

5 Defensive Strategies Against Fragmentation

A Zine Series from AORTA Worker-Owned Cooperative



DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING

"We are prepared to govern."

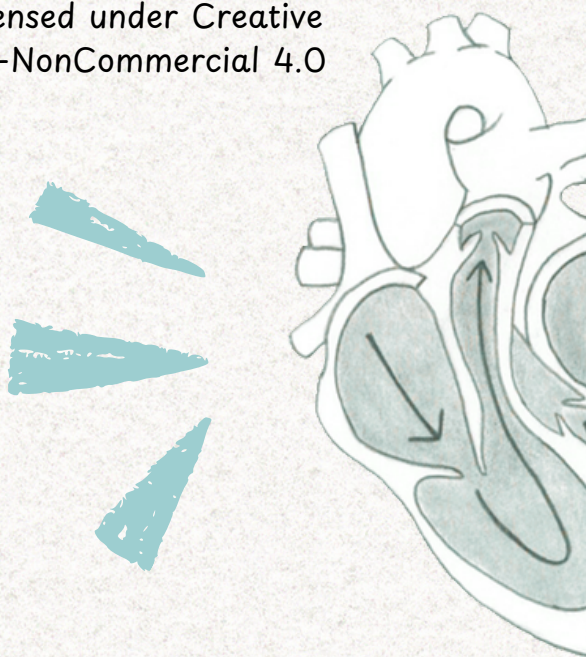
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About this zine series

In our unique role, AORTA supports over 80 movement groups across the country every year with facilitation, mediation, and coaching. Over time, we've witnessed patterns of fracture, horizontal violence, and territorialism that prevents the Left from thriving. This zine series offers five defensive strategies against fragmentation that we think our groups must take up so we don't fold under the pressure of rising fascism, authoritarianism, political violence, and mis/disinformation.

If this zine has been helpful to you, send us an email at info@aorta.coop! We'd love to be in touch. This zine is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International.



DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING



What would happen if
we could do this well?

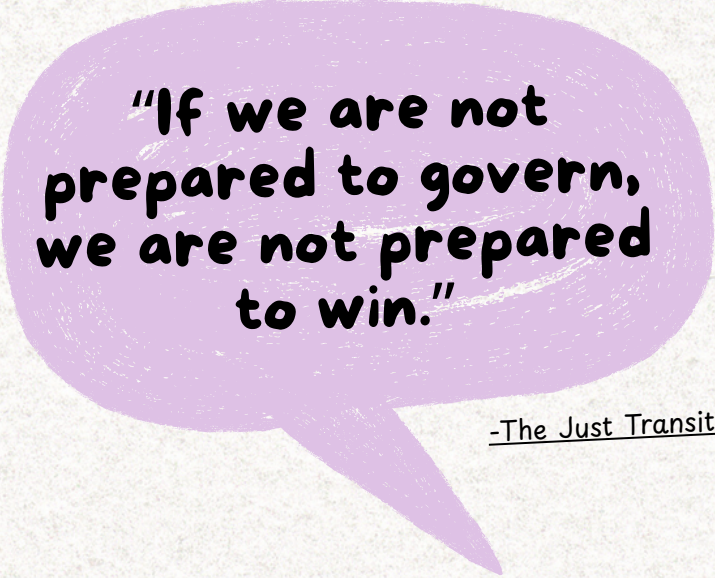
When a group comes to us wanting to learn how they can better live into their values of racial justice and equity, we always say: start with looking at how you make decisions. Whether the decisions are small (e.g. "What snacks should we have at our next meeting?") or big (e.g. "Which state should we prioritize basebuilding in?"), the decisions and who makes them tell a story of how power flows in your group. And power is the foundation of racial justice and liberatory work. In fact, having unclear or inconsistent decision making processes is an early tell for future conflict and division.

Let's be clear. When we say democratic decision making, we don't mean that every organization should have every worker vote on every single decision. That would be exhausting and ineffective!



We believe that strong and principled decision making processes can exist in many different shapes and formations, from small collectives to large alliances, non-profits with complex hierarchy to flat worker cooperatives, as long as **the people impacted by the decision have a meaningful part in the decision making process.**

At AORTA, we are inspired by this principle of the Just Transition Framework: **"If we are not prepared to govern, we are not prepared to win."** When we are skilled at the process of democratic decision making, not only can we make bolder, more effective choices, we are also better at practicing our values of sharing power and caring for each other. Every decision we make as a group is an opportunity to become less reliant on power-hoarding institutions to make choices for us!



**"If we are not
prepared to govern,
we are not prepared
to win."**

-The Just Transition Framework



LESSONS ON DECISION MAKING

We know that there are lots of great resources, tools, and approaches out there on how to facilitate decision making. In this zine, we're eager to share with you four lessons that AORTA has learned that tend to support effective, resilient, and liberatory decision making processes. We hope these lessons resonate with you in some way! We invite you to take what works and leave the rest.



