



Structure Before Crisis

A collection of organizing patterns that
help mutual aid groups lay the
groundwork to build new worlds

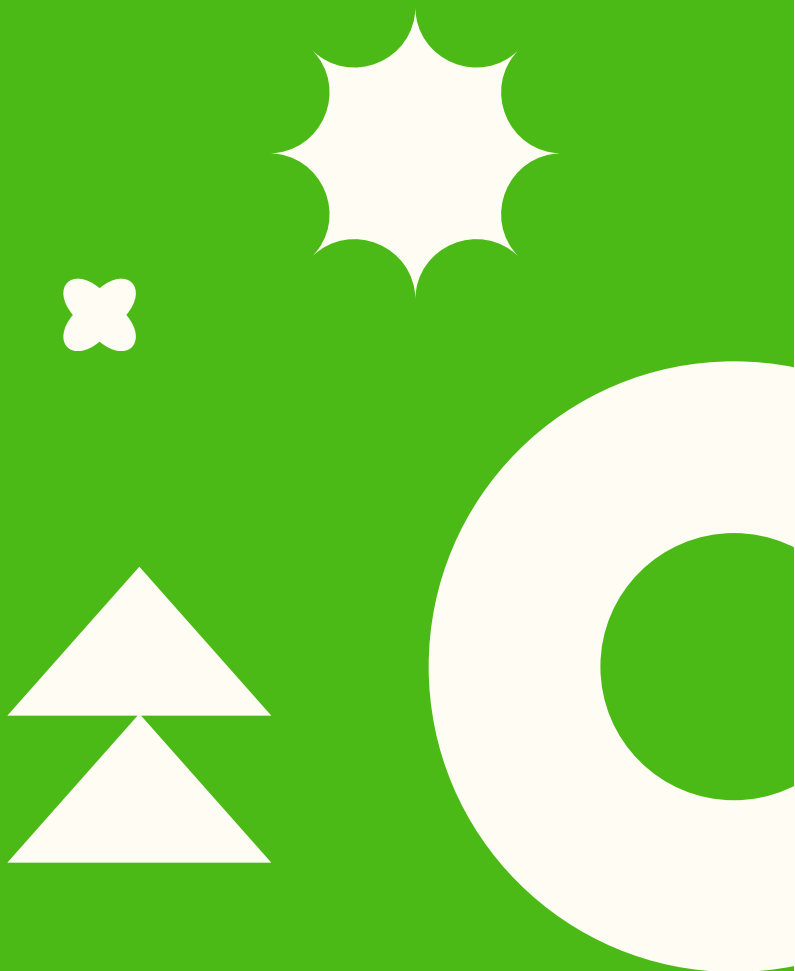


The background is a light cream color with several large, soft-edged green shapes. There are four stylized green flowers: one in the top left, one in the top right, one in the bottom right, and one in the bottom center. A large, stylized green handprint is on the right side.

**"THE RULES OF DECISION-MAKING MUST
BE OPEN AND AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE,
AND THIS CAN HAPPEN ONLY IF THEY
ARE FORMALIZED."**

Jo Freeman

**THERE ARE TWO PATHS:
THE END OF THIS WORLD
OR THE BEGINNING OF
THE NEXT**



This zine presents a selection of findings relevant to mutual aid groups from a study conducted in collaboration with the MEDLab and Nathan Schneider from CU. The study examined horizontalist groups across the world, with special emphasis on mutual aid groups and worker cooperatives.

The research found that for these groups to have deep and lasting impact, they must address formal patterns for decision-making, membership, communication, and conflict management early in their organizational lifespan.

This zine describes patterns relevant to mutual aid groups in each of these three categories:

- Decision-making
- Membership
- Conflict management

These patterns help create durable, strong, and engaging mutual aid groups. They are not one-size-fits-all solutions, but rather a collection of ideas to consider when building your organization.

Here's the liberating truth: most organizational chaos is completely avoidable. The mutual aid groups that flourish understand that clear decision-making structures aren't bureaucratic constraints but tools for collective freedom.

Define your processes early and watch everything get easier. Different decisions need different approaches. Horizontalism doesn't mean consensus on everything is required. Smart collectives protect their members' energy by being intentional about when they gather everyone. Full group meetings are precious resources. Use them wisely.

The following pages map out specific decision-making patterns and where each shines in mutual aid work. These proven approaches help collectives navigate resource distribution, growth decisions, and conflicts without burning out their most committed members.

