

ORGBUILDERS TOOLKITS

Organisational Culture



Acknowledgements

This toolkit was co-created by Carrie Magee, Charlotte Millar and Rachel Diamond-Hunter. Special thanks go to Charlotte as the author of the first drafts, to all the wonderful organisations whose tools and thinking have been included here, as well as significant contributions to the content and tools by Paul Kahawatte, Ali Brumfitt, Ayeisha Thomas Smith, Minda Burgos-Lukes and Katherine Wall; and those who provided reviews and feedback, namely, Emma Rees, Jacqui Howard and Katherine O'Garro.

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Introduction

Your culture is the emotional backdrop to your organisation. It is the answer to the questions: what does it feel like to work here? And how do we go about achieving our goals? At its best, your culture provides a supportive foundation for your team to work at their best, with a common understanding of the types of behaviour and approaches that they can expect from everyone else in the organisation, regardless of rank, power or seniority.

Your culture should be clearly articulated, documented in a way that makes sense for your organisation and shared with the whole organisation. It is a living, breathing and evolving thing that is embodied and practiced by the whole organisation.

Your organisation will have a culture, regardless of whether or not you've ever tried to create one, but it might not be the culture that you want. Good cultures, much like anything else in your organisation, come from attention, practice and being willing to try new things, make mistakes and grow from them.

This toolkit is a guide to identifying what's happening with your culture: What's going well? Where does that come from? How can you have more of it? And, what are the elements you don't want? Why have they arisen? How can you create change?

By the end of this toolkit you will have:

- A clearly articulated vision for the culture you want in your organisation.
- A plan for how to get there as a whole organisation.

This toolkit works in conjunction with our '[Organisational Strategy Toolkit](#)' and '[Structure and Operations Toolkit](#)', which cover other aspects of running organisations.

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Definitions

WHAT IS ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE?

Our organisations are sites of social action, working to create change and move towards our vision of a more just society. Our organisations are also sites where we can realise that vision now. We can create spaces that recognise the intersecting oppressions we face in our day-to-day lives. We can create cultures, processes and structures that challenge this oppression. We can start to build organisations for liberation, by putting our values front and centre in everything we do, and building robust systems that allow us to handle situations when oppression does show up.

Organisational culture is a broad concept that can be defined in many ways - in NEON's movement builders training programme we talk of culture as "the way in which we relate to each other, rooted in our values and beliefs". We also like the way Stuart Hall talks about culture as "a critical site of social action and intervention" where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled.¹

Another way of thinking about the culture of our organisations is as a 'living system'. From this perspective, all the things that make up and influence the ongoing way things happen can be seen as a 'living system', an interrelated whole. It's not simply the things that we say

1

<https://globalsocialtheory.org/thinkers/hall-stuart/#:-:text=Culture%20is%20defined%20as%20a.order%20inherited%20from%20the%20Empire>

we do, but it's everything that actually happens. Drawing primarily on [Dominic Barter's dialogical systems](#) work and [Miki Kashtan's thinking on 5 systems needed to transform organisations](#), Paul Kahawatte at [Navigate](#) has developed an understanding of '[7 living systems](#)', with Jana Light and others. These 7 Systems are seen as inevitably arising in any organisation or group - these systems exist because the organisation exists and there is no way to avoid having some version of them. These systems are: decision making; conflict; feedback; care and support; connection and community; resource flow; and information flow.² We can seek to choose and create the versions of these systems that we want, and if we don't, they will likely take on a shape that is inherited from the dominant culture. Once chosen, we must nurture and tend to these systems to help them evolve and grow, as without that ongoing care, they can slide into systems from the dominant culture.

There are many thoughts on what culture is and what makes up a culture, what is presented here is a very brief introduction to some different approaches to unpacking that and naming the different elements of 'culture' which can often feel abstract. As you work through this toolkit and explore some approaches and thinking in more detail, you will likely find thoughts that resonate with you and feel like a good fit for your organisation and group.

In this toolkit, we have drawn on these understandings and come up with some core beliefs that inform how we've written this toolkit:

² <https://www.navigate.org.uk/organisational-systems.html>

- Cultures are created - they are intentional spaces where we can create environments we want to be in, and that we want to share with others.
- Cultures need nurturing - they need care and attention to help them grow in the ways we want them to, and to change things we don't want.
- Working on our cultures is rewarding - this is an opportunity to build an organisation to be the best it can be, and allow everyone to do their best work.

Often, elements of organisational culture are left unspoken, which makes it easy to slide into habits, patterns and ways of working that don't serve the organisation - often ones that replicate dominant cultures and reproduce systems of oppression. By being conscious about it, we can carve out a space that provides an alternative to the dominant culture, where people with different identities can work together safely and productively, as free as possible from systems of oppression and the dominance of neoliberal, capitalist values.

WHY HAVING A GOOD CULTURE IS IMPORTANT

People may join our organisations because they agree with the type of work we are doing, but they will leave if they don't like the culture. "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."³ Worse still,

³ Attributed to Maya Angelou, 2003.

unhealthy organisational cultures are harmful, creating physical and mental health issues which will cause people significant trauma and make your organisation ineffective.

There are so many reasons why organisational culture is important, we've distilled it down to these three:

1. It creates psychological safety

A psychologically safe environment provides a baseline level of security that is needed for people to be able to bring their whole selves. An environment feels psychologically safe when all team members:

*"share the belief that within the team they will not be exposed to interpersonal or social threats to their self or identity, their status or standing and to their career or employment, when engaging in learning behaviours such as asking for help, seeking feedback, admitting errors or lack of knowledge, trying something new or voicing work-related dissenting views."*⁴

2. It empowers and inspires us

A good culture helps creativity thrive and supports people to work at their best - to try new ideas, take risks, make mistakes and bounce back. It also supports us when things are difficult - fighting for structural and systemic change has highs and lows.

⁴

https://medium.com/@Harri_Kaloudis/psychological-safety-at-work-what-do-psychologically-safe-work-teams-look-like-5585ab0f2df4

A resilient and empowering culture can provide a safe and restorative environment for us to be able to find fresh motivation and support when times are tough.

3. It helps us win

As the old adage goes, “culture eats strategy for breakfast”.⁵ In other words, a good culture is essential to achieving our strategy and making progress towards our mission - it facilitates alignment, bringing people together to work to collective organisational goals, in an environment where people can learn, grow, develop and experiment in a way that is sustainable and nurturing. We can have the best strategy in the world, but we will not achieve anything without our people.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO BE ABLE TO DO THIS WORK?

Working on our cultures can be difficult and we need some structures in place to support us. Not everyone can continually be the best possible person and there will be times when we behave and respond in ways that are not aligned with our values or what we believe best practice to be. As explored in Navigate’s ‘[Living Systems](#)’ work, building good cultures requires a foundation for this work, that will catch us when we aren’t working at our best and support us, as well as empowering those around us to engage and interact with the work we are doing.

⁵ Attributed to Peter Drucker:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/11/20/why-does-culture-eat-strategy-for-breakfast/?sh=538995bb1e09>

This foundation is what Navigate, drawing on [Dominic Barter’s work](#), refers to as ‘pre-conditions’. These conditions support or diminish our organisational systems - the stronger each of these things are, the stronger the system is. These pre-conditions are:

- Agreement/Engagement - How engaged are people with the system? Has work been done to genuinely engage and listen to people with different perspectives and at different levels? What is the actual level of agreement to this way of doing things?
- Information - How do people get access to information on the system, and is that information distributed in a way that ensures everyone is able to engage with it?
- Access - Do people know where and how to get support from the system? In what ways does the system reach out to support them?
- Resources/capacity - Are the systems being built in a way that is within the reach of the resources you have and the capacity of those that will run/engage with it? What activities or tasks need to be taken on to make the system work, and what support do the people doing these tasks need?
- Time and space - What space and time is needed for the system to function well? How do we create the context for the processes we want within each system, both practically and symbolically?
- Feedback - What is in place to invite, listen to and respond to feedback on what’s working/not working about the system, and how is that taken on to evolve the system ongoingly at a practical level?

This concept of pre-conditions can offer a framework for approaching the work we do on our cultures. Asking ourselves these questions as we work to build inclusive, liberatory and values-aligned cultures can lead us to think deeper about the work and to better outcomes.

WHAT IS ANTI-OPPRESSION?

The Anti-Oppression Network⁶ defines oppression as:

“the use of power to disempower, marginalize, silence or otherwise subordinate one social group or category, often in order to further empower and/or privilege the oppressor. Social oppression may not require formally established organizational support to achieve its desired effect; it may be applied on a more informal, yet more focused, individual basis.”

At NEON, we understand anti-oppression as recognising the structures and systems of power, and taking steps to practically challenge power and oppression, as it shows up in ourselves, our movements and the world around us. This means understanding that there are dominant cultures - ones that are patriarchal, racist, ableist, neurotypical, hetero- and cis-sexist, islamophobic, anti-semitic, classist, to name but a few⁷ - and that these dominant cultures will show up unless we consciously challenge them and create alternatives in their place.

⁶ <https://theantioppressionnetwork.com/what-is-anti-oppression>

⁷ <https://theantioppressionnetwork.com/resources/terminologies-of-oppression>

This is particularly important when doing social justice work. Many of us are drawn to this work from a desire to change the world and make it a more equitable place, which makes it extra hurtful when we see and experience systems of oppression being played out in our workplaces and networks, often in a way that is contradictory to the values and beliefs that organisations claim to have. Oppression will continue to show up in our movements unless we consciously seek to do otherwise.

The lens with which these toolkits have been written includes an understanding that:

- Anti-oppression is part of everything we do - it cannot be siloed from the rest of our work, it is integral to creating good cultures, having good strategy, and having operational functions that support our organisations to work at their best.
- Anti-oppression is something that we practice everyday - we will never be done with our learning on anti-oppression and we will make mistakes. This means we need to create space to call in others and do the internal work needed to be able to be called in and continue our own learning and growth, as individuals and as collectives.
- Anti-oppression is central to our success - oppression undermines and damages our movements, and we will not make progress towards our vision for the world, or be successful as organisations, if we're not working in an anti-oppressive way.

How To Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to help you understand and evolve the culture in your organisation, and create a supportive and empowering environment where people can thrive. It is not a how-to guide, and certainly not prescriptive, but it will provide you with the entry points to understanding what's happening now, identifying priorities for moving forward, and putting plans in place to help you work towards the culture you want.

It's normal to be apprehensive about this work. Culture change can be confronting, it requires you to be reflective and willing to confront uncomfortable truths about yourself and your ways of working, and to be committed to change. It can also take a long time - the change you want won't happen overnight. Having a clear vision for where you want to get to, what the incremental steps are, how you will measure the change, and how you will support those most impacted by the negative aspects of the culture in the meantime, is an essential part of this process. We invite you to embrace this challenge and approach it with an open mind by:

- Being committed to understanding and exploring new ideas and perspectives.
- Trying new approaches and ways of working/thinking.
- Acknowledging mistakes, being open to feedback and committed to your own self-reflection and growth.

Each chapter will contain the following sections:

 **Introduction**

By the end of this chapter you will have:

-  **Answers to the following core strategic questions**
-  **The following outputs**

 **Key definitions and concepts**

Tools

 **One 'starred tool' to start with**

 **2-4 additional tools**

 **Further reading**

Limits of this toolkit

This toolkit is one offering in a wider ecology of fantastic organisations doing progressive and radical work in organisational development, strategy and leadership, like Navigate, Training for Change, The Management Centre, Showing Up for Racial Justice and Resist+Renew. We at NEON are learning, and the content we offer on our programmes will always reflect this - it will always be evolving as we adapt to the needs of the movements we serve and build our learning into our programmes. We welcome you to the start of this journey, and with all of the above in mind, let's begin!

Chapter 1: Diagnosis

UNDERSTANDING WHERE YOUR CULTURE IS AT

Introduction

This first chapter is designed to help you get to grips with what's going on with your organisation right now, and get an honest assessment about where you are doing well and where you could do better. It will put you in a place to understand where your priorities are.

Sometimes you might make assumptions about which bits of the culture are a problem, and this can be misleading. You need to be really clear about what's working and what's not in order to make it better. For example, you might notice that there isn't a strong culture around feedback in the organisation and focus on developing a feedback policy and training everyone on how to do feedback, only to discover that people don't feel comfortable to use any of these tools because the power structures are such that people fear being treated punitively. You might notice a lack of care and connection and evidence of unsustainable working practices in your organisation and focus on promoting self-care, but issues with resource distribution means that people are burning out and don't have the time or energy for care and connection.

By the end of this chapter you will have:

Answers to the following core strategic questions

In order to figure out what you want to do about your culture, you need to understand the current landscape:

- What are the main gaps in your culture?
- Where are you thriving?
- How are these things connected and where is the best place to start?
- Is this analysis shared across the organisation or is it dependent on identity and position?

The following outputs

- An honest assessment of where you are doing well and what the barriers are to doing better culturally. (This can be top line. For example: "We have a culture of trust, we think this comes from our culture of giving good feedback.")
- A plan for how to proceed with this toolkit.

Key definitions and concepts⁸

Assessing organisational culture can be difficult. In hierarchical organisations, the people assessing the culture are often siloed from the wider team - for example, the senior leadership team, or people hired by them. There can also be a gap in what the culture is and how it is performed for, or viewed by, those who hold power in the organisation. In non-hierarchical organisations, it may be unclear who has responsibility for understanding and changing the culture in the organisation.

⁸ With thanks to Ali Brumfitt who contributed the content for this section.

Getting feedback on organisational culture

Staff feedback

Anonymous feedback by surveys or suggestion boxes can be a good way to get feedback on organisational culture, however, there are some things to be aware of here: firstly, staff will not invest time in giving significant amounts of feedback if they do not feel it will be acted on - make changes based on feedback and communicate it well; secondly, people who are unhappy are more likely to feedback - don't be disheartened by a lot of negative feedback, but do take it seriously and act on it; thirdly, ask the right people - people disproportionately impacted by structural issues, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, ableism and many other widespread oppressions, need to have their voices prioritised when looking at improving the culture in response to these issues. Consider how you will collect feedback from those most affected by the issues and guard against prejudice showing up in feedback in ways which prevent positive change.

