Chapter 8:
Bridging the gap between theory and practice

It is easy to have a rosy vision of how consensus should work, and then feel disheartened when your day to day reality doesn't match up. We may say: "This is a way of making decisions based on the belief that we are all equally important," and "We're looking for win-win solutions that everyone is happy with," and it's good to remind each other what you are aiming for, but none of these things will come about just because you have said them. While Chapter 7: *Troubleshooting in your meetings* offers tips on things you can do in meetings when a problem arises, this chapter is about the more fundamental changes you can make in a group culture over the long term. We look at ways to respond to a range of more challenging situations, from making decisions when your options are constrained by external pressures; to tackling privilege and oppression and their effects on power dynamics; to addressing conflict; to open groups with fluctuating membership to scenarios where only a small minority of a group are really interested in consensus. Often these areas overlap – for example, the power dynamics in your group will affect the conflicts you have and how you deal with them; groups where the membership fluctuates may find it harder to deal with power imbalances.

Both conflict and power dynamics can stir up emotional and behavioural patterns that may have their roots in early childhood or in a lifetime's repeated experience of oppression. This chapter is not an alternative to months of therapy! We have tried not to over-simplify, or pretend things are easier that they are. However, we have focused on providing a better basic understanding of what is going on when our group dynamics are unhealthy. This chapter offers practical tips for groups that want to develop healthier dynamics, and get on with whatever kind of project they were set up for.

Conflict and consensus

People often associate conflict with arguments and bad feeling. However, another way of looking at it is that conflict simply involves people having values, needs or opinions that are, or seem to be, incompatible. We face conflict in every group or relationship we are in, although it can show itself in a variety of ways. Sometimes incompatibility can be straightforward to work around. At other times, conflict can bring up strong and uncomfortable feelings like anger and anxiety. It can often trigger emotions which have a longer history than the situation you are in. For example, someone whose childhood involved inconsistent parenting and repeatedly broken promises might have a much stronger reaction to changes of plan than someone whose early experiences were more secure. These responses can get in the way of the trust, respect and understanding we need to build consensus.

In everyday society we may have the option of turning to an outside authority when things get difficult, like complaining to the boss if a colleague is behaving in a way that we don't like. However, in many cases this doesn't actually solve the problem. Even if your boss takes you seriously, they are unlikely to be able to get to the root of the issue as effectively as you and your colleague could if you worked it out between yourselves. With greater understanding and skills we can find ways to deal with these situations ourselves. This section provides some pointers to help you with this in low level conflict situations. In more extreme cases you might want to get outside help of some kind.

> ### Example of a conflict
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> Katy and Fahim are friends who have different ideas about how loud to play their music. Katy has been made homeless and comes to stay in Fahim's housing co-op. To begin with, Fahim is relaxed about Katy's music because he knows she needs somewhere to live, and it doesn't affect their relationship. But when she moves in longer term, loud music at funny hours of day and night stop him being able to sleep or relax. He starts to see the music as a sign that she has no respect for him. He becomes irritated by little things she does, like leaving dirty mugs lying about, and forgetting to clean her hair out of the plughole in the shower. She notices his tension and feels judged and unwelcome in the house. Initially, music, mugs and plughole are not mentioned, but they treat each other with frosty politeness.
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> Over time they become stuck in their narratives about the other person – Fahim believes that he is not respected, Katy that she is not welcome. Katy's response is to play the music even louder and leave her things in communal spaces to prove that it is her home too. In a house meeting she suggests a new system for storing recycling and Fahim argues strongly against any change to the way they've always done it. Finally, he trips over a bag that Katy has left in the middle of the floor and starts screaming at her in a way that is totally out of proportion to what, on the surface, has just happened.

The life cycle of a conflict

Incompatibility

In the example above we see how a simple difference becomes an incompatibility when it seems like both people can't get what they want at the same time – Katy can't have loud music at the same time as Fahim has silence in the house. Sometimes the incompatibility is harder to pin down, like having communication styles which don't work well together. For example, what one person thinks is playful banter may be taken by someone else as a crushing put down. In this case, neither person is getting what they want out of friendly interaction. Sometimes, it might only be one person who doesn't get

their needs met, and others might not be aware of the conflict at all. Imagine one person in a group has strong ideas about how things should be done and always shares them with other people. If the rest of the group always follow these suggestions this first person may think everything is fine, and not realise that the others are growing increasingly resentful because they don't think it is acceptable to express opinions so strongly.

The effects on the relationship

The frustration that comes from unmet needs often leads to feelings, beliefs and behaviours which leak into the relationship. In our example above, we see how Katy's perception that she is unwelcome leads her into defiant behaviour that make the problem worse. Similarly, Fahim believes that he isn't respected, and comes to interpret everything she does as a confirmation of this. Sometimes the strength of our emotional response in a given situation may be a hangover from earlier experiences. For example, perhaps Katy came to the country where she now lives in her early teens and never quite felt welcomed. This makes her sensitive to similar dynamics replaying in adult life.

Frustration, and the beliefs and behaviours that people develop around it, can affect the ability to communicate with and accept the other person or group. Often tensions are expressed indirectly. For example, Katy and Fahim argue about how to store recycling, when the real issue was not what the waste paper bin should be used for, but who has ownership of the house, and the 'right' to come up with new ideas. Or it might be that people are no longer able to really listen to each other. If Fahim finally brought up the issue of the music after months of bad feeling, Katy might see it as an attack, and refuse to accept that he couldn't sleep with her bassline throbbing through the floorboards. For a different person the attitudes and behaviours might not be projected at the other person, but turned inwards. For example, someone else in Fahim's position might move from the belief that he wasn't respected by Katy to a belief that he wasn't worthy of respect by anyone. This could block communication by making it even harder for him to assert his own needs.

Ways of dealing with conflict

How often have you heard someone say, "I was really annoyed, but I didn't want to create conflict by making a fuss?" However, if we say that conflict is about your needs not being met because they seem to be incompatible with someone else's, then the conflict can't be *created* by making a fuss – it is already there, however you choose to respond. It is helpful to look at what our own usual responses are, and which responses are common in our group, in order to decide what we might want to do differently. Broadly speaking, these responses vary according to whether we are prioritising maintaining the relationship, meeting our own goals, both, or neither.

Accommodate: here you give up the thing you want for yourself, prioritising harmony in the relationship over your own needs and goals. For example, when Katy very first moves in, Fahim doesn't mention the music and remains relaxed and friendly with her. Choosing to accommodate to someone else's wishes could be a strategy for addressing power dynamics. In this example, perhaps Fahim makes an extra effort to let Katy do things her way in the house because he knows she is new and would otherwise be homeless. Or, in another group, you might actively support an idea you aren't that keen on, just because it was suggested by someone who rarely put ideas forward in meetings. If on the other hand, you are someone who always accommodates, you may end up feeling resentful or downtrodden.

Confront: if you are in confrontation then the priority is your own goals or needs, not the relationship. It is easy to characterise this response as 'selfish', but there are cases where it is appropriate. For example, if someone was picking on vulnerable members of your group you might not think much about maintaining the relationship when you challenged them. It is common for people to get stuck in confrontation over minor issues if they don't address the underlying problems. For example, Katy and Fahim have an underlying tension about who feels at home in the house, but it comes out through arguments about recycling.

Avoid: in this case you don't do anything for your goals *or* the relationship, like Fahim's behaviour when he continues to be silent about the music, but turns cold and distant with Katy. A common

example in meetings is for contentious issues to never make it onto the agenda, or for someone to change the subject whenever difficult topics are brought up. Another pattern is for people to simply stop coming to groups when conflict arises, but never explain why.

Compromise: this goes part way to maintaining the relationship and to meeting the goals. Often it isn't based on a particularly deep analysis of the situation. For example, in the recycling conversation, Katy and Fahim might decide that they can each use their own system for storing recycling in the house, and take it out into the street themselves. With the music, they might decide that Katy turns the volume down by half. A compromise can often be worked out quite quickly if people are willing, and it maintains a relationship by showing a commitment to fairness. However, it is sometimes described as lose-lose because no-one quite gets what they want – the music is still too loud for Fahim and not loud enough for Katy. And coming to a settlement about what is done with the recycling doesn't get to the root of the disagreement.

Collaboration: is based on commitment to your own needs and goals, as well as to the relationship with the other person – in other words it works on the principles of consensus. It combines aspects of both confrontation and accommodation, and goes a step further than compromise, in that it takes a deeper understanding of what is going on to look for solutions which really work for everyone. Finding a way of effectively sound-proofing Katy's room might be a good collaborative solution to the initial music issue – that way she really could have noise at the same time as Fahim had silence. As well as

these kinds of practical solutions, the process of collaboration might involve an open conversation about what they each really needed, in this case in order to feel at home. This could lead to Katy finding more appropriate strategies for asserting ownership than leaving her things on the living room floor. Similarly, if Fahim felt less threatened, he might accept she had the right to new ideas about storing recycling.

