

Beyond the General Assembly

Affinity Groups & Spokescouncils



The General Assembly model of direct democracy has been an empowering process for the Occupy gatherings. Voices have been heard, and a sense of community strength has been built.

At the same time, we've seen the limits of an open meeting of 100 or more people. If we all speak for two minutes, the meeting lasts over three hours. Most of us never speak, and have to hope our views are voiced by others.

As the circle grows, the direct democracy of a general assembly becomes cumbersome and eventually impossible. What is difficult with 100 is impossible for 1000. Some forms of sub-groups and representative democracy are needed.

The models of the mainstream — parliamentary maneuvering, 51% majorities deciding vital issues, Robert's Rules being used to shut down discussion, corporations and wealthy financiers corrupting the process — we want no part of these. So what models do we have?

Direct actions involving hundreds and occasionally several thousand people have used a structure built around affinity groups, working groups, and spokescouncils. Here's some notes on how they work.

Affinity Groups

An affinity group (AG) is about 5-15 people who come together for an action (and sometimes for longer). Some AGs focus around a particular issue — food prep, parents, street theater — others are groups of concerned people joining for a single action. Some form at workshops or nonviolent direct action preps, others among friends or co-workers.

AGs often work by consensus (see below). "Closing debate" and out-voting people are not part of AG process. Unity is built by hearing and honoring every person. Affinity groups determine their own membership — the group itself must agree to accept new members. AGs are usually autonomous at actions — each AG decides its own plans, possibly to be coordinated at a spokescouncil. AGs do not take directions from a central authority.



Affinity groups are a base of support for activists — a small group to check in with, plan tactics, keep an eye out for each other — and perhaps share jail time. At some direct actions, organizers require that all participants be part of an AG. This is difficult in urban actions, where the situation is often more fluid.

AGs are a place to plan street theater or direct actions, to make a banner or signs, to draw together drummers and other musicians... Some may have a special focus, others more general.

Within an AG, folks might take different roles for a particular action. Some plan to do street theater or risk arrest, while others do support at the action and afterward (when you're risking arrest, it's great to know your AG is looking out for you!). Still others send email updates, take photos, or help with childcare. All roles are needed for a successful action. One challenge is how to honor all roles equally.

Work Groups / Cells

A work group or work cell is a small, task-oriented group that takes on a particular part of the work — food, march-route, media, outreach, medics, preppers, etc. Some work groups are ongoing, others just for a single project. Some WG people are also in AGs, some might not be. At the time of an action the work groups may be closed to new people, but in between actions they tend to be more fluid, drawing in fresh energy.

Spokescouncils

A spokescouncil is a gathering of spokes (representatives) from affinity groups and work groups to make decisions and share concerns about an action or other organizing project.

Spokes speak for their group and its decisions, and make clear when they are voicing their personal views. Spokes are rotated when possible, so more people get to participate, and so the spokes do not hold power.

If each spoke represents an average of ten people, 500 participants can be represented by 50 spokes — a manageable size for open discussion and consensus. Anything beyond 80-100 is too cumbersome to hear all voices — some further level of “cluster spokes” is needed at this point.

Spokescouncils meet before actions, to organize ongoing projects — and sometimes in jail. At the 1983 Livermore protest, over 1000 people — 500 men and 600 women, held in separate facilities — held 10-day spokescouncils at which rotating spokes made day-to-day decisions for the whole group. Anyone can attend a spokescouncil (sometimes in jail, everyone does), but those who are not spokes sit in an outer ring.



Facilitators & Consensus

A few pointers for facilitating a consensus meeting: (1) Facilitators focus on the group process and do not take part in the debates. A good facilitator might ask questions, suggest ways to subdivide a discussion, etc — but they do not offer opinions about the issue being discussed. (2) Your job is to draw out all voices. Invite people who have not spoken to speak first. Watch for male domination, ageism, classism, etc. (3) Don't rush toward consensus, but when you sense it may be emerging, try asking only those who object, or only those who have not yet spoken, to speak. (4) Be willing to laugh at yourself, and to let someone else facilitate if that's what the group wants.

Consensus is an art. It takes time to adjust our thinking to this way of working together. Consensus decisions take time so that all voices and views can be heard. Rushing consensus defeats the purpose — a true consensus decision is incredibly powerful, because all of us have been heard, respected, and have a stake in the outcome.

Consensus is not a unanimous vote. Some may disagree strongly. They may “stand aside,” saying in effect: I don't like this proposal, but I can accept others doing it. To “block” consensus is rare, and used only when they (or their AG if they are a spoke) feel they are being pressed to accept a proposal that goes against their principles.

When consensus seems close, the facilitators might ask questions like: Can we hear from people who have not spoken? Can we hear from those with concerns or objections? Is there anyone who feels they cannot live with this proposal (which is often a compromise)? Then finally, when all have been heard: Do we have consensus?

Consensus resources: www.starhawk.org — “The Five-Fold Path of Productive Meetings”

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