

# Affinity Groups

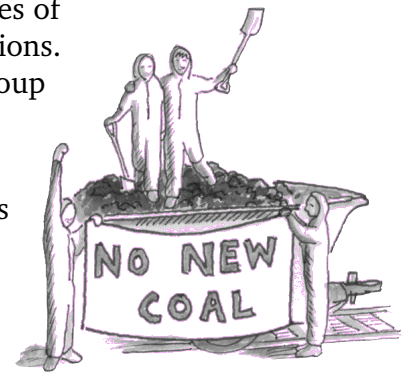
## Buddies, Quick Consensus, Spokescouncils



An affinity group is a small group of people who come together to prepare for and take direct action. Affinity groups are organised in a non-hierarchical and autonomous way, there are no leaders and everyone has an equal voice and responsibility. 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. Affinity groups work best when people have something in common (the 'affinity' bit). This affinity might be where you live, the issues you want to campaign on, the tactics you want to use or a particular skill you have to offer (e.g. action medics), or a mixture of all of these.

Affinity groups have a long and interesting history. 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 cafés to discuss, plan and carry out actions. Later these groups formed local and regional federations, with each group retaining its autonomy.

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 and create alternative social structures.



### Why work in affinity groups?

There are many reasons to work in an affinity group, both in terms of what you can achieve and how you do it. Here are a few:

#### **Collective action, participation and direct democracy:**

In a good affinity group everyone is equal. Everyone participates in making decisions and taking action. This is not just an effective way of making sure people feel committed to getting things done, it is also putting democracy into practice.

#### **D.I.Y. activism and empowerment:**

Another important aspect of affinity groups is their autonomy – all important decisions are made within the group even if you are participating with others in a larger action. By working closely with a small group of people you can work out what's important for you, and then go out and make it happen. Your affinity group

may be part of wider campaigns and networks, but you only need to depend on yourselves. This is especially the case if you work at building up skills within your affinity group, so you can cover your own needs.

#### **Effectiveness:**

Affinity groups make good use of resources. Usually 10 groups of 10 people can achieve more than 100 people acting on mass. 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 the authorities. Many actions can actually be pulled off effectively with just a few people –if this is the case then it allows other groups to come back and do it again the next day!

## Safety, support and sustainability:

Having a group of people looking out for one another before, during and after an action or during a long and tiring campaign is a useful way to make sure everyone is cared for. Stress, police repression, doubt, fear and campaign setbacks are all dealt with much more easily as part of a group than on your own. Also, planning actions in small groups makes it much more likely they will happen without your action target finding out about it first. It is much harder for an infiltrator to win the long-term trust of an affinity group than to gather information at big planning meetings full of strangers. Groups known to be targeted by infiltrators have

included Plane Stupid in 2008 and Campaign Against the Arms Trade from 1997 to 2003. Planning actions in a small group also works as a means of damage limitation – if information does leak out then only a few people are compromised, not hundreds.



### Some recent examples of affinity groups taking direct action in the UK.

- Two coal fired power stations have been blockaded for days by groups making themselves at home on top of chimneys and around the conveyor belts.
- Numerous open cast coal mines have been stopped from working by people sitting on top of the machinery.
- Destitute people have been fed by affinity groups who retrieve and cook edible food from bins at the back of shops.
- Thousands of genetically modified crops have been pulled up and fields decontaminated.
- Guerilla gardening has created green spaces in built up and run down areas.
- Bomb factories and military hardware like fighter jets have been decommissioned.

## Putting it into practice

**Achieving all of the above with an affinity group takes time and energy.** If you are going to be able to support each other you need to talk about your needs, hopes, fears and motivations. Here are some more ideas about how to make affinity groups work.

### Getting started

#### Finding some friends

This is often the difficult bit! Finding friends to hang out with is one thing, finding friends to take action with is something else entirely. The ideal situation may be to have people you like, who live locally, who have a similar amount of time to take action on the same issues using the same tactics. However, even if your situation isn't this perfect, this doesn't need to stop you from doing anything at all.

Organising and participating in events can be a good way of finding local people who feel strongly enough to take action on your issue. This could be a meeting, or something more informal like a film night with opportunities for chatting afterwards. Alternatively, look for people from your area who have turned up to regional or national gatherings, and arrange to meet up afterwards.

If you are considering forming a long term group, work out how much common ground you have got with the people that you find. Do you have just enough in common to work together on one action? Might you work together occasionally over a long period? Or have you found a group of people you can stick to through thick and thin? This is likely to change over time – you may well want to start by doing a few lower risk actions together, and then work more closely together if things go well.