When you build structure from day one, beautiful things happen. Decisions flow smoothly. Energy goes toward helping people instead of managing chaos. Your collective becomes genuinely sustainable because everyone knows how power moves through the group.

Start with good process. Everything else follows.

GROUP DECISION MAKING



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LAZY CONSENSUS

Lazy consensus is a decision-making approach commonly used in mutual aid organizations where a proposal is considered approved unless someone explicitly objects within a specified timeframe. This method works particularly well for project-level decisions and working group coordination, as it allows groups to move forward efficiently without requiring everyone to actively participate in every discussion. Rather than demanding unanimous vocal agreement, lazy consensus assumes that silence indicates consent, which helps prevent decision paralysis while still giving all members the opportunity to raise concerns. This approach strikes a balance between inclusive participation and practical action, making it especially valuable for mutual aid groups that need to respond quickly to community needs while maintaining democratic principles.



FULL CONSENSUS

Full consensus demands universal agreement from every member, which works only in tiny mutual aid groups before becoming a bureaucratic nightmare that scales poorly beyond 30-50 people. At project level, this process transforms urgent community response into endless procedural theater, where minor decisions get trapped in cycles of meeting-about-meetings while people's actual needs go unmet. The relentless demand for perfect agreement becomes a joy-killing machine that burns out activists through the sheer tedium of having to consensus every trivial choice, turning radical organizing into the very administrative hell it seeks to escape. Smart groups reserve full consensus for major decisions only, understanding that the fetishization of process over action ultimately serves the status quo by rendering mutual aid groups impotent through their own procedural paralysis.



CONSENSUS SEEKING WITH DELEGATES

Consensus seeking with delegates involves working groups that negotiate between different collectives to find workable solutions, making it particularly effective for larger mutual aid organizations or regional networks coordinating multiple groups. Rather than requiring all members to participate in complex negotiations, delegates handle the detailed work before bringing refined proposals back to their respective groups for approval. This method scales democratic participation by channeling discussion through representatives who can engage in sustained dialogue without overwhelming large memberships with lengthy meetings. The approach enables larger mutual aid networks to make necessary organizational changes without getting bogged down in unwieldy mass meetings that bog down action.



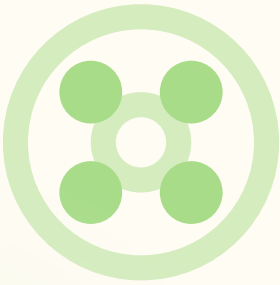
MODIFIED CONSENSUS

Modified consensus seeks full agreement but falls back to supermajority voting when consensus fails, making it perfect for heavy decisions like changing operating procedures or adopting new organizational structures that reshape how the group functions. The mechanics require careful specification: who votes, what constitutes quorum, whether the threshold is 2/3 or 3/4, and how votes get counted, because vague process breeds endless meta-arguments that can render groups impotent. Try to reserve this ritual only for decisions that fundamentally alter group operations, not project or working group level decisions. This hybrid approach prevents both the tyranny of fake consensus and the paralysis of procedure fetishism that mistakes endless discussion for democratic action.



SOCIOCRACY CIRCLES

Sociocracy circles organize mutual aid work into semi-autonomous domains where subject matter experts maintain decision-making authority within their specific areas, whether running food distros, coordinating housing support, or managing community defense. Each circle operates independently within their domain while connecting through designated representatives, creating cellular structure that prevents both micromanagement and isolation between working groups. This pattern works well for larger organizations with multiple distros or focus areas, allowing specialized teams to respond quickly without getting bottlenecked by organization-wide approval processes. Rather than forcing every decision through central committees lacking relevant expertise, sociocracy recognizes that people doing the work often know best how to do it while maintaining enough connection to preserve collective power.



DELIBERATIVE POLLING

Deliberative polling involves mutual aid members engaging in structured discussion and reflection on complex issues before casting votes, ensuring decisions are informed by collective deliberation rather than snap judgments or uninformed opinions. This method works well for larger organizations with multiple distros or focus areas when major strategic questions arise that affect the entire network, such as adopting new organizational principles or allocating significant shared resources. The process requires members to genuinely engage with different perspectives and practical constraints before voting, preventing both reactionary decisions and the false democracy of uninformed mass participation. By combining deliberation with actual voting, this approach enables larger mutual aid networks to make thoughtful decisions that respect both democratic input and the operational realities faced by specialized working groups.

