

THE PRACTICE OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY



Direct democracy, horizontal organizing, nonhierarchical structure — these are all key aspects of our movement. Putting them into practice is an art that requires a shift in our organizational modes as well as in our thinking.

Hierarchy is the model of leadership and organization most people are familiar with and surrounded by from the moment they are born into a modern hospital through their education in a public or private school and beyond, whether their later life includes attendance at a university, a job serving burgers at McDonald's, rising to management at a large corporation, a stint in the military or attendance at the neighborhood church. Although to many of us, hierarchy has negative connotations of disempowerment and lack of freedom, the word actually describes a certain pattern that exists both in nature and in human affairs. A hierarchy is a branching pattern. Go look at a tree and see how the twigs connect to one branch, the branches to one larger limb, the limbs to the trunk.

This branching pattern is extremely widespread in nature. It's the same pattern found in the way that small rivulets combine into brooks, streams, and mighty rivers. It's the pattern of our capillaries, veins, and arteries. Nature repeats this pattern over and over again because it is so useful. A branching pattern functions for collecting, concentrating, and dispersing. It branches out to fill the widest possible space as completely as possible. Notice how a tree fills the maximum volume of space with leaves or needles that can collect sunlight from the largest possible number of surfaces. The energy from the sun is transformed into sugar and then collected and concentrated, and eventually dispersed to feed

the cells of the tree and the roots, which in their structure mirror the branches. The roots collect water and nutrients, which in turn are concentrated and then dispersed out to the branches and leaves.

A branching pattern is also a two-way flow. Streams and rivers carry nutrients (and pollutants) from the hills down to the sea. Salmon, swimming upstream, return nutrients from the ocean to even the smallest rivulets — at least they used to. Now they do only in increasingly rare intact habitats.

A branching pattern links the trunk to the furthest leaf in a clear line, but it doesn't allow the leaves to directly feed each other. Salmon cannot leap from the headwaters of one stream to the headwaters of another.

For a branching pattern to be sustainable, the flows both ways must be balanced. The energy collected by the leaves is balanced by the water and nutrients collected by the roots. The trunk, the place of concentration, is merely a conduit that serves this balance.

But in human societies, branching patterns are often used to collect wealth, resources, and labor from one group and to disperse them to another group. Barely enough is given back to insure survival. The value produced by labor is collected from the workers, the leaves of the corporate tree; then concentrated into the hands of various levels of management, and eventually dispersed to owners and shareholders.

In such a hierarchy, power and decision-making flow in opposite directions. Decisions are made by the few in the top echelons and communicated downward to those who have no voice in the decisions. Inequality and imbalance are justified by assigning a higher value to those who are the recipients of wealth and the makers of decisions. They are seen as a different class, a different order of human being, deserving of more, and both political ideology and religions reinforce this view. Even God is addressed as “Lord” or “King.”

Hierarchies run on power-over: the entitlement and ability of some groups to control others, extract their labor or resources, and impose sanctions or punishment. Power-over also reflects the degree of privilege each group holds. In our society, men have power over women, white people have power over people of color, the rich have power over the poor, those who fit the norms of society around sexual identity, attractiveness, fitness, age, etc. have

higher status than those who don't. Privilege translates directly into wealth and opportunity.

A DIFFERENT MODEL: THE WEB

When we begin to organize around the principle of direct democracy and real equality, we need to look for a different model, a different pattern. It's no accident that the global justice movement has grown along with the Internet and that the most common metaphor for online communication is that of the web. A web implies a pattern of connections that are complex and flexible in ways that a branching pattern is not. In a classic spider web, spokes radiate out from a central point, linked by a spiral of sticky thread. A web can also concentrate information: any point on the web can communicate with the center. But it can also communicate with other points on the periphery. Sitting on the deck during a break while I'm thinking about this, I suddenly realize that I'm staring at three webs, all different. The first is a classic spiral, the second is a dome, held by an intricate arrangement of tension/suspension fibers. And the third seems to have a random, zigzag architecture. All fill space, and their varied forms allow more complex modes of connections.

The World Wide Web is a familiar model of this pattern. It allows multiple forms of communication: one to one, one to a selected few, one to a whole listserve. It allows the posting of information on a website for many to access, and responses can also flow in many directions.