External monitoring

It is surprising how many organisations dismiss social media threads, press articles, blogs and memes which hold valuable feedback about organisational culture. This unfiltered, open access feedback can be invaluable. Conduct an assessment of its key themes and consider how you can use the findings to improve your culture.

Ask stakeholders

Ask your funders, collaborators, networks, supporters... ask all your external stakeholders. Give some structure and make it quick and easy to respond. A good start is to ask two questions: from your own

experience, what do you think is good about our organisational culture? What is the biggest improvement we could make?

Tools


One 'starred tool' to start with

Tool 1.1 - Diagnostic assessment

 2 x 2 hours as a group, plus individual time to complete the survey.

2-4 additional tools

Tool 1.2 - Understanding white dominant culture and how it might show up in your organisation

 2-3 hours individually or as a group.

Tool 1.3 - Culture Visioning

 2-3 hours individually or as a group.

Tool 1.4 - Cultural Web

 2-3 hours individually or as a group.


Further reading

- Harvard Business Review - [What Is Organizational Culture? And Why Should We Care?](#)
- BuiltIn - [The 4 types of Organizational Culture Your Should Know](#)
- Kaytee Ray-Riek - [What organizational culture best fosters diversity?](#)
- Stanford Social Innovation Review - [How Leaders Can Strengthen Their Organizational Culture](#)
- Raising Voices - [Creating an organisational culture for social justice activism](#)

- Equity in the Centre - [AWAKE to WOKE to WORK: Building a Race Equity Culture](#)
- Racial Equity Tools - [Organizational Assessment Tools and Resources](#) to use to understand how racism and white supremacy might show up in your organisation. This will be particularly useful for organisations with white people at senior leadership levels.
- Social Transformation Project - these '[tools for transformation](#)' contain lots of tools and surveys on different areas of organisational culture and leadership.
- Elizabeth Mitchell - a Sassafra Tech Collective presentation on '[building healthy, anti-oppressive workplaces](#)'.

Tools

1.1 DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT

 **2 x 2 hours as a group, plus individual time to complete the survey.**

This questionnaire asks about each of the areas of organisational culture that are explored in this toolkit. Each question is to be answered on a 1-5 scale, and will help you understand where you are doing well, and which areas need work. It is important to approach this task with honesty and to answer the questions based on what is currently happening, rather than what you hope is happening, or what you'd like to be happening. If something makes you uncomfortable, that's ok - it's probably a sign of something that you really wish was going better; acknowledge it, sit with it and try to understand why it makes you feel that way. This is important for moving forward with this work.

You can either use this [google form template](#) or copy the questions from [this google doc](#) into your own survey template.

Guidance

1. Identify who you want to take this survey

If you have a small organisation, then maybe you want to survey everyone. If that isn't possible because of size or logistics, go for a representative sample - make sure you distribute the questionnaire to people of differing levels of structural power within the organisation, to people working in different types of roles, and to people with different identities.

2. Consider how you can ensure people have the time to do the survey and feel able to answer honestly

We recommend conducting the survey anonymously and making those questions that might enable the reviewers to identify who completed it optional. Think about when people will do the survey and how you will support them to have at least an hour to complete it.

3. Establish your timeframes and responsibilities

Plan: who is going to communicate the survey and when? What is the deadline for filling in the survey? Who will review the survey and when will you get together to discuss the results and plan next steps? Book time in people's calendars now: we recommend doing this in chunks - 1.5 to 2 hours to review the results and draw some preliminary conclusions; 1.5 to 2 hours to draw up an initial summary that will be shared with staff; time for staff to make comments/suggestions.

4. Clearly communicate with the people who will be doing the survey

This is a really important step. What you do here will impact how much engagement you get from the wider organisation, so consider how you will communicate the following:

- What the survey is and why you are doing it.
- Who will read and review the completed surveys - there is an option to get creative here and have a few different people review the answers and feed in to the next steps.
- What you will do with the information that is provided.
- When people can expect to hear back about what you learned from the survey and what you are going to do with the information.

5. Do the survey!

We recommend doing this alone and blocking out at least an hour so that there is no time pressure and there is time to reflect on anything that comes up whilst doing the survey.

6. Collate and review the answers

You should already know who will be reviewing and when, because you booked time in people's diaries in step 3(!). Summarise your initial findings and outline your priority areas. This can be top line - be sure to clearly identify success and weaknesses, and what you think the reasons are behind them. For example: "We learned that people feel comfortable giving feedback and do this often, we think this is because there are high levels of trust in the organisation. However, we noticed that people rarely give feedback to people who hold more structural power, so we are going to look at what power dynamics exist in the organisation that might be affecting this."

Here are some prompts you can use for your own reflection when looking at individual responses and in considering them as a whole.

Understanding the big picture

- At a first glance, what do you notice? Is there anything that particularly jumps out at you? (positive, negative or neutral)
- Are there any patterns and trends that you can identify?
- Are there any glaring red flags?

Understanding the detail

- Add up the scores for each section - which sections have you scored well on? Where have you scored low? Are there any surprises?
- Where do you seem to be doing well? What do you think is the reason for this?
- What seems to be in need of improvement? What do you think is the reason for this?

Drawing conclusions

- What do you think are your priority areas and why?
- What do you think are potential blockers or barriers to making changes in this area?

7. Get feedback from staff

It can be useful to provide an anonymous forum for this (for example, using a tool like Jamboard or Miro) and/or give people the opportunity to get together in groups to discuss and share collective feedback.


8. Review and integrate feedback

Make sure you take the time to properly review the feedback and integrate it into what you are doing - if you aren't going to do that, you should tell people why. This is essential for maintaining the trust that's been built throughout this process.

9. Make a plan for next steps

Now you know what your priorities are, make a plan for how you want to use this toolkit to make progress on these areas.

TOOL 1.2 - UNDERSTANDING WHITE DOMINANT CULTURE AND HOW IT MIGHT SHOW UP IN YOUR ORGANISATION

 2-3 hours individually or as a group.

Racial Equity trainer, Tema Okun, defines white supremacist or dominant culture as:


“The explicit to subtle ways that norms, preferences and fears of white European descended people overwhelmingly shape how we organise our work and institutions, see ourselves and others, interact with one another and with time, and make decisions.”⁹

White dominant culture is baked into traditional working practices in ways that you might not expect. Gaining understanding of what this looks like means you are better able to identify and challenge it if and when it arises, either in your own attitudes and behaviours or those of your colleagues.

The worksheet [white dominant culture and something different](#) sets out the characteristics of white dominant culture and alternative approaches and ways of thinking. This is an excellent exercise for understanding what is happening in your organisation and identifying the ways in which dominant cultures show up, plus you can revisit this tool as you work through different chapters of the toolkit.

⁹ White dominant culture and something different: <https://www.cacgrants.org/assets/ce/Documents/2019/WhiteDominantCulture.pdf>

TOOL 1.3 - THE 5 DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM

 2-3 hours individually or as a group.

We have organised the cultural systems we think are most useful around a model of the ‘five dysfunctions of teams’.¹⁰ Whilst this thinking comes from business, with all of its drawbacks, we do think that these five dysfunctions also apply to teams in progressive organisations and, if they can be overcome, your organisational culture will be much stronger.

This toolkit is about organisations, but this toolkit also talks about teams - as this is the basic unit of any organisation and where culture becomes real. So if you can make your culture strong at the level of the team, it is much more likely to be strong at the level of the organisation. It is important to note that some of the five dysfunctions are best addressed through other areas of your organisation’s DNA, and tools can be found in the strategy and structure sections of this toolkit. This is indicated in the diagram.

Guidance


- Gather together the people you want to do this exercise with - for example, your team or a group of people from across the organisation.
- Review the descriptions in the table below and discuss - which of these feel true for your organisation? What evidence or examples do you have of this occurring?
- From your discussion - review the tools, where does it make sense to focus your attention first? What barriers might there be to this? What is your ideal timeframe?
- Use this discussion to make a plan for how you will move forward with this toolkit. Consider who you should communicate this with and what accountability and success measures you will have in place to support you.



¹⁰ <https://www.tablegroup.com/download/the-five-dysfunctions-model-and-summary>

Dysfunction	Description	Tool
Absence of trust	This occurs when team members are reluctant to be vulnerable with one another and are unwilling to admit their mistakes, weaknesses or need for help.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Group agreement on culture ● Commitment to anti-oppression ● Relationality
Fear of conflict	Teams that are lacking in trust are incapable of engaging in unfiltered, passionate debate about key issues, causing situations where team conflict can easily turn into veiled discussions and backchannel comments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understand your approach to conflict ● Tools to encourage challenge in your team
Lack of commitment	Without clear strategic direction, decision-making or roles, team members don't find their place and don't fully commit to a project. This can lead to people delivering late, not to standard, and ultimately disengaging from the work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creating clear strategic direction ● Setting clear roles ● System for decision-making
Avoidance of accountability	When team members are not held to account to agreed standards in your culture, the standards mean nothing and will begin to slip. To stop your culture sliding back to the mainstream culture, it is essential that there is a clear system of accountability in place that everyone is subject to.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● System of accountability ● System for feedback
Inattention to results	Ultimately, your organisation exists to achieve change on the issues you care about. It is essential to set up systems to track results and evaluate them. Without this, it is too easy for team members to put their own needs (ego, development, recognition, etc.) ahead of the collective goals of the team. If a team has lost sight of the need to create impact in the world, the impact simply won't happen.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● System for learning

TOOL 1.4 - THE CULTURAL WEB¹¹

 2-3 hours individually or as a group.

The cultural web is a model that looks at the elements which go into making the 'organisational paradigm', which can be understood as 'what it feels like to work here' and 'the way we do things around here'. Lots of the elements of the dominant paradigm will be understood and enacted, but never actually articulated. Considering each area of the model is a useful way to think about the gaps between the culture you need and want, and the culture you have.

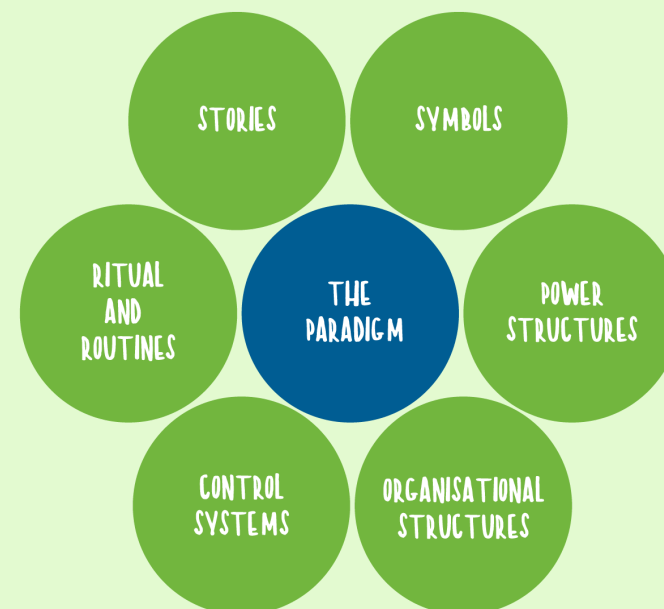
Use the areas below as a starting point for a conversation about what is happening in your organisation, either as a self-reflective exercise, or with a group. From there, make decisions about what your priorities are and what you want to do next.

Areas to consider

Routine behaviours: How do people behave on a day-to-day basis when carrying out their activities? This will be visible both internally and externally. It can be very challenging to modify such behaviours.

Rituals: Activities and events highlight what is important in a particular organisation and they reinforce the culture of an organisation. Rituals can include your induction, how you celebrate team birthdays, 'dress-down Fridays', or the annual Christmas party. Which routines are emphasised? Which routines is it frowned upon for people not to take part in? How do rituals include or exclude certain groups? How would people react if you changed these routines? What beliefs do the routines symbolise or reinforce? What new rituals could be introduced which would embody the organisational culture you aspire to?

Stories: Organisations have stories that are passed on like folk tales. They are often a warning about 'what happened when x person did y' or they may be examples of who rose to power and why. Stories are told internally, but also to external stakeholders. Consider who to ask regarding the



¹¹ Adapted by Ali Brumfitt from the Cultural Web model originally developed by G. Johnson and K. Scholes (1999) 'Exploring Corporate Strategy'.

stories told in and about your organisation. When looking at stories, think: who is portrayed as the hero, the villain, the winner or the loser? Are most stories warnings and tales of failure or are they tales of success? What beliefs are reflected in the stories? What do they say about the organisation and its values?

Symbols: Logos, offices, signs, uniform, dress codes, cars, jargon - symbols are very powerful and often reinforced by exposure on a daily basis. Where there is a hierarchy it will often be very evident through symbols. How people are rewarded, what your structure is and how people may be expected to behave differently around different groups of people are also all symbols. List all the symbols you can think of and what they signify. Have you checked they symbolise the same to others? What do they signify to external stakeholders? What are the status symbols and how and where do they show up? Is there jargon? If so, who does the jargon include and who does it exclude? What changes can you make to align your symbols with the culture you want to build?

Power structures: How is power distributed in the organisation? What are the formal and informal networks of power? How do structural inequalities show up in your power distribution? What barriers do marginalised groups face in accessing power/status? Are your 'top team' or central figures dominated by a particular demographic (often middle class, white, able-bodied men). How can you re-distribute power? Where are people likely to resist sharing power?

Control systems: Measurement and reward systems. How do you measure success? What are your carrots and what are your sticks? Who has the power to decide what to reward? It is common for strategic goal factors to be rewarded above culture - this gives the message that delivering on a strategic target is more important than delivering on positive behaviours. Consider how to ensure this is not the case in your organisation.

Organisation structures: How do the roles you have interact? Do you have a flatter structure or a very hierarchical one? Where are the most resources sitting? Is there a lot of collaboration or a lot of competition? Which teams are most visible? Who is overlooked in communications?