NEW MEMBER PROCESS



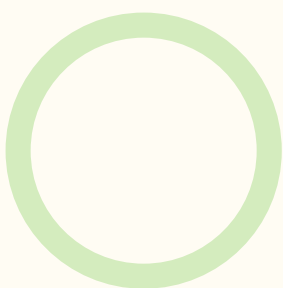
The membership question hits every group within weeks of formation. Who can join? How do they join? What do we expect from members? Groups that dodge these decisions early pay for it later when informal hierarchies calcify into invisible barriers.

This isn't about being exclusionary. It's about being intentional. Without explicit processes, membership gets determined by whoever shows up consistently, whoever speaks loudest, whoever already knows the founders. The most well-meaning groups end up with the most arbitrary gatekeeping because no one admits gatekeeping is happening.

Different approaches serve different needs. Open Participation maximizes accessibility but can overwhelm capacity. Peer Sponsorship builds on existing networks while potentially replicating their limitations. Vetting & Approval-Based Entry allows selection but creates administrative burden. Training Requirements ensure shared knowledge but demand resources. Trial Periods let people test fit. Membership Agreements clarify expectations. Hybrid processes combine approaches for complex realities.

The key is choosing deliberately rather than letting criteria emerge by accident. Groups that establish clear processes early can modify them as they grow. Groups that wait find themselves stuck with whatever informal systems developed organically, which are always harder to change because they feel natural rather than constructed.

Early clarity about who belongs isn't bureaucratic excess. It's the foundation for sustainable solidarity.



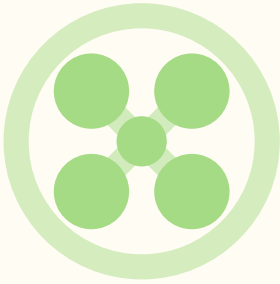
OPEN PARTICIPATION

Open participation allows anyone to show up and immediately engage in mutual aid work without vouching or lengthy onboarding, creating low barriers that can rapidly mobilize community response but may compromise group cohesion. This approach excels at building broad coalitions but becomes problematic for security-conscious organizations dealing with surveillance risks or groups working with vulnerable populations who need protection from bad actors. The method can disrupt established group cultures by introducing people who don't share core values or working styles, creating friction that forces existing members to spend energy managing interpersonal conflicts rather than community work. While open participation embodies mutual aid's inclusive spirit, groups must assess whether unrestricted access strengthens their capacity or undermines the cultural foundations that make their work effective.



PEER SPONSORSHIP

Peer sponsorship requires new members to be vouched for by existing participants, creating accountability mechanisms that help maintain group culture and security while potentially excluding people who lack social connections to current members. This system can inadvertently reproduce existing social hierarchies by favoring people who move in similar circles as established members, creating barriers for marginalized folks who might not have access to these networks despite being most in need of mutual aid support. The method risks turning mutual aid groups into insular cliques where social capital becomes more important than commitment to the work, potentially screening out dedicated organizers who simply don't know the right people. While peer sponsorship can prevent bad actors and cultural disruption, groups using this approach must actively work to ensure their vouching networks extend into the communities they claim to serve rather than just reflecting the demographics of their founding members.



CONSENSUS APPROVAL

Consensus approval requires unanimous agreement from all members before anyone can join the group, creating a deliberate and often lengthy process that ensures complete buy-in but severely limits organizational growth and responsiveness. This method works only for small, specialist groups handling sensitive resources like finances, security operations, or vulnerable population support where one bad actor could cause catastrophic damage to the entire network. The bureaucratic nature of consensus approval transforms recruitment into an exhausting ritual where existing members must invest significant time and energy vetting each potential addition, often deterring both applicants and current members from engaging with the process. While this approach maximizes trust and cohesion within tight-knit teams, it fundamentally contradicts mutual aid's expansive vision and should be reserved exclusively for core operational groups where unanimous agreement genuinely matters more than broad community engagement.



PROVISIONAL MEMBERSHIP

Provisional membership creates a probationary period where new participants engage in most activities while being gradually integrated into full decision-making, allowing both sides to assess mutual fit before permanent commitment. This approach provides more security than open participation while avoiding peer sponsorship's exclusionary dynamics, creating a structured pathway for newcomers to demonstrate commitment and learn group culture. The provisional period typically lasts several months with mentorship and training requirements, helping new members develop necessary skills while giving existing members time to evaluate contributions. While this can create two-tiered dynamics that make some feel like second-class participants, it offers practical compromise between security needs and inclusive growth for groups handling sensitive work or valuable resources.



