

INTEGRA LEAD ZINE

Levelling up Leadership
Practices in Grassroots
Social Change Initiatives



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STOWARZYSZENIE
LEPSZY ŚWIAT



This zine was created as part of the project "Integralead – Integral Leadership Skills for Civil Society," a collaboration between Stowarzyszenie Lepszy Świat (Poznań, Poland) and Civil Action Network (Vienna, Austria).

We invite you to use this publication as a source of inspiration for engaging with a few chosen facets of practicing collective leadership, namely relationship building, managing conflict, telling stories and setting up structures.

The choice was made based on the feedback gathered during the research and training activities, and in recognition of the limitations of the format of the publication.

We hope for it to remain a valuable resource for those who seek to broaden their perspective on leadership in self-organized groups, and that it may encourage future learning on the subject and deeper reflection on the ways leadership is lived and practiced in the groups where you are active.

PURPOSE OF THIS ZINE

The zine and the training content, developed and delivered between January and November 2025, are based on eight interviews with organizers from Poland and Austria.

These interviews aimed to understand how the organizers currently think about leadership, as well as the challenges they face in practising it.

In total, we ran 13 training sessions: ten 2.5-hour online trainings, two three-day in-person trainings, and one final five-day in-person training. We worked with more than 40 participants across the in-person trainings and around 50 online.

Alongside this zine, you can find a short film about our leadership approach and four full-length interviews with training participants at civilaction.net/integralead.

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LEADERSHIP



The aim of this project was to support representatives of self-organized groups in developing skills and knowledge around the subject of collective leadership.

We started out with a bit of research to diagnose the challenges and barriers that people who take responsibility for their groups are experiencing. This analysis, together with our shared knowledge and experience, was the basis for designing online and in-person training formats.

One of the most common challenges we see in the groups we work with is a collective resistance towards the lens of leadership, out of the conviction that leadership itself can only be an expression of domination, control and violence.

In response, both the project as a whole and this zine advocate for recognizing the importance of engaging with the subject. We want to support developing the understanding and skills needed to purposefully engage in ways of collaboration that serve not only the external goals of the group but also nurture the members who co-create their social fabric.

Collective leadership is the practice of creating the conditions in which a group can flourish and pursue its shared purpose.

While many of us have reason to be suspicious of people who claim to know something about leadership, over the years we've found that attempts at decentralizing responsibility in groups lead to new challenges that often remain unaddressed.

The results might be familiar: hidden hierarchies, painfully slow decision-making processes, opaque structures and behind-the-scenes lobbying, having to learn the same lessons over and over because no one feels empowered to carry them forward, and groups only working out because a few members take on responsibility after all, then collapsing when those members leave.

Of course, this is a bit of a caricature of self-organized groups; many of them are doing great work.

Nevertheless we believe there is a better version of the story about leadership. A version that transcends "it's good" and "it's bad" and integrates valuable lessons from all sorts of sources. Hence the name "Integralead".

CONTEXT AND CREDITING THE SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE



We recognize the richness of knowledge about leadership and the multitude of frameworks and methods present in the field. During the project we drew on many inspirations as well as from our experience as organizers, activists, group process designers, and systems thinkers. Based on these combined perspectives we attempted to piece together a coherent terminology enabling participants to engage with the material.

The main sources were the work of:

- Community Organizing
- Integral Theory
- Microsolidarity
- Internal Family Systems
- Reinventing Organizations
- Nonviolent Communication
- Restorative & Transformative Justice
- Emergent Strategy



CULTIVATING RELATIONSHIPS

If individual members or smaller teams taking care of specific roles in a group are like organs and systems, then the relationships between them are like blood vessels.

They are the primary pathways that enable the flow of information, both between singular members and across the whole group, creating an environment where everyone has access to shared resources and understanding.

Like oxygen in blood, no cell needs to ask the lungs for permission to use it; similarly, when some people in a group hold vision or hope for the future, others do not need permission to believe in it as well.

The network of relationships between members of a group, and the quality it carries, is a key resource contributing to collective resilience and capacity.

