



Southerners On New Ground

ALCHEMY: The Elements of Creating Collective Space

From ideas evolved collectively between Cara Page, Suzanne Pharr, Paulina Helm-Hernandez and Caitlin Breedlove

One of the most common things groups and members say about why SONG is crucial in their lives is the way that SONG can create a space for conversation and community that makes people feel whole, connected, and courageous. The ways that we help to create this space is a sort of alchemy. Usually alchemy is defined as a magical process by which something of little value is made into something of great value. As opposed to chemistry, which is a process that many see as putting together a formula that, if followed correctly, comes out the same every time.

Working with people is much more about alchemy than chemistry, because alchemy is different every time. There are parts of what happens in the process that cannot be named, and it always involves an element of hope—the hope that each of us together are more than just the sum of our parts or our numbers. We cannot define all of what happens between people in groups sometimes: it is 1 part structure and formula, 1 part energy, and 1 part good facilitation instincts. We cannot put all of what we have learned into words, but —we share the basics with you here. For further questions, you can always get in touch with us.

We also would like to draw attention to the fact that many of the elements listed below have been historically taken care of by women and others perceived as or self-identified feminine people in our movement spaces and groups. Many of these elements have been seen as less important than “strategy”. We disagree. We see these elements as essential to long-term group cohesion and wellness. In our time, groups will have to form so they can help people get a whole range of needs met—spiritual needs, food needs, housing needs, etc. These groups will have to be holistic and strong. These elements can help to build such groups.

Elements of Collective Spaces that have worked for us:

Altars and Attention to Physical Space

Folks often do paid work for long and hard hours in places that deprive our senses and demoralize us. It is part of how we are oppressed. SONG finds cheap ways to create spaces that are colorful, bright and sensuous: like adding a tablecloth or some flowers from outside. Altars are also a great way to help groups remember why they come together. If you are meeting in a space over a long amount of time, build an altar together where each person puts something on the altar that symbolizes why they are in this work with this group in this movement. In a short-term space, create a quick altar with a candle and a few plants or flowers from outside. Acknowledge the altar at the beginning of each meeting, and why it is there.

Nourishing Food

We lead such busy lives that we often end up at meetings with only chips and dip. When we are meeting over dinner at SONG meetings, we do our best to make it a hearty dinner: we make something inexpensive that has protein and nutrients. It really affects how our hearts and bodies feel during meetings.

Child Care

SONG tries to always line up child care for meetings when needed. The bottom line is it is usually what makes the difference between parents of young kids being able to participate in meetings or not. If possible, have a child care person who will do liberation-oriented stuff with the kids—this is great for kids and parents because it starts kids off early with a role in our movements.

Accessibility Work

We consider accessibility issues around disability and language to be on-going. Non-disabled people and monolingual English speakers need to do our homework to figure out how to make spaces as accessible as we can, and carry thru on this. We also need to address accessibility at each meeting—so folks can check in about what they need. Multi-lingual space is a process that groups must commit to in order to build multi-lingual communities. A great place to start is with having a few multi-lingual members, translating materials into multiple languages, and figuring out how to have meetings interpreted.

Check-Ins

We ask how each other are doing before digging into where the group is at. A group is its members. If individuals are bringing raw pain, sadness, or joy to the group it will be felt—the question is only whether we allow it to be acknowledged and held or whether we try to push it down deep (which usually doesn't work, as people put how they are feeling on any given day in meetings anyway.) This also builds a sense that people actually care about each other in this work.

Quotes, Poetry, Visual Art and Music

Besides altars, this is another way we provide a group with a touchstone for why we are here. SONG uses quotes, poetry, visual art, and music that remind us of how the struggle is long, tumultuous, filled with history of ancestors, and powerful. Using 2 minutes for a grounding quote is never a waste of time.

Humor

We use humor as a way to lighten our spiritual loads, to release tension, to have fun, and, at times, to gently critique ourselves as a group. It is also a great way to acknowledge all of our inevitable struggles and gaps in skills. While being self-hating is not helpful, it is great to set an example of having a sense of humor about ourselves. It loosens us up, and loosens others up too.