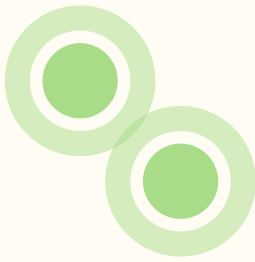
MEMBERSHIP AGREEMENT

Membership agreements establish clear principles and behavioral expectations that all participants commit to, creating shared understanding around communication patterns, conflict resolution, and core values rather than leaving group culture to chance or individual interpretation. Every mutual aid group should implement some form of written agreement covering basics like respectful communication, meeting participation expectations, confidentiality protocols, and procedures for addressing harm within the organization. These documents prevent the endless rehashing of fundamental questions about group norms while providing concrete reference points for addressing problematic behavior before it derails collective work or drives away committed members. Rather than bureaucratic box-ticking, effective membership agreements function as living documents that help maintain focus on community support rather than internal drama management.



TRAINING OR ORIENTATION

Training or orientation requirements ensure new members understand the group's operational procedures, safety protocols, and cultural norms before jumping into active work, preventing well-meaning newcomers from inadvertently creating chaos or compromising vulnerable community members. This process works particularly well for groups handling sensitive situations like housing support, legal aid, or crisis response where mistakes can have serious consequences for the people being served. The training requirement also functions as a commitment filter, weeding out individuals who aren't serious enough about the work to invest initial time in learning how to do it effectively rather than just showing up to feel good about themselves. While orientation can create barriers to immediate participation, it ultimately protects both the organization and the community by ensuring everyone operating under the group's name actually knows what they're doing.



SCREENED REFERRALS

Screened referral requires potential members to be recommended by trusted community partners, organizations, or individuals outside the group rather than relying solely on existing members' personal networks, helping expand recruitment beyond insular social circles. This approach works well for groups needing reliable people but wanting to avoid the exclusionary dynamics of peer sponsorship, as it leverages institutional relationships with other advocacy organizations, service providers, or community leaders who can vouch for candidates. The method creates accountability through external validation while potentially reaching people who are deeply embedded in community work but don't have direct social connections to current group members. However, screened referral can still reproduce institutional biases and may exclude grassroots organizers who operate outside of mutual aid networks, requiring groups to cultivate diverse referral sources that reflect the communities they aim to serve.



TIERED MEMBERSHIP

Tiered membership creates different levels of access and responsibility within the organization, allowing broader participation while restricting sensitive operations like financial management, commercial kitchen access, or data handling to vetted core members who have demonstrated sustained commitment. This approach enables groups to maintain open participation for general activities while protecting critical resources that could be damaged by inexperienced or unreliable participants, preventing one bad decision from destroying relationships or assets that took years to build. The system recognizes that not everyone needs or wants the same level of involvement, allowing casual volunteers to contribute meaningfully without requiring the intensive vetting necessary for people handling expensive equipment or sensitive community information. While tiered membership can create hierarchical dynamics that contradict egalitarian ideals, it provides practical protection for resources that mutual aid groups cannot afford to lose.



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MANAGING CONFLICT



Conflict is inevitable in mutual aid work. Organizations that wait until crisis hits to develop resolution processes find themselves paralyzed when they need to act.

The impulse to escalate immediately to group processes reflects the neoliberal fantasy that all problems require institutional solutions. Most conflicts begin as simple misalignments between individuals. The first step should always be direct conversation. Two members who disagree about resource allocation or meeting procedures can often resolve differences through honest dialogue without involving the broader collective.

When direct conversation fails, the next step involves peers, not procedures. Each person should engage a trusted friend from the group to help mediate. This approach acknowledges that most conflicts stem from miscommunication rather than fundamental incompatibilities.

Only when informal approaches fail and conflict begins affecting group function should organizations turn to formal processes. Whether through consensus mechanisms, consent-based approaches, or modified decision-making structures, the goal is creating clear pathways for resolution that everyone understands in advance.

The key is building these systems before they're needed. Groups in crisis cannot design fair processes. Establishing conflict resolution frameworks early prevents small tensions from becoming organizational disasters.



CONSENSUS BUILDING

Consensus building approaches conflict by bringing all affected parties together to identify underlying needs and interests rather than simply adjudicating between competing positions, creating solutions that everyone can genuinely support rather than grudgingly accept. This method works well for mutual aid groups because it prioritizes maintaining relationships and group cohesion over winning arguments, recognizing that ongoing collaboration matters more than being right about any particular dispute. The process requires significant time investment and skilled facilitation to guide participants through identifying root causes, generating creative alternatives, and finding common ground that addresses everyone's core concerns. While consensus building can transform destructive conflicts into opportunities for deeper understanding and stronger group bonds, it becomes impractical when dealing with fundamental value conflicts or when one party refuses to engage in good faith problem-solving.