Making choices about how to respond to conflict

Often the way we respond to conflict doesn't feel like a choice. Many of us are socially programmed to take a particular approach to conflict, regardless of whether it is appropriate for the situation. Some people learn early in life that confrontation is the only way to get their basic needs met. Others are expected to 'be good' and 'not cause trouble' and consistently accommodate. On top of this we need to deal with the other person's patterns – if their default setting is confrontation, then accommodation or avoidance might feel like the 'natural' response. However, becoming more aware of the different options open to us can help us start to make more conscious decisions about what approach to take in different situations.

We have prioritised collaboration in this chapter because this is the approach needed to reach synthesis – a fully supported consensus where everyone's needs are met. This is not going to be right for every situation – if someone attacks you in the street it may be *logically* possible to work with them to find a different way of getting money instead of taking yours, but self-preservation is likely to be your first priority. Collaboration takes trust, time and commitment, and people may only want to use this approach when both a relationship and our goals are important. Collaboration requires us to try to understand the other person's perspective even when we feel angry with them. It asks us to be honest with ourselves even when we feel vulnerable. There are lots of reasons why we might feel like we can't, or don't want to do this. In a situation in which you have been seriously hurt it might feel like too much. If the other person has a lot of power over you it might be more important to protect yourself. If they won't work with you, you can't collaborate

on your own. On the other hand, collaboration has the potential to take you out of the conflict without either party needing to lose the thing you share – the group you are in. Through a deeper understanding of each person's needs it looks for a way to *remove* the incompatibility altogether, and carry on living, working or campaigning together. This might not always be possible, but the attempt will build a stronger relationship and a much better compromise than any quick fix or win-lose solutions.

Techniques for inviting collaboration

Create a supportive culture

The culture of interaction in a group makes a big difference to how easily people can bring up issues at an early stage, before frustrations have built up and affected the relationship. For example, you might have a regular slot in your meetings for giving feedback to each other, talking about how you are feeling about the group or for evaluating the meeting itself. A lot of groups set up mechanisms like this but rarely use them. However, if you regularly provide minor bits of feedback it will become a more normal part of your group culture and bringing up bigger issues may feel more possible.

Feedback is not just about things which don't work for you. Whether or not you use formal meeting slots to do it, giving each other positive recognition can help people feel valued. This may in turn mean that people are more able to handle conflict without losing

trust and understanding. This means taking the time to notice and tell someone when they do something well or put a lot of work into a task, including routine tasks which don't usually come with much prestige. Some people will appreciate it if you ask about what is going on in their life outside the group, so long as you remember what they said last time – asking the same question five times probably won't help them feel listened to! This doesn't mean you have to all be friends with each other, or even like each other. Finding out what you can respect and appreciate in each person, and making efforts to at least understand the rest, will help you make effective decisions together.

Giving positive recognition doesn't mean you have to gloss over things you don't like. If you feel you are in a group where disagreements aren't voiced, and frustrations are suppressed, see what you can do to respectfully bring them to the surface. For example, if a decision appears to be going ahead with only a few enthusiastic voices behind it, be proactive about asking for anyone who has concerns. If, outside of meetings, people regularly complain about the group as a whole or individuals within it, encourage them to bring it up. If you sense tensions or bad atmosphere, try to deal with it directly.

Simple facilitation techniques can reduce the chances of conflict damaging your group. For example, it is common for people to go away with different interpretations of a discussion, and then to lose trust when other people don't do what they expected. Instead, agree the exact wording of a decision and write it down at the time that it is made. This could include going into more detail. Perhaps you are a worker's co-op developing a sick pay policy. It could be a good idea to hear from each person to check you have a similar understanding of 'too ill to work' or else resentment could build up when someone stays off with a slight cold. In a group where trust is already low, check through and agree the minutes at the end of a meeting while everyone's memory is fresh and there is still time to change things. During a meeting, techniques like active listening and summarising can help to identify any misunderstandings, and bring them into the open before too much tension has grown up around them.

Being honest about what you really need

Collaboration means we may give up some of what we *want*, but it aims to give us all of what we really *need*. Differentiating between wants and needs isn't always easy in practice. Returning to the housing co-op example above, clearly Katy didn't *need* to play music at home in the sense that it was necessary for her survival. The same could be said for Fahim wanting silence. However, they clearly both felt these things were very important in order for them to feel at home. Other things they did may also have been strategies to feel more at home, even if they didn't think that through consciously, such as Katy leaving her things in communal areas, and Fahim resisting any changes to the recycling system. However, these strategies may not have been *necessary* in order for them to feel at home. As we suggested above, collaboration might involve both of them finding new ones that enabled them to share ownership of the house.

Before you can get to the stage of having these conversations with someone else, it helps if you can be honest with yourself about what you want and why. This isn't always easy. For example, we have been assuming that Fahim's resistance to Katy's new recycling idea was that on some level he believed that her feeling ownership of the house threatened his right to feel it too. However, admitting this would mean admitting ungenerous feelings, so he may have found it more convenient to think he was so annoyed by her suggestion because it made the house look messy, even if none of their other housemates seemed to think so.

Being honest might also mean accepting that you have been wanting someone to meet a need that wasn't really their responsibility. For example, maybe you have spent months feeling frustrated because you have joined a climate action group where no-one else seems to see the value of having fun together outside of meetings. You may have supplied hundreds of very good reasons why socialising outside meetings is good for group dynamics, and still everyone insists that they don't really have time. Thinking hard about why it is so important to you may reveal that maintaining relationships in the group isn't your only priority – actually you are looking for people to go out dancing with, and you spend so much time on your activism

that the people you see in meetings are the easiest ones to ask. If it's not something they want to do, claiming it is for the sake of group dynamics may be doubly counter-productive – it may be bad for dynamics, and prevent them from seeing that you actually want their friendship for its own sake.

Thinking about what other people might need

Some people spend a lot of time guessing what is really going on for other people. At best, this can help us be ready to empathise, and find ways forward. For example, someone suggests something which most people in the group like, but one person passionately insists it is impractical and a waste of time. If they actually oppose the idea for more personal reasons they'd rather not express, then taking them at face values and debating the practicalities could leave you talking in circles for a very long time. Instead, offering them respect and recognition could bolster their trust in you, so they became more able to discuss the real issues.

However, when we start second guessing other people, and then finding ways to work round the problem, there is a danger we could be manipulating them. After all, it can be tempting to search out someone's underlying emotional needs when you don't want to listen to the content of what they are saying. Maybe the idea you like *is* quite impractical, and it is you who doesn't want to admit it. For this reason your first question needs to be "What is actually going on for *me*?" Rather than trying to mind-read, a better approach is to use open questions to encourage other people to be honest with themselves as well. For example: "Everyone has made practical arguments for what they think we should do but we don't seem to be moving towards agreement on anything. I wonder how everyone is *feeling* about the ideas?" Or simply, "There seems to be a lot of tension in the room. I'd be interested to hear if anyone has anything they're holding back from saying?"

If you know someone well enough, you might want to tell them what you guess is going on for them, but be very clear that you know it is a guess, and be open to being told you are wrong: "You seem to have lots of reasons why Jemma's idea won't work, but I don't really agree that it would be as difficult as you think. My interpretation of this

situation is that you have another anxiety going on. For example that you'll end up with an unfair share of the workload if we put it into practice?" This is a tactic best used with caution, because some people will feel annoyed, or think it patronising. Another approach when you think someone else has something they aren't saying, is to think hard about whether they have been getting the basic respect they deserve, and then trying to put back anything that might be missing. For example, listen carefully to the things that they say, give them recognition for the things they have done for the group, and if you think it might help, encourage them to open up about where their tension might come from.

Setting up a conversation about the conflict

Often in consensus groups conflict will emerge in meetings. You might need to deal with it straight away, for instance because you have an urgent decision to make. However, communication about underlying issues often goes better if everyone concerned has a bit more time to think about it. If it is possible, take a break from a meeting where you are struggling to reach agreement – people may well return with a clearer idea of what they want and a better capacity to listen. On the flip side, there is the danger that if people have a preference for avoiding conflict they may not return. If it is important to have the conversation with that particular group of people you might want to keep the break short, or get a clear commitment from everybody to come to the next meeting.

