



Relationships & Team Culture

A strong team culture is an essential part of your team. The work you are doing is serious and difficult, but neglecting the relationships you have with each other means falling into the damaging patterns our work is trying to transform.

The first four sections of this guide explain more deeply why it is important to build strong relationships and cultivate an intentional team culture. Try to set aside an hour or more to read through these sections and take the time to journal on the reflection prompts. The last section of this guide provides some specific structures and practices your team can adopt to implement these values.

Of course, you shouldn't just make friends and have fun just because this guide says it's a good idea. Doing these things is instinctual, especially for youth! Embrace this instinct, and don't feel a need to contort to fit into corporate models of productivity.

Table of Contents

1. Focussing on Relationships is Important	2
2. Teams Need Trust To Function	4
3. Relationships and Team Sustainability	7
4. Joyful & Intentional Community Building is Radical	8
5. Structures and Activities	9
6. Going Deeper	13

1. Focussing on Relationships is Important

“One must seek to live with others in solidarity...only through communication can human life hold meaning.” Paulo Freire, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (p. 57-58)

Sometimes, teams feel like getting to know each other is not the best use of time. This feeling is partly based in the very real urgency of the climate crisis. When we as organizers are acutely aware that every day that passes means getting closer to the point of no return, it feels like we need to devote 100% of our energy into what will be the most productive to stop this crisis. But the assumption that team bonding is superfluous, an optional, unnecessary “extra” must be challenged. In fact, it may have been drilled into us by our economic system, capitalism, which tells us that producing clearly definable results matters above everything else.

Capitalism tells us that success comes through individualism; that we’re not dependent on everyone else, and that if you just work harder as an individual, you will produce more profit and value. These assumptions and values are instilled in us through school: how often do high school classes devote any time to learning the names of everyone in your class, let alone getting to know them? How often have you done a group project with someone who was and still is a complete stranger? (FURTHER LEARNING: read the book [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#))

Part of our movement for a more just and sustainable world is fighting back against the values, assumptions and worldviews of capitalism that created so many of our social and environmental issues in the first place. You must remember that you are, in fact, deeply interdependent with each other, and that all success is based on the strength of the group. In organizing, deepening into relationships allows us to create more together. There are a number of reasons why, including:

1. [Trust is everything](#) in community organizing
2. [Building community](#) enables sustainable and effective organizing
3. [Joyful and intentional community](#) building is radical and important work in itself

2. Teams Need Trust To Function

A key goal of effective team building is to build trust, because trust is what holds a team together. The more your team trusts each other, the faster and more effectively you will be able to move on your project, for a number of reasons.

2.1 Trust and Interdependence

Teams are most effective when members trust each other because doing so allows each person to not feel responsible for completing every function of the team. Since our work is so high-stakes, many organizers can find it hard to fully trust their other team members; for example, they may be worried that other team members don't have the best interests of the team at the center of their actions. However, this perspective forces team members to act defensively, instead of exploring how to act with full collaboration. Each team member should each be able to function independently like different parts of the body making up one wonderful whole, trusting that the other parts are also doing what is best.

Trust requires us to acknowledge that other team members might have skills or knowledge that we don't have, and that that is ok. This default of trust goes against dominant worldview values: many people are taught to compete with each other instead of exploring how to share our intelligence to create something better.

You may have experienced how lack of relationships means you have more work during class projects. One person will often end up taking on all of the work because of distrust and other people being unreliable. Students usually aren't given the time to build relationships during team projects since they occur during such a tight timeframe, which means that someone gets burdened with putting in all the effort.

REFLECT:

- ❖ *When was a time that your lack of trust in another person's abilities resulted in you needing to do extra work?*
- ❖ *When was a time that trusting another person allowed you to work really well together, and create something you couldn't have made alone?*

- ❖ *Have you ever felt a need to prove you're better than another person, instead of exploring how your strengths can complement each other? How can you work to unlearn this attitude?*

2.2 Trust and Shared Decision Making

The most effective decisions bring in the perspectives of every team member. Projects designed with as many perspectives as possible are more likely to be effective with as many different people as possible. If team members feel entirely comfortable and trusted with each other, your team will not waste time going forward with a flawed idea that someone knew wouldn't work but was not comfortable to raise their voice.