Trust and a shared understanding of what is possible for the group and its members enable action and making informed decisions without being held back by insecurity.

These dimensions are deeply intertwined with the culture of decision-making and the ability to hold friction and tension that arise in collective efforts.



Relationships that the group and its members maintain with external actors are equally important.

They shape the accuracy of the group's understanding of the environment it operates in, including risks, challenges, alliances, and opportunities.

A group with weak internal relationships lacks self-awareness and confidence, while weak external relationships limit its awareness of the wider context.



This understanding has led to a broad body of practice on how to cultivate relationships that support collective engagement.

Groups that consciously undertake these activities often distinguish between different ways of spending time together, so that shared learning and the state of relationships can become visible and acted upon.

This can include regular informal gatherings, celebrations, facilitated reflection sessions, individual conversations across the group, or intentional one-on-one meetings that support people's orientation, safety, and integration.

Two useful perspectives for understanding relationships are transactional and temporal.

The transactional perspective focuses on motivation, interests, resources, and potential exchange between actors.

The temporal perspective focuses on how relationships evolve over time, what intensity is needed to sustain or develop certain qualities, and what trajectory a relationship follows—whether it should continue as it is or be adjusted.

Reflection on the quality and importance of relationships naturally leads to reflection on organizational culture: how leadership is practiced, what power structures exist, and how conflict is handled.

In this sense, relationships are not only a resource but also a lens through which the health of the entire group becomes visible.

The more complex the social setting and the higher the stakes of collective work, the more sensitive the group becomes to the quality of its relationships.

We encourage you to read more by Marshall Ganz on relationship-building practices!

For deeper grounding, we also recommend engaging with key concepts and theories such as:

- *Network Weaving* by June Holley
- *Communities of Practice* by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave
- *The Network Society* by Manuel Castells
- *The Strength of Weak Ties* by Mark Granovetter.

TRANSFORMING CONFLICT

"Wherever people care deeply, there is also potential for strong feelings to boil over."

If I bring more parts of myself into the group, there is also more potential for some of them to trigger defensiveness, anger or uncertainty in others. Relating as whole human beings while doing purposeful work is not an easy feat. But - as with anything in life - it is a skill that can be practiced.

The general attitude we try to inhabit when dealing with tension, disagreement or conflict is one of curiosity and compassion, toward oneself and others:

"Even if I can't see it right now, I'm sure everyone involved has valid needs."

This is an opportunity to get to know them and myself better."

We talk about Conflict Transformation, instead of Conflict Resolution, because we believe the most sustainable way of dealing with conflict is to transform the conditions that give rise to it: inner, interpersonal and systemic.



Pointers we've found useful:

The goal is learning about each other and coming back to connection.

The way I relate to myself when I'm activated is a mirror of how I relate to others in conflict.

To be able to express myself to another, it helps to first be connected to my own feelings and needs.

To be able to listen to another fully with an open heart, I might need to take care of my own feelings first.

When things feel too big, ask for support.

If tension rises, slow down and make sure what you hear is what the other person meant to say.

Address conflict at the smallest scale possible, but at the biggest scale that's necessary.

It's okay if it takes a while to come back into connection after a rupture.

Having a place and a time to address tensions helps to catch them while they're small.

These four quadrants are a tool we borrow from integral theory.

INDIVIDUAL

You can use this diagram and the reflection prompts to understand better how you and your group relate to the topic of conflict.

How do I relate to the different aspects of my own personality?



What meaning do I attribute to my emotions?

How do I express my emotions?



What makes it easier or holds me back from surfacing tension?

INNER ATTITUDES STORIES BELIEFS VALUES

What stories are we telling about disagreement?



Which regions can we recognize in our collective landscape of motivation?

What structures we do have to support surfacing and addressing tensions?



