

CHAPTER 5

Principles of Solidarity

P rinciples of solidarity express the values and ideals that everyone in the group shares. They form your common ground that you intend to remain constant regardless of whatever happens in the group. In fact, all groups actually have certain ideals and principles that you can detect by watching what the group does and how its members interact. Principles of solidarity put these ideals and principles into a form that brings them into clear focus. Your principles of solidarity also provide a bridge between what the group shares in common and things that everyone recognizes as the differences everyone intends to honor.

When a group functions relatively well together and stays cohesive over a period of time, it tends to take on characteristics of a community. These groups give members a certain identity because of the values, customs, and concerns that they share.

Human beings share in common a yearning to belong somewhere—to find a place where we feel comfortable, relatively safe, and “at home.” Our communities can provide this kind of sense of belonging. However, communities that give people deep satisfaction over time require leadership, commitment, and extraordinary effort on the part of every member. It is this kind of group—a deeply satisfying community—that Peace and Power can help you develop.

Why Do We Need Principles of Solidarity?

The challenges of an increasingly complex and diverse world call for new approaches in the ways we live and work together. Groups that function effectively in modern cultures value both cohesiveness and diversity. This means that the members of the group work on ways to maintain all the things they share in common, but they also find ways to respect individual differences without these differences tearing them apart.

Putting the values of cohesiveness and diversity together into action brings forth solidarity. This means that you come together knowing that you will disagree, have different opinions, and see things differently from one another. Rather than seeking to agree, or pretending to agree, you acknowledge things that divide or that could divide you. You resolve to work together to understand one another and work toward mutual resolution of differences that get in the way, and you celebrate those differences that enrich everyone.

You also resolve to overcome fears, prejudices, stereotypes, resentments, and negative forms of competitiveness. Competitiveness that inspires fine performance and nurtures mutual

respect and admiration for one another's accomplishments strengthens your group. However, when competitiveness nurtures jealousy, resentment, envy, rage, and hatred, your group experiences negative dynamics that are harmful. Peace and Power processes help you overcome fears of differences and provide constructive ways for everyone to understand all points of view, to respect one another without coercion to change, and to find genuine common ground that sustains your group as a whole.

Principles of solidarity provide:

- a grounding from which your group can focus its energies and resources,
- the ideals toward which your group builds,
- a guide around which to integrate all individual perspectives in forming decisions,
- a basis for giving one another criticism that is constructive and promotes growth, and
- a foundation for transforming conflict that inevitably arises in any group.

How Do We Start?

To get started, set aside time for members of your group to develop a written document that expresses all of the things all members of your group heartily agree upon. Typically this process requires a dedicated time—usually 2 to 3 hours—when everyone gathers to get the initial document written. It is best if every member of the group can be present for this discussion. If this is not possible, at least make sure, in advance, that everyone knows what is going to happen at this meeting, and how they can participate at some point. You will want to make sure that everyone knows they have an important “voice” in creating this document.

When the time comes to start, everyone shares ideas about the group, what interests them in being part of the group, and what they expect from the group. Each perspective is expressed as fully as possible. Then the group begins to identify those ideas around which there is common ground and those ideas that represent diversity from which to build common understandings.

Online groups have an advantage in forming principles of solidarity because of the ability to have every voice heard, to extend discussions of values beyond the limits of a face-to-face meeting, and to revisit principles at any time that the group's actions and values seem to be at odds. For a group that meets face- to-face, you can extend your discussion online as well.

Although writing your principles down is important and they express lasting values, they are alive—they change and grow as the group changes and grows. New members will contribute valuable perspectives that can lead to shifts and changes in the principles, but the principles also provide a way for the group to convey to new members what is important to the group. The principles provide stability within the group as membership changes.

The written document that contains the principles of solidarity is kept before the group; each member has a copy and works with it constantly. If your group has a Web site, you can post your

document on the Web. The document is particularly important as a source for building decisions (see Chapter 8), forming critical reflections (see Chapter 9), and when the group is addressing conflict (see Chapter 10). When each member's copy is almost illegible from the penciled-in changes that emerge over time, it is time to consider making a fresh copy!

What Needs to Be Included in Our Principles of Solidarity?

Your group needs to consider at least seven questions in forming principles of solidarity⁴. Each question becomes a section of the written document, but the specific principles will vary according to the needs and purposes of each group. (For an example of Principles of Unity, see the [Friendship Collective Principles - https://wordpress.com/page/peaceandpowerblog.org/29](https://wordpress.com/page/peaceandpowerblog.org/29))

WHO ARE WE?

The name of the group implies a great deal about your group. You may need to define some words in your name to be clear about your identity. For example, the word “radical” in a group's name might be defined as “fundamental; going to the root,” to contrast your meaning with common assumptions about what it means to be radical.

Your group may also want to agree who the individuals within the group are or will be in the future. For example, a group formed to create and maintain a women's center in the community may deliberately seek participation from a broad base of women in the community, including women of color, women of all sexual identities, women of differing economic classes, and so on. A group that is working on the rights of lesbian mothers may actively seek the participation of nonlesbian mothers and also lesbians who are not mothers.

An important dimension of defining membership is clarifying how open the group is to integrating new members and when and how this will happen. A group formed to accomplish a specific, detailed, and long-term task may need to limit membership initially to a few people who are able and willing to remain dedicated to the accomplishment of the task.

Although many groups will choose to be open, there may be times when the group needs stability in the membership, and the group might be open to new members only once or twice a year. Making a specific agreement about how long your group membership will remain stable is helpful in preventing misunderstandings within the group. This also helps communicate to people who are not in the group if, when, and how they can join if they wish to do so.