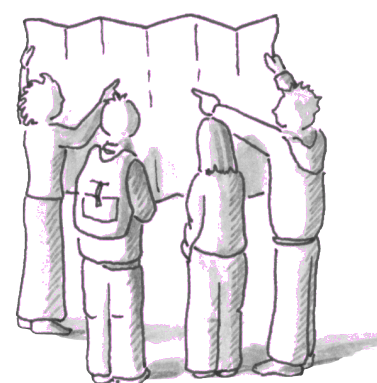
Here are a few factors you might want to think about to help you decide whether there's enough 'affinity' there:

- Individuals' attitudes to taking actions which are public or covert, accountable or non-accountable.
- Personal definitions and beliefs around violence and nonviolence.
- Attitudes to doing acts of criminal damage.
- Where people stand on using the mainstream media.

Getting together with people who share a similar approach to these issues will create energy and enthusiasm through your shared aims and use of tactics, and will help you avoid conflict later on.

## Building your 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 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, limitations and motivations. Knowing each other better will make it possible to give each other the right kind of support in stressful situations. It needn't be too formal either – going for bike rides, eating together, or going to the pub with each other all help.

### 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. Depending on how long you are likely to work together for, this could require a long time to work out. It's important to get it right though – everyone needs to be willing and able to keep to this agreement. Talking about things in advance makes it possible for the group members to trust each other's reactions, even in the heat of a stressful moment. It's important to communicate agreements to new group members and ensure they agree and respect them.

**Long term:** Is this an open or closed affinity group (i.e. can new people join the group)? How do we make decisions? What do we each expect from the group?

**Action planning:** How do we react if... (e.g. the police intervene, someone gets violent)? How do we act towards people we encounter during actions (bystanders, the police, company directors)? How opportunistic are we (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?

### 3. Planning

After coming to a basic agreement, it's time to make plans. For a long term group, this might mean creating a campaign strategy, for a short term group it might just be one action. Either way, make sure everyone is fully involved in the process. Start with your aims, and work out how much time and energy you can realistically devote to achieving them. Do your research, pick your targets, and decide which tactics will be most effective.

## 4. Take action and support each other

Taking action together is one of the best ways of getting to know each other. Remember to keep checking that everyone is OK, and make sure you are keeping to the agreements you made. Organise yourselves into pairs or 'buddies' for better support, and practise making quick consensus decisions (see below).

In a longer term campaign, watch out for people who take on too much and may be at risk of burning out. Be careful to share out tasks so they

aren't always done by the same people, and so that skills are shared.

## 5. Debrief and evaluate

Make time to reflect on your action or campaign all together. Check-in on how everyone feels, and whether they are getting what they need from the group. Think about what has worked and why, and apply these lessons to the future. Take time to celebrate your successes and to enjoy each other's company as people as well as as activists. Before your action happens, set a time and date for the debrief.

# Keeping it going

## Affinity group skills

If people are to stay happy and productive in an affinity group, it's worth thinking about the following skills and how you can share them with each other.

- ✓ **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 consensus (or whatever decision making process the group has chosen), how to facilitate meetings and how to resolve conflicts. It helps if individuals balance a commitment to the group with an open and honest acknowledgement of their own needs and feelings.
- ✓ **Strategy and planning:** Planning a campaign or an action takes skills and knowledge. It is crucial that these skills are shared if everyone is to participate as an equal.
- ✓ **Sharing out tasks:** Again, making sure that tasks are shared out fairly within the group ensures no one person is overloaded and at risk of burning out. It helps everyone learn new skills and feel empowered.

## 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, or get into a long term habit of over-working.



**Tips:** Debrief thoroughly, learn from mistakes, socialise and share workloads and skills. Be realistic about what you take on. Take time to celebrate your successes, no matter how small. Look after yourself and encourage everyone else to do the same. Above all, support each other through stressful times and watch out for signs that people may be suffering from burnout. If you are worried about

### Some signs of burn-out

- emotional & physical fatigue
- lingering illnesses
- lack of energy & motivation
- feeling disempowered, hopeless & angry
- unable to maintain relationships
- forgetfulness & poor concentration

someone, be ready to ease their workload even if it means you get less done as a group. Where possible try to make sure that people can take time away from your campaign without losing their social network at the same time, by having social time that is not connected to meetings or actions, for instance.

## 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. If the ethos and methods of working aren't clear to new members from the start it can lead to problems later.

**Tips:** Be explicit from the start about the 'groundrules' or 'vision' for the group, make these clear to all new members and ensure there is opportunity for discussion and collective understanding around difficult issues. For example, the group's commitment to nonviolence, or a belief in doing, or not doing, economic damage on actions.

## Informal hierarchies

These often arise because some people are seen as having more experience and skills.