Paradigm: The paradigm is difficult to articulate, but take a step back and consider the diagnostic assessment questionnaire. What sort of organisation do the answers to your assessment questions portray? Think about the answers as if they are about an organisation other than your own; what would you think about it? Does the summary of your analysis remind you of any other organisations? Which ones?

Chapter 2: Power

EXPLORING POWER AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Introduction

How power is understood and distributed within your organisation is intrinsically connected to your values - it communicates what you believe and value about power, who should hold it, why they should hold it and how they should use it. It is equally connected to your strategy - a shared understanding and effective distribution of power helps your organisation work effectively and achieve your strategic goals, and impacts how you go about achieving systemic change.

This chapter explores what is meant by power, different types of power, common issues with power and their impacts, and what good accountability systems look like.

By the end of this chapter you will have:

Answers to the following core strategic questions

- Who holds power in your organisation?
- What types of visible and invisible power are there in your organisation?
- Is there an issue with power, and if so, what is it and how does it impact your organisation?

- What kind of accountability structures are there for the people who hold power?

The following outputs

- An understanding of power in your organisation.
- An accountability mechanism.

Key definitions and concepts

Understanding power

Power has been understood in various different ways. At root it is about the ability to act, to do something, to change something. Often, power is used over others - to get them to do something they would not otherwise do. Power can also be built with others to create change. Power can operate across many levels - at the individual, interpersonal, structural and systemic. At NEON, we understand power as the capacity to mobilise resources to achieve an objective or meet a need. Within an organisational context, this can look like:

- Each member of staff has the resources and decision-making power they need to be able to do their job well.
- Clarity and transparency on decision-making.
- An agreement of standards to be upheld across the organisation.
- Clear accountability systems and structures that uphold those standards.

Types of power

Educational institute Processwork understands power through the concept of rank, which is defined by the Processwork founder, Arnold Mindell, as “a conscious or unconscious social or personal ability or power arising from culture, community support, personal psychology and/or spiritual power”.¹² Processwork outlines four main types of rank that exist within groups and individuals and argues that we all hold multiple, intersecting rank identities. A clearer understanding of these types of power can help you navigate power and conflict in groups, as well as develop a better understanding of your own power. If you are able to see yourself and others as powerful in multiple ways, not just through the structures offered by institutions, the opportunity to achieve large-scale systems change becomes far more democratic and inclusive. The four types of rank model can help you move away from seeing power as a zero-sum game that we have no control over, and towards conceptualising power as something we naturally all share and hold in various ways.

1. **Social rank** - This is the power you have (or lack) because of your race, gender, age, economic standing, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, education, health, or language. Social rank may be universal or may depend on context
2. **Structural rank** - This is the power that belongs to your position in an established hierarchy. This is usually clearly identifiable and explicit - for example, in a hierarchical organisation, the director may outrank a manager.

¹² Mindell, A. (1995). *Sitting in the fire: Large group transformation using conflict and diversity*.

3. **Psychological rank** - This is personal power which you acquire through your life experience. It includes how you move through and make sense of life events, and what you learn from them. A person who generally feels OK about themselves and their ability to navigate through the world might have a higher psychological rank than someone who feels depressed, lonely, or suffers a lot.
4. **Spiritual rank** - This is a sense of power that comes from feeling connected to something larger or transcendent. Someone with spiritual rank might be a religious person, someone who dedicates a large amount of time and energy to their spiritual beliefs, and/or someone who is very closely connected to the organisation’s cause or mission.

Another useful understanding of power is outlined by outlined by Lisa VeneKlasen and Valeries Miller in ‘A new weave of power’,¹³ describe four ‘expressions of power’:

- **Power Over** - power which is taken from others and used to dominate and control, often through fear. This is how power is most commonly understood. Central to this is a belief that power is finite and static, that some hold it and others don’t.
- **Power With** - is about collective strength based on mutual support, solidarity and collaboration. ‘Power with’ is at the heart of what makes successful movements and strong communities. This, along with power to and power within, sees power as dynamic, transferable and shareable.

¹³ <https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2019/02/01/4-types-of-power/>

- **Power To** - is the power to create change and recognises the unique potential of every person to shape his/her/their life and world, which linked with mutual support is part of creating 'Power with'
- **Power Within** - which is about an individual's self worth and self knowledge, including their ability to recognise individual differences while respecting others.

Considering these different expressions and understandings of power can be helpful for us to understand what kind of power we do and don't want to see in our organisations. As an organisation, we can work more effectively and collaboratively, and with a more democratised approach when we seek to build 'power with', 'power to' and 'power within'. Focusing on 'power over' can undermine those efforts and lead to increased power imbalances in our organisations.

Issues with power commonly arise when power is hoarded, or when there is a lack of clarity over who holds power.

Power hoarding¹⁴

This occurs when power is concentrated in the hands of a few select people who control decision-making and how information is shared, often operating with a lack of transparency. It is one of the ways in which white supremacy culture can show up in your organisation. It is characterised by those in power being resistant to change and/or threatened by change, and assuming they know what is best for the organisation; coupled with assumptions that those who suggest change hold ill intent and lack the knowledge or expertise to be able to do so.

¹⁴ <https://coco-net.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Coco-WhiteSupCulture-ENG4.pdf> P17

It is closely associated with defensive and paternalistic behaviours, and serves to limit options for growth and progression for the organisation.

Lack of clarity

Issues can also arise when there is a lack of clear leadership, for example, when it's not clear who has decision-making power or authority in a given situation. This can be addressed by ensuring that there are clearly defined roles and responsibilities, clear decision making processes and accountability systems that build trust in those decisions - the '[Structure and Operations Toolkit](#)' has more information on this.

Accountability

Accountability goes hand in hand with power. It ensures everyone knows what they are responsible for, who is providing guidance to help them stay on track, and what mechanisms are in place for course correction and feedback. Accountability is often seen as something that is punitive - a punishment, but this does not have to be the case. Instead, you can choose to see accountability as a way of offering support to each other and to decision-makers, and for increasing transparency for those impacted by decisions.

Accountability made up of strong accountability mechanisms is important for a number of reasons:

- It keeps you on track, and helps build trust and alignment across the organisation.
- It makes sure issues are raised early, which helps minimise surprises and reduces risks.

- It gives everyone opportunities to do their best work and have opportunities for growth and improvement.

In addition, it is important to set out explicit accountability structures for those responsible for strategic direction and organisational leadership, as these decisions affect everyone in the organisation. This is an opportunity for you to think about what support and guidance is available to you as leaders, where there are opportunities for scrutiny on your decision-making, and how you can build robust feedback mechanisms. For many organisations, these things come from outside the organisation, for example, from expert advisors or trustees, organisational coaches or accountability groups. This can, and should, also come from inside your organisation, and it is important to create space to do this by building a culture that facilitates and encourages

open feedback and healthy conflict, and supports individuals to do the personal work needed to be able to engage in this type of communication. This is covered in more detail in Chapter 4 of this toolkit.

We believe that every organisation should have a unionised workforce and a voluntary recognition agreement with a union, in line with our principles of sharing power and encouraging collaborative decision-making, building solidarity, and creating safer spaces for those with less structural power to have a voice. Unions lead to better conditions for the whole organisation, build trust and transparency across the organisation, and provide a clear pathway for scrutinising and improving organisation-wide decisions.

The table below outlines a model for accountability that is applicable to everyone in the organisation:

Area of impact	Setting expectations	Course correction	Intervention
<p>Delivery of work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Objectives in work plan and personal development plan ● Agreed deliverables in a project/programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 121s with key support person, e.g. line manager, peer supporter, external coach, etc., with both sides providing feedback ● Appraisals, with guidance provided on progression and staff development ● Feedback between colleagues who are not in a line management relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Performance management

Culture and values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective agreement on values and behaviours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback - to any colleague, anywhere in the hierarchy • Collective culture reviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict mediation
Anti-oppression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core definitions and beliefs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calling in • Opportunities to further learning and understanding • Possibility to transform the culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grievance • Consequences appropriate to the situation and context

Accountability for leadership and direction, with the input of a unionised workforce, can look like this:

Area of impact	Setting expectations	Course correction	Intervention
Strategic direction and organisational leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational strategy • Policies and processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trustee meetings • Organisational formal and informal feedback mechanisms • Union input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Union action • Complaints/grievance from staff • Trustee intervention

Tools

 **One ‘starred tool’ to start with**

2.1 - Understanding your relationship to power

 1-2 hours as a self-reflection exercise.

 **2-4 additional tools**

2.2 - Understanding power and white supremacy culture

 1-2 hours as a self-reflection exercise.

2.3 - Creating a system of accountability

 1-2 hours for a group discussion.

 **Further reading**

→ Understanding Society - [Lukes on power](#)

→ Organising Work - [Progressives in the streets, union-busters in the sheets](#)

→ Range - [The real meaning of accountability in the workplace](#)

→ NEON - [Power and privilege: A handbook for political organisers](#)

- In Conversation (YouTube video) - [Understanding Power and Privilege](#)
- Raji Hunjan and Jethro Pettit - [Power: A practical guide for facilitating social change](#)
- USC - [Diversity Toolkit: A Guide to Discussing Identity, Power and Privilege](#)
- Charity Village - [Overcoming Founder's Syndrome: Practical tips for founders, boards of directors and employees](#)
- Liam Barrington-Bush - [Anarchists in the Boardroom](#)
- Training for Change - [Trapdoors](#)
- The Commons Social Change Library - [Power Mapping](#)
- The Centre for Community Organizations - ['Portes Ouvertes': Anti-oppression practice for community groups](#)
- Northstar Network - [Long-term power building. A shared analysis of navigating crises](#)
- ATC tools - [Sources of power](#)

Tools

2.1 UNDERSTANDING YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO POWER

 1-2 hours as a self-reflection exercise.

The [Social Transformation Project](#) identifies that many people come to activism in reaction to abuses of power and therefore often carry a deep-seated mistrust of power, and may identify more with feeling powerless than powerful. They set out four common issues with power that occur in social justice organisations:

1. Awkward or ambivalent leaders.
2. Lack of respect for hierarchy.
3. Disempowerment of staff.
4. Inappropriate use of power.

One of these might resonate with you in particular, or you might identify with more than one, or even all of them, at different times. Be curious about this and seek to understand what's happening: pay attention to how you feel in different situations, such as when communicating with the whole organisation, when communicating with other leaders from different organisations, how you respond when challenged or confronted.

[This Confusion Around Power document](#) from ATC Tools for Transformation explores each of these challenges, how they might show up and tips and best practices to overcome them.

Guidance


- Review the four common issues with power laid out in [this document](#) and think about which ones resonate with you.
- Talk to people who can give you some insight on this - get feedback from peers, people who you line manage or are accountable for, or from someone who you are accountable to. Particularly if you hold more structural power than the person who you are asking for feedback from, remember that it is your responsibility to make space for that feedback and ensure that it can be given freely without fear of repercussions, and that you are able to hear that feedback from a place of openness and curiosity.
- Make a personal plan for what you want to do with this information - what opportunities are there for you to continue your learning? What learning is available to you? Who can support you with this journey? Who can hold you accountable? How will you know things are changing/improving?

2.2 UNDERSTANDING POWER AND WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE

 1-2 hours as a self-reflection exercise.

Power is one of the ways in which white supremacy culture can show up in your organisation. [This guide](#) from the Centre for Community Organizations, adapted from Dismantling Racism Works, outlines issues with power on pages 17-24 and explores Power Hoarding, Paternalism and Defensiveness. For each, it outlines what it is, behaviours to notice, antidotes, and questions to ask yourself to deepen your understanding of power and comfort with power sharing.

2.3 CREATING A SYSTEM OF ACCOUNTABILITY¹⁵

 1-2 hours for a group discussion.

When team members are not held to account to agreed standards in your culture, the standards mean nothing and will begin to slip. To stop your culture sliding back to the mainstream, it is essential that there is a clear system of accountability that everyone knows they are subject to and everyone feels supported to use. It is really important that people feel safe enough to hold their peers to account, this way accountability doesn't become the job of one person, or a subset of people. Often people who have felt unsafe in groups before, because of their identity, are most keenly aware of violations of group culture. However, the burden should not be placed on them to hold others to account; accountability needs to be collectively held and enacted.

This also normalises it as 'just something you do' in your organisation and lowers the threshold to take action. Often people can be very scared of holding others accountable, or of being held to account themselves. Our own inner critics can be very loud, so the thought of receiving criticism from others can be awkward at least and panic inducing at most. People may also have had negative experiences of accountability before and may resist or avoid it.

Accountability is required for the different ways you can impact each other at work. To keep this simple, and therefore more likely to be implemented, we offer three major areas for accountability:

¹⁵ With thanks to Charlotte Millar who developed and shared this tool.

- Delivery: being accountable for delivering the work you are each individually responsible for, in a way that facilitates smooth collaboration on projects and achieves external impact.
- Culture: being accountable for your behaviour, such that it aligns with your organisational values, as defined in your group agreement.
- Anti-oppression: being accountable for ensuring your behaviour is in line with your organisation's commitment to anti-oppression.

The following table sets out these different areas of accountability and the mechanisms used to enact them at different phases of escalation:

- Setting expectations: clarifying what is expected of team members in that area of accountability and the standard to which they will be held accountable.
- Course correction: the mechanisms which team members can use to offer feedback to one another to adapt behaviour, before it becomes an entrenched issue.
- Intervention: mechanisms to use, if course correction hasn't achieved the desired result.

This way people understand which tool to use, at which stage and who is responsible for what.

Area of accountability	Setting expectations	Course correction	Intervention
Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expectations should be clarified and agreed up front, e.g. in someone's objectives, a project plan, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Depending on your organisational structure, this could happen: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In 121s with manager and managee (with feedback flowing both ways) ○ In appraisals ○ Feedback between colleagues from other parts of the organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● E.g. Performance management
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collective agreement on values and behaviours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Non-violent feedback - to any colleague, anywhere in the hierarchy (section 6.2) ● Collective reviews of group agreement on culture (section 3.1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● E.g. Conflict mediation ● E.g. May involve performance management to ensure behaviour complies with collective agreement on culture
Anti-oppression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Commitment to anti-oppression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● E.g. Calling in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● E.g. Grievance/consequences appropriate to the situation and context

Wider issues

There may be issues of accountability around wider issues, for example, organisation-wide processes like project management. It should be made clear that team members should feed back on these processes to the person responsible for them.

