Occupy San Francisco is meeting in Justin Herman Plaza. The group is engaged in another long and painful consensus meeting, made more painful by a lack of skills on the part of our brave but inexperienced facilitators. I raise my hand and make a suggestion.

“Maybe instead of all of us trying to order the agenda, the facilitators could just take a few minutes and do that for us.”

Behind me, a young man so agitated that he appears to be jumping out of his skin turns and glares at me.

“I haven’t seen you here in the camp before! I don’t see you here at night! Why should we listen to you?” he shouts.

I bite back the retort, “Oh yeah? I haven’t seen you in the forty years I’ve been organizing in this town!”

It wouldn’t do any good. The meeting limps on in its painful way, so embroiled in ineffective process that nothing of substance gets decided, and I stand there more and more frustrated—not least because for many of those forty or more years, I have worked in groups that also defined themselves

Radically horizontal structures put a check on leaders’ authority—but at what cost? Here, protesters at Occupy Sydney in 2011 take part in a consensus-building exercise.

Structure Without Hierarchy
Effective Leadership in Social Change Movements

BY STARHAWK

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as horizontal and egalitarian yet were able to organize efficiently and create empowering experiences for their members.

And so I eagerly read both Miki Kashtan’s new book, *Reweaving Our Human Fabric*, and the commentary on leadership it elicited from Charles Eisenstein in this issue of *Tikkun*. Issues of power, leadership, and group conflict have been key interests of mine for decades, so I’m delighted to offer my own response to the ideas raised by both Kashtan and Eisenstein.

Since the early days of the second wave of feminism back in the ’70s, I’ve been involved in groups that consciously defined themselves as “nonhierarchical” and have often been in the uncomfortable position of serving in leadership roles in nominally “leaderless” groups. I’ve seen many groups undergo intense struggles, and I’ve also been part of large-scale mobilizations that organized quite effectively without central control.

What makes the difference? While there are thousands of books and trainings and MBA programs that will teach you to manage a hierarchy, there are few models and little theory about how to nonmanage a nonhierarchy. And yet the issue is crucial. The simple problem of how to get along in groups is probably the most constraining factor in challenging the overarching structures of oppressive power. Struggling with these issues led me to write *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery* back in the ’80s, and more recently, *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups*.

**Understanding Social Power**

Kashtan differentiates between “power-over” and “power-with.” But to work both collaboratively and effectively, we need an even more nuanced understanding of power, for the word can mean many different things. Power-over is something we are all familiar with: the ability of one person or a group to control resources, set standards, use force, or impose punishment on others.

*Power-from-within* is the term I prefer for that sense of power that means ability, skill, confidence, and proficiency; our creative and spiritual power; or our courage to take risks or to speak truth. *Empowerment* is another term we might use, and one goal of our egalitarian groups might be to empower one another: to help each member feel a greater sense of agency and potentiality, and gain skills, confidence, and courage.

But there is a third type of power that arises in groups, however they are structured. *Social power* is the level of influence and respect a person holds, apart from whatever structural power the person may have. Understanding social power is crucial to addressing complex questions of inclusion, equality, and effectiveness.

For social power itself comes in two basic flavors: earned and unearned. *Unearned social power*—the respect automatically accorded to someone because of some factor such as race or gender or good looks or family background—is a form of privilege, something progressive groups oppose. *Earned social power* means the respect and influence that come from taking on responsibilities and fulfilling them, from having a track record, from making long-standing commitments to a group or mission, from helping the group function smoothly, and from making real contributions. It may also come from making mistakes and admitting them so that they become part of the group’s collective learning. Earned social power may derive from having experience and expertise around a certain issue.

The division between earned and unearned social power is often murky and includes much overlap. Joe may have a strategic mind and make brilliant contributions to the group, and his confidence in speaking out may come from being a white male in a culture that, since childhood, has assured him that his contributions will be heard and valued. Jane’s PhD may represent both the privilege to be able to attend a university and a lot of real work, research, and grueling hours spent writing up her results.
Social power—the respect and esteem of our friends and community—is one of the basic human needs that nonviolent communication addresses. It is also one of the main draws to group membership and one of the primary rewards we get from voluntary groups that don’t offer us payment or the opportunity to earn other tangible rewards.

