

Affinity Groups

What is an affinity group?

An affinity group is a small group of people who come together to prepare for and take action. The group is organised in a non-hierarchical and autonomous way and is focused on direct action. Sometimes these groups are formed just for one action, but often they are ongoing groups that organise and take part in actions over a number of years. They can be made up of friends, people from the same community or people with shared interests such as music or street theatre.

Affinity groups have a long and interesting past. They were used by the anarchist movement in Spain in the late 19th and early 20th century. Small circles of friends would come together in cafes to discuss, plan and carry out actions. Later these groups formed local and regional federations, with each group retaining its autonomy. This principle of non-hierarchy also applied within the group – there was no leader, everyone had an equal voice and responsibility.

This way of organising collective action was developed further by anti-nuclear activists in the 1970s in the US and Germany, where thousands of people took action together, organised into small affinity groups. Affinity groups have since been used around the world by peace activists, ecologists, anti-capitalists and many others to organise for effective action.

Why work in affinity groups?

- ➔ **Collective action, participation and direct democracy:** Affinity groups offer a means to collective action based on equality and direct democracy. They avoid relying on one strong leader and often use consensus for decision making. This encourages everyone to actively participate in planning, making decisions and taking action. Another important aspect of affinity groups is their autonomy - all important decisions are made within the group even when the group is participating with others in a larger action. This allows the group to stay flexible, creative and responsible for its own actions. It also challenges traditional top-down decision making.
- ➔ **Flexibility and creativity on actions:** Because affinity groups can make decisions autonomously on actions they can react quickly and creatively if the situation changes. This also provides an element of uncertainty for our 'opponents'.
- ➔ **Safety and support:** Affinity groups tend to stay together during an action and look out for each other, thus offering protection and more safety, as well as moral support. They help avoid the feeling of anonymity and isolation on actions.
- ➔ **Long-term sustainability:** Taking action as part of a small group also offers long-term support to each member, helping people to stay active through high levels of both internal and external pressure. Stress, police repression, doubt, fear, violence and campaign setbacks are all dealt with much more easily as part of a group than on your own.

- ➔ **Countering infiltration:** The intimacy of small groups makes police infiltration harder. Especially in longer term groups people get to know each other, their backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses. If infiltration does occur, decentralisation means limited access to information within a larger movement.
- ➔ **Organisation and communication:** Direct action organised on the basis of a network of affinity groups working together also improves organisation and communication. It's much easier to stay in touch with 5 groups than with 80 people.

How to build an affinity group

Affinity groups are based on mutual support and trust which takes some work to build. Whether you are building a long-term group or you are an ad hoc affinity group that has come together just before an action, always try to run through all the steps below. The time you'll be able to spend on this will of course vary, but try to have at least a couple of hours to prepare together for the action and half an hour for debriefing after the action.

1. Getting to know each other

This is vital if you want to build trust. Get to know about each others' experiences, worries, hopes and motivations. This will allow giving each other the right kind of support in stressful situations. This needn't be too formal either – socialise, have meals together and go to the pub with each other.

- Name and contact details? Motivations for participating in this action? What sort of actions do you/don't you want to do? What are our concerns and worries – of doing the action, of possibly getting arrested, being injuncted, being in the media limelight etc? What can we do individually and as a group to address these?

2. Working out a basic agreement

Each affinity group needs an agreement for how the group operates, how decisions are made, what it does and how it will react in certain situations. Everyone needs to be willing and able to keep to this agreement, even in stressful situations. It forms the basis for being able to rely on each other.

- Is this an open or closed group (i.e. can new people join the group?) How do we make decisions in the group? What do you expect from the affinity group? How do we react if... (e.g. the police intervene, someone gets violent)? How do we react towards people we encounter during actions (bystanders, the police, company directors)? How opportunistic is the group (e.g. what do we do if the plan was to hold up banners outside some office, but then there is the chance to actually get inside the building? How would that affect the group?) What happens if someone really feels the need to leave? A name for the group (for communicating on the action - e.g. shouting it to get everyone's attention)

3. Planning

After coming to a basic agreement, it's time to plan the action. Make sure you involve everyone in this process. When deciding what preparation tasks need to be done, make you decide who will do them. Some aspects may be delegated to smaller groups, e.g. prop making. Other questions to consider include:

- What materials do we need and how do we get them? How much time does each person have before, during or after the action? Where do we meet before the action? How do we stay together

and communicate with each other during the action? Where do we meet afterwards if we get separated? On a mass action, which tasks does the group take on (eg legal team, blockading, communication, entertainment)? How can the group support the overall structure of the action?