Lesson 1:

SHOW THE STAGES



It's a common misconception that a group decision happens in one singular moment and that practicing democratic decision making is only about who gets to be in that moment. We believe that **strong decisions are made in clear and distinct stages**. If you skip a stage, it can lead to the wrong decision!

STAGES OF DECISION MAKING

1

Identify the Problem

One of the most common mistakes we see in group decision making is that everyone isn't on the same page about what problem the decision making is trying to solve. Getting a group aligned on the core problem is the foundation to a strong decision. For example, before we identify different co-leadership models, what is the problem that we are trying to solve about the current solo ED structure we have? Is it primarily about an unmanageable work load? Or a collaborative work culture? Depending on the problem we identify, the solutions will look quite different!

2

Generate possible solutions

Also known as “brainstorming,” this is the part of the process where we come up with as many bold and creative ideas as possible to respond to the problem. We sometimes even prompt people to suggest ideas they think are “bad” ones without identifying them as such to the group! This helps prevent the group from judging ideas in this stage, and gives them the powerful opportunity to align during the ‘Narrowing Down’ stage later.

3

Identify constraints and criteria

There are always constraints on our solutions to the problem. Whether it's due dates, money, people's availability, or something else, this is the stage where we identify them. Usually, this stage comes after “Generate possible solutions” because we don't want the group to come up with their most bold and brilliant ideas under the shadow of constraints. However, we sometimes swap the two stages and identify constraints first if the constraints are very significant. For instance, if your group has just \$200 and five days to plan an event, that might be helpful to have in mind before you start brainstorming. This is also where you identify the criteria for a good solution - more on this in the next section!





4

Narrowing down

Looking at the long list of ideas, here's where we take the criteria we've developed and assess the ideas against them. If we've done a good job in our 'Generating Ideas' stage, we should have some ideas that are an easy NO for the group, which is an excellent alignment building opportunity. This stage is where principled disagreement can especially shine! Wrestle with the ideas and see what solutions best meet your needs.



5

Finalize the decision

Depending on your group's governance structure, this might look like a vote, a small group of people coming to consensus, one person making a decision, or something else.



6

Implementation

Finalizing the decision is never the last step! Now comes the hard work of taking action.

Lesson 2:

CLOSE THE DOOR



Imagine a large house with many rooms. Six, in fact! Each room has its own feel and atmosphere and a door that shuts. Now, think of each stage of the decision making process as being one of those rooms. Perhaps learning about the problem is the library room full of books and globes; brainstorming ideas might be the dance floor with fun, loose energy! Have you ever been at a meeting where some participants are having a great time on the dance floor brainstorming ideas on how to solve a problem, but a handful of others wandered out of the room and are in the calculator room, crunching numbers and critiquing the ideas? We have! It can be confusing and frustrating for everyone.

Try opening each stage of the decision making process with these two moves:

SHOW THE STAGES

Make it clear when and where participants can expect to be in each stage.

"After today, the organizing team will take the ideas and connect with our partners so we know what ideas they are considering too. We'll go into the calculator room together at our next meeting in March to narrow down the options, keeping us on track for a decision by April."



CLOSE THE DOOR

Set clear "will do" and "won't do" goals for the meeting based on the stages.

"Today we **WILL** be generating as many big, bold ideas as we can about where we should expand our base in the next year. We will **NOT** be narrowing down or judging our ideas today."

It's a common misconception that sharing power in decision making takes more time. In fact, not having enough time is a common reason groups give for not sharing power! In our experience, showing the stages and closing the door doesn't necessarily take time, **it takes discipline.**

3 FACILITATION HACKS!

Try these facilitation tips while you are guiding groups through the different stages:

1

Don't make them multi-task

Trying to come up with ideas while narrowing them down is tough! When participants are allowed to fully inhabit one mode at a time, they are more likely to succeed.

2

Get Specific

When participants are asked broad, open ended questions in decision making (e.g. "What do you think we should do?"), it can block meaningful participation. Get specific about what you need from the group in that stage.

3

Set clear expectations

Our expectations for someone generating ideas (creative! bold!) are different than for someone narrowing down (precise! critical!) Clear expectations for each stage sets participants up to build trust.

Lesson 3:

SET CRITERIA



Have you ever been in a group that is trying to narrow down a decision, where everyone is just choosing the options that serve their own interests? When groups don't have shared criteria to help narrow down a decision, it can lead us to landing on an outcome that isn't fully purposeful or values aligned. Setting shared criteria that will be used when making a decision supports the group's values to shine and ensure that we aren't defaulting to the most popular or well resourced person's interests.



Imagine, for example, a mutual aid group trying to narrow down the ideas of work projects to prioritize in the next year. Darren wants the option that they think the community most needs. Lee wants the option that they think is most financially responsible. While both interests are important, it's common for groups to get themselves stuck pitting equally important criteria against each other. And what about social and positional power dynamics? Sheila wants to prioritize options the team has time for, she is a new member and isn't able to sway the group as much as Darren or Lee. Without shared criteria, this group would not only make a decision that might not feel purposeful or effective, but also may continue to unintentionally prioritize dominant opinions.