Another issue is whether a meeting is the right setting to have the conversation at all. On the one hand, if a number of people are affected by something then they might want to be involved in talking about it. If there is an issue you are anxious about bringing up with somebody, you might feel more secure knowing there will be other people there who share your perspective. For example, if someone shouted at you in a meeting in a way you found abusive you might not feel particularly safe talking to them about it one on one. On the other hand, some people find honesty easier if fewer people are present. The person who shouted at you might be more ready to apologise if it doesn't mean losing face in front of a roomful of people. If one person has difficult relationships with a number of people in the group, then it might sometimes be better to have several one-on-one conversations than to try to get everyone together and sort it all out at once.

Remember, even if it is you who is raising an issue, the decisions about when and where to have the conversation, and who else should be there, are not just yours. It is best to give the person or people you want to speak to a broad outline of what you want to talk about and then decide other details with them. This might be as simple as saying, for example, "I'd like to chat about the noise levels in the house, when would be a good time?" Or it might involve more complicated logistics around neutral venues, and who is prepared to be in the same room together. If you are planning to talk about the issue in a meeting, it could help to mention it to individuals in person, before it goes out as an agenda item. Think about your wording and how people might respond to it. For example, people might arrive with more open minds to a meeting about "distribution of tasks" than to one about "some people not doing their fair share"!

The tips below on ways of expressing yourselves can be applied in meetings or one on one situations. Generally, preparation will help you work out what you want to say and how, but the basic principles can be applied at any point you are in a conflict situation.

A Consensus Handbook

Expressing what you feel

If we can honestly express our thoughts and feelings, other people may find it much easier to empathise with us. This may help them see beyond any assumptions about us, and our behaviour in the conflict. It also paves the way for a discussion of their needs as well as ours.

Showing and talking about feelings

Your preferred way of bringing something up will depend a lot on your own culture and habits. You might also want to think about who you are talking to and what they are able to hear. Some people find it much easier to connect to and understand an emotion if you *show* it to them instead of just talking about it – if you shout at them or burst into tears it will help them recognise something is important to you. Other people may be uncomfortable around displays of anger or distress, possibly seeing it as manipulative, and find it much easier to hear what you are saying when you are more calm. You might not feel you have much choice about how you express yourself, or you might not want to adapt it to suit other people. For example, in northern Europe, the stereotypes are for middle-class cultures to avoid showing anger, and masculine cultures to hide vulnerability. You might well argue that these cultures are dominant enough, and there is no reason for you to fit their norms simply in order to be taken seriously. However, communication can be more effective if you are aware of the preferences of the person or people on the receiving end as well as your own. If you feel you aren't getting through to some people with your feelings on display, then a pragmatic decision might be to explain yourself a second time after you've calmed down.

Naming your feelings without blaming anyone

Being honest about what you feel shows self-respect, you aren't pretending your feelings are something else in order to be taken seriously. It can also help other people to empathise with you and to be honest in their turn. It can help to talk about feelings in a way that doesn't imply they are anyone's fault – our own, or someone else's. This is a bit counter-intuitive if you have been brought up in a

culture where blame is very normal, so here is a detailed explanation.

Returning to the housing co-op example, consider Fahim's anger with Katy's music. This anger certainly isn't *his* fault – he wants to relax and the music is preventing him. Feelings like irritation, anger or disappointment shouldn't be suppressed. Nor does it help anyone if we turn those feelings inward – deciding we are a bad person for feeling angry, 'pathetic' for feeling hurt, etc. However, Katy didn't *make* him feel angry, any more than the sea can *make* you drown. His anger comes from the fact that *his* needs aren't being met – none of the other housemates particularly need silence and they aren't bothered by the music.

People usually do things to meet their own needs, and very rarely have the *intention* that we should respond in a particular way. The main point here is that even when you have strong feelings, the answer isn't *necessarily* that the other person should change the behaviour that triggered those feelings. It might mean you making changes yourself, or accepting that their behaviour doesn't mean what you think it does. For example, maybe you get upset if someone ignores you when they are working. You might want to demand they pay you more attention, or simply write them off as cold or rude. However, part of the answer may simply be for you to recognise that this is about their need to concentrate, not about them not liking you. This doesn't mean that they shouldn't *consider* your feelings. For example, if they know that you find it hard to be in the same group as someone who doesn't acknowledge you for long periods of time, they could learn to give you a nice smile before asking you to let them finish. Nor do you have to give up what you really need. For as long as you want to go on sharing something – a house, or a relationship or a group – you all have a responsibility to find ways of meeting your needs that don't get in the way of anyone else's. Giving other people information about how you feel is the first step in a collaborative process which takes into account everyone's feelings.

'I statements'

A formula for expressing feelings without blame is known as the 'I statement': *When you (+ behaviour), I ...* For example, "When you play your music so loud, I can't sleep." "When the meeting starts late, I get frustrated." "When we make a plan and then you don't turn up, I stop wanting to make any more plans with you." In this way you can name the two things – the other person's behaviour and your response, without implying that the one is the direct and only cause of the other, (as in "You make me angry", or "I'm angry because you..."). Keeping your account of the behaviour as fact-based as possible can help pinpoint exactly what bothers you. For example, "You often leave your things in the living room" may be more helpful than "You're lazy and messy". Using the 'I statement' formula may have the added benefit of the other people becoming less defensive. However, if you express yourself in this way simply in order to get a better response from them they may detect it and feel manipulated – as always, honesty is key.

For example, be aware of whether what you say about your own feelings is an indirect comment on the other person's or people's behaviour. You might say "I *feel* exploited/ignored/betrayed/let down" but in fact these words are not so much about how you feel as how you *interpret* someone else's behaviour. These interpretations may be an important part of why you feel what you do, and you might have good reason to want to present them to the other people. However, *if* you want to stick to the 'I statement' formula, then "I feel overworked/lonely/disappointed/frustrated" talks purely about what is going on for you. A test is whether someone could deny what you said. For example, if someone says "I feel frozen out of the group", it is easy to respond with "We're not freezing you out", whereas "I feel alone in this group" is much harder to glibly contradict. This can reduce the potential for the other person to respond defensively.

On the other hand, you might find this dishonest. For example, you could translate "I feel betrayed" to "I feel disappointed", but it wouldn't really do justice to how complex your feelings are. Plus, explaining how you interpret someone's behaviour could help them understand why you feel so strongly about it. "I always do the cleaning and I feel angry about it, because I think you are exploiting

me." You might need to get this interpretation off your chest in order to listen to their view on the matter, "I don't see it as exploitation, I just don't think it is necessary to hoover the carpet every day." This doesn't mean you have to agree – simply recognise their different perspective.

There is no single right answer as to whether it is helpful to let other people know how you judge their behaviour, but it does help to be aware that it can produce a strong reaction. Use phrases like "I think...", "My interpretation of that is...", "In my head, that means..." to acknowledge that they might see it differently.

Where to go from there

If you have spent a long time preparing what you want to say, it is easy to forget that collaboration also involves drawing out the other person's perspective, which is harder to plan for! Broadly speaking, the aim is to come to an understanding of each other's needs and perspectives on the situation as it stands, and work from there to find new ways forward. This can be easier if you accept from the outset that the other person will have a different memory and interpretation of whatever has happened in the past. For example, a protracted back and forth about whether someone really said the words that you found so hurtful, may undermine goodwill and not take you forward. If you can tell someone "What I *remember* you saying is... and what I *believe* you meant by it was..." they might be able to accept your feelings, even if they still insist that what they intended to say was something different.

If you have led the way with honesty and feel like they are covering up what they really think and feel, or are refusing to accept your thoughts and feelings, you may well feel angry with them. However, be aware that defensiveness is often a stage that people pass through. You can tell them you don't think they are really listening to you, and ask them to meet you again when they have had a bit of time to think. These kinds of delays may be frustrating, but they can be a better option than wrangling over details. You've had time to consider things, they probably need it too! Also watch out for someone who goes to the opposite extreme and seems to agree with and accept everything you have said about their behaviour. They

may have decided that being accommodating to your version of events is the easiest way to avoid having to really talk about it. Or they too may need to process what you have said in order to 'discover' their own point of view before attempting a constructive dialogue about what to do next. However careful you were to express your feelings without blame, they may still believe that it is there, and blame themselves too.

Get yourself ready to listen, even if you don't like what you hear. Be aware that if you have spent your time rehearsing 'I statements' what you get back from other people may come in less carefully chosen words. For example, if they say "You make me feel inadequate", remember that this is a very common turn of phrase, and it doesn't necessarily indicate that they think the feeling is your fault. Rather than becoming defensive yourself, or insisting they express themselves in the way you consider to be correct before you will listen, try to pick out the information that will help you move forwards – their feelings, and the behaviours of yours that trigger it.