Actions organized in a direct democratic fashion can be patterned in many different ways. One model is for participants to form affinity groups, small groups that support each other, make decisions together, and take on some of the specific roles of the action. Affinity groups send representatives to a spokescouncil, which may be empowered to make decisions or simply functions to synthesize ideas and proposals and to send them back to affinity groups for decision-making. Affinity groups may also combine into clusters or blocs. The organizers are part of working groups which take on specific tasks: communications, media, scenario, etc. They may have their own coordinating council. Their role is to make proposals to the whole body of participants, to hear feedback, and to implement decisions, but it is the whole body that ultimately makes decisions.

The reality, of course, is usually much messier. Actions include many people who are not integrated into affinity groups. Some arrive early enough to be included into mass assemblies, where anyone can come and anyone can speak, without needing to belong to a specific group. In the early stages of an action, before affinity groups form, open meetings allow more direct participation.

Most antiauthoritarian groups work by some form of consensus. Consensus does not mean unanimity; it means that everyone's needs and concerns are listened to and taken into account. Consensus works best as a creative thinking process, when enough time is allowed for open discussion of an issue as well as for synthesis and revision of ideas to occur. At best, consensus fosters an attitude of openness, of respect for each person's position, and of flexibility. Consensus can be time-consuming and frustrating — but so can any decision-making process in which there are real differences to be resolved. Glossing over those differences or allowing one side to simply outvote the other doesn't actually resolve them, and the splits then show up when the group tries to enact its decisions. There are many resources available for learning consensus process, and a skilled facilitator can be a great help to a group.

The model above works for actions, but it may change and develop when a group needs to apply it to the work of an ongoing organization, when people's energy and commitment must be sustained and long-term accountability must be provided.

I've worked with one such group, Reclaiming, for over twenty years. Starting in 1980 as a small collective of five women, we've gone through many evolutionary stages as we've grown and expanded.

Reclaiming began as a tight-knit circle of friends who started teaching classes in earth-based spirituality and Witchcraft together. We were all in the same ritual circle, knew each other well, and saw each other frequently. As we taught each class, we recruited new student teachers for the next, and so our circle began expanding.

Originally, we were an open collective: anyone could come to meetings, get involved in the work, and participate in decisions. We shortly realized the pitfalls of this openness when we found ourselves dealing with an actively hallucinating psychotic at one meeting, or with people who had strong opinions but no interest in the work.

Also, with everyone involved with every decision, meetings were long and often tedious.

We soon shifted to a model of working groups we called “cells,” partly as an ironic reference to Communist cells and partly because the word described what the groups did, namely perform specific functions for an overall body: teaching, putting out a newsletter, planning public rituals, etc. Cells had autonomy over their own affairs. A central, closed collective was formed for coordination and to decide on larger issues.

The collective had a tight mechanism for letting in new people: someone would be proposed, and the whole group would have to reach consensus on their admission. We had no mechanism for getting people out, and that proved to be a problem. Over time, the collective grew insular. People didn’t want to let new people in and risk getting stuck with people they didn’t like. People stayed in the collective when they were no longer actually doing work, and people who were doing work weren’t in the collective. Others who might have been interested in joining were entirely mystified by our selection process and had no idea how to get in.

After about fifteen years of existence, we began a long process of restructuring. We collectively wrote a statement of our Principles of Unity. We created a new body called “The Wheel,” in which working cells had actual representatives that they chose. The old collective resigned and passed on its power.¹¹

In the meantime, however, we had expanded in other ways. For years, we’d been teaching weeklong intensives we called “Witchcamps” in various parts of the U.S. and Canada and Europe. Each camp had inspired local people to begin to teach and organize classes, rituals, and gatherings. Originally, the San Francisco teachers’ cell staffed all the camps or chose all the teachers. But as people in other locations developed their own experience and skills, they began to resent the “central control” and to ask for a voice in those decisions. We eventually created a spokescouncil structure for the whole web of Witchcamps. The Spokescouncil consists of a teacher and an organizer from each camp community. It is not empowered: major decisions must go back to the communities for consensus. It meets once a year face-to-face, and once a year online in an extended e-mail meeting.