Flexibility and Patience

Things don't always go as we planned, and sometimes getting through an agenda is not as important as slowing down and understanding where others in the group actually are. Of course, if a group has a chronic problem moving thru a reasonable agenda, then that must be addressed—but often we just all think we can do more in 2 or 3 hours than we can really do, and do well. Also, be patient with others as they formulate thoughts, reach for understanding, or repeat themselves. If you are still in this Movement, surely someone has been patient with you on many occasions.

Breaks

We use breaks to stay strong and focused. No group should meet for more than 2 hours without a break, because we are always more productive with carefully planned breaks.

Attentive Listening

We try to listen carefully and deeply to each other as a practice. Some of us listen best while writing notes or drawing. That should be talked about in a group so that everyone feels heard even if some folks are doing things with their hands during discussion. We also think that letting distracting acts go on during meetings (like cell phone use or texting) creates a culture where everyone feels like it is OK to do other things at the same time. It usually leads to folks feeling that their time and voices are not valued, and can lead to people leaving groups. It helps if a group agrees on how they will listen and be present during meetings.

Well-planned Agendas

We try to make an average meeting no more than 2 hours, with ½ hour of social/eating time before the meeting starts. In 2 hours, it is reasonable for a group to accomplish: Intros and/or Check-ins, 15 minutes of updates, 2-3 content questions or issues, and the planning of the next meeting. Be thoughtful about which agenda items might be long discussions or hard discussions, and give them at least 30-45 minutes. After that much time a group should know next steps on a question or issue, even if the next step is more of a reflection than a conversation.

Shared Values

We do a shared value process with groups convening for 5 days or 5 years. We base it off of a visioning exercise that came to us from healing practices in our lives. We ask groups to envision what kind of world they want to live in, and what kinds of values people would live by in that world. Then, we ask them to list and enact those values for our work together. We live in a time with a lot of discussion about 'values', and yet the mainstream world is functioning out of values of greed, scarcity, dishonesty, and domination. If we do not declare, reflect on, and struggle with our own values we will fall into living in those values too. This is a core tenet of building groups that can make another world possible and viable.

Sustainable Lengths of Meetings

As mentioned before, meetings should have breaks and use time well. Even in a multi-day meeting or retreat, after 3 full days people are usually full of information and need some reflection space. A full day is, at the most, 7 hours of content.

Shared Leadership and Leadership Development

We work on sharing leadership by sharing all aspects of the work: decisions, planning, strategizing, acting, reflecting, and all other aspects. Shared leadership means that people switch roles often and easily. Everyone can do a little bit of everything. Shared leadership is always connected to leadership development because we all have some area where we need support and growth in our leadership. Additionally, new leaders are precious and key: as organizers, we always think about how we can share ALL the skills we have with new leaders—we consider their development as equally important to any campaign or strategy. Our movement has a shortage of leaders; we need to get better at transferring our knowledge to others. It is a skill that requires intention and patience. Creating processes for how to bring new people into the group, make them feel welcome, and having each member make an individual growth plan for themselves really helps with this.

On-going Political Education and Analysis

A commitment to on-going education and analysis means we are always committed to becoming more aware and acting more fully from that awareness. We are never done learning. It also means that we understand our strategies are connected to the current moment—and that our strategies must shift based on conditions as well as a strong analysis of these conditions. That's why we pay attention to what we can learn from the stories around us and the media in order to bring new insights into meetings and our work.

Shared Decision-Making

We work on making all decisions either by consensus or consensus minus one (a process that stops one person from blocking any decision). Decisions should be made, ideally, when a whole group is ready to make the decision and everyone is present. It should be clear which groups make which decisions (if there is a larger body and a smaller body). Without shared decision-making, many people will leave groups or grow very bitter within them.

Clarity and Agreement about Goals, Strategies, and Practices

We put a lot of time into discussing goals, strategies, and practices to get full agreement. We document them to go back to. This takes time, but again, without it people will feel lost, insecure about the group and the work, unable to speak about it to others, and may leave the group

A Sense of Group and Individual Responsibility

We try to develop this by talking about who has which responsibilities within the group and checking in about tasks and roles often. It is important to know if tasks are completed, and if not, why. It is also important to check in with people about if they have too few or too many tasks—clear communication about this can help avoid under-activity or burnout. Interestingly, we find that under-activity pushes away new people as much as burnout. Often new people come to groups and are given nothing meaningful to do or be part of, and they leave out of frustration or boredom. It helps for core members to have plans ahead of time for how to bring in new people, and to let go of some control as soon as new members are properly oriented and have shown up for 3 events or meetings.