Try to show an interest in their perspective without losing sight of your own. For example, maybe you work with someone who consistently arrives late in the mornings. You can show understanding for why they find it hard to get their kids ready and arrive in work at the agreed time, but still insist that you want their help with the early morning jobs. Or perhaps someone tells you that they find you cold and distant. It is fine to tell them that you haven't been very outgoing recently because you are suffering from depression. However, it helps if you can also accept that they perceive you in a particular way, regardless of whether you think this perception is 'fair.'

Remember as well that in order to get everything you really need, you may well have to give up some of the things you want. If the issue is arriving late to work, then perhaps your colleague really can't come in on time. In this case you need to think about whether you really need everyone there first thing in the morning, in which case the only solution might be to find

someone else to join your worker's co-op. Alternatively, maybe what you need is to feel the work is distributed fairly, and if they take on all the jobs at the end of the day so you can leave early it might be OK. Be aware also, that none of these options are likely to feel as comfortable to them as carrying on as things are, so don't be surprised if they are reluctant to acknowledge the problem at first. Stick at it – if you cannot carry on working there as things are then they have a responsibility to help find another way round the problem.

Whatever solutions you come to, it can help take the pressure off if you think you are just trying them out. You might not be convinced by the idea of your colleague taking on end of the day jobs instead, but you could still try it out for a limited time period, with a commitment to review how it is going after a fixed time. It can make it easier to let go of things you want if you know you both have the option of revisiting the decision, and if you are deeply unhappy you can say so at any point.

The final option is to decide whether the incompatibility is so fundamental that you cannot go on sharing whatever it is you share, or whether it is better to reach a compromise, however unsatisfactory, than to split. If you are part of a campaign group that has long running disagreements about who they should be targeting, there maybe a very limited range of actions you can do together, and you might get more done as two groups. By contrast, a residents' association in a block of flats might be able to divide into different working groups so that certain people didn't have to spend too much time together, but they might undermine each other if they split entirely and started putting opposing demands to the landlord, or one group started laying tarmac where the other was planning to dig flower beds. Even in situations where you opt for a split, the attempt to collaborate for a good solution can help everyone feel they have had a fair deal in the division, and enable you to work together on specific things in future.

Power dynamics

Sadly, we can't get from today's unjust society to one where everyone is equal simply by saying that is where we want to be. The reality is that in any group, even one which uses consensus and is committed to non-hierarchy, some people will be feeling more empowered and comfortable than others. Who this is might vary from situation to situation, but particularly when it is the same people a lot of the time, these characters can end up dominating the group. The reason for this might be that they've been heavily involved for a long time, or that they have grown up with privileges that mean they are more used to the idea that their needs are valid and their ways of doing things are OK.

The problem here is *not* the fact that they feel empowered and comfortable. If everyone felt their needs were valid and their way of doing things was OK, and the power to do things in the group was shared between everybody it would be great. The difficulty arises when there are big imbalances between members of the group, or some people use their power against others. For example, someone who is very involved might see themselves as indispensable, and insist that meeting times are always fitted around their personal timetable, even if that means that there are other people who can never make it. Or it might simply always be the same people who express their views and feelings when an issue is discussed, meaning that ultimately the decisions always go their way. If this is the case then a group is not really using consensus, because it will not be finding solutions which work for the people who are less able to express their views.

Step one: What are our feelings about power dynamics?

Realising our group is not as non-hierarchical as it claims to be can be dispiriting, and can stir up feelings of guilt, shame and anger. This can particularly be the case when the root of the problem is in social inequalities that impact on the whole of people's lives – not just their interactions in this particular group. People can respond to guilt, shame and anger in a number of ways. These feelings can provide the impetus for change. Alternatively, people can be paralysed by these feelings to the extent that they don't feel able to look honestly at their behaviour and work out how to change it so they take more, or less, power in a situation.

An approach that some people find helpful to avoid paralysis is to recognise that these feelings are valid, but also to recognise that the behaviours that triggered those feelings are part of a system of oppression and exploitation that has a much longer history than their particular group and the individuals within it. This approach acknowledges that we all have responsibility to learn to behave in ways that are more equal (and therefore it's understandable to feel angry or guilty if we, or someone else, is not doing that). At the same time, it accepts that this learning process takes time for everyone, and if we haven't got to where we want to be yet, it doesn't make us 'bad' people.

For example, imagine someone in your group makes a casually snobby comment. They may be a product of the class system, and they are certainly perpetuating it, but they didn't technically create the whole structure of social and economic exploitation. On the other hand, it is understandable if sometimes they get the full brunt of your rage as if they did. After all, consensus decision making is all about human equality, and it can be very disappointing when people don't live out the politics they believe in. Plus, it is very common to internalise oppression – to believe, emotionally, if not rationally, that there is something wrong with you if you haven't got a fair deal in life. Discovering anger at the outside world can be an important stage in undoing that internalised oppression, and it is not surprising if that anger is sometimes directed disproportionately at the people

around you. However, remember that the behaviour that triggered your anger, resentment or shame may well come from the other person's insecurity, or at least their lack of awareness, and is unlikely to be about them being deliberately malicious. For example, maybe you feel intimidated by someone who takes up a lot of space talking in large meetings, but perhaps they do it to make up for their own feelings of inadequacy in more informal social situations.

Similarly, if someone directs that kind of anger at you, or even gently challenges you on something you have said or done, remembering the wider perspective can help you put guilt and defensiveness to one side. If you are a white person and someone calls you racist, for example, a common response might be to feel like a terrible person and shut down, or to deny it altogether. A healthier way of dealing with it might be to use what was said to become more aware of the privileges you have benefited from, or how your behaviour impacts on other people. You can do this even if you don't immediately agree with their interpretation of the situation. For example, maybe you and your group have travelled to another city for a demonstration and you get lost at night in a neighbourhood that your guidebook describes as 'rough'. Afterwards, someone points out that you chose the only white person in the street to ask directions from. You may think that the reason that you felt safer approaching this person was that they were also the only one you identified as a woman, and believe that this was a more acceptable reason to trust them than the colour of their skin. However, it shows more respect to the person who challenged you, and greater honesty with yourself, if you also seriously consider their suggestion that, at a sub-conscious level, race may also have played a part in your decision.

Along with anger and guilt, another common dynamic is for people to develop a competitive attitude around different forms of privilege. A classic example would be a middle class woman and a working class man debating whether patriarchy or the class system is 'the real problem', as if there wasn't enough oppression to go round, and acknowledging someone else's might cancel out their own share. If you find you are feeling resentful when someone complains they have been abused, exploited or overlooked, it is worth stepping back and thinking about where that feeling comes from. Maybe you have things of your own to complain about, and feel these could be given

more attention. Sometimes you might want to do this by bringing your own experiences into the conversation, at other times you can simply acknowledge them to yourself. Either way, this can be done alongside a recognition that other people may have experienced a similar dynamic for different reasons, and there may be situations where you have unfair advantages, as well as others where you are disadvantaged.

One final feeling to consider is hope. It is easy to lose motivation if progress is slower than you expected. Challenging these patterns can be more difficult than organising an event or an action or setting up a new project. It means going against years of our own socialisation in a divided and competitive society. It means changing our feelings and beliefs about ourselves and other people. And however much honesty and understanding you achieve, you will still face defensiveness from other people, and recognise it occasionally in yourself. Whatever you do to learn to live and work as equals, there will still be times when you don't take the power that is due to you, or you exert power over others. Don't give up, sorting out your power dynamics is an important part of making consensus decisions real, and whatever steps you take to a more equal and balanced dynamic deserve pride and recognition.

Step two: Diagnosis – what is actually going on in your group?

We often have a strong sense for what the power dynamics in a group are, but it can help to also work out what is going on in a more objective way. For example, you might particularly notice the dominant behaviour of someone you find socially irritating, and overlook it in someone you are friends with. Looking at how important decisions are made in your group may help you assess how balanced your power dynamics are. These decisions may be taken on a day to day basis, but they shape the direction of your group over time. Examples of these decisions are: What things should you prioritise doing? How should you use your resources?

Questions to ask yourselves

How are decisions made? Do they go to meetings or are there key people in your group who decide what needs doing and then just get on with it? If someone has a question about whether to do something, are there particular people who they are more likely to ask, and then take their opinion as permission? Or do you make enough clear policy decisions and share enough information in meetings that everyone is equally able to make judgement calls for themselves, or work out whether they need to check in with everyone? For example, in a workers' co-op, one person might agree to work that came in without checking what anyone else thought, while others put it to a meeting. Neither of these options is intrinsically better – whether it is useful to check with the whole co-op first will depend on the circumstances – the key question is whether everyone is doing the same.