Guidance

- Think through what the accountability mechanisms are in your organisation for the three major types of accountability and the three phases of escalation.
- Document all relevant policies and procedures for each phase and agree these with others in your organisation (using the relevant decision-making procedure for this type of decision in your organisation; see our '[Structure and Operations Toolkit](#)' section on decision-making).
- Make sure staff are trained in these procedures and are supported in carrying out the procedures that are relevant for them.
- To embed accountability in your organisation, think about where else you can 'bake it in'. Think about where different groups of stakeholders will meet or collaborate, what kind of impact could occur, and therefore what accountability mechanism could apply. For example:
 - ◆ Your appraisal system and how it connects to how people are living up to your values.
 - ◆ A board charter or document that sets out expectations of board conduct.
 - ◆ Volunteer policy.
 - ◆ Consultants policy and contracts.
 - ◆ Policies that govern conduct of other key stakeholders connected to your organisation. For example, NEON has a membership policy which sets out expectations of members' conduct, benchmarked against its three core values.

Chapter 3: Information

SHARING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

Introduction

Who has access to information is partially a choice about who has power because it gives people access to something that allows them to make different choices, and is often a proxy for social capital.

Information also intersects with power and privilege so it is important to be conscious and deliberate about who has access to information so that you don't replicate oppressive structures. This chapter is all about how information circulates within the organisation. You will look at what is meant by communication and transparency, the importance of good communication in helping the flow of information and how you can improve information flows through your organisation.

By the end of this chapter you will have:

Answers to the following core strategic questions

- How effective is communication in your organisation?
- What does communication actually mean?

The following outputs

- A diagram about how different types of information flow through your organisation.

Key definitions and concepts

At its simplest, communication is a method by which messages are conveyed. This can be both formal and informal, as well as explicit and

implicit. Often a lot of attention is paid to the more explicit forms of communication, both formal and informal, for example written documents such as strategies and policies, or written and verbal communication like email, slack, teams, intranet, meetings, or 121s. Implicit communication is equally important, and this includes (but is most certainly not limited to): organisational norms; people's actions, reactions and responses; how and when people communicate; what people choose to communicate about and what people choose not to communicate about.

It is easy to forget the forms of communication that are implicit and may serve to undermine or contradict the more formal communication that is put out there. For example, the organisation says it is open to feedback and creates policies that set out an approach to feedback. However, when you approach someone for feedback, it takes them a week to respond and, when they finally set up a meeting to discuss it, they only allot half an hour, and nothing changes as a result. If implicit and explicit communication are not aligned, you risk eroding trust.

The main choice you have to make about information is how transparent you want to be as an organisation. What do you want the default or norm to be? A simple way to define transparency in an organisational context is operating in a way that creates openness between different areas of the organisation, for example, between teams or between those with different levels of structural power, if you operate within a hierarchy.

In more traditional organisations, information is often dependent on your seniority and is kept restricted from the majority of staff. For example, information about finances or budgets might be kept to more senior positions. However, for a number of years now organisations

have shifted to more of a norm of transparency and trust. The idea is that unless something is strictly confidential (mostly for legal or HR reasons) then it can and should be shared and easily accessible. This includes anything from salaries to how and why a particular decision was made, or how a process will take place.

Whether you are operating in a very transparent culture or a more information-restricted one, communication is key to creating a healthy culture. Communication needs to be deliberate and intentional, whether that is in an email, a slack message, in person or on zoom. This means thinking through your key messages and what you want someone to think, feel and do as a result of your communication every single time. It also means making sure that this is modelled and made explicit so that the entire team is skilled to communicate well. It also means setting a tone that communication is always a two-way process. Even if you are simply sending an informational message to the team, it is important to build a culture where questions, feedback and ideas are welcome and the team knows the possible routes and processes to give these different types of responses.

Organisations often default to the communications styles and tools that dominate the culture they operate in. Consider whether the tools and style in which you communicate are chosen to suit your preferences, those of the people you are communicating with, or somewhere in-between. Actively seek feedback not only on the content of your communications, but also the timing, style/tone and delivery method.

It is also important to consider any 'filters' which your communications may go through. As a message passes from individual to individual, people will consciously or unconsciously edit it based on their own views and communications style. For example, a manager may be

briefed on a decision made by a more senior person and asked to share it with their team but, depending on whether the manager presents the decision in a positive or negative light, the team will respond differently.

Each organisation will face different communication challenges based on the work you do, who you communicate with and the levels of risk, sensitivity or confidentiality that are associated with your work. For example, for organisations doing direct action or working with groups who are vulnerable, such as those with difficult immigration statuses, there might be risks associated with being a visible part of the organisation and a need for anonymity. Consideration must then be given to how people are communicated to and about, who might be excluded or not represented within these communications, and what impact that might have. Getting collective input on how, when and why things are communicated internally is essential, and there can be a lot to learn from other organisations and groups within your movement on how best to understand and manage these types of situations.

Tools

One 'starred tool' to start with

3.1 - Information flows

 2-3 hours as a group.

1 additional tool

3.2 - Undertaking an internal communications audit

 2-3 hours as a group.


Further reading

→ StoryTagger - [An in-depth look at internal communications and its importance](#)

- Management Study Guide - [Communication Flows](#) in an [Organization](#)
- [The Leap](#) - [Off Time Communication Guidelines](#)
- Just Works - [20 Easy Ways to Improve Communication in the Workplace](#)
- Collectively Free - [Nonviolent communication is for the privileged](#)

Tools

3.1 INFORMATION FLOWS


 **2-3 hours as a group.**

As the saying goes, “knowledge is power”, so who has access to what information can influence how power is distributed inside the organisation. Without conscious thought, informal cliques can form with some people privy to more information than others and thus better able to influence decisions and events. In structures with a hierarchy, information can tend to get ‘stuck’ at senior levels, resulting in people in more junior roles feeling out of the loop and marginalised. Flat structures can have the opposite problem with so much information shared that it can be overwhelming to navigate, with some people switching off all together from the overflow of information. To avoid these problems, it’s best to have some simple rules on how you manage information flow inside your organisation.

Guidance

- Agree a simple way to share information from different parts of the organisation, such as across different working groups or teams. For example, this could be in the form of sharing key updates at a weekly team meeting.
- Have an agreement on what gets shared about important cross-organisational issues. This could be part of your ‘rhythm’. For example, you may wish to have monthly meetings where you address key organisation-wide issues, or it could be an agreement on what information gets shared publicly from confidential meetings, such as board meetings.
- Be clear on what type of information gets communicated via which channel. Here are three categories to simplify this:
 - ◆ Realtime (for example, slack, whatsapp) - this signals to your colleagues that you expect them to read and respond to this information immediately.
 - ◆ Asynchronous (for example, email) - this signals to your colleagues that you don’t need an immediate response but that this information is important for them to read and possibly respond. If you require a response, give a clear deadline for the response.
 - ◆ Static (for example, a handbook) - this is information that has been agreed and needs to be kept as a record or as instructions that colleagues need on an ongoing basis, such as how to submit expenses.
- Don’t confuse the channels! Often you can overload your colleagues on slack/whatsapp or email. Think about what kind of response you require from them before you send out the information.
- Don’t use these channels as a ‘meeting’! Often you can use realtime or asynchronous communication as a channel for discussion or debate. This is not a good forum for deliberation and can tend towards polarisation of views, especially if about sensitive topics. If you think the information you will share requires discussion, call a meeting.

3.2 UNDERTAKING AN INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS AUDIT¹⁶

 **2-3 hours as a group.**

It is surprising how many leaders of organisations fix methods of communications without engaging with the wider organisation to find out what works for them. Conducting an internal communications audit will give you the information you need to make communicating across your organisation easier and more effective.

For an effective internal communications audit you will need to:

1. Map the current flow of information in the organisation.
2. Determine how you will measure the effectiveness of your communication channels.
3. Engage staff in measuring effectiveness and identifying their communications preferences.
4. Put together an action plan for improved communications.
5. Share the action plan for feedback.
6. Finalise and implement the plan.

Don't forget to include 'unofficial' channels in your audit - you will not be able to gain a definitive assessment of these, as by their very nature they are not transparent. However, it is likely you will be able to find out enough information to take into consideration in formulating your action plan. Here is a basic example of an action plan:

Channel	Assessment	Action	Timescale	Success measure
Email newsletter	Not regularly read, visually unappealing, email liked as mechanism for delivery	Shorter content with links, redesign, better internal navigation	By X date	Improved feedback - built in interaction measures
Whatsapp	Fast and easy, overload of chat, too many groups	Consolidate groups, content protocols, 'Broadcast only' groups	By X date	Positive feedback from teams
Grapevine	Too much info learned here first	Faster flow of direct comms, fortnightly Q&A zoom	Action plan by X date, implement X date	Staff report official sources as primary information source

¹⁶ Contributed by Ali Brumfitt.

Chapter 4: Conflict And Feedback

FEEDBACK, TENSION AND CONFLICT AS PATHWAYS FOR GROWTH

Introduction

Your approach to conflict is shaped by your own life experience and your identities. This is unique to every one of us, but there are broad patterns that emerge. Those with marginalised identities can struggle to engage with conflict in a work environment, because they are used to accommodating others' needs, not being listened to and being silenced, which makes them less comfortable speaking up, or it may be that the conflict they do experience is high stakes - defending rights, freedoms, identities and experiences. For people with privileged identities, who have received messages their whole lives that their needs are important and they should use their voice, may feel more comfortable asserting themselves and challenging others, and may be less used to being challenged and having their opinions and ideas questioned. Conflict aversion and avoidance often shows up in those with privileged identities, stemming from this discomfort. These are not the only patterns and they are not true for everyone; your approach to conflict is as unique as your own life histories. Your approach is also not fixed, you may employ different approaches to different types of conflicts and when in different types of cultures. This chapter unpacks what is meant by conflict and feedback, what healthy and productive conflict and feedback looks like, why these are

important tools to embrace, and how you can build more spaces for conflict and feedback in your organisation, both at an individual and collective level.

By the end of this chapter you will have:

Answers to the following core strategic questions

- What does conflict and feedback look like in your organisation?
- How often is conflict and feedback used to help develop and improve ideas?
- What would you like conflict and feedback to look like in your organisation?
- How could you encourage healthy conflict and feedback in your organisation?
- What barriers do you see to doing this?

The following outputs

- A plan for where change needs to happen and how you're going to make that change.
- An understanding of how you perceive conflict and feedback with an anti-oppressive lens (dependent on how the dominant culture has shaped your life and experiences).

Key definitions and concepts

Conflict and feedback are terms that are often laden with negative connotations and can bring up a lot of feelings. To bring conflict and feedback into your organisation, it will be important to remove the

negative frames attached to these terms and present them as opportunities. Conflict and feedback are communication tools that help bring out dissenting opinions, diverse viewpoints, and can lead to better, well-tested decisions. Using these tools well builds trust among team members and builds commitment to decisions that have taken account of different group members' views. Below we unpack what we mean by these terms.

Conflict

We define conflict as a positive and healthy form of communication that aims to openly and constructively challenge ideas, with the best interests of the organisation, project or task at heart. In other words, it is a form of communication that allows you to unpack and explore ideas, approaches and issues with a view to seeking positive and constructive outcomes. For example, in developing a new process, a member of staff raises an issue that this process is not accessible to some people in the organisation. The person who developed the process invites that person to share their thoughts and makes space for this person and others to feedback on the process and there is discussion about how it can be improved.

When we frame conflict as a healthy form of communication, we mean it helps develop an understanding of how a lack of or aversion to conflict can be damaging. We understand conflict aversion as not acknowledging or engaging with conflict, or not initiating conflict when needed, resulting in a lack of exploration or critical analysis of decisions, ideas or concepts.

Engaging with conflict is essential for developing your anti-oppressive practice, as a failure to engage with conflict most often impacts those with marginalised identities. For example:

- In the development of a new programme, the person responsible does not listen carefully to critiques that others are raising about the way it will be rolled out. This means there is never an opportunity to get feedback and improve the programme, and ensure the programme is accessible to people with marginalised identities. When the programme is rolled out, it misses the mark and doesn't meet its aims.
- Someone in a managerial position is conflict averse and doesn't want to raise issues with a member of staff who is not performing. As a result, the problems build and that member of staff never has an opportunity to course correct, while other members of the team who are more junior and more likely to have a marginalised identity pick up the slack. This impacts on team morale, resentment builds, and it has a negative impact on the culture.

Conflict aversion and/or avoidance of conflict is one of the ways in which white supremacy can show up in your organisation, as it often looks like people in power avoiding or ignoring conflict. This often comes hand in hand with those who hold power focusing on how issues are raised rather than what is being raised, in an attempt to disengage from the issues and avoid taking responsibility for their actions. You see this in action, for example, when protesters are criticised for being violent and the conversation moves away from their legitimate complaints about the way in which, often, violence is being done to them.¹⁷ In organisations this might show up as attempts to equate the raising of issues as rudeness or

¹⁷ <https://qz.com/1863651/violence-and-extreme-actions-shouldnt-delegitimize-a-protest>

insubordination; this focus on politeness can be a way of denying people their right to have an emotional response to issues. It is important to acknowledge if any of these behaviours are showing up in the organisation and to challenge that appropriately - [the mainstreams and margins tool from Training for Change](#) might be particularly useful here.¹⁸

So, now you know what conflict is and why it's important to engage with it, how can you do conflict well? Unhealthy conflict¹⁹ can be identified by actions that 'land a punch' rather than genuinely achieve a better outcome. For example, a person:

- Lashes out at ideas without a rationale for their critique: "That's rubbish."
- Attempts to undermine a team member's skills without constructive criticism: "This is clearly not your forte."
- Attacks aspects of a team member's working style or approach: "You're so disorganised."
- Defends their own actions: "I told you how to prioritise the requirements."