⁴ Kathleen MacPherson first identified four components around which the Menopause Collective formed their principles of solidarity. Her experience is related in her doctoral dissertation, completed in 1986 at Brandeis University, entitled “Feminist Praxis in the Making: The Menopause Collective.” These Peace and Power components draw on Kathleen's ideas, as well as the ideas and experience of the Friendship Collective, who worked extensively to develop principles of solidarity.

WHAT ARE OUR PURPOSES?

Defining who your group is provides a start in identifying the group's purposes. However, your purposes in being together as a group give everyone a more specific understanding of what you are all about. For example, a women's center group may have the immediate purpose of establishing a center and finding a space for the center, but then they need to identify the purposes for which that space will exist and how it will be used. If one purpose is to provide shelter for battered women, there are additional concerns to be addressed in relation to this purpose, such as whether to offer counseling or economic, legal, or educational services.

Consider your group's purposes in light of what is realistic. The members of a battered women's support group may want to see the group offer a full range of services to women and their children. However, the resources of the group may be such that the initial purpose needs to be limited to fundraising and educational work. Being clear at the outset about the limits of the group's purpose can help your group use your resources and energies in productive ways, rather than in working at cross-purposes.

WHAT ARE OUR SHARED BELIEFS AND VALUES?

Values are fundamental to Peace and Power processes; stating your specific group values is important in helping each member of the group grow in understanding the meaning of these values. Having the beliefs and values stated provides a way for the group to examine how the values create changes in actions and group interactions.

If you begin to discuss beliefs and values and find that you have some big disagreements, set those beliefs aside for the moment. As you continue your discussion, you may find that you have so much in common that those beliefs you set aside are not things you need to agree on in order to maintain your group. Instead, these may be things that you will learn to appreciate about one another. Consider a group that comes together to establish a monthly talent showcase. Some members of the group say that they do not want to showcase rap music, but others believe that all forms of music need to be included. As they continue discussing the issue, they realize that the value that they all agree on is that they do not want music that demeans or belittles anyone, especially women; rap music itself is not the problem. The group decides to include a principle that makes clear their value about the messages contained in any art form related to respect for all people.

WHAT INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES DO WE NEED TO CONSIDER?

Some values that are not shared by everyone can affect your group in important ways and need to be acknowledged and respected by everyone. Different circumstances create different expectations and commitments. Different personal circumstances and experiences also influence what individuals need from a group to feel safe to speak, to act, and to be.

Some people in your group may need careful limits on time and other personal resources. Women who have been verbally abused may need an agreement from group members that people will be careful about how loudly they speak and take care not to use sarcastic or assaultive voice tones. A person in a wheelchair not only needs space that is accessible, but also needs the group's awareness of the particular fears and challenges faced by someone in a wheelchair. A large person may not need specific physical arrangements, but needs the group's awareness of the discriminations she experiences and how the group can overcome these.

Any person who is a minority within a group, whether based on race, age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, or education, needs recognition and valuing of these differences. Once the group has openly explored the range of personal circumstances of each person's life related to the group's work, then the group can agree on a common set of expectations that everyone values.

WHAT DO WE EXPECT OF ONE ANOTHER?

Time, energy, and commitment expectations can take many different forms. For example, group members might be expected to attend a monthly meeting and contribute to the work of a task group that meets for about 3 hours each week. For an other group, members might be expected to attend a yearly meeting and work on one project during the year.

Large groups that do not meet together but join in a network to promote communication might simply expect that every member contribute financially to the network, with the work of specific tasks done by smaller groups as they volunteer to assume a specific responsibility. Online groups might expect everyone to post check-in and closing messages every week, or whenever someone in the group calls for check-in or closing messages (see Chapters 6 and 9).

Bring to conscious awareness ways in which you expect each member to interact within the group. You have probably entered groups with an unspoken ideal or hope that everyone will be "open and honest." In reality, most typical groups have agendas that are hidden from some members, and members' ways of working together are not well understood by everyone. Making your group's expectations of one another clear is one step in the direction of nurturing openness and honesty.

WHAT MESSAGE DO WE WISH TO CONVEY TO OTHERS?

Every group conveys a message to the rest of the world about who they are and what they are all about. Sometimes the message matches what the group intends to convey; other times the message is entirely different from what they intend. A group using Peace and Power forms their message with careful and deliberate intent and constantly examines the ways in which they are conveying that message.

For example, a group that exists to develop services for battered women may decide to form

a message that emphasizes women as physically strong, powerful, and resourceful. Another component of that message might be that women help other women, providing support and assistance in a variety of ways. These two messages become central in considering ways in which members of the group interact outside the group. These messages would grow out of the beliefs the group has about women in general, and also beliefs about women who are battered.

HOW WILL WE PROTECT OUR GROUP'S INTEGRITY?

Groups often encounter demands for time and attention from outside the group, particularly when their work creates social change. These demands may place unrealistic burdens on the group, and they may not always be consistent with the direction that the group wishes to take.

Conscious awareness and anticipation of these possibilities help a group to develop agreements that can guide responses to outside demands. For example, a group that has been successful at fundraising might be asked to share their experience and knowledge with another new group in the community. If this happens once, it would not be a burden. But if it happens often, the group's energy could be drained responding to these requests.

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Demands that the group did not anticipate, but that the group must accommodate to accomplish their purpose, are especially difficult. Consider a group that is involved in establishing a community theater for children. The group finds an ideal building that they can use for a fee that they can afford. However, as they are getting started they find out that there are major requirements from the town related to fire and safety regulations that have to be met for each of their events. In order to meet these requirements, they must fill out several long forms, file the forms in the town hall, and wait at least 2 weeks for approval before they can actually plan a show. The group decides to figure out a way to meet these demands without distracting from their main purpose of providing an educational and cultural opportunity for children in the community.