If these decisions are made in meetings, **who participates?** Is everyone equally involved? Or are there some people who don't go, or don't get involved in the discussion as much? When people speak, are they all equally likely to be listened to (which isn't the same as agreed with)? And when people talk, what are they talking about? There is a world of difference between opening your mouth to say "Does anyone want a cup of tea?" or even "I think the text on the leaflet should be bigger" and having the openness and trust to assert more 'difficult' needs, like "I think that action is too risky" or "I really don't want that person to join our band."

And **how are decisions implemented?** Are there some people who do what they want and ignore or forget what was agreed? When people take on tasks, are there some who don't get any guidance at all from the group, while for others every detail is micro-managed?

Exactly how people participate in a group will vary over time. People will take on different roles depending on personal things like day to day fluctuations in their mental and physical health as well as the context, like what topic is being discussed, or what tasks are taken on. Sometimes a power dynamic will right itself quickly. For example, someone who is quite confident might be briefly intimidated by someone else's expertise, and then realise their own contributions are equally valid, even if they can't express them in the same technical terms. The key, therefore, is to look for repeat patterns across several meetings, so you can identify where the more entrenched problems lie.

Step three: Where do your power imbalances come from?

Identifying what patterns there are in your group is important, but to change them, it helps to think about where they came from. The answer to this will rarely be simple. For example, Fred might not speak very often in meetings, and an immediate reason for this might be that the group isn't sharing enough information early on in the discussion for him to understand the issues that are being talked about. However, there might be a longer term problem: if Fred had more confidence and self-trust he might ask about the things he didn't understand instead of sitting in silence. And if the rest of the group valued him more highly, they might notice he wasn't talking, and fill him in on the details he was missing. In this example, people could make the situation a little better by spending more time introducing the issue, as suggested in the consensus process outlined in Chapter 1: *Making decisions by consensus*. However, if there is an underlying power dynamic in which Fred is consistently undervalued both by himself and the rest of the group, sharing information in a meeting is unlikely to go far enough to change things.

Who's most involved?

In this example, it may be that Fred's silence is linked to the fact that most of the talking in the meetings is done by a small group of people who are heavily involved. These people may have got into

this position of power through commitment to the project, rather than a desire to dominate. They may talk more because they have a greater overview of what needs doing, care more what decisions are made and are better informed about the options. Other people may defer to them because they always know where things are kept, how things work and what happened last time an idea was tried out. In this case, steps need to be taken to make it easier for people to get involved in the things the group does, not just to make it easier for them to talk in meetings. A key thing to remember is that we are looking for ways to share power, not simply to take it away from the people who have it. The answer is not to resent and ignore the people who have more experience, but for people who are new to build up their involvement, so they gain the knowledge and understanding to take shared responsibility for making good decisions.

Who does what?

Are there some people who always take on tasks that society considers high status, and other people are very involved, but always do jobs that are considered 'menial'? It can often be the case that the people who do more respected jobs are also treated like more important people. For example, if one person always makes the leaflets and someone else 'only' delivers them they may not participate as equals in meetings. In some direct action groups, it is common for people who take part in actions to get seen as somehow more important than the people who drive them there, or cook food before they set off, or go along to court to cheer them on. There can be a similar dynamic around jobs that are traditionally gendered. For example, if you live on a protest site, cooking, constructing defences against eviction, chopping wood and washing up are all equally necessary jobs, and all require learnt skills. However, it is not unusual to find that there is a gender divide in who does those jobs, and for the people with the skills that are considered masculine also to be accorded a higher status.

Who feels at home?

Another dynamic is around what 'kind' of people feel at home in the group. Consensus provides a radically alternative way to make decisions, compared to direct voting, representative democracy or straightforward hierarchy. People who choose to join consensus groups are often 'alternative' in other ways too: they may be anarchists, feminists and environmentalists; they might work in co-ops, or devote their spare time to campaigning against something they see as unfair. They often go through life feeling like they are in some way different from mainstream society. It is common for those people to forget that in the 'alternative' groups in which they get the rare pleasure of feeling 'normal', there is usually someone else who is feeling like a misfit and an outsider. They may feel isolated partly because of a lack of self-confidence, rather than because the people who are on the 'inside' of the group actively exclude them. For example, if Fred generally isn't very comfortable in himself, he may dislike being in a group where everyone dresses differently to him, even if he is welcomed with open minds and arms. However, it is common for people who feel at home in a group to do and say things which contribute to others feeling marginalised. For example, maybe the group are slower to trust Fred with secret details about planned actions than someone else who looked more similar to them.

Social privileges

It is not just 'alternative' people who get to feel at home in consensus groups. In fact, the internal power dynamics of consensus groups are often much closer to those of wider society than people like to admit. Sometimes this is explicit, like people making sexist jokes or assuming a disabled person is helpless and needs everything doing for them. Sometimes, it is harder to spot the connections between your group dynamics and wider social ones. For example it may always be the same people taking on organisational roles. You might assume that this is because they have more time to be involved, but it is worth questioning whether they all come from a similar background. For example, middle class people are often brought up with the expectation that they will do 'professional' jobs, and are more likely to be confident about their abilities in a 'managerial' role. Sometimes social privilege is more about what is *not* said or done, e.g. does your group take a month's break each year while 'everyone' goes to see family for Christmas and this is the only festival which is ever mentioned? Do people make sweeping statements about men and women, and seem to forget that there are people who don't want to or can't fit either category? Do your meetings happen up at the top of a five storey building with no lift, and no-one thinks about people who can't climb stairs because they're never there to point out their exclusion? Do posters for the group's events get put up in the wholefood shop, the arthouse cinema and the university but not the laundrettes, the chippy and the bingo hall? The assumptions, about who 'we' are, behind these examples can have an impact that is greater than the sum of their parts. If your life experiences or culture are never acknowledged, then it is likely to undermine your sense of belonging to the group and your ability to find the trust and openness needed for consensus. And, of course, if you are never able to be there at all, because the publicity is never aimed at you, or because the group chooses an inaccessible venue, then you will be even further from being 'at home' in a group.

Recognising the role of privilege and oppression in how people behave is not so simple as assuming that dominant people are privileged and quieter ones are oppressed. For example, some people might respond to their own oppression with a strong need for achievement to prove themselves. This may come out as a desire to

plan everything thoroughly, and do everything well. If other people have the same desire, there may be resulting tussles over what 'well' means, but the power dynamics can still be fairly equal. On the other hand, people with a more relaxed attitude may experience this behaviour as controlling. Or there may be some people in the group whose frustrations are often expressed as anger. If other group members find this intimidating, then the angry people may always get their way. On the other hand, they may find their views are disregarded because their anger is not seen as socially acceptable. In other words, oppression shows itself in complicated ways, and the assumptions we make about how other people have 'had it easy' are often inaccurate.

Step four: Work out some ways to change your power dynamics

We have assembled a few tips and thoughts below about things you can do to balance out the power dynamics in your group. It is by no means a comprehensive list. Hopefully, these ideas will spark off more of your own – try them out, refine them and share them – equalising power dynamics is work in progress for all of us. Some of these ideas are concrete suggestions – for example a series of questions to ask about a venue to consider different aspects of accessibility. Others are more about the approach that you take and can be applied in a number of situations, like encouraging your group to take shared responsibility for tackling poor dynamics.

Shared responsibility

Because some people react defensively when you point out their role in power imbalances it can be tempting to try to deal with them on your own. For example, you might realise you are doing a lot of the talking and decide to hold back. If the gap you leave is filled by other people who were already speaking a lot you may end up feeling self-righteous and resentful without having changed anything. Being more open might make it easier for the group to share responsibility for the change. For example, you could say: "I've noticed we're all doing very different amounts of speaking. Personally, I've decided to

try and hold back a bit, but I wonder if anyone else feels it is a problem and would like to suggest anything else we could do differently." Or, if it's someone else's position of power you want to challenge: "I've noticed that Sam has the greatest overview of the finances, and I've caught myself asking her what we can afford instead of bringing my questions to a meeting. That doesn't feel like a very fair on Sam or the rest of you, because she's going to end up making decisions about what's worth spending money on. Can we have a finances skillshare so we're not giving all that power and responsibility to Sam?"

Offering each other support makes a massive difference when challenging power dynamics. It is a common scenario for strong characters to keep each other in check, while everyone else keeps their head down and avoids getting mixed up in conflict. For example, perhaps someone is insisting on their favourite plan, even though it clearly won't work for other people. If another person challenges them, it is easy to keep quiet yourself. However, this puts pressure on people who are already dominant to stay in that role in order to balance out other dominant people. There is a much better chance of really changing the situation if a range of people in the group take responsibility for challenging abuses of power. The conflict section above has ideas on how to raise these issues.