Conflict is healthy when it's out in the open, visible to all members of the team, and available equally so everyone can safely participate. Many people experience discomfort around conflict, and this discomfort can be a valuable part of healthy conflict - it is a sign of

¹⁸ <https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.peachpit.com/articles/article.aspx?p=2086873&seqNum=2#:~:text=I%20distinguish%20these%20two%20kinds,project%2C%20no%20better%20design%20solution>

being exposed to new ideas, approaches and ways of thinking, and that helps people to grow and develop. In order to have healthy conflict, team members need to set aside their egos and avoid becoming defensive and remain open to other people's ideas. This is no easy feat, it can take time to build these skills and a commitment to ongoing practice and reflection, both at an individual and organisational level. It's not easy work and whilst there appears to be growing awareness of the importance of healthy conflict within movements and movement organisations, no assumptions can be made about the readiness or ability of individuals and groups to do this work. For organisations to nurture healthy conflict within their organisations, they must therefore also think about how to nurture healthy conflict at an individual level and support people at all levels to engage with and access resources that suit them. Some additional resources are offered in the 'further reading' section that can provide a starting point for this.

Feedback

Feedback is a gift, a mechanism by which people learn, develop and grow. We define feedback as communication that is aimed at supporting or challenging someone to develop and grow. Feedback can be used for three main purposes:

- Positive reinforcement - For reinforcing behaviour you want to see in the future.
- Developmental suggestions - For growth: for a person's individual development; for collaboratively developing ideas; and for collective development as a group, team or organisation.

- Course correcting feedback - For things that must change in order for an individual, or the organisation, to meet your expectations.²⁰

Feedback vs criticism vs compliments

Much like conflict, constructive and healthy feedback is for the benefit of the person, organisation or team on the receiving end. It is not about sharing opinions or unloading your feelings; and it must give someone information on how they can do things in the future - without this, it is simply criticism. Similarly, telling someone they are good at something or they have done something well is generally a nice thing for them to hear, but unless it gives information on why something is good, it is not feedback. Compare “this is well written” to “this is well written because it has a good structure and the concepts are clearly explained”.

²⁰ The Management Centre.

The statement...	...tries to...	It could...	...by saying...
“That’s rubbish”	undermine the team mate’s self-confidence.	help the team zero in on the reasons for the direction/decision	“Help me understand some of the decisions you made.”
“This is clearly not your forte”	elevate the speaker over other members of the team.	help the colleague move forward	“Seems like you’re spinning. Which parts can I help with?”
“You’re so disorganised”	deflect attention from the challenge in the project.	help the team prioritise tasks	“Are you having trouble prioritising?”
“I told you how to prioritise the requirements”	deflect attention away from the speaker’s shortcomings.	align the team’s understanding of the problem/challenge they face	“How did you interpret the priorities I gave you? Let’s make sure we’re on the same page.”

Reluctance to give feedback

A lot of people find it difficult to give feedback and may shy away from it, because of their own discomfort, lack of practice, negative experiences of giving/receiving feedback in the past, or a feeling of not being ‘qualified’ to give feedback. If you are feeling reluctant about it, take time to understand why and what kind of reframe would help you to move into a different place with this.

How to build conflict and feedback into your organisation

A framework that explains what healthy and productive conflict and feedback looks like in your organisation, and when people can and should use these tools, helps build shared understanding of what these things mean and creates the safety for people to be able to actually use this.

It can take some time to build the habit and it can help to create explicit spaces for this to happen - for example, having an explicit stage in project development where people can feedback and share their points of view, or creating space in meetings for people to critique ideas.

One example of this type of space can be found in Holacracy²¹ which is a type of organisational structure built around roles that uses a governance model that assigns power and responsibility to roles rather than by hierarchical rank. Foundational to the practice of Holacracy is that of understanding ‘tensions’ which are defined as “the feeling you get when you sense a gap between *what is* and *what*

²¹ <https://blog.holacracy.org/>

could be.”²² Tensions, as explored with greater depth in [this blog post](#), are understood within Holacracy to be sensed rather than thought; they are any feeling that is not neutral and can be positive or negative; they are evidence that a problem exists, but the tensions aren’t necessarily a problem in and of themselves; that each person will feel that tension individually in a way that is unique to them; that information can help dissolve tensions; that tensions may be layered and include sub-tensions; and that tensions should be processed one at a time, using Holacracy’s [governance meetings format](#). This can be a useful approach to understanding tension within an organisation where it is not necessarily attached to any one individual, but it exists by virtue of connection and interdependence in how roles interact with one another.

Tools


One ‘starred tools’ to start with

4.1 Understanding conflict

 1-2 hours as a self-reflection exercise or as a group.

2-4 additional tools


4.2 Developing an organisation conflict system

 As needed

4.3 Constructive feedback

 As needed.

4.4 Encouraging healthy conflict and collaboration

 As needed.

²² <https://blog.holacracy.org/holacracy-basics-understanding-tensions-98fc3c032acf>

Further reading

- Radical Candor - [tools for giving and getting better feedback](#)
- Cradle Community - [How to be an abolitionist today](#)
- Dismantling Racism Works - [Web Workbook](#)
- The Centre for Community Organizations - [White Supremacy Culture in Organizations \(adapted with permission from Dismantling Racism Works\)](#)
- Scarlett Hall - [A Dance with Defensiveness](#)
- The Management Center - [Developing People](#)
- Harvard Business Review - [The Assumptions That Make Giving Tough Feedback Even Tougher](#)
- Harvard Business Review - [Your Employees Want the Negative Feedback You Hate to Give](#)
- Kilmann Diagnostics - [Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Diagnostic Instrument](#)
- Mediators beyond borders - [Conflict literacy framework](#)
- [XR UK Transformative Conflict System](#)

Tools

4.1 UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

 1-2 hours as a self-reflection exercise or as a group.

This tool will help you understand what conflict looks like now in your organisation and what you would like it to look like. This tool is adapted from [this guide](#) from the Centre for Community Organizations - adapted from Dismantling Racism Works, and can be done individually or in collaboration with other members of your team.

Step 1: To understand what is currently happening in your organisation, answer the following questions:

1. How is feedback used to assess and improve programmes and activities?
2. If unexpected issues or developments occur how will they be addressed or responded to?
3. What techniques are used to regularly check in with colleagues and community members about needs, processes and goals?
4. To what extent do I or the organisation have space for people to be themselves?
5. What are the ways in which self-reflexivity, trust and openness to being challenged are fostered in the collective culture?

Step 2: Now ask yourself, what would you like to be different about each of these areas? What would these ideally look like in your organisation? The answers to these don't have to be long or complicated.

Step 3: Now think about possible barriers to getting there. These questions provide a starting point, you may have other areas that you want to consider, depending on what has come up in the first two parts of this exercise.

1. What are the unconscious beliefs that I or my organisation hold that create and sustain our fear of open conflict?
2. How can I, or my organisation, find ways to help manage my/our fear of open conflict, other than avoiding conflict altogether?

Step 4: Look at your answer to part 2 and 3, and consider what needs to change to get from where you are to where you want to be. How can you build this into your planning?

4.2 DEVELOPING AN ORGANISATION CONFLICT SYSTEM²³

As needed.

Many issues that arise in organisations are not interpersonal but are evidence of something that isn't working well for different people in different roles, for example, competing priorities, different approaches to a task, different ways of working etc. [Navigate](#), inspired by the practice in Holacracy to understand, explore and resolve tensions that arise within organisations, have both regular 'feedback meetings', to give and receive feedback as individuals, and regular 'systems evolution meetings' which are there to gather organisational feedback and help evolve and shape the organisational systems. With good systems for feedback, care and support, connection and community, you are less likely to end up in painful conflict. However, conflict will likely still arise, so it is beneficial to develop a system in a way that everyone has genuinely agreed to, and that they feel able to lean into that system when things are difficult.

This tool is about how to bring a conflict system into your organisation, setting out the conditions that will help make it successful and an approach to developing the system in a collaborative way.

Preconditions:

As outlined on page 5 of this toolkit, there are some conditions that support or diminish organisational systems - the stronger each of these things are, the stronger the system is. This foundation is what [Navigate](#), drawing on [Dominic Barter's work](#), refers to as 'pre-conditions'. These conditions are:

- Agreement/Engagement - How engaged are people with the system? Has work been done to genuinely engage and listen to people with different perspectives and at different levels? What is the actual level of agreement to this way of doing things?
- Information - How do people get access to information on the system, and is that information distributed in a way that ensures everyone is able to engage with it?
- Access - Do people know where and how to get support from the system? In what ways does the system reach out to support them?

²³ With thanks to Paul Kahawatte who developed and shared this tool

- Resources/capacity - Are the systems being built in a way that is within the reach of the resources you have and the capacity of those that will run/engage with it? What activities or tasks need to be taken on to make the system work, and what support do the people doing these tasks need?
- Time and space - What space and time is needed for the system to function well? How do we create the context for the processes we want within each system, both practically and symbolically?
- Feedback - What is in place to invite, listen to and respond to feedback on what's working/not working about the system, and how is that taken on to evolve the system ongoingly at a practical level?

Power underpins all of these elements and it is important to consider the implicit and explicit power at work in each element.

Developing your conflict system:

This process would be very difficult for one person to develop individually. A conflict system is a collaborative system that requires high levels of trust, engagement and agreement, and bringing people in early to the development of this system will help to lay the foundations for that and will likely make the system much better able to meet people's needs.

As outlined in more detail in [this document](#) written by Navigate, there are some different approaches that you can take to systems development:

- Mapping the current system - outlining what's happening at the moment. This can be particularly useful to unpack implicit systems.
- Asking system development questions - what is working in how we do things? What is not working in how we do things? If we had a magic wand and could realise all our hopes and dreams, what would it look like?
- Assessing the preconditions - looking at the preconditions listed above and assessing how those are currently being met and what's needed to make them work better.
- Criteria-based system creation - gather information that's important to everyone who is likely to be impacted by the system and using that information to create a proposal, get feedback and use that to make further iterations until everyone is happy.
- Create a proposal with input - this can be a fairly quick way to develop a system and involve others. Think first about what would work for you, speak to others about it and check for any concerns or ideas for improvement, and integrate those ideas. Formulate a proposal and present it to the group for a decision to be made. This will be most effective if you speak to people that you think might have a different opinion to you.

Some additional things to consider in developing your conflict system:

This list is by no means exhaustive; it is intended to highlight some things in particular to consider to help you develop this system.

- What is the scope of the system? For example, how do you define and understand conflict? What is this system for? What is it not for?
- What avenues will people have to raise conflicts?
- What steps will you take to support people to feel safe enough to be able to share and engage with the process? For example, what are the ground rules and boundaries that you expect people to follow? How will you support people to bring tensions where there is a power difference? How will you make clear what kind of consequences, if any, there might be for raising issues? How will you build trust and transparency?
- What kind of follow up and accountability processes do you need to have in place? In other words, how will you ensure that things are taken on board and changed as a result of this meeting? What happens if nothing changes and the same tensions continue to arise? How will you use this to learn, grow and evolve as an organisation?

Drawing on examples:

Seek inspiration from other organisations to help you understand what to do. This [example from XR](#), which was developed with support from Navigate, can be a good place to start.

4.3 CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK²⁴

As needed.

Much like conflict, there are healthy and unhealthy ways of giving feedback, and the traits of these follow the same pattern as healthy and unhealthy conflict. When the feedback is genuinely for the good of the collective - supporting your colleagues to grow and develop - it is constructive. When the feedback is about retaliation for your own hurt, it is destructive and is likely to spiral into unhealthy conflict. So when inviting people in your organisation to give each other feedback, it is essential you clarify the principles and process of constructive feedback and provide training.

It's essential to have a model of feedback that everyone can understand, that can be used and that can be improved on over time and with practice. There are different ways to do this, here are the principles and process that are used by NEON.

Feedback principles

- 1. Be aware of the negative frame around feedback:** Many people have had bad experiences of feedback and fear it. They may have a deficit of feeling heard, appreciated and valued, and have internalised negative criticisms of themselves. Feedback then gets filtered through this and can easily become blame, shame and criticism.
- 2. Change the frame! Feedback as a gift for the other person's growth and development:** Provide feedback that is constructive and points to how the person can have a more positive impact through their behaviour; "If I give feedback, energy flows to you".²⁵ For the person receiving the feedback, honour the time and effort the person giving you feedback has gone to, to bring this 'gift' to you. Consequently, make sure your curiosity about the content of the feedback outweighs any judgement you may make about the tone in which the feedback is given.
- 3. Avoid blaming language and use non-blaming language:** Blaming language conveys a negative generalised judgement about someone, for example "you are always late", that often assumes a motive, for example "you couldn't be bothered". Non-blaming language sticks to observable, specific behaviours, for example "you were 10 minutes late for this meeting", and sticks to "I" statements, where you speak for your own feelings and motives and don't make judgements about the other person's motives.

²⁴ With thanks to Charlotte Millar who developed and shared this tool.

²⁵ Miki Kashtan, BayNVC: <http://thefearlessheart.org>

4. Check your power and privilege:

- a. You will always give and receive feedback from your own positionality
- b. It is important that you interrogate how your positionality may be interacting with how you are perceiving things, and filter how you give and receive feedback through this lens. For example, if you want to give feedback, critically reflect on how the incident you experienced intersects with your structural power inside the organisation and the social power afforded to you by your identity/ies.
- c. As a general note, NEON staff are encouraged to share feedback in line with this process with people that have different social and structural power to them. We don't want feedback to build up into conflict and we also don't want people to suppress feedback because they feel that someone "might not be able to take it" - which could be perceived as infantilising - but we all need to consider how we give feedback in the most sensitive and constructive way.

