the war to be politically justified, how can ecstatic cheering be the overwhelming reaction to death, suffering and destruction on a massive scale? Wouldn't the more human reaction be sober regretfulness that sometimes harm is done in order to achieve a purportedly worthwhile objective?

Yet even among the activists who vehemently oppose war, many do so for political reasons, because they object to imperialism or other political forces they believe to be at play in this conflict, not out of moral outrage. And of those who invoke humanitarian objections to war, many adopt that view as a persuasive arguing position, not as a deeply held revulsion to causing suffering.

The purpose of activism, fundamentally, is to create a better world, one where there is greater justice, equality, and harmony and less pain and hardship. It is not to put forward a particular agenda. When we overlook this basic truth and allow ourselves to act with deliberate cruelty toward people in our own collectives, then go on to justify our actions by saying that we vilified or attacked our comrades because they were interfering with important political organizing, we have twisted our motives into an indefensible moral pretzel.

Cruelty

How we choose to treat each other in a group that is committed to equality and justice goes to the core of what we hope to accomplish as activists. If we hope to bring about a fairer, more compassionate world we have to start with our most basic interactions. The fact that deliberate cruelty does not lead to greater justice should be too obvious to mention. Yet in collectives it's very often considered normal, not even worthy of a mention or of a raised eyebrow. Tormenting someone mercilessly until they flee the collective—or even the entire local activist scene because they are so afraid of encountering further abuse—is common practice. We've never heard anyone speak up to say that it's morally repugnant or to try to stop it in any way.

Condoning and accepting cruelty as business-as-usual is an attitude and a way of living. Its potential for creating and promoting social injustice and a more vicious, less tolerant world makes it a matter of the utmost importance: it is our duty and responsibility to vigorously oppose cruelty within our own midst.

The same behavior we saw as children in school playgrounds, where an individual is singled out for no other reason than he or she is an easy mark and is then subjected to a gleeful campaign of abuse, is much too often at work in our activist collectives. Are we so conditioned by our upbringing in a society that forces us to conform to authority that whenever the mantle of established authority is removed (like it is in an egalitarian collective and in a playground), we can think of nothing better to do than prey on each other with cruel name-calling and senseless attacks? Another frequent consequence of new-found freedom is to immediately establish and follow new hierarchies based on who is more popular or stronger or the best at manipulation versus who is unpopular, out of the group's mainstream, the easy target, etc. It's just like *Lord of the Flies*...

Individuals who believe they have been mistreated by their fellow group members feel genuine pain. It is not possible or appropriate, in our view, to explain away somebody's pain by pointing to the group's positive work or invoking regulations that the pariah in question may or may not have properly followed. Do you honestly believe that anyone deserves to have cruelty visited upon them? Even if they're a pain in the ass, if they're impossible to deal with—even if they themselves are cruel—that is no reason to taunt, torment, bully, slander with vicious lies, etc. As activists, we hope to create a world in which difficulties can be addressed and every attempt is made to resolve them, not one where suppression,

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 consensus? 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. Consensus 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 disagreements or dissension. 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 a consensus-based 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

Sometimes, moreover, the individual can be really badly misunderstood by a group which has made assumptions or followed presumptions that might not really apply to the person involved. In judging individuals, groups can make terrible mistakes, sometimes based on a lot of bias and prejudice. This is illustrated not only by the countless collectivist mistakes made throughout history, but also by the many smaller examples of collective injustice and manipulation that we have already discussed in our Collective Book. When a group is manipulated, becomes misguided, or simply fails to be vigilant about judging everyone fairly and equally, it can become more wrong than any single member.

The individual also might have a particular outlook or opinion in a given situation that ultimately proves to be wiser or more accurate than the outlook of the group. This is why it really is necessary to listen to the opinions of individuals within the group who may not be going so well with the collective flow. Dissenting opinions sometimes can change the mind of the entire group, once the group considers the dissenting opinion fairly, allowing each person within that group to weigh the merits of each (differing) point of view.

In examining other literature dealing with problems within collectives, we have seen quite a few articles talking about how to deal with the difficult person who won't go along with the group, the ornery person, the malcontent whose behavior or opinions seem to disrupt the group's smooth functioning. The issue is thus usually depicted as finding a good way for the group to collectively deal with a problem member. Unfortunately, this is only one way of looking at things.

A truly democratic and egalitarian collective can't always assume that the only problem to be considered in group-versus-individual conflicts is protecting the integrity of the group against the disruptive individual. Sometimes, the problem involves protecting the individual against the group.

The Collective Is Not Always More Correct Than The Individual

One mistake often made by people who want to strive for a more collective society — whether that society might be called anarchist, communist, or "small-d" democratic — is to assume that the collective can always be trusted above the individual. Unfortunately, in many radical-left circles, if we talk too much about individual rights and even suggest that an individual's opinions and observations might be closer to the truth than the votes or consensus of the collective, we might be accused of pushing "individualism," which supposedly is a bad trait typical of capitalist and "bourgeois" society, not to be tolerated in egalitarian circles. Yet, this kind of mentality, at least when taken to the extreme, enabled a lot of really nasty totalitarian societies to exist in the past century, and the history of those societies basically proves the point that individuals (who were suppressed) can often be more correct than the group.