Teaching teams are now chosen by local selection committees, with input from a smaller group called the “Guidance Council,” whose job it is to keep an overview of the whole and to assure cross-fertilization.

In setting up these structures, we’ve tried to assure maximum freedom, creativity, and autonomy while instituting minimal rules and the least amount of centralized control necessary.

We’ve found that certain informal roles are useful in our organizations, our celebrations, and our actions. In *Truth or Dare*, I called them crows, snakes, graces, dragons, and spiders.¹²

The task of the crows is to keep an overview, to keep the groups’ direction in mind, to look ahead, and see to the big picture. The task of the snakes is to keep an underview, to notice what’s not happening, who is not present, what problems are brewing.

Graces invite people in, make people welcome, expand the group. Dragons watch the boundaries, keeping track of the details and guarding against intrusions. And spiders sit in the center of the web, linking and communicating.

At times these roles are formally designated. At other times, they’re roles we can each take on. They are all aspects of empowering leadership. When they are articulated, they can be shared and rotated more clearly.

EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP

Leadership is necessary and valuable even in antiauthoritarian, “leaderless” groups. But the empowering leadership needed in such groups is very different from leadership in hierarchical groups. It’s not the authority to give orders, issue decrees, make unilateral decisions, or tell people what to do. Rather, empowering leadership is about persuasion, inspiration, and the sharing of power, information, and attention. It’s the leadership that steps out in front and says, “Hey, let’s go this way!”

Empowering leadership is not based on power-over, on the ability to control or punish others. It draws on a different sort of power that I call “power-among.” (In *Truth or Dare*, I called it “power-with.”)¹³ However, since then many people have been using that term for collective power, the power we have when we’re acting together.) Power-among could also be called “influence,” “prestige,” or “moral authority.” It’s based on respect, on people’s assessment that what I’m

saying is worth hearing, perhaps because I have more experience or skill or knowledge in a certain area. In most indigenous cultures, elders wield a great deal of power-among because of their greater experience.

Listening to those with greater experience can save a lot of trial and error. If the elder says “Don’t eat that plant, my uncle did and he died in agony,” we can save a lot of pain by following that advice.

But power-among can also lead to dependency and transmute into power-over. Too much obedience to the words of the elders can prevent experimentation. Maybe Uncle died in agony not from the plant but from something entirely unrelated, and we’re passing by a perfectly good food source. In the post-modern world, when situations and constraints change so rapidly, the experience of the past is not always a valid guide to the future. When power-among is recognized and identified, it can be assessed and challenged if need be.

For someone who is moved to take leadership in an empowering manner, power-among is a precious resource, and we do well to think of it as a limited resource. I think of it like I think of the water in my tank in summer that is filled from a spring. Theoretically, it’s endlessly renewable. In reality, it fills slowly in August, and it can all too easily be lost if I do something really stupid, like leave a hose on. Once it’s gone, it’s going to take time for it to recover. If I use too much of it, I diminish the reserves.

Influence in a group is also best used judiciously, and always with respect for others. Never take it for granted. Always listen to the opinions of others with respect. Leave room for others to learn and make mistakes. Overused, influence breeds resentment and dries up.

Empowering leadership means stepping back as much as stepping forward, not doing something you are good at so that someone else has a chance to learn. But stepping back is not empowering if you are sitting silent but are inwardly glowering and criticizing.

George Lakey, a longtime organizer and nonviolence trainer, talks about the value of silently cheering for your students as they practice an exercise.¹⁴ Silent cheering has become one of my ongoing practices as a teacher, trainer, and leader. If I step back and let someone else facilitate a meeting, I consciously cheer them on internally: “Go, Charles, go — hurray, that was a brilliant move, now, yeah, a home run!” Imagine the difference in atmosphere if I’m sitting there thinking,

“That was stupid — I would have done that better. Oh no — why did you say that? I should be up there, not him!”

Empowering leadership is not just a metaphor. It means literally supporting others energetically and emotionally, and creating an atmosphere in a group in which that energetic support and respectful attention is the norm. In such a group, people are more creative and smarter and make better decisions, and more energy is generated to do the work.