Accountability Structures

We find that the clearer the structure, the better the accountability. We use our agreements and values to make accountability structures out of these values. For example, if we say we value honesty, then we expect people in the group are honest with each other. In order to move forward if someone is not, we have a process for how to talk about that, and what to ask from the person who broke an agreement. We also have a process for if the behavior happens more than once. Finally, it is important to know what a group's bottom line is. Asking people to leave a group is really hard. You should know collectively what you would be willing to ask someone to leave a group over. For example, at SONG, we would ask someone to leave over repeated and intentional major confidentiality violations because it is just so harmful to the work.

Reflective Practice

Reflection is a practice for how to help groups and individuals hold pain and conflict; it is also a way to help bring deep clarity and focus to our work. We recommend reflection, at least a few moments, at every meeting. This can be silent or loud, quiet or active.

Economic Justice and Resources

This is one of our core principles around economic justice. All people should be involved in how money and other resources are used. Everyone should know how to look at financial tools too—like budgets, etc. It is not shared decision-making if some people cannot read the tools, or if folks who can read the tools rush others through decision-making. Also, having just practices is very important if people are paid inside the group for work. There will always be tensions in groups, in some form or another, when one person makes more than \$10,000 more than another person. Transparency about who is paid what is also very important. Sometimes, foundations only grant a certain amount of money for some people, and more for others. For example, SONG gets much more money to pay full-time staff than for interns. Part of how we handle this is by refusing to pay interns thru stipends (which usually ends up being \$3-\$4 an hour), but rather pays them by the hour—therefore paying more for less work, to get the pay scales closer to each other. Especially in a recession, groups should think very carefully about the economic justice principles that they put out publicly, and what they do internally. It is a place of great hypocrisy in many groups, because often folks who get more resources from the organization become used to their pay level, and rarely ever take a voluntary pay cut. In groups where no individual is paid, it is also important to think about fair resource allocation. Does most of the group's money and time go to a project that only 2 members are really excited about? Are there projects that the majority of the group believes in that are unaffordable because too much money is going in to expensive projects only favored by the few? Finally, smart resource allocation means we always bring the best of working-class money sensibility to the table—we make a magic dinner out of a few cans and some rice, we make regional events out of \$100. When we combine good organizing skills with working class scrappy strategies, we can become good financial stewards no matter what our personal stories about money are. When we are careful and sparing with overall costs, we can make sure we keep a strong political line about budgets and where we don't cut: people and program. People's wages and core program costs for members or constituents should be the absolute LAST place we cut money from. By the time we are cutting there, we should have already gone to the bare bones on office costs and overhead. If we do not make strong value judgments around money as leaders in organizations, people will leave our groups heart broken because they see that we do not truly believe and follow thru with our commitments; whereas if we make strong and transparent choices our folks feel emboldened, energized and hopeful.

Clear Communication and Transparency

Clear communication means on-going communication. It means that we provide regular updates to each other on a regular basis, and that we are clear and honest about where we are with an issue. If things come up we bring them to the whole group.

Conflict Resolution Process

Having a process for how to deal with inevitable conflict that comes up is very important. We recommend a more formal procedure (like a traditional grievance procedure), as well as using shared values to figure out how to address conflict. For example, having an agreement that if there is conflict between 2 people they will address it directly, or that if one person needs to confide in a 3rd party they will bring it to the relevant parties within 1 week of talking to the 3rd party.

Acknowledgement of People's Work

We don't do the work to be complemented, but it really helps a group's morale when appreciating people's work is the norm. At every meeting think about who has been doing what work, especially concentrating on folks who do not often get recognition.

On-going attention to the Minds, Bodies, and Spirits of all involved and ability of all involved to bring their whole selves to the room

This means that we are able to bring our joys, desires, fears, and be heard for all of who we are. This often creates a sense of belonging and identity with the group, and is not always easy. It means that often we have to hear ways of being that are not like our own, and that we are constantly opened to new insights about others experiences of which we had not previously been aware.

**Have questions, need support or technical assistance on this tool?
Contact us at ignite@southernersonnewground.org or 404-549-8628**