

Open Organizations Project

**Political Structures for Organizations of
Volunteers and Activists**

The Problem

- The structures that organizations typically use for decision-making are closed: individuals are unaccountable, abuses of power are hard to prevent and knowledge is hoarded.
- The desire for open organizations stems from a widespread dissatisfaction not only with the formal power structures found in governments and corporations, but also with the informal structures found in many voluntary and activist groups.
- Informal structures are sometimes created intentionally, but more often they appear *by default*; since they are hidden, and often personal, they are very difficult to challenge, or even to identify and discuss. This is one of the major causes of conflict in activist and volunteer groups.
- It often takes up a lot of time and energy at the expense of the ideals pursued and projects undertaken, and has a demoralising effect on individual groups and on the movements they are involved in.

However...

...just denouncing or rejecting old paradigms about the ways how to organize and work, but without having anything formalised to replace it, we are stuck in limbo.

Another world is possible: let's start at home.

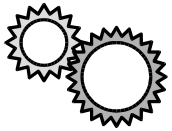
Our Proposal

The goal of this project is to explain how to set up and maintain transparent, diverse, accountable and truly participative organizations, focusing on elaborating a concrete **framework** for action called "**Open Organizations**".

This framework:

- is in a large part the result of observing and distilling the patterns, or processes, in the functioning of existing organizations.
- is a functional organizational structure, hence it is developing according to the understanding that theory and practice rely on each other.
- is modular, people can choose to adopt in part or whole.
- can be used to as a tool to analyse other organizations.
- does not pretend to be the only one model, nor suitable to all organizations who subscribe to values that it promotes, but it can be a valid alternative for some.
- Core values that this framework attempts to embody, and possible formal agreement on those, is being discussed at our mailing list:
openorg-dev@lists.socialtools.net ...your participation is welcome!

So far we have identified four regular processes (and a fifth extraordinary process), and eight functional rules for an Open Organization.

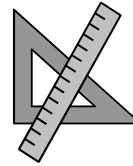


Regular Processes

- Decision-making
- Accountability
- Transparency
- Coordinating

Exceptional Process

- Excluding



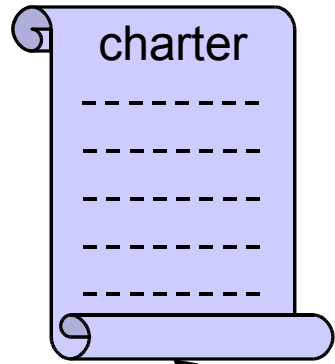
Functional Rules

- Charter
- Open participation
- Self-management
- Best practices
- Respect for skill
- Public ownership of knowledge
- Diversity
- Affirmative terms

For a detailed explanation of each process and rule, see:

<http://www.open-organizations.org/view/Main/IntroToOpenOrg>

An Open Organization



In the charter, the organization sets:

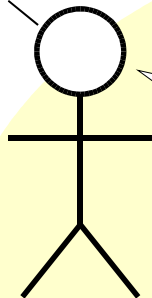
- ✓ goals
- ✓ scope
- ✓ principles
- ✓ geographical location
- ✓ geographical work area
- ✓ decision making
- ✓ working groups

- how:** consensus, voting or another.
- where:** meetings, email or another.
- who:** right for participation.

The charter must be **publicly accessible**

For example, on...

- a web site
- a wall in office

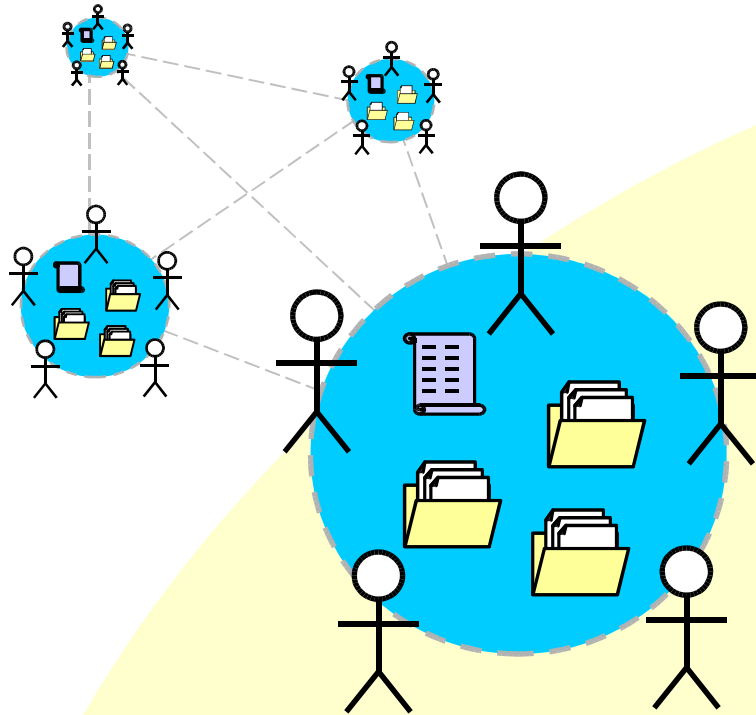


I WANT TO PARTICIPATE...