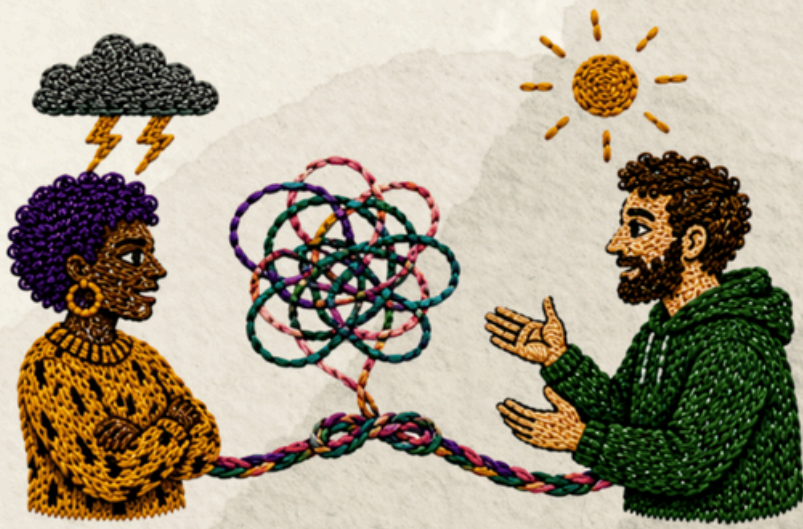
How do we practice the skills that aid in transforming conflicts?

OUTER STRUCTURES BEHAVIORS ACTIONS

They can help to get a fuller picture of where you or you group are in relation to a topic by looking at how that topic shows up in the inner (attitudes, stories, beliefs and values) and outer (structures, actions, behaviors) dimensions across individual and collective domains.

COLLECTIVE

It can be used for individual reflection or to start a group conversation.



Practice:

Befriending your inner critic (inspired by Ricard Schwartz's *Internal Family Systems*)

Anytime you notice a voice in your head that has a harsh opinion about something you're doing or other aspects of yourself: take a few deep breaths, then turn towards that part and invite it to a conversation.

You can ask:

"It seems like there is something that's really important to you.
What is it you want me to know about you?"

"Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously" - Prentis Hemphill

It may not work at first, but keep going. After a while, you'll notice that it becomes easier to understand where the critical voice comes from.

And at some point, when you have enough of a relationship with it and understand its motivation well enough, you might be able to help it find different strategies for meeting its needs, rather than shouting at other parts of yourself.

Where we draw from:

- Internal Family Systems
- Karl Steyaert
- Jocelyn Endres
- adrienne Maree Brown
- Restorative & Transformative Justice
- Non-Violent Communication

STORYTELLING

Both as individuals and as groups, we perceive ourselves and the reality around us through the lens of the stories that we hear and tell.

The stories we are immersed in determine whether we relate to others and to reality from a place of fear, anxiety, distrust and scarcity or a space of possibility, hope, purpose and agency.

Sharing and crafting new stories based on shared experiences is an ongoing process that, if brought to collective awareness in a group, unlocks the power to shape the shared understanding of reality and grow collective psychological safety and emotional capacity to address challenges.

Practicing telling the stories that connect the group with a sense of purpose, and that explain the logic of common action as well as the plausibility of the intended outcome, supports the coherence of the group, enables its members to retain an awareness of the meaning of their actions, and thus supports them in sustaining motivation.

Through telling stories, groups craft a common sense of identity and transform it over time in response to processes happening inside the group but also under the influence of external reality.



While practicing telling stories we encounter questions like:

- *Is it relatable?*
- *What emotions will it evoke in me and the listeners?*
- *Is this influence supporting us in remaining meaningfully engaged, or is it hindering us?*
- *What way of approaching the world is the story I'm sharing/ promoting?*
- *What beliefs is it spreading?*
- *What future seems possible thanks to them?*

To reflect on the stories that the group creates, adopts, or replicates, the following questions can be helpful:

- *Which stories do we share with one another and celebrate?*
- *Which stories tend to be forgotten or get silenced?*
- *Who gets to tell the stories in the group and for the group?*
- *What behaviour and world views are these stories promoting?*



The practice of telling stories supports fostering personal connection, collective identity and shared urgency.

