Case Study: Healthy Democracy
Interview Date: Dec 18th, 2023
Interviewee: Alex Renirie (she/her), Program Co-Director, 3 years with Healthy Democracy

Organizational Background:

- **Mission:** Healthy Democracy is a US-based nonpartisan nonprofit that designs and coordinates innovative deliberative democracy programs.
- **Region:** The headquarters for Healthy Democracy is in Oregon. Their staff is fully remote and they are a national organization that works all across the country.
- **Size:**
  - 4 staff members
  - 9 board members
  - Annual budget around $500k
- **WSDN Status:**
  - Healthy Democracy is a “co-directorship”. They do not technically identify as a Worker-Self Directed Nonprofit but they have had a “non-hierarchical structure” since 2021.
  - The organization was founded in 2007. Previous to this transition the organization had a direct hierarchy with an Executive Director and various combinations of Manager and Coordinator level staff roles.
  - The Co-Directorship structure was first proposed to the Board in 2020 in response to a planned leadership turnover.

Structure:

- As a full co-directorship, each person on the Healthy Democracy staff is in charge of their piece of the organization. There is a Director of Operations, a Director of Outreach and Communication, and 2 Program Co-Directors.
- The team has weekly all-staff meetings and monthly strategic priority-setting meetings. They also make sure to schedule recurring social time to connect together.
- The team is primarily responsible for the strategic direction of the organization, with collaboration from the board.
- Administrative responsibilities are managed by the Director of Operations.
- Connection with the Board is maintained by a rotating Board Liaison responsibility. It is a year-long term with a 6 month overlap for the next staff member ensuring that 2 staff members are acting as Board Liaison at all times.
- **Board of Directors Structure:**
  - The Board is still relatively traditional in structure.
  - The team is working on creating more opportunities for staff and Board collaboration.

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

- Having a team that is self-motivated and self-aware of their own capacity. Everyone on the team must be able to ask for help when they need it.
● A clear Staff Evaluation system that allows the team to engage in generative conflict from a values-centered place. Their eval process has clear steps to make sure everyone is taking the time to understand before discussing action steps. First, they fill out the tool, then they read and process, then a listening session to clarify (not trying to problem solve), and in the final session they start to work on solutions.

● Regular collaboration between team members. Meeting each week to share individual priorities keeps the team in the loop with each other. Additionally, they have implemented a “buddy system” for most major projects so that two people are managing work like grant writing and outreach strategy.

● As the team has lived into this model they have recognized the need for some more clearly defined systems and policies. They are currently working on the following:
  ○ Even clearer job descriptions which outline how their work overlaps with other staff members and what their role in strategic development is.
  ○ A clear escalation policy for serious conflict or harassment.
  ○ Collaborative decision-making document that outlines what the processes are and who needs to be involved.

What are some of the challenges you have faced since becoming a WSDN?
● Since the team is so small and collaborative they have to fight the tendency to schedule everyone into everything. This can stifle the independent work of the team. They are exploring a buddy method to address this.
● It is no one’s job to monitor the Co-Director’s work on a regular basis. This means that if anyone is struggling they have to seek help themselves. It depends on a high level of self-awareness.
● Balancing time off. The team builds a collective momentum in the work that can lead to overworking. There is no boss in charge of tracking their hours and telling them to step back so they have to self-regulate.

What are some highlights you have experienced since becoming a WSDN?
● The team truly enjoys working together. They are empowered to steer the organization and the work feels fulfilling.
● There is flexibility in the workplace that feels more personable. No one is telling them how and when to work, they are not being monitored. They have autonomy over their own time which allows them to balance their personal lives more effectively.

What advice would you give to an organization considering shifting to a WSDN?
● Peer evaluations are very important. Start the process with a statement on why you are doing peer evaluations. Make it clear that you are not evaluating each other’s performance, you are cultivating a culture of supporting each other to grow.
● Make it someone’s explicit role to manage the development of new policies and procedures. You don’t need to have it all figured out when you start, things will change as you go so make sure to designate organizational capacity to continue to develop these things.
• Embrace messiness. Often collective decision-making takes much longer than it would in a traditional hierarchy. This can be frustrating and even messy but is so worth the payoff in greater buy-in and intrinsic motivation among staff.