Take it a step at a time

Another general principle is that deeply ingrained power dynamics are unlikely to change overnight, and achieving change may take patience. Sudden breakthroughs may be followed by unexpected setbacks, but this isn't a reason to give up. It is easy to have a moment of self-realisation, ("Aagh! I keep my mouth shut til I've heard what Rakesh has to say, and then I go along with that,") and then find that you are doing exactly the same next meeting – the only difference being that you notice afterwards and get cross with yourself. Follow up your moments of insight with small achievable changes in behaviour ("Next time I catch myself doing it, I'll stop and think hard about whether I really believe in what I've just said and if I don't, I'll say I've changed my mind.") Similarly, the dynamics of the whole group aren't going to shift instantly just because you have named them. Try to recognise steps forward for what they are, and keep pushing for more.

Is your group accessible to as many people as possible?

The first and most basic step to challenging power dynamics in a group is to make sure that everyone who wants to be part of it can come to your meetings and events. This doesn't mean that an anti-fascist group needs to welcome members of a racist political party. Nor does it mean that it is always wrong to get together with a few friends and get on with doing something without including anyone else. However, if you do want an open group, then make sure you don't exclude people who would otherwise agree with your aims.

It's up to people already in a group to be pro-active about this, because the people who are left out may never provide feedback. We've already provided the example of the group that meets up five flights of stairs – someone who can't get there at all may not put lots of effort into pointing out how exclusive this is – it's up to people in the group to work it out. Similarly, if you do all your publicity on social media sites them someone who uses email (or the postal service!) is unlikely to ask you to do it in any other way because they won't know you exist. The following tips will make it easier for people to find out about, and get to your meetings.

Publicity

The first question is who knows the event is happening. Think about where your publicity goes. Try talking to people who are involved in groups with very different memberships about what they find the most effective ways of publicising an event. This might be as simple as finding out where there are noticeboards in parts of town you don't usually go to. Alternatively, it may involve things like getting your leaflets translated, or printing some in larger text.

The second question is about who can get there. There isn't always a perfect venue, (although there are tips below on finding the best you can). Gather accurate information about the venue and the event and list all access features clearly in all your publicity, e.g.:

    2 parking spaces for blue badge holders;

    level entrance to the building from the car park;

    stepped entrance with a handrail on the left;

    hearing induction loop in the meeting room;

    vegetarian, vegan, halal and kosher food available;

    baby-changing facilities and crèche available.

Giving this level of detail will not only help someone decide whether to come. It also helps them trust that access has been thought about in advance, so they are more likely to get in touch with questions or feedback.

Choosing a venue to hire

Sometimes the only venue you can afford is someone's front room, and even when you are paying, the choices can be limited. The following list of questions will help you pick and make the best of what is available. Ask and listen to feedback about how accessible your event is so you can extend this list for next time.

To find out about venues with disabled access, you could contact your local disability rights organisation – look in the Yellow Pages or Phone Book (under "Disabled – Information and Services") or ask your local council or Citizen's Advice Bureau for contact information.

Visit the venue before booking it to check accessibility. Here are some things to check:

What are the public transport links? Are any of these accessible, if so in what ways?

Is there a car park or any area near the front door for cars? If so, are there marked blue badge spaces? If not, consider reserving the parking spaces for badge holders.

Is the 'accessible entrance' kept locked? If so, this is sending a clear message to wheelchair users and people with mobility impairments that they are not wanted. Insist that the locked entrance is kept unlocked for the duration of your time in the building. Make sure that the path up to the accessible entrance is not blocked by wheelie bins, rubbish bags, advertising boards etc.

Is the adapted toilet kept locked? If so, make sure that it is unlocked while you are in the building. Non-disabled adults do not have to ask for permission to use the toilet, so why should disabled people? Is the adapted toilet clean and free of clutter?

Is there a loop system in your meeting room for hearing aid users? If so, is it working? Does anyone know how to switch it on or alter the volume? If so, will that person be there when you hold your event in the building?

Are there clear signposts from the entrance to the room?

Are there any visual flashing fire alarms in the toilets to alert deaf and hearing impaired people of fire? If not, consider what you will need to do in an emergency.

Is the baby changing area accessible to disabled people?

Is the venue child-friendly? Are there obvious hazards, such as unlocked doors that open onto busy roads, or stairs with no stair gates.

Does the venue have a private room that can be used as prayer spaces? Remember some faiths require followers to pray at regular intervals. Does your event timetable allow for this?

Finally, if anyone complains about access to your venue, listen carefully and make a note of the difficulties so that you can either sort out the problem or add the information to future publicity.

Creating a group where more people can feel at home

Making sure that people can get to your meetings is just the starting point. Creating a culture in which a diverse range of people feels relaxed and able to take ownership and initiative requires time and work. Unfortunately, there is no simple checklist to follow here, although there are a few things you can do at events that avoid excluding people in really obvious ways. For example, you can adapt handouts for visually impaired people, book sign language interpreters and translators, and make sure any food you provide caters for all diets.

To deal with more subtle forms of exclusion, there is a strong case for building up your self-awareness, pausing to reflect on how the little things you say and do give messages about who 'we' are. This applies to everyone – even if you feel on the outside of the group or mainstream society a lot of the time, there will be some ways in which you leave other people out. However, it is particularly important if you are someone who takes up a lot of 'space' – the more you do and say, the greater your influence on group culture. You could try giving yourself a few moments for reflection shortly after a meeting, to replay things that were said and done, and how they might look through someone else's eyes.

Imagining another person's perspective, especially the things they never mention, is never going to give you as accurate information as if they told you about it themselves. Progress is more likely to happen when people start pointing out when they are sidelined or exploited, and bringing perspectives forward that aren't usually heard in the group. Before this happens organically, a lot of people may have left, and others may be exploding with suppressed anger. Whatever position you have in a group, there are a number of things you could try to speed the process. For example, you might have an individual chat with someone about the behaviour you observe and how you feel about it (see the conflict section above for more on this). Alternatively, you might point it out straight away when someone makes assumptions you find even a tiny bit exclusive: ("Some of us have to go to work or drop kids at school – we can't all stay up til late tonight and pay it off with a lie-in in the morning.")

If the group makes it easy for people to give each other feedback and say how they feel, then people are much more likely to voice any concerns early on. The ideas in the above conflict section about creating a supportive culture can help here. For example, you might have a regular slot in your meetings for everyone to say how they feel about the group dynamics. It is important that when someone challenges something that they are respected by the group. Even if you think they are over-reacting, listen carefully and encourage them to explain why they see it in the way they do.

There can be a danger that people who are often in a position of power in a group can want their group to be more diverse simply because they know that this is 'good'. For example, there might be a group opposing cuts to public services, where everyone is able-bodied. If disability benefits is a major issue the group is campaigning on, members might have strong desire to involve some of the people who currently receive those benefits. If this desire leads them to think carefully about the choice of venues and how publicity is made and displayed to ensure maximum accessibility, there are few people who would object. However, if you are a wheelchair user and people are trying to *persuade* you to join their group, or even if you receive an exaggerated welcome at first meeting you turn up to, then you may believe that your visible disability has led them to pick you as a mascot, and feel even less like you can be at home in the group. Each person has the right to decide for themselves whether a group will meet their needs, and the group should respect that.

Sharing out tasks and skills

We identified above that an unequal distribution of tasks was a barrier to people getting involved as equals in decision making. This can be the case when some people do a lot more work than others, and also when the tasks that some people do are accorded more status that others. There are a number of possible responses to this situation. For example:

Leaving the distribution of tasks as it is, but trying to change the status that is given to them, for example by thanking the person who took the minutes at a meeting in the same way as the facilitator, or pulling people up when they say things like "Well, I sort of went to the action camp, but I just did the washing up". Be

aware in this case that ideas about status can be deeply ingrained, and someone might feel more patronised than encouraged!

Swapping roles on a regular basis, for example, using a rota system, or setting a rule that someone can only do a particular job once a month.

Run skillshares, buddy up on tasks and share key information so that people are supported to take on new roles. When sharing skills informally like this, it would be unusual to plan exactly how to go about it in the way we might if we were running a workshop, but it can help to put some thought into what will help people actually learn. See the short guide on facilitating workshops in the Appendix for some tips.

Aim for a balance of the type of tasks each person takes on. For example someone who does lots of facilitation at a gathering could do a little less, and take on cleaning the toilets as well!