Groups and individuals can intentionally create spaces for this practice. These spaces can vary in how regularly they occur (check-outs after regular meetings, monthly experience-sharing sessions), how spontaneous they are (interventions called for in a moment of crisis or celebration), how many people they include (a conversation during a coffee break with one or two people, an end-of-year celebration event for all the members of the group) and how formally moderated they are (facilitated debriefings, visioning workshops, moderated dialogue practices)

Finally, the practice and skill of telling stories also shapes how the group can communicate what it is and what it does to the outside world, and how other actors will perceive and interact with it.

If you would like to explore this topic further, we encourage you to check out:

- Public Narrative framework by Marshall Ganz
- Narrative Theory of Social Movements by Francesca Polletta
- Collective Identity Theory by Alberto Melucci

FINDING FLOW THROUGH STRUCTURE

When we try to live leadership differently, one essential tool in our belt is structure.

Structure means: the agreements we have about how we work together.

They range from role descriptions and having different meetings for different purposes, to having systems for strategizing, reflecting and learning from the past or transforming conflict.

The purpose of any structure should be to enable us to make use of our collective resources toward shared goals effectively.

What structure enables us to do when we think about collective leadership is to decentralize and depersonalize some of the functions that in more traditional leadership models were fulfilled by managers: planning, delegating work, holding people accountable, evaluating success.

We can have shared agreements about when it's time to plan and when it's time to do work, when we'll check in on progress and when we'll reflect on how our systems are working for our shared purpose.



“Consistent repetition orchestrates attention and builds shared identity” - Richard D. Bartlett

This way, exercising leadership in part means reminding the group about the structures that were agreed on to fulfill essential functions for the group, instead of fulfilling those functions by yourself.

When we add a time dimension to structure, we talk about rhythm. This is where the real magic happens: If we do the same thing every week on Thursday evening, soon enough it becomes second nature.

Structure exists on different scales in space and time: how I structure my own work and what agreements I have with one other person or my small team are different from the agreements we have as a whole group. How we structure one meeting is different from how we structure the week, the month, the year.

See the description of the graphic in the chapter about conflict for an explanation of how to use this diagram. (Page 13,14)

INDIVIDUAL

*How do I relate to structure?
Does it bring up any resistance?*



How much external structure do I need?

How do I manage my own time and resources?



Where do I provide structure for others?

Where do I compensate for a lack of structure through my own behavior?

INNER ATTITUDES STORIES BELIEFS VALUES

What spaces do we have to care for the soft aspects of our group?



What stories are we telling about the importance of structure?

How is structure valued in our collective unconscious?



OUTER STRUCTURES BEHAVIORS ACTIONS

What agreements and structures do we enact regularly?



What spaces do we have at our disposal to make decisions about our goals and how best to use our resources to achieve them?



How does our structure evolve?

COLLECTIVE

“Structurelessness is organizationally impossible.

**We cannot decide whether to have a structured or structureless group; only whether or not to have a formally structured one.”- Jo Freeman,
“The Tyranny of Structurelessness”**

There are principles that apply on all scales.

Minimum Viable Structure: what’s the least amount of structure that still does the job?

Iteration: have a fixed rhythm for reflecting on and improving your structure.

Clarity and Purpose: What is this structure for? Where does it begin, where does it end?

Visibility: Does everyone that the structure concerns know it exists?

Where we draw from:

- **Microsolidarity**
- **Reinventing Organizations**
- **Community Organizing**

A practice: Rhythms mapping

Duration: 30-60 mins.

Purpose: to make visible the existing structures and identify gaps.

Find it here:

<https://www.thehum.org/members/resources>

Finding flow as a team means balancing consistency with flexibility.

Groups need enough structure to coordinate action, but enough openness to adapt when circumstances change.

The goal is making collaboration long-lasting and reducing unnecessary friction.

We are not perfect, so our organizations don't need to aspire to perfection either.

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WORDS OF RESISTANCE

“What I do is enough.”

“Leadership is shared.”

“Conflict is part of care.”

“We create culture by living it.”

“Community is the work.”

“I choose where my energy goes.”



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