For more resources on creating decision making norms, check out the [“Deciding how to make decisions”](#) section of the Team Roles & Structure guide.

REFLECT: *Think about a time you've made an important decision in a group (for example, choosing a project in a previous club or team you were part of)*

- ❖ *Do you think each person felt enough trust to voice any concerns they had with the decision?*
- ❖ *How did the decision work out? Could it have been made better if more diverse perspectives had been included?*
- ❖ *Can you think of any way you and the team could have created a trusting enough culture to allow everyone to feel comfortable enough to voice disagreements? For example: ways you could have structured the decision making process, things you could have said, etc.*

2.3 Trust and Democratic Leadership

Democratic leadership depends on strong relationships with high degrees of trust. Although this can look different on every team, most teams above a certain size need a certain level of hierarchy in order to function. Our aversion to hierarchy is often based in a lack of trust: we don't like someone else making decisions for us if we can't fully trust that person to make a decision with our best interests at heart. However, in a strong team, leaders are trusted by members and held accountable through relationships.

A leader should be someone in trusting relationships with most people on the team; this should allow others to feel comfortable sharing any discomfort they have with how the leader is acting. Creating this level of comfort is partly beholden on the leaders, who must work to create a culture of approachability by not acting like they are above anyone else and by making an effort to build solid relationships with a variety of people. It is also beholden on the team members to internally deconstruct previous relationships to power they have experienced, and to understand that their friend who is leading the team is not the same sort of authority as a teacher. The team should work together to build trust among the leaders and members.

2.4 How to Build Trust

- ❖ Establish a shared sense of purpose with your teammates.
- ❖ Be accountable – doing what you say you'll do.
- ❖ Try your best, while being aware of and sticking to your boundaries through clear communication.
- ❖ Be aware of your capacity and avoid overcommitting and then being unable to deliver on everything you committed to.
- ❖ Treat everyone with respect and empathy .
- ❖ Avoid a culture of gossip and behind-the-back talk about other team members
- ❖ Strive to act with the best interests of the collective group at heart.
- ❖ Treat other team members with the understanding that they have the potential to do well and assume they are acting with the best intent possible.
- ❖ Remember that everyone has different circumstances in their lives that dictate how much capacity they are able to devote towards getting work done.
- ❖ Build relationships with one another through personal storytelling. Grounding our relationships in stories allows you to connect authentically and help your group build the emotional resources to take on the issues you care about.

REFLECT:

- ❖ Which are these ways of building trust do you currently practice in your life in general (for example, with your friends, in group projects, or in a team such as a sports team or arts group)?
- ❖ Which of these attitudes and habits will you try to practice in your organizing team? What do you need to do in order to implement them?

→ **LEARN MORE:** [Listen to this podcast about trust](#) from Brene Brown and Oprah Winfrey.

3. Relationships and Team Sustainability

Emotionally, we need to have fun and have strong relationships to be sustainable in our changemaking! The climate crisis is exhausting. No one can be fueled primarily by their anxiety about avoiding approaching doom. Instead, sustainable organizing comes from the relationships we hold with our team members.

The more that people get to know and appreciate each other, the more time they will want to spend at meetings and doing work, and the more you will collectively accomplish. If people see the group as something that is a discrete part of their life, like school, where they just need to show up and get things done, it will not be as fun or as all consuming. Instead, the movement can become your entire social group and source of identity!

You must have a fun culture if you want to attract people to the team, beyond those who are too anxious about the climate crisis to join. Teenagers don't want to devote their scarce free time to a boring corporate meeting. Nobody wants to join the army of the glum.