4. Taking action and supporting each other

Affinity groups usually stay closely together during the action, making sure that everyone gets support and nobody is isolated. Remember to keep to your agreements and keep checking that everyone is feeling ok. People often take on specific roles within the group, see below.

5. Debriefing and evaluation

It is important to take some time for debriefing after the action. This should be done as soon as possible, ideally on the same day. It is a really good way of learning lessons, allowing people to tell their stories and giving everyone a chance to express how they felt. Make notes of anything that is useful for planning the next action. Sometimes it can be helpful to have another session a few days later, when people have had time to recover and think about anything that happened.

- What happened to each person? How did people feel during the action? Was everyone supported by the group? How did the group interact with each other? What was achieved? What was good? What could be improved? Does the group want to stay together for further actions?

Long-term and one-off groups

When setting up a long-term group it is best to look for friends and activists that are interested in the same issues for campaigning on and who are interested in using similar tactics. Key issues to consider are:

- individuals' attitudes to taking open and accountable or more covert actions,
- personal definitions and beliefs of violence and non-violence
- attitudes to doing acts of criminal damage,
- where people stand on using the mainstream media.

Getting together with people who share similar views on these points will help avoid conflict later on.

If you are setting up a group for a one-off action it should be easier for people to come to a temporary agreement. It is however important that all members of the group adhere to it and that people can trust in this.

On mass actions it's best to get together with people who want to participate in the same aspects of an action, e.g street theatre, blockading, occupying a building, holding banners, handing out leaflets. If there are no overarching guidelines on nonviolence/accountability then, again, it helps to get together with people who share similar beliefs on these issues (or at least people who are willing to set aside personal agendas and come to one agreement for this action.)

If there are lots of people without an affinity group then form ad hoc groups. Sometimes it will be possible to join existing affinity groups – if possible join one that fits your beliefs and style of action. Be aware that not all group are open to new members.

Characteristics of an effective affinity group

1. **Common ground** – that's the “affinity” bit. It might be a shared political or ideological outlook, everyone living or studying in the same town or a shared desire to take action on a specific issue or in a specific way.
2. **A willingness to work towards the group agenda** - this means putting aside personal agendas that conflict with the group aims, based on the recognition that working in groups we can achieve more than when we work alone.
3. **Trust** - group members need to be able to trust each other in stressful situations. This means that people need to know each others strengths & weaknesses, hopes & fears. This ensures that actions fulfill everyone's vision for safety and effectiveness and that everyone can support each other throughout the action.
4. **Commitment to using group building tools** - these will help build high levels of trust, openness and clear common ground. They include consensus decision making, an awareness of group dynamics and good group facilitation.
5. **Skillsharing** - makes new members feel included right from the start, strengthens the group as a whole and avoids informal hierarchies developing around those who have specific skills. It's also just plain common sense - if you use consensus decision making, everyone needs to have the skills to make it work .
6. **Action** - an effective group takes action!
7. **Sustainability** - Pulling off the action of the decade but burning everyone out for the next decade in the process isn't realistic.

Roles and skills within the affinity group

There are many tasks and roles that are needed to plan and take action. The specifics will vary from action to action and from group to group. What is most important is having enough skills within the group to allow for effective autonomous action. When planning an action go through all the tasks that need doing and check whether you have enough people able and willing for each task. If you don't then you'll have to either find more people with the right skills or change your plan of action. Some groups choose not to allocate who takes on what role until the action is planned and ready to go. This can prevent divisions forming over people that see their role as more important and others who resent this. Roles often include the following (see also our briefing Nonviolent Direct Action):

- ★ **Transport** - drivers with cars/buses
- ★ **Legal support** (at the end of a phone) - keeps track of arrests, works with solicitors
- ★ **Legal observers** - take notes on police conduct, arrests, violations of activists rights
- ★ **Police liaison** - facilitates communication between police and affinity group
- ★ **Action support** - provides direct personal support for action participants (food, water etc)
- ★ **Media liaison** - empowered to talk to the media and act as a spokesperson
- ★ **First aiders** - deal with any medical or health issues during the action