5. Process your emotions before you give the feedback: The feedback process foregrounds emotions, and it is an essential part of the process that you share the emotional impact of someone else's behaviour on you. However, try not to give feedback if you are overwhelmed by your emotional reaction to someone else's behaviour. If you give feedback from a triggered place, it can easily become retributive rather than restorative; "If I am in pain, energy flows to me".²⁶ Equally, when you are receiving feedback, make sure your curiosity about the content of the feedback outweighs any judgement you may make about the tone in which the feedback is given.

6. Use communication that emphasises your needs, not just your feelings: This creates momentum for change, as understanding your needs helps the other person to see why their behaviour needs to change, not just what was wrong with it.

7. Receiving feedback:

- a. Due to principle 1 & 2 above, you can often be fearful when receiving feedback. Notice this, accept it and agree a time to receive feedback when you are open to receiving it with an attitude of curiosity rather than judgement.
- b. Remember that when someone is giving you feedback, they are doing a lot of emotional labour and are making themselves vulnerable by making their emotions and needs known to you. They may also be fearful that they won't be heard and may be shut down. So the person receiving feedback has a particular responsibility to be open and kind when receiving it, helping the other person feel heard and appreciated.
- c. This is particularly important when people with marginalised identities are giving feedback to people with more social power than them. The person receiving feedback here should in no way judge the person giving feedback and accept that the feedback may make them feel guilty. This is not an emotion that should be shared with the person with the marginalised identity, it is emotional work for the person receiving feedback to do on their own/with the support of their line manager.

²⁶ Miki Kashtan, BayNVC: <http://thefearlessheart.org/>

- d. In the moment of receiving the feedback, it can be helpful to reflect back your understanding from what you heard the other person say and check with them if this is accurate. This can be a way to show the other person that you have heard and are working to understand them. If you have misunderstood them, the other person can correct you at this point, saving potential misunderstandings and hurt.

Feedback process

1. Inform your colleague that you would like to give them some feedback. Ask for their consent for you to give them feedback. If the person has less structural power in the organisation, ask them if they would like their line manager, a supportive colleague, or a union representative to be involved in the process.
 - a. If it helps you over the 'threshold' of deciding whether to give feedback or not, you could consider signalling to the other person the level of significance the feedback has for you. For example, signalling that you have something to say that is not extremely impactful, but is better to share to allow for course correction.
2. If consent is given, schedule a meeting for the feedback at a time when you can both be calm and focused.
 - a. Depending on the level of significance of the feedback, it could be that a meeting is not necessary to convey it. For example, it could be appropriate here to have a short conversation: "Could I speak to you quickly to give you some minor feedback?"
 - b. If consent is not given, then, at NEON, the person with the feedback can go to the person's line manager with it.
3. Apply the principles in section 2 above, as you gather your thoughts about what exactly you want to feed back.
4. Use this framework to structure your thoughts²⁷ - this is how you will convey the feedback in the meeting.
 - a. This is what happened: anchor your feedback in something real and specific.
 - b. This is how it made me feel: try to focus on 'primary' emotions - for example, sad, hurt, afraid - as they are the real drivers of the impact.
 - c. This is what I need: understanding why you need the person's behaviour to change helps them more deeply understand why their behaviour needs to change.
 - d. This is what I would like to see happen: make a proposal for what the person could do to avoid a similar impact, as this is more likely to lead to change.

In the moment, it might be easier to remember **BIFF**: behaviour, impact, feeling, future. But, if you're able to, use steps 1-4 above.

²⁷ Challenge Consultancy: <http://www.challcon.com>

5. It can be helpful to document the outcomes of the conversation, so there is accountability for what was agreed and what one or both of you will commit to doing to improve the situation.

This is one way to develop a set of principles and a process for constructive feedback in an organisation. There are others. The most important thing is that you prioritise developing these for your organisation and provide training and support for people to enact them, and accountability for when they don't.

4.4 ENCOURAGING HEALTHY CONFLICT AND COLLABORATION

 As needed.

Part of this work is all about creating a culture where conflict is ok. The question in culture building is what can you do to encourage more of the collaboration mode of conflict in your organisation? Here are some practices that help do this, taken from [The Management Centre article on creating healthy feedback cultures](#).

- Encourage dissenting views. When you are developing new project ideas or strategies, proactively design meetings to include input from all group members about what's strong and what's weak about the idea.
- Clarify decision-making. Make sure people are clear and confident about how their views will be taken into account in the decision-making process. Without this, people could feel that it is pointless to share their views if it makes no difference to the final decision that is made.
- Give people time to prepare. If people are more introverted or if they prefer to think through their perspective before they voice it, give them some key questions to consider ahead of any group meeting. This helps mitigate the risk that they feel overwhelmed in the meeting and hold back from sharing their views.
- Do go-rounds. For issues where everyone's views are needed, do go-rounds where each person speaks for a similar length of time.

- Build more trust. If you find that some people are still holding back from asserting their opinions and needs in group meetings, you may need to build more trust through one of the mechanisms outlined in the previous section.
- Offer multiple channels for sharing views. Some people may feel unsafe or uncomfortable voicing a dissenting opinion, especially if it is about a sensitive subject. Offer people the chance to share their view 121 or through email/other written channels. The goal is to get to a place where people feel comfortable enough to share their views in a group but, depending on the situation, a more confidential channel may be more appropriate.
- Role model and appreciate healthy conflict behaviours. Publicly recognise and appreciate it when people respectfully and constructively challenge each other. Make sure you model the kind of behaviours you want to see that build towards healthy conflict and collaboration. Use some of the behaviours set out in the tool for giving and receiving constructive feedback.
- Ask the group! Ask group members what would help create the conditions for them to actively assert their views, whilst also being committed to cooperation.

Putting it into practice

- Looking at the list above, which of these do you think you would like to try in your organisation? It isn't possible to do everything at once, choose 2-4 of the above that you would like to implement first, and gradually introduce more steps once those practices have taken hold.
- Consider what else will need to happen to make space for these practices to happen. For example, if you decide to pick number 4 - do go-rounds, then consider the additional time that will be needed for this to occur and make sure that time is available. Or, if you want to do number 6 - offer multiple channels for sharing views, consider what channels are currently available, and find out what would be a good additional option by consulting members of your team.
- We recommend taking each step deliberately, collaboratively and openly. Share with your team what you are trying to do, ask for their input on how to do it, get feedback on how it's working and use that feedback to make changes. As well as getting valuable information, you will also model the type of feedback behaviours you want to see more of.

Chapter 5: Resource Distribution

HOW TIME, MONEY AND ENERGY ARE INVESTED

Introduction

How you allocate resources communicates what you value and prioritise; the areas that get the most time, money and energy are generally the areas that get the most attention. Conscious, strategic decision-making about where to allocate resources can enable you to make the most of limited and finite resources in line with your strategy and values. This is closely connected with roles and responsibilities - allocate resources to people who own those resources and use them to get work done. This is explored in more detail in our '[Structure and Operations Toolkit](#)'. This chapter will look at factors that mean resources get allocated to things that are not in line with your strategic aims; common assumptions about progress and growth and what these mean for your resources; and how you can best distribute your resources to help you achieve your strategic aims.

Note: in this chapter, we are not considering people as part of your resources. This section is not about whether you have enough people to achieve your strategy - that is something you can consider when looking at structure and roles and responsibilities. This is about what resources are available to your people and how you use them.

By the end of this chapter you will have:



Answers to the following core strategic questions

- Where are you allocating your resources currently?
- Does this align with your organisational priorities?
- Are there things that you'd like to be doing that you aren't able to do?
- Are there areas of your organisation that are under-resourced? What do they need?



The following outputs

- Ideal world visioning: where you want to spend your time, money and energy
- Knowing where you are currently spending your resources



Key definitions and concepts

A lack of resources can be a limiting factor and a source of frustration: there is often pressure from funders to do more with less in ways that are unsustainable; your area of work might be particularly underfunded; and the lack of resources available to your cause can feel demoralising. This might mean that you spend more resources doing work that is easier to get funding for and put less resources into areas that require unrestricted funding - for example, core operational functions and teams - which puts additional strain on certain teams or staff members. There are two things you can do to help you manage this: develop a fundraising strategy (for more on this, see our '[Structure and Operations Toolkit](#)'); and make strategic

decisions about how to allocate funds in a way that aligns with your priorities and values.

There are a few things you should unpack before starting this work, to understand how you can approach this differently.

Progress and growth²⁸

Progress has become synonymous with growth; capitalism tells us that bigger is better, and if we're not bringing in more money and doing/achieving 'more' then we aren't succeeding. When you see growth, and therefore success, as bringing in more money and people, you ignore the harm that growth can do - for example, becoming increasingly reliant on funders; focusing on quantity over quality; the negative impacts on your staff, such as stress and burnout.


You can counter this by thinking about growth in different ways - for example, evolving as an organisation with a robust and skilled staff team; being able to learn and develop so your work has more impact; or building better relationships with our members. This gives you scope to rethink what progress and growth means to you and to set goals in line with your values and priorities.

Abundance vs scarcity mindset

An abundance mindset is a way of working in which you consider the wealth of resources at your disposal to deliver a project. They may take the form of time, support and ideas. This is opposed to a scarcity mindset, which likely isn't uncommon to find in your work context if you are often used to working with extremely limited resources and trying to make big things happen.


²⁸ <https://coco-net.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Coco-WhiteSupCulture-ENG4.pdf>, p33

LEADERS WITH AN
Scarcity Mindset



- ❶ Resource constrained
- ❷ I win/you lose
- ❸ Lack of Trust
- ❹ I have the answers
- ❺ Cost control
- ❻ Focus on costs
- ❼ Buy time/hours
- ❽ I expect bad news
- ❾ Micromanagement
- ❿ Stress and frustration

LEADERS WITH AN
Abundant mindset



- ❶ Prioritize better
- ❷ I win/you win = we all succeed
- ❸ Trust = relationships
- ❹ Together, we can find the answers
- ❺ Investment with a return
- ❻ Buy desired outcome/results
- ❼ I expect high outcome/results
- ❽ I expect high performance
- ❾ Stewardship
- ❿ Confidence and success


How you distribute your resources communicates what is important

Work can only happen if you allocate resources to it - someone needs to own that piece of work and have the time, energy, tools and support they need to get that work done; if not, it won't happen. This is also a form of implicit communication around your values and priorities. If you say, for example, that your organisational culture is important, but it's not clear who has responsibility for that and there are no resources dedicated to it, then it communicates that this is not actually a priority, and the statement can feel disingenuous. Your strategy and values are useful tools to help you allocate your resources. When making decisions ask: does this fit with your strategy and is this aligned with your values?

Tools

One 'starred tool' to start with

5.1 Visualising resource distribution

 As needed.

1 additional tool

5.2 'Seventh generation thinking'


 1-2 hours as a group.

Further reading

- David Carboni - [People are not resources](#)
- Flevy Blog - [4 Effective Ways to Manage Resources More Efficiently](#)
- Living Cities - [Shifting Mindsets: Scarcity vs. Abundance](#)
- Gwendolyne VanSant - [On Abundance Thinking & Being a Black Woman Leader](#)
- Intentional Communication Consultants - [The Scarcity Mindset is Killing Us](#)

Tools

5.1 VISUALISING RESOURCE DISTRIBUTION

 **As needed.**

This is a tool to help you understand where your resources are currently being allocated, and how that aligns with your values, priorities and goals. By visualising your resources and bringing them to your consciousness, you can start to allocate your resources differently and make the best use of what you have.

This can be done as a live exercise - for example, taking information as it is now by tracking what is happening with resources over a period of time and then reviewing them, or as a reflective exercise - for example, by thinking back to the previous week, or month and making some informed estimates.

It is important to do this as things are, and not as you would like things to be, or how you think things 'should' be.

Step 1: Choose one area of your resources that you would like to focus on, for example, time, money, effort or rewards.

Step 2: Document where these resources are currently being allocated. You can do this in broad categories - for example, for time this might be 'admin', 'responding to emerging situations', 'meetings/phone calls', 'innovation/organisational development', 'personal development'. If you're struggling with grouping your resources, you might find it easier to note some of the activities and then come up with a heading - be careful not to get too lost in the detail here! For example:

- Time - make a note of what you spend your time doing, say over a week or a month. Categories here might be 'admin', 'personal development', 'line management', 'responding to emergencies', or 'strategic development/innovation'.
- Money - look at the finances, say for the previous quarter or year, and your expenditure. Categories here might be 'different projects/programmes', 'fundraising', 'learning and evolution'.
- Effort - note what is taking up a lot of your energy. Categories here might be related to the organisation, such as 'managing relationships' or 'crisis management', or they might be more personal and related to things that you find challenging or that cause you stress.

- Rewards - note what types of things are rewarded, for example, financially, with praise/recognition, with opportunities for promotion/development. Categories here might be 'work done to a high quality', 'people embodying the organisation's values', 'working overtime' or 'volunteering for additional responsibilities'.


Step 3: Find a way to rank these categories from most to least and present that in a way that makes sense to you. For example, you could estimate what percentage of time you spend in each of the categories and create a pie chart to help you visualise it, or you could write a list and put it in order.

Step 4: Take a step back and think about what this means, using the following questions as a guide:

- Do the things that are taking up your resources match with your strategic priorities?
- Do the things that are taking up your resources match with your organisational values?
- What is being implicitly communicated to the wider organisation?

Step 5: Are you happy with the answers to the above questions or are there things you would like to change? If the answer to the first part of the question is 'no', the next tool can help you envision where you would like to allocate your resources.

5.2 'SEVENTH GENERATION THINKING'

 1-2 hours as a group.

This is taken from P34 of [this guide](#) from the Centre for Community Organizations, adapted from Dismantling Racism Works, and is related to how you think about progress and growth, and what that looks like for your organisation. We recommend doing this activity as a group made up of people from across the organisation.

- Take the time to think about the vision you have for your organization in 25, 50 or even 100 years - not just the upcoming season or your five-year strategic plan. Foster 'seventh generation thinking' by asking how the actions of the group now will affect people seven generations from now.
- Make sure that any cost-benefit analysis includes all (i.e. human) costs, not just financial ones. Human costs may include, for example, the impacts on morale, credibility and use of resources.
- Include process goals in your planning, such as how you want to do your work, not just what you want to do.
- Ask the people you work with to evaluate how growth and change management affects them.