Acknowledging Different Paths to Power

Yet social power is never entirely equal in groups, even those that award everyone equal structural power. Some people will always command more respect and wield more influence than others, because as human beings we are different. We bring different levels of skill and commitment into a group. We also bring a variety of talents and limitations. In other words, we have differing abilities to help the group function. We can’t legislate those differences away. What we can do is acknowledge them. Then we can make clear, conscious choices about how and when social power confers decision-making power or other structural power. And we can create structures that allow people fair opportunities to earn social power by making real contributions to the group in a variety of ways.

The diversity of paths to social power is important, because if social power can be gained in only one way, no matter how fair, some people will be excluded. The incident at Occupy with which I began offers an example. In many of the Occupy groups, social power rapidly became concentrated amongst those who could spend the most time in the encampments, sleeping and living there. They exhibited the most commitment and shared the highest degree of risk, so that was, in a sense, only fair. Yet there were many like me, lifelong activists with decades of experience who simply could not drop their lives to live on the streets, in part because we had already built lives full of commitments to social change actions and organizations. While at times I succeeded in bringing my experience to bear on meetings or trainings, the major avenue to gaining social power was closed.

Fairly allocating social power is always a balancing act. Those who found a group, make long-term commitments to it, and build a track record of responsibility may fairly accrue huge social power—but if they monopolize all the power available, there’s no room for new people to enter and gain a voice.

As Kashtan points out, inclusion is never total. In a section titled “The Myth of Inclusion,” she writes, “The explicit inclusion of all so often leads to the implicit exclusion of those who cannot bear the behaviors of some.” I would suggest that, rather than framing the question as “Who do we need to include or exclude?” groups would do better to ask, “What standards of behavior do we want to uphold? What paths to social power do we prefer? What boundaries do we want to set?”

A group cannot avoid the responsibility of setting standards and boundaries, as refusing to do so itself becomes a standard. Again, to use Occupy as an example, many groups were unwilling to prohibit illegal drugs or alcohol in the camps because they didn’t want to exclude those who were dependent on alcohol or drugs. Yet the presence of heavy drinkers and active users created a level of danger in the camps that excluded many other people.

To be effective, a group also needs a governance structure that conforms to its vision and purpose. Nonhierarchical groups often say, “We work by consensus.” Yet consensus is a decision-making method. It doesn’t tell us, as Kashtan points out, who makes which decision about what. No group that attempts anything of complexity can make every required decision by a full consensus of the whole. There simply is not enough time for that! Every group needs to delegate responsibilities and allocate power to those who need it in order to function. “Structure” is not the same as “top-down hierarchy.”

Cues from Effective Movements

Kashtan looks at King and Gandhi as models of movements based on centralized leadership, but they are not the only models for effective social movements. The antinuclear movement in the ’70s and ’80s was organized around a simple structure that functioned well overall and set a pattern for many movements that followed, including the anti-intervention groups of the ’80s, and the forest defense groups and the global justice mobilizations of the ’90s and early 2000s.

Everyone who joined one of these mobilizations became part of a small group, called an affinity group, and made decisions together about how they would participate in the action. The groups allowed for many roles, from risking arrest to doing home support. Groups that took on specific tasks, such as running the medical clinic or doing outreach, formed working groups. Both working groups and affinity groups sent representatives to spokescouncils, which made overall decisions for the action as a whole. Working groups might also send representatives to coordinating councils that dealt with all the logistics and preparations for the actions. We rapidly learned that facilitating large and sometimes contentious meetings by consensus required skill and experience, and we made conscious efforts to provide training for new people and to develop a pool of skilled facilitators.

This model allowed us to mobilize thousands of people to face real dangers and act together in empowering ways. It gave everyone a voice and offered many ways to contribute. The Occupy movement, because it sprang up so quickly and spread so rapidly, often via social media rather than direct
contact, took pieces of this model but left out some of the crucial elements—affinity groups, governance structure, agreed-upon standards of behavior, and training, to name a few—that might have allowed it to function more effectively and build the internal cohesion necessary to withstand attack.

Kashtan and Eisenstein reframe “leadership” as service, and I agree with this framing. Empowering leaders are comfortable with the social power they have fairly earned, aware of the privilege they have not earned, and accountable for the structural power they wield. Groups that are “leaderful” rather than leaderless can function effectively and still allow us each to find our voice, express our creativity, and come together to realize our vision for a just and thriving world.