- ★ **Traffic wardens** - responsible for the safety of people from cars and other vehicles
- ★ **Quick decisions facilitator** – helps group to make decisions quickly during an action
- ★ **Action participants** - carry out the actual action (climbing, locking on, trespassing etc)
- ★ **Spoke** – participates in spokescouncil meetings to input the affinity groups' views and decisions and to participate in collective decision making

There are also some general skills that will help people in the group work together more effectively. There will often be one or two people in a group that have these skills. Encourage them to share the skills with everyone else – the more people have these skills the more effective and flexible your group will be:

- **Good meeting and group work skills:** Good meetings that make everyone feel valued and involved will help build trust, commitment and enthusiasm in the group. The group as a whole has a responsibility to learn about how to make decisions by consensus, how to facilitate meetings and how to resolve conflicts.
- **Quick decision-making on actions:** Even on the best planned actions the situation can change suddenly from what you expected. To stay effective your group need to be able to decide how to react quickly. This requires practice in advance – think of some scenarios that might occur and try to decide what you would do within a minute.
- **Strategy and planning:** Develop and share skills about strategic thinking, organising and planning. Make sure it's not always the same person dealing with these tasks - holding together the tactics and logistics for an action can be very stressful indeed.
- **Effective delegation:** Making sure that tasks are shared out fairly within the group ensures no one person is overloaded and at risk of burning out. It can also help with empowerment and sharing skills, as people take on new tasks and acquire the skills needed to make them happen.

You can find more info on these issues in our briefings *Consensus*, *Facilitation of Meetings*, *Quick Decision Making*, *Strategy for Projects and Campaigns*.

Affinity groups on mass actions

Affinity groups can come together for mass actions and co-ordinate their activities via a spokescouncil. Each group sends a representative (often called a spoke) to the spokescouncil meeting, where issues such as tactics, overarching action guidelines and logistics are discussed. What the spoke is empowered to do is up to their affinity group. Spokes may need to consult with their group before discussing or agreeing on certain subjects. The spokescouncil does not take away the autonomy of each individual group – consensus on each proposal has to be achieved not only within each group but also among all groups together. During an action a spokescouncil can be convened to discuss immediate issues that arise out of unexpected situations. (More info in our briefing *Consensus in Large Groups*).

Affinity groups can take on certain roles during a mass action, for example, there can be a legal support group, roving street medic groups, samba bands and groups providing food.

Affinity groups can also come together to form clusters that work on specific parts of an action. For example one cluster could occupy the office buildings while another cluster goes off to blockade machinery. In large blockades clusters can also take on an area.

Common problems in affinity groups

(and how to deal with them)

Long term sustainability - it can sometimes be difficult to stay inspired and energised and to avoid burnout within the group, especially if you experience setbacks or several less successful actions. Thorough debriefing, learning from mistakes and lots of socialising can help, as can good delegation and shared workloads

Mass actions - pose the problem of how to maintain your autonomy. It can be difficult plan and act independently, and report on your own actions. This is often caused by relying too much on the overall organisers for information and infrastructure. For example groups often expect a legal support system to be set up for them to use, but then find out that it isn't happening. This can be countered by making sure that the group covers all its own needs for the whole action (organisational ability, inspiration, group work skills, media skills, first aid skills, legal knowledge).

Informal Hierarchies - often arise because there is a perception that some people have more experience and skills; or because a minority act as the source of information for the group (and information is power). Sometimes it can be down to the 'strength' of personalities in the group, with some people dominating discussion and decision making and others feeling undervalued. There are also issues around the perceived levels of 'commitment' in a group, with those prepared to turn up to every meeting and action becoming the 'core' of the group. This is often the case regardless of the reasons why others don't turn up to meetings, many of which have nothing to do with lack of commitment – e.g. childcare commitments, a full time job, health issues, or simply a more sustainable attitude to taking action! The creation of a 'core' often leads to informal decision making outside of meetings and before you know it you've got a committee and a membership. Try to prevent this from happening by using consensus and facilitation for your meetings, rotating jobs and roles and sharing skills and knowledge with each other.

New members - Some groups struggle with the issue of attracting new members and making them feel included whilst not 'watering down' the original ethos of the group. This can be avoided by being explicit from the start about the 'groundrules' or 'vision' for the group, and making these clear to all new members. Examples of this are a commitment to nonviolence or a belief in doing (or not doing) economic damage on actions. If these aren't clear to new members from the start they can lead to problems later.