Case Study: Sustainable Economies Law Center
Interview Date: Dec 5th, 2023
Interviewee: Sue Bennett (She/Her), Director of Operations and Miscellaneous Stuff, 7.5 years at SELC. Fun Fact: SELC allows staff to choose their own job titles

Organizational Background:
- **Mission:** Sustainable Economies Law Center (SELC) cultivates a new legal landscape that supports community resilience and grassroots economic empowerment. We provide essential legal tools - education, research, advice, and advocacy - so communities everywhere can develop their own sustainable sources of food, housing, energy, jobs, and other vital aspects of a thriving community.
- **Region:** SELC works nationally. The staff has historically been based in Oakland. Most still work in CA but since the start of the pandemic, the team has dispersed across the US and Mexico.
- **Size:**
  - 19 full-time staff
  - 6 board members
  - Annual budget above $1 Million
- **WSDN Status:**
  - SELC was founded in 2009 as a Worker Self-Directed Nonprofit
  - The term Worker Self-Directed Nonprofit (WSDN) originated with SELC. Originally they called it SELCocracy.
  - Each year the Board renews their vote on the WSDN resolution. Legally binding that the organization will continue to be run by the staff for another year. This is done because the WSDN mandate is not written in the bylaws.

Structure:
- SELC employs a “circles” structure to organize their team. All staff who work 20+ hours a week are part of the General Circle which functions as an overall governing body. Smaller circles organize more specialized areas of the work: Operations (including Communications) and Programming. Each circle has an Asana workspace and manages their own budget. Their goal is to have a structure in which the people who are the most impacted by decisions make those decisions.
- Decisions are made with a “Consent” based process. When making a decision each individual person is invited to comment on the three rounds of the process. The team does not all have to agree on the decision but must consent to the decision. The organization holds a high threshold for objection, meaning that the decision would have to harm the organization or set them back in their mission to be rejected. This process is intended to allow things to move along and allow the brilliance of the collective to shine.
- **Board of Directors Structure:**
  - Board leadership is made up of the following positions:
    - President-usually a staff member
    - Legal Compliance OWL (Secretary)
    - Finance OWL (Treasurer)
Programmatic OWL
Legal Compliance OWL

○ The board and the staff work closely together with the General Circle electing and voting on new board members as needed. The organization has a very clear matrix that outlines when board advice or approval is needed.

○ For example, the board is required to vote on any policy that affects the benefits of the staff.

What has been integral to making this work for your team?

- Intrinsic motivation by the people involved. All team members have to be invested in the idea of stewarding the organization.
- Ongoing education for empowered decision-making. Both incoming staff and long-term staff need opportunities to learn to engage in decision-making effectively and to unlearn habits from less collaborative workspaces.
- Clear expectations that 10-30% of time for all staff will be in running the organization. Operational work is valued equally to Programmatic work.
- Trust between the staff.

What are some of the challenges you have faced since becoming a WSDN?

- In the 16 years of functioning as a WSDN, SELC has grown and changed. One of the major challenges they have been working to address has been adjusting their processes as the team has grown. When the team was static for a long time they had the opportunity to build significant trust. As they have brought in new staff members they have had to invest time and energy into building new trusting relationships and more efficient systems. They are currently experimenting with a Stewardship Circle, to make staff-wide decisions, that would have representation from each area of the organization. This would also make the General Circle more of an information-sharing space than a decision-making space.
- People are not used to working in this way. It takes continuous re-education to remember that there is no boss and to overcome the conditioning that "somebody up there is going to take care of it" when things get hard.
- The team has also had challenges related to race, class, and gender. Building an awareness of the ways that systemic racism, sexism, classism, and one’s history within academia inform who feels more confident to speak up and who does not.

What are some highlights you have experienced since becoming a WSDN?

- The empowerment of really trusting the knowledge and brilliance of the collective
- Knowing that I am doing the work with people who care about it.
- To work in a place that embodies the values of a collective. It feels so supportive.

What advice would you give to an organization considering shifting to a WSDN?

- Move at the speed of trust - Adrienne Maree Brown
  - Go slow and start small. Try out programmatic circles as a test run before converting the whole organization
• Recognize that the organization is making a shift and individuals are making a personal shift in their mindset and approach to their workspace
• You can't create a nonhierarchical organization with a market-based hierarchical pay structure. Pay differential needs to reflect the values of the people and the organization, not the values of capitalist markets.