Common criteria we use



- Passion: What lights my fire?
- Need: What does the community need?
- Niche: What are we uniquely positioned to do?
- Alignment: Which is most closely aligned with our values/goals?
- Easy win: What's something we can easily succeed at?
- Capacity: Which of these comfortably fits in the time and energy we have?

LESSON IN PRACTICE:

Utilizing Shared Criteria

WHAT CRITERIA WOULD YOU USE FOR THIS DECISION?

A group of students have escalated their work fighting for a free Palestine by occupying a building on their campus. They are demanding that the university ceases disciplinary action towards student activists and divests its stock from Israeli bonds. About 75 students are in the building, and they've been holding it down for about 6 hours, when they get word that instead of just campus police surrounding the building, local police and potentially ICE agents will also be coming to surround the building. The group has to make a decision in under 45 minutes about how they should respond to this upsurge of law enforcement.

"Which response will meet all 3 criteria:

- **Time:** We can quickly get into these shapes or formations;
- **Skill:** We have members of the core organizing team who are able to confidently anchor each team/phase;
- **Protection:** Students who have the highest risk when facing arrest are protected (focusing on immigration status, race, gender identity)?"

Lesson 4:

MAP AUTHORITY

MAKE POWER PLAIN

In order to shift how we govern, we must first understand how decisions are currently made. Many groups never get around to writing down who has authority over what decisions, and we get why. Writing down the nuts and bolts of decision making can feel both tedious and intimidating! But when there is no map, it's easy for authority and information to accumulate in inequitable ways over time without anyone realizing it. Often, the people who have the most understanding of how decisions are made are also the people who have the most power, leaving people who have less power in the dark.

WHAT TO TRY



Build a map of the key decisions that the group makes. Include who makes each decision, who influences each decision, and how each decision is made. Make sure everyone in the organization understands the map.

DISTINGUISH CULTURE FROM STRUCTURE

Have you ever been a part of an organization that had a culture of collectivity, but when you looked under the hood, the culture of collectivity was not matched with a structure of collectivity? Sometimes, the culture can be encouraged by leaders who are uncomfortable with the positional power they hold and are unintentionally obscuring their authority behind the “feeling” or language of consensus. At other times, the group started out small and structurally collective, but as it grew, the structure shifted but the culture remained the same. This dynamic has the most negative impact on people with less power, stirring up confusion (“Wait, are you asking for my idea because it might influence the decision?”) and eventually frustration (“I’m tired of putting energy into these conversations when my contributions aren’t actually doing anything!”) over time.

WHAT TO TRY



Once you have mapped who has authority and influence in the organization (see above!), discuss the cultural and social norms in the group. Where do they match the structure, and where is there dissonance?

EVERY DECISION DOES NOT REQUIRE EVERYONE

It's a common misconception that the only way to share power in decision making is to have **complete transparency and no hierarchy**. Instead, we believe there are many levers in the stages of decision making to distribute power while accounting for efficiency and difference in skill and role.

Many of us have made the mistake of trying to express our values of power sharing by having every single person in the group involved in every decision. The result? Eternal meetings, low morale, and the feeling of “never getting any real work done.” Yikes! At AORTA, we have a flat structure where we are all co-owners of the business. But we're always experimenting with role differentiation and delegating decisions.

WHAT TO TRY



Build the practice of identifying who should play which roles in specific decisions and why, and make sure the who and why are clear to everyone. We like to use the decision making sequence in Lesson 1 to map on who has what authority over which stage of the process. This can support the full group to know and understand who has what authority over which stage and why.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Think of an upcoming decision that your group is making together, and try filling out this reflection sheet!

Which stage of the decision making process does my group typically get stuck? Why?

Who has the authority in each stage of the decision making process and why?

Identify the problem: _____

Generate possible solutions: _____

Identify constraints and criteria: _____

Narrowing down: _____

Finalize the decision: _____

Implementation: _____

What is one way that I can better “close the door” in this process?

ABOUT AORTA

AORTA is a worker-owned cooperative of facilitators, coaches, and consultants devoted to movements for liberation. AORTA offers facilitation, coaching, process design and thought partnership to groups. We focus on: strategy and planning; values and purpose; shared leadership and democratic practice; navigating organizational transitions; relational tending and conflict; and political education and practical skill-building. We also offer training, coaching, and thought partnership to individuals! Learn more about us at aorta.coop.



The Just Transition Framework

The Just Transition Framework developed by **Movement Generation** and the **Climate Justice Alliance** is one of AORTA's guiding political frameworks. Learn more about the principle that we quote earlier "If we are not prepared to govern, we are not prepared to win" and the broader framework it sits in!

Groups who have inspired us

Check out these groups who have inspired us: AORTA's approaches and tools have been inspired by many movement projects and formations across the Left. For democratic decision making, in particular, learn more about the **Sustainable Economies Law Center**, **New Economy Coalition**, and **The Management Center**.