Questions to reflect on:

- Do the projects being pursued have meaning for your wider community?
- Does their relevance extend beyond the moment of engagement and connect with longer term priorities and goals?
- How are your activities woven into community life and existing community activities?
- How are community priorities being integrated into your projects?
- Does the organisation work to challenge 'work-over-people' culture? Is the well-being of your staff and volunteers important to you? Do you invest time, energy, resources and reflection in assuring this well-being?
- Is it really your desire to grow as an organisation? Could you be more precise about your desire and vision for your organisation - for example, is your desire actually to be continually learning, or continually improving? Instead of growing as an organisation, has there been a consideration for strengthening partnerships with organisations who have resonant missions and values?
- For those who work with youth,* how are they engaged at various levels of the organisation? Are these engagement techniques aligned with the values of the organisation and are they structured in a way which makes sense for the organisation? (*This can apply to all organisations working directly with communities, in particular those that are marginalised and/or vulnerable.)

Chapter 6: Alignment

MAKING SURE EVERYONE IS ON BOARD

Introduction

As explored in our '[Organisational Strategy Toolkit](#)' your organisation has a purpose and is working towards a vision of the world. Alignment is all about the component parts of your organisation - for example, your people, policies and processes, and your culture - pulling in the same direction and working towards a shared goal. This chapter will look at what alignment is, why it is important, why there might be mismatches and ways of generating greater alignment.

By the end of this chapter you will have:

Answers to the following core strategic questions

- How closely aligned are you across the organisation?
- Where is there a mismatch in alignment and why does that exist?

The following outputs

- A summary of current levels of alignment.
- A plan to generate further alignment, with checkpoints for how to do so.

Key definitions and concepts

Alignment

Alignment means that everyone has the same goals in mind, and is working under a set of shared values that have been clearly articulated to ensure common understanding. This does not necessarily mean that everyone is in complete agreement - difference in belief or approach can provide valuable and constructive challenges to decision-making and direction (see the conflict and feedback section for more information about this). High levels of trust in the organisation and healthy conflict will enable people to commit more deeply to ideas, knowing that they have been openly discussed and debated.

In order to generate alignment, you need to know what you are trying to align on. For example:

Your strategy

With a clear organisational strategy that has been shaped by others in the organisation, you can create a unified direction and boundaries for action, giving people autonomy and ownership of their work and the ability to be creative and innovative. Without this unity and these boundaries, people's actions will feel purposeless and their commitment and motivation will dwindle.

Your values

As explored in our '[Organisational Strategy Toolkit](#)', at an organisational level your values are the core principles that set out the foundations for your organisational beliefs. Gaining alignment around your values means that people know what your values are, have a shared understanding of how your organisation defines those values, and what they look like in practice. Without this shared

understanding, people might interpret your values differently, which can lead to behaviours you don't want to see in your organisation. For example, if one of your values is 'trust' but it does not specify that part of that is trusting that your colleagues will provide feedback and guidance when needed, then someone might interpret this as trusting that everyone knows what they are doing, and then not offer that guidance. This can lead to misunderstanding and misalignment.

Organisation-wide decisions

This might be, for example, development and roll out of a new policy or process, or the introduction of a new role, team, project or programme. Gaining alignment helps people understand what is happening and feel invested in the outcome; it creates space to scrutinise the decision and to course correct where needed, and it means that new things and changes are rolled out smoothly and with the intended impact.

Alignment to role/goal

At an individual level, this is about how your people align to their role - is it a good fit for their skills, experience and interests, and does it offer them opportunities to develop in the ways that feel rewarding? A misalignment here can be frustrating for everyone involved, and a lot comes down to good recruitment practices and supporting staff within their role. This means you can get the right people into the right roles.

Whatever it is you are trying to gain alignment on, there are a few core principles to help generate alignment:

- Communicate about the issue clearly, regularly and through multiple channels.

- Create opportunities for meaningful engagement, input, co-creation and feedback.
- Recognise impacts, hear concerns and use that to shape decision-making and development.

Where there is a lack of alignment, acknowledge it and use the principles above to understand why this lack of alignment exists and how to move forward to get better investment and engagement.

Tools

🌟 One 'starred tool' to start with

6.1 Aligning on values

🕒 1-3 hours as a group.

✂ 1 additional tool

6.2 Group agreement on culture


🕒 2-3 hours as a group.

📁 Further reading

- ULEX - [Sustainable Activism Regenerative Organising](#)
- Forbes - [A Simple Flow For Thinking About Organizational Alignment](#)
- Harvard Business Review - [How Aligned Is Your Organisation?](#)
- The Management Centre - [How to develop and use core values](#)
- Navigate - [Convergent facilitation](#)

Tools

6.1 ALIGNING ON VALUES

 1-3 hours as a group.


This [values creation exercise tool](#) from [ATC Tools for Transformation](#) is a useful exercise for either developing a new set of values for your organisation, or for digging into your existing values to understand whether they are fit for purpose.

This tool is broken down into three phases.

- Phase 1: Define a shared set of values.
- Phase 2: Make values meaningful and relevant in the context of working together.
- Phase 3: Implement new (or renewed) values in a way that builds alignment and commitment.

We looked at phase 1 in the vision and values chapter of our '[Organisational Strategy Toolkit](#)'. Phase 2 (pages 5-7 of that toolkit) and 3 (pages 7-14) will help you understand what your values mean in practice - what the behaviours you want and don't want are, and how to implement your values, gaining alignment and accountability across the organisation.

6.2 GROUP AGREEMENT ON CULTURE

 2-3 hours as a group.

Your group agreement on culture sets out your core values and the behaviours you encourage that enact those values, and the behaviours you discourage that contravene your values. This forms the basis of trust in your organisation, as it sets out what group members expect from each other in terms of behaviour.

Guidance

1. Work together and with key stakeholders to identify your three core values. For simplicity and integrity, these should link to the values you want to see lived out in the world. This also helps guard against the mainstream culture seeping through into your organisation. Keeping it

at three values also makes them memorable and easier to enact. Remember these values are operational and you want them to be embedded in people's behaviour, so keeping things simple makes this more likely to happen.

2. Once you have identified what your core values are, think creatively about the kinds of behaviours that you want to see in your organisation, and that would bring these values to life. Be as specific as you can!
3. Then think through what behaviours you don't want to see, those that would contravene your values. Again, be as specific as you can be - you want people to be able to implement this easily.
4. Make sure you apply an anti-oppression lens to these values and think specifically about how the kinds of behaviours that would make the culture actively work to dismantle oppression. For example, consider how certain behaviours are often exhibited by people with privileged identities - talking first, talking most, not taking on more 'menial' tasks like tidying the office.
5. For consistency, you should use this agreement with all people and stakeholders who work for or with your organisation, for example, consultants, volunteers, board members. Having a consistent approach means you encourage everyone to model your culture and you mitigate the risk of having pockets of misaligned behaviour in your organisation, which is particularly problematic when it comes from people with more structural power either in the organisation or in society.
6. Think through where else you can embed this agreement to make it real and to hold people accountable to it. For example, you could embed it in:
 - a. Your appraisal system and provide feedback on how people are living up to your values.
 - b. A board charter or document that sets out expectations of board conduct.
 - c. Volunteer policy.
 - d. Consultants policy and contracts.
 - e. Policies that govern conduct of other key stakeholders connected to your organisation. For example, NEON has a membership policy which sets out expectations of members' conduct, benchmarked against its three core values.
7. Review your group agreement on culture every year. Work together to reflect on your values and the behaviours associated with them. Do these still hold? Do they need to be updated? In the early years of your organisation, you may find that you change your values to more accurately reflect the ideal you hold true. It is through trying to enact your values that you work out if they are actually the right ones! In the early years especially, you are still figuring this out, so it is important to create space to reflect and evolve your culture.

Chapter 7: Sustainability, Care And Connection

CREATING RELATIONAL CULTURES IN YOUR ORGANISATION

Introduction

This chapter is all about building a relational culture which prioritises sustainability, care and connection to create an environment where people can come to work as their authentic selves, in the knowledge that they will be treated with respect and dignity at all times. It looks at what we mean by relationality, sustainability, care and connection in an organisational context, why this is important for your organisation and ways of creating relational cultures in your organisation.

By the end of this chapter you will have:

Answers to the following core strategic questions

- What does your culture incentivise?
- Are there aspects of your culture that are not possible for some people to be fully part of?
- What level of emotion is acceptable in your workplace?

The following outputs

- A summary of what sustainability, care and connection looks like for your organisation in practice.

- An understanding of what this currently looks like.

Key definitions and concepts

Relationality

At its most simple, a relational culture is one that believes in and supports people to build relationships as core to achieving its mission. It's not an add-on or afterthought - it's built into the heart of the organisation, with processes to facilitate and incentivise it, and because care and connection enable the organisation to be successful.

Relationality helps people to be vulnerable and able to share when they've made mistakes or need help; creating shared trust and interdependence, where people feel safe enough to be able to share issues from their personal lives that may impact how they show up at work. This is particularly important for those who experience marginalisation and oppression - knowing that they won't experience this at work and, if they do, that there are channels to safely raise and challenge it, is a huge relief and allows them to bring their A game.

Clear boundaries around what relationality means are essential to creating it - knowing and understanding where the lines are provides the safety to be able to do it in practice. These boundaries will look a bit different for different organisations, and careful consideration must be given as to how you go about establishing the spaces and forums for sharing, exploring the ways to make these spaces meaningfully safer for those using them. Co-creating ground rules for using the spaces is a common approach, but, as Daniel Hunter has

discussed, this can also be a harmful approach that centres mainstream experiences if it is not done in ways that get actual agreement on the rules, what they mean in practice, and what accountability looks like.²⁹

Sustainability

This is all about working in a way that is manageable in the long term. There are a lot of practical considerations here, for example, ensuring that working hours, schedule, workload and deadlines are manageable, and ensuring that staff are mentally and emotionally supported. Your organisational culture is a supportive factor here - when things are tough, your culture is what ensures staff continue to feel held.

Care

This is about being attentive to what's around you and showing respect and consideration. It includes several types of care: care for others - for example, checking in, offering support, giving feedback and input, collaborating on work; care for your work - doing it to a high standard and paying attention to quality; and care for your environment - how you show up in shared virtual and in person work spaces.

Connection

There are different types of connection: connection with who you are working with, or for - for example, colleagues, supporters or members; connection with what's being done - organisational vision, the projects or programmes; and connection with how it's being done -

²⁹ <https://www.trainingforchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Breaking-the-Rules.pdf>

values, ethos or approach. Connection brings your organisation together, supports collaboration and strengthens your culture.³⁰

Self-responsibility

You are responsible for your actions and how they impact others. This is central to a relational culture - the organisation can support, encourage and prioritise relationality, but it equally requires each person to treat others with care and respect and take responsibility for doing so.

Two important notes

Bringing your whole self does not mean being unfiltered. You don't have to look very hard to find examples of people saying harmful things and justifying it as 'being honest' or 'being themselves' as justification for expressing views that violate other people's dignity and respect. Boundaries and guidelines will help you establish what is and isn't acceptable, and highlighting the importance of self-responsibility will make clear that people are responsible for their actions and how they impact on others. You can refer back to the previous chapter on conflict and feedback for ways to manage situations like this, should they arise.

Work is not therapy. Whilst it is important to build trust and interdependence, and work can certainly create a therapeutic space if it's a healthy culture and people are able to thrive and grow, it is really important people don't become overly dependent on each other for psychological well-being. Your colleagues are not therapists!

³⁰ <https://blog.iostle.me/blog/why-connection-in-the-workplace-matters>

How to build relational cultures in your organisation


It can take time to build a relational culture into your organisation, depending on what is currently happening and where you want to get to.

1. Have a vision for where you'd like to be - what does sustainability, care and connection mean to your organisation? What would you like things to look like?
2. Understand where you are currently - what does your culture incentivise? Where are there potential blocks to building a more relational culture?
3. Make a plan for how to get there - are there simple things you can do immediately? What plans do you need to make for longer term change?

Tools

One 'starred tool' to start with

7.1 Practical steps to building care, connection and sustainability into your organisation

 2-3 hours as a group.

1 additional tool

7.2 Creating boundaries - safer spaces policy

 2-3 hours as a group.


Further reading

- Relational Uprising - [Relational Culture Framework](#)
- Training for Change - [Sustaining Self-Care: a tool for personal awareness](#)

- Daniel Hunter - [Breaking the Rules: How Ground Rules Can Hurt Us](#)
- Rightway - [Activist Trauma and Recovery](#)
- Denise Shanté Brown - [Check-ins for Connection & Care: A Growing Collaborative List of Questions and Prompts to Help hold Space](#)
- Samaritans - [Developing listening skills: the listening wheel](#)
- Mind - [Free resources to help you take care of business](#)
- Rockwood Leadership Institute - [8 Practices for a More Emotionally Just Organisation](#)

Tools

7.1 Practical steps to building care, connection and sustainability into your organisation

 2-3 hours as a group.

Care and connection needs to become part of the fabric of your organisation, embedded on a structural level in your day-to-day practices, in policies and processes, and in how you develop and evolve your strategies, projects and programmes. This tool helps you understand what these words mean in practical terms, what needs to happen to enable care and connection, and how you are going to do it.

This tool is inspired by a [blog post](#) from Agustina Vidal outlining eight practices for building more emotionally just organisations that dismantle harmful practices.