In fact, the main factor that determines whether volunteers will continue to return to campaigns may not be how strongly they believe in the cause, but how strong their relationships with other volunteers are. To learn more about this, and for some more examples of the importance of team bonding, check out the [“Engagement Paradox”](#) section of the Y4CA Recruitment guide.

Of course, none of this is to say that you necessarily need to be best friends with everyone on your team. The goal is to understand the importance of a strong team dynamic, in order to respect members as teammates and to trust them in the team environment - even if you don't particularly get along outside of that environment.

REFLECT:

- ❖ *Have you ever felt energized by other people making change? For example: at a protest or event, on a previous team (it's okay if you've never experienced this).*
- ❖ *What would a really fun team feel like to you?*
- ❖ *What can you do to make your team as fun as possible?*

4. Joyful & Intentional Community Building is Radical

The work we as organizers are doing - stopping the climate crisis - is pretty serious. Sometimes, it feels like the only response to such a serious and intense problem is for us to be constantly serious and intense in our work. However, we're fighting against a world centred on urgency, anger and fear.

Emma Goldman was a pioneering feminist and activist who worked in New York around the turn of the 19th century. She said - "If i can't dance I don't want to be a part of your revolution". While being unflinching in beliefs and demands for change, our movement to create a more just and sustainable world must practice the values that we as organizers are fighting for - love, joy, and hope. The impact you have as a team is not just what you collectively accomplish in the external world, but the culture and patterns you create in how you interact with each other. This culture must actively challenge the harmful patterns that create the crises our movement is fighting against.

Climate change is the result of a worldview that creates deep divisions. These divisions exist between society and the rest of the living world, between some people and other people ("us" and "them"), between our actions in the present and their impacts in the future.

This is the worldview that underlies many of our society's interconnected problems, including racism, colonization, environmental destruction and inequality. These are all related to each other *and* to climate justice. Capitalism tries to separate people into individuals, unable to support each other.

You can counter this division in how you interact with each other and the community you build. The movement for justice and sustainability is about creating a world in which each of us as people can fully exist as who we are. As such, in doing changemaking work, you should feel free to be yourself and resist the need to create a divide between who you are as an organizer and who you are outside of organizing.

5. Structures and Activities

Here are some specific structures and activities that you can use to build a relational, trusting, and fun team culture! Read through these suggestions as a team, and then decide on a few that you are going to implement in your team. Make sure that you make a plan for implementing them!

5.1 Creating Shared Principles

To define the culture that you want to create in your team, it is powerful to create shared principles for how you want to interact with each other. Here is one method of creating principles together. This process takes around 20 minutes.

1. Each team member takes around 5 minutes individually to reflect on a powerful, meaningful community you have been a part of. What made that community powerful? What made it feel different than other communities you were a part of?
2. Then, ask team members to form into partners and share what they reflected on. Sharing stories about a community important to you is also a great way to build relationships! After sharing your stories, try to come up with a list of characteristics that you want to emulate in your team based on the elements.
3. Return to the full team, and invite each partner grouping to share the community characteristics they came up with.
4. Based on all of the characteristics of a powerful community that your team came up with, write down a list of principles of how you want to interact with your team.

Make sure to regularly reflect back on these agreements. For example, you could read them at the beginning of every meeting, or post them on the wall (if you meet in a physical room).

5.2 Understanding Your Team Members

Part of having interdependent and trusting relationships is understanding the skills, passions, and needs of other people on your team. An amazing way to build your team is to explicitly share these things with each other. Here are suggested activities:

Invite each team member to reflect on the questions below. Then, share answers during an intentional team meeting. For example, you could go around the circle, each sharing answers to one of the questions at a time. It's important that you create a supportive environment for this exercise. Another way of running this is that each team member could write their answers in a shared document, and then read over each other's answers.

- ❖ **Skills** - What am I good at? What do I need help with?
- ❖ **Passion** - What makes me come alive? What do I not enjoy doing? (links to Boundaries)
- ❖ Is there anything else you want the rest of the team to know about you? Are there any other needs you have?

