POWER DYNAMICS
& HORIZONTAL ORGANIZING

Power is an uncomfortable subject, especially for folks with "progressive" (liberal, radical, or egalitarian) values.

Many people think of power as "power over," rather than "power with."

Power-over = hierarchy, e.g. boss and subordinates, teacher and students.
Power-with = power exercised as peers.

Without the use of power in some form, nothing gets done. We all have power to take positive action on behalf of people and causes we care about.

Hierarchy is not inherently bad. For example, in order to make decisions at scale, activist groups as well as large societies rely on representative democracy. Or in co-op meetings, we give time-limited power to the facilitator to sequence who speaks when so that everyone has a turn rather than talking over each other.

Questions to ask about hierarchy include:

- What's it based on?
- What kind of checks & balances are present?
- Does it serve collective interests or private interests?

Stella Maris says, "No form of power is in itself abusive. It depends on whether power is wielded by the fearful, controlling ego, or whether it is used with love, generosity, and skill."

In addition to individual abilities and situations, **power dynamics in groups are strongly affected by all the larger scale divisions in society**, e.g. racism, sexism, class, beauty standards, economics, and other oppressions.

Given that society is filled with crappy, abusive hierarchies (which we are all in recovery from and continually in reaction to), **we arrive at cooperative entities lugging all the baggage** of that, with trauma and sensitivity.

Power in Cooperative Living Settings

Cooperative living is a shift in the power dynamics of occupying space. Living in shared housing means being a *citizen* and co-creator, rather than a consumer, in relation to the community.

- If we are used to being unempowered and reduced to complaining (often with no result) as renters, it is a major change to be collectively empowered to take action, and to participate in many decisions that affect our housing. There's not someone else to address many of the problems or needs that arise—it's us, even if some of us serve as team leads or board members.
- If we are used to acting individually as private homeowners, it is a major change to consult and collaborate with each other to get things done.
- Either way, it requires a shift in mindset that takes time to settle into.

Leadership in Cooperative Settings

- **Exercising leadership in cooperative settings is really challenging!** While nothing gets done unless people make it happen, a person trying to accomplish things in groups often encounters criticism, blocks, apathy or confusion. Complaints are cheap and easy, while action takes work.
- **Leaders in voluntary and cooperative settings do not have the same carrots or sticks available as in more conventional settings.** For example, someone leading a team in an all-volunteer operation can't offer a salary incentive. Your power is directly affected by how well others like you and feel taken into account, their perceptions of your motivations, and other intangible factors.
- As Laird Schaub said, "**There is a tendency to expect leaders to assume all the responsibilities of traditional culture** (available on demand for questions/criticisms about their areas, will step to the plate in times of emergency, will cut through heavy traffic to solve a problem and pull the group together, will put aside personal interests for the group) but **without the perks** [no nicer apartment or better parking], no slack on how you operate. It's all the headaches and no neck massage."
- **Healthy groups are leaderful, not leaderless.** The more everyone steps up and shares responsibility, the more the group can accomplish together. If no one takes responsibility, nothing gets done.
- **"Poppy lopping"** (aka "tall poppy syndrome") is an Australian term referring to the cultural tendency to enforce egalitarianism by cutting down anyone who sticks up too high. If people who attempt to take leadership or get things done receive too much criticism rather than support and appreciation, they burn out—and then voluntary energy to make things happen is no longer available to the group, which collectively suffers as a result. Healthy groups welcome ambition, drive and talent, finding ways to harness them toward the group good.
- **Responsibility and power ideally travel together.** The problem with bad hierarchies is they funnel power (without responsibility) upward and responsibility (without power) downward. Be pro-active in considering what responsibilities you want to accompany power. For example, groups can delegate power and autonomy to teams, while requiring those teams to consult with the whole, invite others to their meetings, or publish minutes.

Power in Consensus Decision-Making

- Participating does not mean you always get your way. It means your voice is considered as part of the collective, and your reasoning and desires are given a fair shake. No one gets their way all the time.
- Groups that fall into seeing consensus decision-making as the power to say No are likely to be unhappy. If one person continually uses individual power to prevent the group from moving forward, that's a "tyranny of the minority," which may feel worse than a "tyranny of the majority (i.e., majority voting).
- Happy consensus groups see their process as a way to get things done effectively with wiser solutions and higher enrollment than would otherwise be available.

Quick Reference by Stella Maris

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A Field Guide to Social Power

	Also called	What it says	How it works
Personal power	Autonomy Empowerment Leadership	"I need" "I can" "I will"	Individual perspective and initiative expressed through speech and action
Power over	Hierarchal power Nonconsensual power	"You must" "You better not"	Through force, intimidation, and/or rules enforced by penalties
Collective power	Social power Power-with Solidarity Collaboration	"Together we can" "We support each other" "So say we all"	Working together to find common ground and achieve shared vision
Privilege	Unearned social power	"I have" "I get to" "I don't have to"	Certain traits are rewarded or penalized to reinforce systems of oppression and/or through luck
Earned influence	Social capital Reputation	"You respect me for" "You trust me to"	Power gained through contributions to the group
Negative power	Power not-to Resistance	"I won't" "We must not"	Passively or actively opposing others' actions
Power under	Naming oppression Playing the victim card	"I can't" "You won't let me"	Calling attention to disempowerment in order to gain visibility and influence
Power of Subcontext	Underlying assumptions Social conditioning Cultural commons	<silence> "As we all know" "This is how the world is"	Creates the possibility for major shifts of consciousness by rebuilding underlying assumptions
Power of Context	Intention Facilitation Hospitality Leadership	"Here's what's going on" "Look, this is important""	Establishes context and creates meaning
Power of Connection	Love Service Interdependence Magic / Woo	"You are another self" "We are interdependent parts of a larger whole"	Power expanded through enlarged perspective and connection