Guidance

- Get a group of people together to do this activity - think about who is in the room and make it as representative of your organisation as possible.
- Set this up in a way that works for you - the table below is one example of what the finished product might look like, but you could do this using a collaborative tool like Miro or Jamboard, or as an open discussion with one or two people capturing everyone's thoughts and noting them down.
- Start with the question: what does care, connection and sustainability look like? Brainstorm ideas about what these mean (this can be vague at this stage). Prompts here might be:
 - What kind of behaviours do we, or don't we, want to see?
 - How do we want people to feel about their work?
 - How do we want people to interact and respond to each other?
- Move on to ask: what does this mean? Gather together ideas of what care, connection and sustainability look like in practice. This will be much more tangible, things that can be actioned.
- Move on to what needs to happen in practice - this is drilling down into what needs to change in how you currently work.
- Then, think about how you are going to set about actioning the practices. Some things might be quick fixes - adding check-in/out questions to meetings, for example, or changing your 121 structure. Other aspects might take a bit longer and need planning for implementation.

→ The final steps involve deciding who is going to be responsible for implementing these changes and when they will happen. By assigning responsibilities and deadlines, you make it an actionable plan. Remember to make sure this planning is realistic, and will lead to the sustainable changes you want.

Area	What does this look like?	What does this mean?	What needs to happen in practice?	How are we going to do this?	Who?	When?
Sustainability	People don't feel tired and stressed out by how much work they have, or pressured to work extra hours.	E.g. People are able to do their work within their working hours, and their workloads are manageable.	E.g. We need to review how we set individual work plans and goals in a way that is realistic for people's capacity.	We are going to do individual work planning and goal setting collaboratively, with discussion about how long work will take and how much time a person will have to do it, to inform the final product.	G will research work plan options.	Present at a team meeting next month, then plan to trial and implement.
Care						
Connection						

7.2 CREATING BOUNDARIES - SAFER SPACES POLICY

 **2-3 hours as a group.**

Boundaries can help create safer environments by setting clear expectations around what is and isn't acceptable behaviour. What that looks like will depend on what's appropriate for your culture and the type of spaces you are trying to create. As outlined by [Dismantling Racism Works](#), by grounding spaces in respect and building trust, you can create spaces that recognise the dominant and harmful cultures we live in and support people to take responsibility for their actions within the space.

There are some important things to note here.

Firstly, the term 'safer spaces' as an alternative to 'safe space' is a recognition that no space can be fully safe because of the pervasiveness of systems of oppression. Secondly, it is important to consider how the boundaries for the safer space are developed, who is centred in the process of that development and what accountability looks like in this context.

Guidance on how to create safer spaces and develop ground rules can be found from Daniel Hunter at Training for Change [here](#), and we have included an example policy from Sisters Uncut below.

Sisters Uncut Safer Spaces Policy

1. Consent; before you touch anyone or discuss sensitive topics ask if they are comfortable with that. Don't assume your physical & emotional boundaries are the same as other people's.
2. Be aware of your privileges; including less obvious or invisible hierarchies. Think about how your words, opinions and feelings are influenced and who they might exclude or harm.
3. Calling out; if you have acted or spoken harmfully, even if unintentionally, someone will bring this up with you. If this happens, listen and reflect on what they are saying even if you think they may be wrong. Don't try to absolve yourself of responsibility.
4. Learning; if you don't understand something, just ask. You may be directed to a book, website or skillshare to learn more. We are each responsible for our own learning and if we feel able, for sharing it with others.
5. Labour; please contribute whatever you can; this will be different for everyone and that's fine. It's ok to make mistakes. Please show appreciation for the hard work of others and be considerate when you offer criticism.
6. Social; like other communities we build social relationships outside of meetings and actions. We commit to this Safer Spaces policy wherever we are together, this includes ensuring that ALL spaces are accessible to disabled people and we create opportunities to socialise without alcohol. You are not expected to participate in social events, this shouldn't make you feel less included.

7. Security; please don't use the names/details of people who have been involved in organising and carrying out our actions. This makes sure that journalists, Police or other unknown people don't hold information that could put sisters at risk of harm.
8. Community accountability; when a sister(s) is harmed, we use the principles of transformative justice to hold ourselves to account and find ways to heal, learn and move forward together. You can speak to any other sister if you would like information or support to work through an issue you have experienced or observed. Our Accountability Toolbox is a useful starting point to learn about transformative justice and accountability in Sisters Uncut.

When we work together in this radical and transformative way, we are creating the change we wish to see in the world.³¹

Here are some methods for developing relationality, within boundaries:

Active listening means to listen to another not in order that you can then speak next (!), but to truly understand the position, perspectives and experiences of the speaker. The result is better decision-making, and a more inclusive conversation. Read about the core skills of active listening [here](#).

Storytelling is about sharing elements of your own personal histories that help convey your values and why you do the work that you do. Sharing stories like this helps you connect with others. One method used in Movement Builders is resonance practice, where one person shares a meaningful moment that shaped them and another person listens using active listening. This method was learnt from Relational Uprising in the US, and you can read more about this practice and their work [here](#).

Self-awareness is the ability to monitor your inner world and observe your thoughts and feelings without getting swept away by them. It helps you understand your own internal experience and your impact on the internal experience of others. Your thoughts and feelings are multi-layered and there is no quick fix for building self-awareness! Key practices to help develop self-awareness are:

- Journaling - tracking your own thoughts and feelings and understanding what triggers certain emotions or thoughts.
- Therapy/counselling - for extra help processing painful emotions and difficult experiences.
- Asking for feedback - others can help you see sides of yourself that may be unseen to you.

Read about more practices to develop self-awareness [here](#).

³¹ Original list can be found on the Sisters Uncut website here: <http://www.sistersuncut.org/saferspaces>

Chapter 8: Learning And Evolution

CREATING A CULTURE OF EXPERIMENTATION, GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

Learning and evolution applies to both individuals in the organisation and their personal development and growth, and how the whole organisation learns and grows. This chapter is about how you create a culture of learning within the organisation, enabling individuals, teams and the whole organisation to be continuously building knowledge, experimenting, learning from experience and evolving. It looks at what is meant by a culture of learning and evolution, why this is important and how you can nurture and encourage this.

By the end of this chapter you will have:

Answers to the following core strategic questions

- What would a progressive approach to learning and development look like for your organisation?
- How can you build structures for experimentation, learning and evolution?

The following outputs

- An understanding of what learning and evolution means/looks like for your organisation.
- A rough structure for a progressive learning and development (L&D) policy for your organisation.

Key definitions and concepts

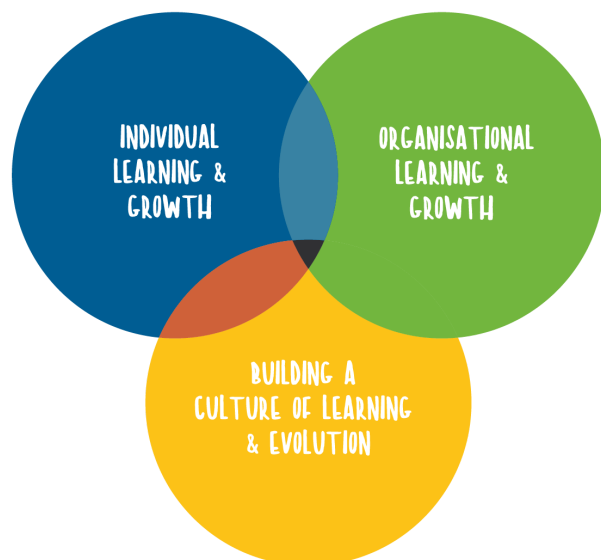
What is learning and evolution and why is it important?

This encompasses what, when and how individuals within the organisation are encouraged and supported to learn and put their learning into practice, and what that looks like at an organisational level - how do you, as an organisation, try new things, learn from them and evolve? The two are interlinked and interdependent - an interest and openness to learning and growth at an individual level helps facilitate wider organisational growth, and vice-versa. Learning and development enables you to go deeper and work with greater understanding and efficacy. It also prevents you from repeating the same mistakes.

Ultimately, your organisation exists to achieve change on the issues you care about, and our toolkits contain the building blocks to help your team collectively achieve results, supported by systems to track results and evaluate them. Without these systems, it is too easy for team members to put their own needs (ego, development, recognition, etc.) ahead of the collective goals of the team. If a team has lost sight of the need to create impact in the world, the impact simply won't happen.

What does learning and evolution look like for your organisation?

People are by nature curious to learn and try new things. A culture of learning is one that takes this assumption seriously and allows it to thrive, by providing a container in which to learn on an individual level and at an organisational level, and by building learning into the culture.



Each organisation will have a different understanding of learning and development and different priorities, depending on the nature of the work you do, what skills and knowledge are required for different roles and what skills and knowledge you want to prioritise for development. There are opportunities to think expansively about learning and why you want to prioritise it.

Remember that learning means different things to different people,

and people have preferences for different types of learning experiences. Some people excel in a more formalised learning environment, some prefer forms of self-study, some prefer more experiential forms of learning,. Valuing different learning approaches is important, not only to help encourage a learning culture, but as part of putting anti-oppression into practice.

For example, prioritising more formalised forms of learning might be exclusionary to people who have been denied, excluded from, or otherwise unable to access formal education, or who struggle with academia - something to consider when thinking about if and how learning and development is linked to opportunities for progression/pay. Another example is how you support people to learn in ways that work for them.

Areas of learning	Types of learning	Opportunities to embed learning	Opportunities for growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Related to roles ● Related to programmes/activities ● Culture and values ● Anti-oppression ● Soft skills - communication, leadership, management, listening, etc. ● Personal, mental and emotional support and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Formal training ● Shadowing ● Coaching/mentoring ● Peer support ● Therapy ● Clinical supervision ● Self-study ● Research and evaluation ● Experiential, e.g. action learning cycles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Piloting/trialling new ideas, approaches, tools and methodologies ● Sharing learning with others in the organisation ● Peer support and mentoring ● Iterative/agile development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Evaluation ● Feedback ● Reflection

Tools

 **One ‘starred tool’ to start with**

8.1 What a learning culture means to your organisation

 2-3 hours as a group.

 **1 additional tool**

8.2 Developing a system of learning


 2-3 hours as a group.

 **Further reading**

- Human Edge - [Growth Mindset As A Vehicle To Developing A Learning Organization](#)
- Harvard Business Review - [4 Ways to Create a Learning Culture on Your Team](#)

Tools

8.1 WHAT A LEARNING CULTURE MEANS TO YOUR ORGANISATION

 **2-3 hours as a group.**

To develop a culture of learning in your organisation, you will need to understand what this means to you and how you will codify that within the organisation. Answering these questions will help you start to develop this understanding.


Guidance

- Review the questions below - decide what information you need from others and use that to inform who is involved in this conversation and how you have this conversation. For example, do you need to gather information internally or externally? Are there people who have specific insight or expertise?
- Work through these questions - either as one longer conversation or as a series of conversations.
- Use the answers to develop a 'vision' of what you want to see in each of these three areas - summarise in a sentence or two.
- Drill into the practicalities - how will you get to this place? Who is responsible for that and how? What changes need to happen elsewhere to support it?

Individual learning and growth	Organisation-wide learning and growth	Building a culture of excellence
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What will you support people to learn? 2. How will you support people to grow and develop? 3. What kind of training will you provide/consider mandatory? 4. What kind of budget will you set aside for this? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How is learning embedded within the culture/organisation rather than staying siloed, or institutional knowledge being lost? 2. How can you build experimentation into organisational processes? 3. How is learning and reflection built into organisational developments? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How does your team know what is considered excellence? 2. How does your team know it's ok to make mistakes? 3. How does this intersect with how you support your team to perform? 4. What does it look like to model a culture of learning and evolution?

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| | 4. How do your stakeholders feed into that development - e.g. the wider team, volunteers, members, people who you deliver services to? | |
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8.2 DEVELOPING A SYSTEM OF LEARNING³²

 2-3 hours as a group.

A process for how you learn as an organisation can help make sure that you apply this across your work. You can use this to evaluate anything from the success of your strategy, to individual programmes, to how well a new tool or policy has been rolled out.

Guidance

- In order to treat your work like an experiment, you must have an explicit hypothesis to test. Your strategy is your hypothesis, where you unearth your assumptions, for example, through building a shared analysis of the problem you are trying to tackle or interrogating how you think systemic change happens through creating a shared theory of change.
- Once you have a clear strategy, put it into motion and test it. This requires the team delivering the strategy to monitor it as its implemented, noting what's working and what's taking you off track.
- In order to make sure you are monitoring the right things, you need to agree what your indicators of impact are, how you will track them, who will do it and when.
- In line with this monitoring cycle, schedule periodic evaluation sessions in which you come together as a team to share monitoring data, reflect on it and share what you think worked and what didn't, plus any adaptations you can make as a result. Keep these sessions simple, with a standard set of questions that everyone reflects on. For example:

³² With thanks to Charlotte Millar who developed and shared this tool.

- ◆ What worked? What didn't? What do we do differently? In trainings at NEON, we break this down into different elements of delivery:
 - Content
 - Participants
 - Logistics
 - Team
 - ◆ Another simple set of reflective questions is: What? So what? So what now?
 - ◆ You can also include an element of personal reflection here, too, by asking a simple question like what did I learn about myself? This can encourage people to develop more self-awareness, particularly about how they performed as a team member and the impact they may have on others.
- It's important to write down what you are learning - both what is going well and what changes you are going to make. You can come back and reflect on these over a longer period of time and they can be the basis for pivots in your strategy. At NEON, we capture these in 6 and 12 month evaluations of key programmes. These learnings are then shared with other teams and the board, to ensure they can benefit from examples of the good practice and key lessons learnt that might be applicable to their work.
- Celebrate your successes! Lift up what has gone well, and who has performed well. Decide how you will recognise and celebrate those successes - be mindful of doing this in a way that aligns with your culture and values.

Additional Resources

- Bay Area Nonviolent Communication - <https://baynvc.org>
- Training for Change - <https://www.trainingforchange.org>
- Kaytee Ray-Riek - <https://www.kayteerayriek.com>
- [Navigate](#) - workshops and training on organisational systems and conflict mediation
- [The Management Centre](#) - management and leadership training for progressive and social justice organisations
- Training for Change - [making anti-oppression a strategy issue](#)
- [The Art of Transformational Consulting](#) - tools and publications resources
- NESTA - [DIY toolkit](#) - Development Impact & You: Practical Tools To Trigger And Support Social Innovation