Personality types: Different types of people have different attitudes to contribute to the team. A framework for discussing your different personality types is a powerful model called the 4 directions. Here is a training to go through to use it:

[Team Types](#)

5.3 Meetings

→ For general information about team meetings, Y4CA [Team Meetings Guide](#)

Team meetings are the main time that all of the members of the team are interacting together. Because of this, the structure and culture of your team meetings plays a large role in determining the culture of your team. When you are planning and facilitating meetings, consider what culture you are creating.

Check-ins/outs:

- ★ People come to meetings with a lot of different things going on in the rest of their lives. It's important to start any meeting with an acknowledgement of this.

- ★ It can help the facilitator to hear how everyone is feeling coming into the meeting.
- ★ Creative check-in questions allow you to get to know your teammates better!
- ★ Here is a list of [Check-in/out questions in meetings](#)

Other fun meeting ideas:

- ★ For in-person meetings, always have food! Food brings people together and makes your meetings more accessible. There's a couple ways you could do this:
 - Set up a rotating snack sign-up - anyone who is able to signs up to bring snacks one week
 - Buy snacks using a shared pool of money, to which team members can contribute as much or as little as they are able.
 - Ideally meet in a place where team members can make themselves tea
- ★ Ensure that the tone of the meeting is upbeat. Even when going through necessary, but sometimes slightly dry or dull content (eg: logistics), try to bring energy and positivity.
- ★ Have dance parties sometimes!
- ★ Try singing! Some teams in the US-based Sunrise Movement start every meeting with a song. You can check out their [list of movement songs here](#).
- ★ Try to come up with other fun traditions! For example, skillshare sessions, where team members can share a quick performance or teach the other team members a skill.

Dedicated bonding time in meetings:

One of the best ways for team members to get to know each other is through discussion questions in each meeting! Split team members into small groups and give them a list of questions to learn more about each other. Here are some helpful lists of check-in questions:

- ★ [The Change Agency list of games and icebreakers](#)
- ★ [Icebreakers Inspiration!](#)
- ★ [Check-in/out questions in meetings](#)

5.4 Culture Coordinator

To make sure someone is always working on developing team culture, it is a good idea to have a dedicated team culture + bonding role. These one or two people can be responsible for:

- ★ Making new members feel welcome
- ★ Developing relationships with all team members and informally checking in with them regularly to get a sense of the general energy of the group (ex - is everyone feeling really stressed and over capacity? Are the relationships in the group really fractured?)
- ★ Being someone who every team member knows they can talk to if they have concerns such as any of the ones above
- ★ Based on the energy of the group, suggesting meeting activities to the facilitator (ex - if everyone is really over capacity, dedicating time to determining which tasks can be delegated or put off for later)
- ★ Organizing social events (see below)

All team members can and should be responsible for all of these tasks, but the culture coordinator is responsible for always making sure they are getting done, and for being the point person to go to about all things culture!

The person/people holding this role should be very friendly and easy to talk to. Building off the [compass Team Types activity and framework](#), the culture coordinator role should be held by people of the “south” personality type. They should be highly attuned to the energy of the group, and focussed on making sure everyone is feeling as good as possible!

5.5 Social Events

The relationship coordinator(s) can also be responsible for organizing regular social events. Note: busy team members often won't come to social events - you need to emphasize that these are just as important as meetings.

Ideas of social events that work well include:

- ★ Movie + pizza nights!
- ★ Potlucks are a classic!

- ★ Go for hikes! (nature connection and team bonding? Heck yeah)
- ★ Organize creative elaborate events, like trivia nights, board game tournaments, or scavenger hunts.

6. Going Deeper

[Be careful with each other – Briarpatch Magazine](#) → More perspective on why and how to build trust and care into your team

[We don't need to be friends to be comrades](#) → Written in response to the previous article - about the limits of the emotional labour organizers should expect from our team members

[Caring About Thriving](#) → A series of questions to guide your group through reflecting on the level of care in your team community