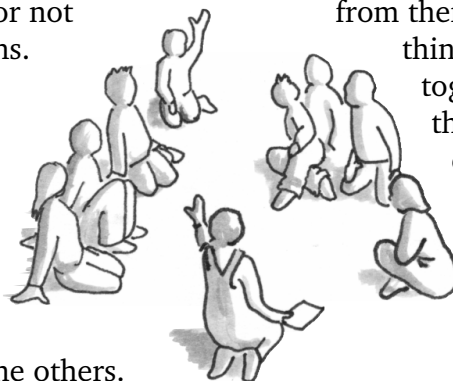
Sometimes, the problem is a small number of people having access to more information than the others. In some groups it's a question of personality – more confident people can dominate, making others feel undervalued. There are also issues that arise when some people are seen as more committed than others, perhaps because they always turn up to meetings and actions. This is often the case regardless of the reasons why others don't turn up, many of which have nothing to do with lack of commitment – e.g. childcare responsibilities, a full time job, health issues, or simply a more sustainable attitude to taking action! The creation of a 'core' of people who always turn up often leads to informal decision making outside of meetings and before you know it you've got a committee and a membership.

**Tips:** In meetings use good facilitation – with an emphasis on allowing everyone to participate. Vary your meeting times so it isn't always the same people who can't go, and make sure that people who miss one meeting still get told about the next one! Even if someone has missed a meeting, there may still be ways for them to take on tasks in preparation for the action. Rotate jobs and roles and build in skill-sharing to your work to build up everyone's confidence and respect for each other.

## Failure to reach agreement

It may simply be that the group doesn't have enough common ground, and you don't have enough affinity to work together. Occasionally, splitting up might be the most empowering and effective course of action. Alternatively, it may be that minor disagreements and personal issues are blinding you to the common ground you do have. If there is common ground, splitting the group and starting at the beginning again is likely to waste time and emotional energy.

**Tips:** Go back and remind yourselves what aims and ideas you share and see where you can go from there. Remind yourselves of the things you have achieved by working together. Ask yourselves whether the sticking points are disagreements about important principles, or if personal agendas and personality clashes are creeping into your meetings. Look for training in consensus decision making.



## Mass actions

Joining a mass action can pose a problem of how to maintain your group's autonomy. It can be difficult to 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, or a handful of media spokespeople to do all the interviews.

**Tips:** Organise or attend skill-shares, so that the group is able to cover all its own needs for the whole action (group work skills, media skills, first aid skills, legal knowledge etc.) Participate in mass actions that have scope for you to plan your own role. For instance, a mass blockade might involve several affinity groups taking on a different entrance or access road, and co-ordinating about times, but deciding within their groups where and how they will form their blockade. Alternatively, affinity groups might take responsibility for particular roles, such as legal support, first aid or providing food.

# Other ways of making direct action happen

## Buddying up

Even within affinity groups there are extra support systems you can use. Buddying up is one, and has special relevance to larger affinity groups. It means agreeing in small groups (generally 2–4) to look out for each other's well being. Buddying should mean you are never alone on the action, you're less likely to get lost, and have someone to leave the scene with if you need to stop for any reasons.

Buddies should be prepared to:

- ✓ Know if their buddy has any particular (e.g. medical) needs.
- ✓ Check that their buddy is still with them whenever a group is moving around.
- ✓ Make sure their buddy is physically OK, and find food/drink/warm clothing/medical attention if they aren't.
- ✓ Keep an eye on their buddy's emotional state, and try to calm them down / comfort them when necessary.
- ✓ Leave with their buddy if they want to go, for any reason.
- ✓ Provide support if their buddy gets arrested. This could mean passing on their details to a legal support person, or arranging for someone to meet them when they get out of the police station.
- ✓ Get help if their buddy is getting hurt – this could be calling an ambulance, finding a first aider or asking someone with a camera to record the situation.



This might make it all seem rather formal and difficult to maintain. In reality it isn't – it's just a way of making sure no one gets forgotten in the confusion of an action, and everyone has a friend to look out for them.

## Quick consensus decision making

Consensus decision making is a system of reaching decisions that is widely regarded as one of the most participatory and empowering processes available to activist groups. However, it can take time, and often, in an action, time is exactly what you haven't got. If the police are threatening arrest at any moment, or you may have spied an opportunity that you need to take quickly or miss altogether, you may only have seconds to decide what to do.