If we are really striving for a fair and egalitarian society, then we need to give utmost importance to the rights and liberties of the individual. This does not mean promoting the kind of "individualism" that dictates that each person must look out for her/himself and that collective decision making and concern for the community are a hindrance to true liberty. What it does mean is that each of us is unique and must be considered, judged and observed according to our own unique combination of circumstances. This means that our behaviors are far more complex than might be assumed by the knee-jerk sort of ideologue who would say, for instance, that any of us enjoys certain privileges above others for belonging to one particular group based on race, gender, or ethnic origins. It also means that nobody's behavior should be judged by a formulaic check list, so that in any given situation, one person must be assumed to have certain politically undesirable characteristics based on a particular incident when we don't know the backgrounds, tendencies, or histories of the individuals involved. (So, for example, a man who shouts at a woman or says something vaguely disrespectful to her is automatically assumed to be "sexist" when a closer examination of the histories of the individuals involved might reveal a dynamic that is far more complex, with more equal hostilities, etc., than anyone realized.) When we fail to recognize the potential uniqueness and complexity of the individual, then we are failing to create a situation in which each individual might enjoy a maximum amount of freedom and liberty.

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 golden age, perhaps after the revolution, 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.

Staying True to the Mission

Many egalitarian collectives consist of activists working to achieve a just society and were formed for that purpose. Even collectives that don't have specific political aims have made a commitment to social justice by virtue of being anti-authoritarian and pursuing equality as a fundamental goal. It should be obvious that internal power plays, deceitful back-room plotting, rumor-mongering, and marginalizing or ridiculing are behaviors that do not befit a group fighting for fairness and against oppression. Yet, people in collectives do these things all the time, usually without even inviting a raised eyebrow.

Collectives that incorporate as non-profits are required by law to draft a mission statement letting potential supporters know about the work that the organization exists to achieve. Fulfilling the mission is a non-profit's legal reason for being (as well as the reason it doesn't have to pay taxes), just as a for-profit company's all-consuming purpose in life is to make money for its owners. Most collectives have no such mandated requirement, but it's still a good idea to compose a mission statement to refer back to whenever a decision needs to be made on how the group should act in a given situation. This position paper should spell out the fundamental belief that the collective must operate internally by the same high standards of fairness and democracy that it is working to bring about in the larger society. If it fails to do that, then it has failed in its most basic goal.

There has to be some way for people to be allowed to clear the air 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 human beings can stem from a great many factors that are not easily reduced to race, class, or gender. Thus, anyone who attempts to combat injustice by applying overly simplistic criteria might actually perpetuate even more injustice. And many collectives, from what we have seen, need to be more conscious about avoiding that kind of mistake.

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. Everyone should feel free to say, "I have no comment," without being made out to be a deferrer to oppressors. 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.

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, not try to dictate actions that are awkward and artificial, 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 grossly untrue and damaging statements about a project in an attempt to denigrate it. The person who made the original proposal may be desperate to say something, but he mustn't interrupt, and there are others in line to speak. If the proposal-maker speaks up for himself 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 is 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 on various topics and no semblance of a discussion.

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.

Respect for Differences

Many collectives are aware that they need to do better in addressing racism, sexism, and homophobia 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.

Prejudice does not come in separate compartments. It's not okay to be against racism, sexism, and homophobia but be indifferent to xenophobia, ageism, nationalism, classism and the myriad other ways that people are suspicious of and discriminatory toward one another.

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. Tolerance begins with the acknowledgement that people other than ourselves may see things differently than we do, and suspending judgment while those with whom we may disagree or whose point of view 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. Group dynamics fail to respect differences whenever assumptions are made about another person.

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, many find it difficult to see beyond their own limited experience. A dissimilarity as slight as an awkward social manner, imperfect language skills, or a reticent personality can be enough to cast someone as weird or tiresome, and her opinions therefore pre-judged as unimportant. 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 college students or recent graduates, an older person with a family to take care of can be shut out of the group's work simply by scheduling meetings at night, when he has to be home to put the children to bed. Members' disabilities are also often unacknowledged by healthy people: it's hard 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 late 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 to truly operate by consensus.

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. A computer is a tool that costs approximately \$1000, plus a monthly internet subscription. Assuming that everyone in a group, especially a political collective dealing with issues of economic inequality, should be able to afford such a luxury is completely at odds with the realities that social activism exists to address. A collective cannot function by consensus when some of its members are systematically excluded from its activities.

On a related matter...

Using ugly societal ills like racism and sexism as a pretext to assassinate the character of perceived enemies is reprehensible. When a fellow collective member has acted inappropriately, his particular actions should be addressed by the complainant. Calling them 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 go to the person’s defense without appearing to condone sexism, and too unspecific to be refuted. As a result, all dialogue, which is necessary in order to come to an understanding of the issue and seek fair solutions, is silenced. An allegation of sexism or racism can be used as a ploy specifically to silence dialogue and force group censure or ostracism against an undesirable individual. If, instead, an offender is confronted with specific bad 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 whether his actions were the result of broader racist or sexist beliefs and to discuss the role that sexism and racism play within the collective’s interactions.

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 consensus system 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 of consensus. 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 codify and restrict normal human interactions 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 often 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

well meaning, they are abdicating their responsibilities to the collective by acting without having done their homework. And those circulating the petition 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-on 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 not necessary 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.

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 us to the logical conclusion that the best way to preserve harmony in the group is simply not to 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.

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 their names to an accusation about which they have absolutely no first-hand knowledge, sometimes even excoriating a person they have never met. Needless to say, this is not a sign of healthy group dynamics. Even if the persons doing the signing are