Power-among is best saved for those moments in which skill and experience are vitally necessary. But do use it when it’s needed. When the plants in the garden are about to die, water them — that’s what the water is for. When a thousand people are gathered for a meeting after the first day of blockading in Seattle and trying to decide what to do the next day while the police are outside tear gassing the street, the group needs the most experienced and skilled facilitator possible. But that person will meet less resentment in a tense situation if she or he has not previously facilitated every other meeting.

There are several types of leadership we might exercise in a directly democratic group. We might call the first one “issues leadership”: proposing actions, directions, tactics, decisions, raising issues, urging the group to take certain directions. The second we could call “process leadership”: helping the group find effective ways to make decisions, share skills, and solve problems. Meeting facilitation, training, skills sharing, meditation, and counseling might be some of the ways process leadership is exercised.

In directly democratic groups, when we exercise process leadership we generally try to remain neutral and not exercise leadership around issues. So, if we’re facilitating a meeting, we don’t argue for a particular proposal. That would concentrate too much power in one voice. If we have a strong action to propose to the group, we don’t facilitate that agenda item. If we’re embroiled in a conflict, we don’t also try to mediate it. When we’re training a group, our job is to provide skills and a chance to reflect on experiences that will help people form their own opinions and make their own choices, not to impose our own philosophy or values. Pushing our own agenda would not only be an abuse of our power-among, it would be ineffective and likely cause resentment rather than inspire respect.

If I do a direct action training in which we have time to consider questions of violence and nonviolence, I don't lecture about my own beliefs, no matter how strong they are. Instead, I try to create an atmosphere that models respect, in which people can explore their own beliefs and listen to others.

In hierarchies, leaders often hoard information. If we're trying to create a model of empowerment, people have to have access to the information they need in order to make decisions.

Control of information and monopolies of certain skills are ways in which both power-among and power-over can be maintained.

There can, however, also be a positive benefit to some hierarchies that establish quality control. We can assume that a licensed doctor has a certain body of information, that a licensed mechanic has certain experience and abilities. But part of our work as activists is to spread skills as widely as possible. So, in actions, we train medics to provide care for each other in situations where the officially approved medical teams won't go. Doctors and nurses volunteer to provide their higher level of skill and to train the street medics. When even the Red Cross won't enter a scene because the police are still firing tear gas, when hospitals can't be trusted because activists will be arrested from their wards and tortured, the action medics are literal lifesavers.

IndyMedia, the web-based independent media group that provides alternative coverage for actions and issues, is an example of the power of free access to information. Anyone can post stories. You don't need to be an accredited journalist or a graduate with set credentials. Stories tend to be personal, sometimes biased, sometimes inaccurate. But major media stories are also often inaccurate and biased, and they carry a weight of authority that IndyMedia writers don't. People reading IndyMedia know what the bias is likely to be, and can read critically. If a reader disagrees or knows contradictory facts, she or he can post their own story. IndyMedia journalists rarely have the resources a journalist writing for, say, the *Washington Post* might be able to put into researching a story. But they also don't have to answer to an editorial department with its own biases, which today are more and more determined by corporate interests.

Sharing information, communicating, and networking are aspects of empowering leadership: they help us make links between people, establish connections, weave a rich web of relationships.

Empowering leadership means sharing and expanding skills, passing them on as widely as possible, and making space for others to bring in their own creativity, to take material and make it their own, to do things you wouldn't have thought of, to make their own mistakes but also their own discoveries.

Empowering leadership is not about always having the brilliant idea yourself, but about recognizing and supporting the ideas of others. In ritual, sometimes one person will begin hesitantly humming a new tune or putting words to a chant. A good ritual leader is always listening to the group, ready to join her voice and make that softer melody audible.

Sharing information, sharing skills, supporting the creativity of others, networking, and communicating spread power throughout a group and therefore increase its effectiveness and intelligence.

Through the practice of direct democracy, we can develop forms and models that establish a true contrast to hierarchy and domination. We can learn from our mistakes and experiment, exploring approaches on a small scale that may eventually become a way to organize society on a large scale so that each person has a voice in the decisions that affect us.