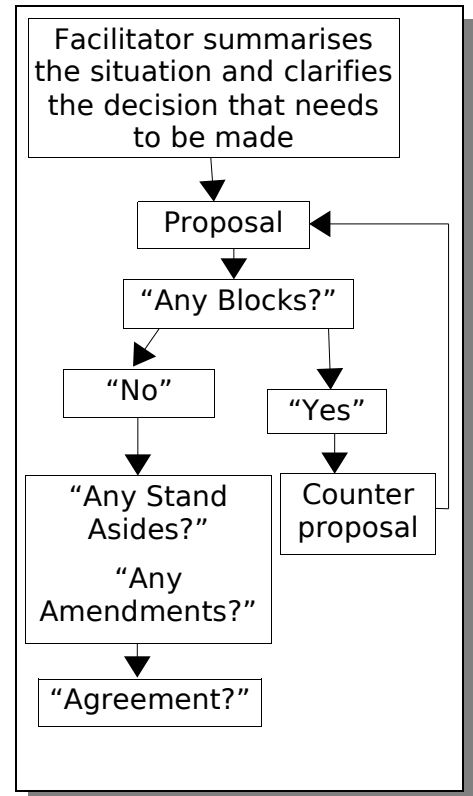
Quick consensus is a way of making collective decisions in situations where time is very limited. It aims to find a solution that everyone can support. These decisions might not be perfect, but at least everyone had the chance to agree or disagree, and everyone bears equal responsibility if things go well or badly.

### Blocks, stand asides and friendly amendments

- **A block** is a veto – it kills the proposal dead. Everyone has the right to do this. In quick consensus blocks usually happen for two reasons: 1) a proposal will split the group, usually because some people have an ethical objection to it, or because it might endanger someone's safety or 2) the group is failing to make a decision. If a proposal is blocked, you need a new one! Some groups insist that in quick consensus you must have a counter proposal before you can block.
- **A stand aside** is agreeing to disagree. It allows the proposal to go ahead in the group's name, but those that choose to stand aside take no part in that particular action.
- **A friendly amendment** enhances a proposal. It's not a new idea, but a way of making an existing one more effective.

## The Quick Consensus process

1. **Appoint a facilitator.** For the sake of speed you could do this in advance, but try not to always use the same person. The facilitator briefly clarifies the situation, and the time available to talk. "We've been given 2 minutes to move or we'll all be arrested. I think we should make the decision in one minute."
2. **If there's time, the group briefly discusses the situation.** It is up to the facilitator to judge how long to give to this, or whether to skip this stage altogether.
3. **The facilitator asks for proposals.** "Yeah, I propose we link arms and sit down". There may be time to take friendly amendments, e.g. "Let's sit down in a circle and link arms – we'll be stronger that way."
4. **The facilitator re-states the proposal and tests for consensus.** "OK, it's proposed that we sit in the road and link arms. Any blocks?". If there are, you need a new proposal at this stage. "Any stand asides?" – "Yeah, I'll lose my job if I'm arrested – I'll watch from the side and act as a legal observer." "Everyone else agree?" Chorus of agreement.
5. **Make sure everyone knows who is doing what – and then get on and do it!**



## Making it work

First of all, a shared knowledge of the quick consensus process is essential. Take time to practice this – it does get easier the more often you do it.

Appoint a facilitator who you trust to remain neutral. This doesn't mean the facilitator can't express any opinions – they are in the same situation as everyone else and have the right to participate. However, they should not steer the discussion to suit their own agenda, or jump in to make proposals before anyone else has had a chance. If there is time for discussion, be alert to signs of disagreement – it is important to reach full agreement on an important decision.

It also helps if the facilitator is able to summarise what has been said, and asks questions to check when things aren't clear – good communication is vital if quick consensus is to work.

It also helps to have thought through the kinds of situations that might arise, and how you want to respond to them beforehand. If you already know how people feel about

getting arrested or making last minute changes of plan, this should affect the proposals you make. This is where the work you did creating a group agreement and talking about each other's concerns pays off.

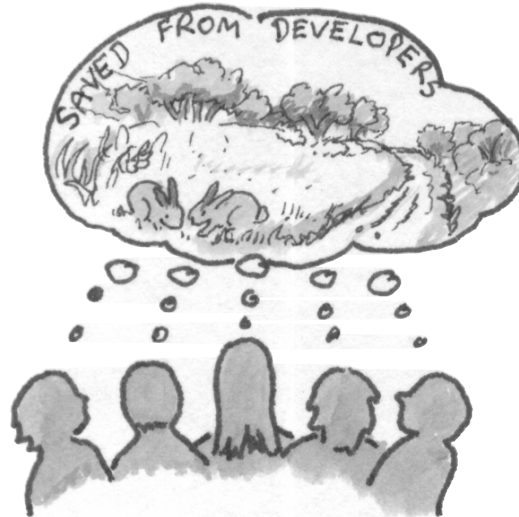




## Spokescouncils

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.



## A final reflection

**Affinity groups, buddies, quick consensus decision making and spokescouncils have one thing in common.** They all offer a liberating way of organising – anti-hierarchical, participatory, supportive, directly democratic, empowering, sustainable, creative... Liberating because you work as equals, and liberating because of the things you can achieve together. This is all about creating a world where we don't need leaders and laws. It's about direct democracy. If you also use affinity organising to plan and carry out effective direct action, you'll be a good step along the way to creating a better world, inside and outside of your group.

*For more briefings and training workshops see:*  
[www.seedsforchange.org.uk](http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk)