A consideration when shifting roles around is whether people have, more or less, enough skills to simply take something on, or whether they need support to learn. In the protest site example we used earlier, it is probably not the end of the world if the food is less good and the log pile grows more slowly for a little while. On the other hand, if everyone gets food poisoning, and someone chops off their foot with an axe, it could be a little more problematic!

However much skillsharing you do the aim is not necessarily to get to a place where everyone spends exactly the same amount of time on each task. It would be a waste if someone was never able to use their talent and passion in a group because they were always making space for other people, or desperately struggling with other tasks

that they were never going to enjoy. We can assume that with enough support to pick up the skills, most people will be able to do an acceptable job at most things. However, you are unlikely to get to the point where everyone is equally able to do any task and if you did you might never do anything else! A simple yardstick to aim for in an established group might be that there is no task that only one person knows how to do, and everyone does some tasks that are considered skilled. Remember that the aim is to take some steps towards evening out your power dynamics, while still achieving whatever it was that your group was set up for, and the distribution of tasks is only one factor in that.

Changing social relationships

Tackling power dynamics can involve changing people's beliefs about themselves and each other. A beautiful presentation of the accounts won't help if people are sat there thinking "What's this got to do with me?" or "Deirdre will decide what we can afford, so why should I get my head round it?". Deep-rooted beliefs may take more time and work to change than this chapter is able to offer tips on, but shifting the ways you relate to each other can help. In meetings, simple things like having a slot for people to talk about feelings, or things that are going on in their lives can help some people. (It can also be very challenging for others, so you might want to limit the time you devote to it, and make it optional!)

Another simple strategy is to spend social time together doing something the group doesn't usually do. Meetings are a very specific way of interacting that work better for some people, and for some sides of people's personalities than for others. If we also socialise together, we can develop greater trust and understanding through knowing each other in different ways. This isn't always straightforward. If you go to the pub and talk about the usual group topics, you may find it doesn't help as much as you hoped. People who don't like sitting in a circle and talking in meetings might not find it a lot easier to join in when the same people are doing the same thing in the pub. The social time only helps if people feel like they can be themselves, and it may make things worse if they don't. For example, if you feel an unease because the group assumption is that everyone is heterosexual and you are not, then if the rest of the

group relaxes in the pub and start gossiping about who fancies who it *might* help you bring some things into the open, or you might keep your mouth shut and feel even more estranged. Not to mention that basing your social time on alcohol isn't great for non-drinkers or people who can't afford it. It is best therefore if going to the pub after a meeting is not the default or only option, but one of an array of different contexts in which your relationships are built.

Games let out tensions in different ways, or doing practical activities together, like cooking or walking. If these activities involve an 'expert' to show everyone else what to do then the ideal is for that to be one of the people who is less established in the group. Sometimes it can be easier for people to learn openness and trust through building one on one relationships within a group. Be aware of any-one who is not being included in these activities – an individual's isolation could be increased as informal small group bonding happens between others.

Talking about issues directly

If there is an imbalance in your group, it can help to name it and talk about it directly. For example, maybe some people are putting a lot more time into the group than others. A group where no-one is paid is unlikely to have a way for them to get formal recognition for this. The possibility for guilt and resentment in this situation might be diffused by an explicit conversation about how people feel about it. This might lead into a discussion about how to share tasks more effectively, either immediately, or over the longer term as people's available time fluctuates. On the other hand, it may be that people simply have to accept the imbalance, but are able to do so more easily for having acknowledged it openly.

Whether the power dynamic you see is to do with something specific to your group – like some individuals working harder than others – or whether it is part of a wider social pattern – like people with mental health problems being stigmatised – naming the issue can bring up strong feelings. Mentioning things little and often can help. However, if something has built up to a point where some people feel anxiety about discussing it, then asking for an outside facilitator could be a good idea. If this option isn't available and you ask

someone in the group to facilitate, then make sure that everyone trusts them, and that they have time to prepare.

What about when people leave?

You may find that people who don't feel valued in a group don't stick around long enough to let everyone else know how they feel. If you are in the core of a group and notice people leaving, the first thing to remember is that they have every right to do this! You might want more people for your campaign, or it might help you feel good about your group if it manages to be more inclusive, but this isn't their responsibility. However, if you want honest feedback, you could approach the person who has left on an individual basis. Make it clear you're not trying to win them back, but let them know you would welcome them if they did. Check what bits of feedback they are happy for you to pass on to the rest of the group and which they would prefer you didn't. You could ask them how easy it was to speak in meetings and take on tasks. Remember it's not all about you – they may simply have left because it wasn't the right group for them or they realised they didn't have the time or energy. Don't push them beyond what they are comfortable saying – their feedback is a favour to you, and not something they have to do. Prepare yourself not to be defensive if what you hear reflects badly on you or your group, and thank them for helping you out.

Other common issues

External pressures

Consensus works at its best when we can be creative and work together to find new solutions that really work for everyone. However, even if our group dynamics are great, our options can still be limited by external pressures. The political and financial system we live in places a lot of constraints on us that we can't always ignore. If you are a housing co-op looking for somewhere to live, for example, the limited range of buildings you can afford might make it much harder to find something which suits everyone. Even if it was theoretically possible to find a synthesis of different people's ideas by extending and adapting one of the less than ideal buildings, you would still be constrained by planning law, not to mention the limited time left to work on the house once everyone had gone out to work to keep paying off the mortgage and the bills.

If you are in a situation where you are choosing between two bad options, the best thing you can do is be honest about it. Don't tear your group apart battling over which is least terrible. Accept that the problem comes from outside yourselves, and see what you can do to work towards a situation where you have some real control in future. For example, maybe you are a vegetable growing group that has sat on the waiting list for an allotment for several years, and has finally been offered the choice of waiting even longer or taking a small, shady space full of rubble and litter. In the short term you might accept you have to make the best of one of these two options, even if neither are great. However, it helps to recognise that your options would not be so limited in the first place if land was more fairly distributed, and this is the issue which needs to be addressed in the longer term. You might not be able to achieve this on your own, but

you could do things in whatever way suited your group to work towards it. This could involve pressurising your local council to provide more allotment spaces, or finding some unused ground that 'belonged' to someone else and planting out your seedlings there.

Chapter 9: *Consensus in wider society* presents some ideas about how society might be differently structured to give us even more real control over the decisions that affect our lives. This wouldn't remove external pressures altogether – our options will always be constrained by what resources are available. When there simply isn't enough to go round any means of making decisions will have its limitations. However, this shouldn't be taken as an excuse to close down the options too quickly! There is usually a fairer way of sharing out what we have, or a creative way of getting more, or the possibility of re-assessing what we really need so that one of the 'bad' options can be made to work – and consensus can help us find our way through all this.

Open groups with changing membership

In a group where there is clear membership, and each person has defined responsibilities, like a co-op or a closed affinity group, then problems can be easier to identify, and there may be more widespread commitment to addressing them. By contrast, in groups that have open membership people often simply disappear if there is an unaddressed conflict, or if they feel there is an inner circle they are excluded from. In other cases someone with limited commitment to a group may push their own views with less concern about what is right for everyone else. The sections above on power dynamics, and creating a supportive culture for a collaborative approach to conflict, provide some ideas about how to create a welcoming group that people don't feel the need to melt away from. This section focuses more on ways the core aims and values of the group can be protected.

What's the problem?

Someone might have their own agenda when they join a group, for example getting involved in a network with a general focus on ecology hoping to get people on board with a more specific campaign – say, against nuclear power. They may have very valid reasons to hold the views that they do, but if these views aren't balanced with a real care for what other people want as well as respect for the core aims of the group then reaching true consensus may become difficult. Or it may simply be that another person has a different understanding of what the group is about. For example, supposing you are an anarchist group that doesn't want to put people off by being too explicit, and simply publicises itself as being into 'empowerment'. This is open to all kinds of interpretation, and may mean that a more diverse range of people come along, but there may not be enough common ground in what they want to do for the group to be useful to anyone. Or perhaps you set up a campaign group that was committed to preventing a new shopping centre from being built in your town. Someone else joins, who is quite positive about the shopping centre, but wants to make sure that it is built in a way that doesn't destroy any of the old buildings on the existing site. You might be able to work with this person on specific issues, but if they joined your group and had a significant influence on the direction it took, you might find that soon there was no group left that was actually opposed to the shopping centre. Therefore, as well as supporting new people to become included, you may want to find ways to protect the group's core aims and activities so that it is not prevented from doing and being what it was set up for.

Protecting the group

As always, there is a question of striking the right balance between protecting the group and its aims, yet being open to new ideas and people. There is limited benefit to a group that is so dominated by what the founding members wanted that it can't adapt to changes in circumstances, or new people can never have an influence on what it does. However, there are a few simple strategies that can make sure everyone has a grasp of what the original vision was, and changes come about through conscious decisions rather than drifting along or misunderstandings.