FACILITATED NEGOTIATION

Facilitated negotiation brings conflicting parties together with a neutral third party who guides structured dialogue aimed at reaching mutually acceptable agreements rather than determining who is right or wrong. This approach works well for mutual aid groups dealing with resource disputes, role conflicts, or operational disagreements where maintaining working relationships matters more than establishing moral victories that can fracture collective capacity. The facilitator helps participants separate personal grievances from practical problems, focusing discussion on concrete solutions that allow everyone to continue contributing effectively to community work rather than getting trapped in cycles of blame and defensiveness. While facilitated negotiation can resolve conflicts more efficiently than consensus building, it requires access to skilled facilitators and willingness from all parties to compromise, making it less effective when dealing with fundamental value differences or power imbalances that negotiation alone cannot address.



CONFLICT COUNCIL

Conflict management councils involve a small group of trusted members who investigate disputes, hear from all parties, and make suggestions about how to resolve conflicts that threaten group functioning or community safety. This approach works well for mutual aid organizations dealing with serious interpersonal conflicts, policy violations, or situations where informal resolution has failed and the group needs clear authority to make difficult decisions about membership or consequences. The council structure prevents conflicts from consuming entire meetings or paralyzing organizational work by delegating resolution to a focused body that can dedicate time to thoroughly understanding complex situations and crafting appropriate responses. While conflict resolution councils can provide necessary decisiveness and protect groups from being hijacked by endless drama, they risk creating hierarchical dynamics and require careful selection of council members who have genuine commitment to the organization's values.



CIRCLE PROCESSES

Circle processes gather all affected parties in a structured format where participants sit in a circle and share their perspectives using a talking piece, creating space for deep listening and collective understanding of conflicts before moving toward resolution. This approach works particularly well for mutual aid groups dealing with harm or interpersonal conflicts that have damaged trust, as it prioritizes healing relationships and community accountability over punishment or exclusion. The circle format ensures everyone has equal opportunity to speak and be heard while fostering empathy through storytelling and shared vulnerability, often revealing underlying issues that formal resolution processes miss. While circle processes can create profound healing and stronger community bonds, they require significant time commitment, skilled facilitation, and genuine willingness from all parties to engage in emotional labor that may feel uncomfortable to people accustomed to adversarial conflict resolution.

The processes outlined in this zine aren't academic exercises but survival tools for building the organizational capacity we need to weather capitalism's ongoing collapse. Strong mutual aid groups that connect meaningfully with their neighbors become the foundation for regional networks that can coordinate resources, share strategies, and build collective power beyond what isolated collectives can achieve alone.

The alternative to conscious organizing is watching our communities fragment under the weight of crisis while existing institutions continue their spectacular failure. We cannot afford the luxury of informal structures that reproduce hierarchy while pretending to be egalitarian, nor can we indulge in procedural paralysis that prevents effective action when people's lives depend on rapid response.

This is an invitation to get serious about building infrastructure that can survive and thrive beyond the current moment. If you're organizing in Colorado or nearby regions, connect with Mutual Aid Colorado. We run workshops to help groups define minimal structure that prevents issues later, we're building deeper supply chains between distro groups, collaborating on organizing patterns like mutual aid newspapers, sharing resources like design and risograph printing services, and creating ateliers and communities of practice that seed new institutions.

The future we need won't emerge spontaneously. It requires deliberate construction, disciplined organization, and the courage to move beyond the ambiguity toward genuine collective power. The time for building is now.



The tyranny of structurelessness masquerades as egalitarian virtue while reproducing the power dynamics it claims to oppose. Groups that refuse to acknowledge informal hierarchies inevitably get dominated by whoever has the most time, loudest voice, or strongest friendship networks, creating shadow power structures without accountability. This pseudo-democratic chaos makes coordinating across neighborhoods impossible, let alone building regional networks to challenge state power.

Without explicit frameworks, mutual aid groups remain trapped in perpetual localism, unable to scale solidarity or pool resources strategically. They stay reactive rather than building institutional capacity to prevent crises. As liberal democracy collapses and abandons communities to market forces, the absence of clear structure becomes a death sentence for creating genuine alternatives.

The solution isn't abandoning horizontal organizing but making power visible and accountable. Clearly defined roles, transparent decision-making, and explicit coordination mechanisms build the disciplined capacity required to fill the institutional void. Only through conscious structure can mutual aid transcend charity and become the foundation for new collective power.



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