Learning from closed groups

More formal groups often have systems in place to keep the group true to its original intentions. It is common for a co-op to have a structured joining process for people who are new to work out if the group is right for them and vice versa. During this period, there may be limitations on the influence the newcomer can have on the group and its direction. For example, probationary members might only be able to contribute to short term decisions which will definitely affect them, but not to a longer term strategy. Or they might be allowed to give their opinion, but not to block a decision from going ahead until their probationary period was over. A more open group, the membership of which is made up of people who happened to turn up at any particular meeting, would find it hard to put structures like this in place. It would be possible to have rules saying something like people had to attend at least two meetings before they could have certain rights in the group – like using the block or joining the email list. However, this might be more off-putting than it was useful! Other possibilities are setting rules which limit the use of the block for everybody – saying that it can only be used to protect the core aims of the group, and not for individual reasons, for example.

Clear communication with newcomers

Any group can use some simple ways of protecting itself and its activities. The suggestions below are less about introducing rules and procedures, and more about how you communicate about the group and what it stands for.

A Consensus Handbook

Be clear what the core goals and shared principles of the group are. Explain these in any publicity and tell new people when they come, along with anything else they need to know about how the group works. Don't overdo it – lots of people don't like being bombarded with information when they first arrive somewhere. On the other hand it is not particularly empowering to be left trying to work out what is going on, or to only find out what the group's views are when you say something different and an awkward silence falls. Pace the information you give, and balance it with an interest in the new people and who they are. If someone suggests something which goes against the group's beliefs and aims, it is usually better to say so openly than go silent and leave them guessing what they've done wrong.

It is particularly important to **make sure everyone understands how you make decisions**. Don't just explain the process (or worse, just the hand-signals!) that you use when making a consensus decision – be clear about the principles behind it. You might need to give this explanation at the beginning of the meeting and repeat it at the decision making stage. Be especially careful that everyone understands how your group uses blocks, stand asides etc. This is worth doing even if someone has used consensus before. It is less likely to seem patronising if you frame it in terms of different groups having different ways of making consensus decisions, and show a genuine interest in any variations that they have met.

Record the decisions you make, and refer back to them whenever a related item comes up so that you aren't unnecessarily revisiting past decisions. For example, imagine a group has already had a long discussion about how to present their campaign in a way that made clear links with other issues. You might not be exactly the same set of people next time you come to make a leaflet or prepare a media interview, and you may well make different decisions, but it can be helpful to all look at what was decided last time and why, so you make use of the work and thought that has already gone into it. Think carefully about which decisions are open to review when someone new comes along. For example, an anti-militarist group that did direct action at army bases and weapons manufacturers might have some standard security procedures to make sure they got to do their actions before anyone came to stop them. They might simply

explain these to new people and expect them to either agree or leave, or they might decide it was worth starting from scratch when someone new joined so that everyone was fully on board with what was agreed.

What if you're the only person who wants the group to change?

A lot of the advice in this book is written for the benefit of a whole group. But, what if you are in a group where other people don't know about, or aren't interested in consensus? Another common situation is for a group to say that they use consensus, but without wanting to make any real changes in order to properly involve everyone in decision making. If you are just one person, or a small minority that has a different view, then your options for making the changes you would like to see are more limited.

Questions to ask yourself

Is consensus right for the group, or is it just something that you would like to see happen? If the group has made a conscious decision to use a different method of decision making, you could explain why you didn't agree, but you probably couldn't change what they did. In a group where people hadn't really thought about how to make decisions, it might be easier to persuade them, but this might be an abuse of your power, or at least a waste of your time. Refer back to the conditions for consensus, and think about whether you can imagine them ever being met. For example, maybe the group has been set up with a particular purpose – like setting up a community orchard or opposing a new road, and for most people this objective will always be much more important than the internal group dynamics. Therefore, even if people agree to use consensus, or say they already do, it may never get a high enough priority for them to change how they hold their meetings. Alternatively, perhaps you have a formal role in the group which gives you the 'right' to introduce something new – like being the president of the Student Union, a teacher overseeing a school council or a volunteer who runs a youth group. In this case the question is whether the people you

are introducing it to have the power to make meaningful decisions themselves – if you or someone else has the final word then it is best to be honest about this and only use consensus when everyone really does get involved as an equal, and the group does have the power to make decisions.

What are you going to do about it?

Thinking about these questions on your own might be enough for you to decide the group will never work by consensus. If consensus is a big priority for you, you might decide you want leave, or you might stick around because the other things the group does are important to you. If you stick around, you could still make some suggestions about more democratic ways of working. For example, a group could continue to use voting, but pay greater attention to including everyone in the discussion. Alternatively, it might be that there are a number of people who seem interested in using consensus, as well as others who are more sceptical, or just not interested. In this case, you might decide to look at where the group is at currently, and make a few suggestions about how to improve the dynamics. Alternatively, you might present your entire vision for how group decision making could work and why. This might inspire some people and be totally dismissed by others – use your judgement as to what would work best in your own group.

Sharing your thoughts

If the issue seems to be that people follow the rhetoric of consensus but are actually too attached to their own power to really apply it, then look back at the sections on power, privilege and conflict for thoughts on how to deal with the issue. On the other hand, if the issue is that people lack knowledge and experience of consensus, you can find ways to share yours. Make sure that anything you say is in the spirit of offering suggestions and observations, but not trying to convince them that you are right. If they don't share your values you can't force them to, you can just explain what you think. Try to explain the principles of consensus in a way that enables people to think about what they believe without being too loaded. If you say for example, "Voting allows minorities to be steamrollered into silence – anyone who truly respects other people uses consensus"

then people who have used voting all their life may not feel that this is a fair representation of their own behaviour. It might be more effective to say something more neutral like, "When a group votes anyone in a minority position is over-ruled, whereas consensus looks for options everyone can live with."

Observations on how meetings are happening may help people see different ways of doing things. To begin with it can help to express this in a way that doesn't comment directly on individuals, e.g. "I notice that people are speaking different amounts" is easier to swallow than "Juan dominates the group". (This doesn't mean you should brush it under the carpet if Juan continues to do all the talking – look at the conflict section above for ideas about how to bring it up.) Link your observations to alternative suggestions, e.g. "Maureen said she thought the community centre was the best venue and a few people nodded and now we seem to be assuming it has been agreed. I think it might be helpful to check whether everyone really is happy with this venue. That way we know we actually did have consensus, and we can write it down knowing that it was a clear decision."

Limit the number of suggestions and observations that you make in order not to create an unhealthy dynamic. If some individuals in the group are interested you might want to talk to them more about your ideas, but avoid creating a faction of people who back each other up on things they've already talked about outside the meeting. For example, if you have a private discussion with someone about the group dynamics, and you encourage them to bring it to a meeting, be honest with yourself about whether your intention is to empower them or to get someone else to voice your ideas. If they had said something you didn't agree with would you be equally encouraging?

A better strategy might be to get someone in from the outside. For example, you might think there are lots of things the group could do to improve their facilitation skills, but worry that they might not listen to these ideas coming from you. Getting someone from another group to run a workshop might help people to be open to new ideas which they can think about for themselves.

A conclusion

Many groups choose consensus because they want to work together as equals, using the full creative power of everyone involved. Some groups call their decision making process 'consensus' simply because they don't vote. However, in order to achieve the meaningful consent of everyone in a group, all those people need to be interacting as equals, and taking shared responsibility for how the decision gets made as well as what the outcome is, even when their interests appear to be in conflict. It is easy to feel disillusioned, or even betrayed, if you feel that your group is not even attempting to do this work. Most of us experience frustration when progress is slow or uneven. However, it is also possible to look at the situation the other way round: it is when we succeed in a difficult situation, that consensus can have a transformative power.

When there is real commitment to doing consensus we experience respect and understanding, not just from the people who are close to us and 'on our side', but from a wider group that may not agree with us, or even like us. Trust and openness were listed in the first chapter as conditions for consensus. However, the reverse can also be true. By experiencing good consensus processes we can learn to be trusting and open. We can learn – whatever our life experience of trying to prove ourselves, of trying to win people over, of suppressing our own needs in order to fit in – that there are many other possibilities out there. It is possible to honestly express what we want, and have it taken on board by people who want something different. It is possible to experience powerful anger, and still listen to the perspectives of the person who triggered that anger. It is possible to let go of the control we have had over a group, and share that control *with* the group instead. Experiencing these things opens the door to another way of living and to different kinds of community. There is no time like the present to start learning how.