I AGREE AND FEEL ABLE!

Participation requirements:

- ✓ to agree with Charter
- ✓ to have the necessary skills (certain experience, knowledge or nothing in particular)



Participation

The group's charter should make it clear whether special skills are required, and if so, whether the group is prepared to train newcomers in those skills.

Written Charter

- Each working group sets its own written charter.
- It must be compatible with the organization's charter.
- It must be approved by the organization as a whole.

Projects

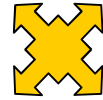
A project is any unit of work that's significant enough to take a decision about it. It is formally initiated with a **proposal**, consisting of:

- goals (realistic and measurable ones)
- estimated time the project will take
- responsible members
- other relevant information



Transparency

Each working group regularly publishes, in a readily accessible form, summaries of the work it is doing and of the knowledge gained from that work. This generates **public ownership of knowledge**.



Accountability







Each working group regularly searches for potential effects of its actions on other groups, adapting its work to prevent adverse effects. The group that is affected decides what is adverse to it, even being allowed to cancel a project. This way, limits to self-management are set. This makes your group, by choice, accountable to others.



Coordinating



One or more volunteers, for a limited time and preferable short time, assume these tasks:

1.   ★ Maintaining lists of priorities.
2.   ★ Maintaining a record of who is working on what.
3.  
- ...
- ★ Writing periodic summaries (e.g. every month or two) of what has been done.



Excluding

Under certain conditions, which are defined in the charter, a working group may decide the exclusion of a member. For example, if someone breaks more than two commitments in a row.

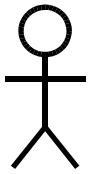
In any case, his or her participation in other working groups should not be affected.

Decision Making

A simple process for consensus decision-making is outlined here, easy to implement by electronic mailing lists. Each working group may adapt this process to their needs, since it may not be suitable to all situations. More details at:

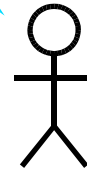
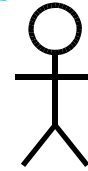
<http://www.open-organizations.org/view/Main/OpenOrgGuideConsensus>

1) A group member makes a **proposal**.



2) **Discussion** takes place, if needed.

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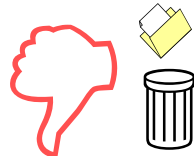
3) The initiator answer concerns and tries to incorporate **amendments** suggested to the proposal.



4) When the initiator feels that a rough **consensus** has been reached, he or she asks if anyone wants to '**stand aside**' or '**block**'.

5) If the proposal is blocked, the initiator may either **drop** the proposal, or **continue** the discussion in order to reach a compromise, and then call for consensus again.

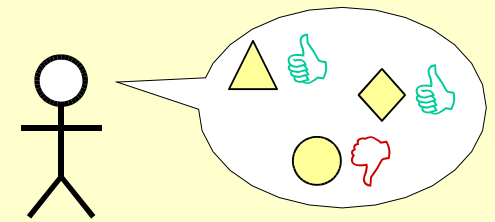
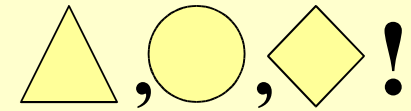
6) The approved proposal turns into an active **project** of the working group.



Trust and Delegation

A special case for decision making

- There are important decisions that need to be taken **quickly** and **often**, either inside the group or in **particular meetings** with other groups, where the decision-making process may be considered too **cumbersome**.
- A working group specifies that that decisions can be taken without a formal proposal nor group approval: one or more members of the same group are **trusted** or **delegated** to make that decisions.
- However, the **terms** of the decision-making (responsibilities, goals and time period) are **formalised** in a **proposal** to be approved by the group.
- In order to maintain **transparency** and **accountability**, trust-based decisions should still be published..



Interdependencies

A working group must consider its relations with the outside world. You can identify key interdependencies using the following approach:

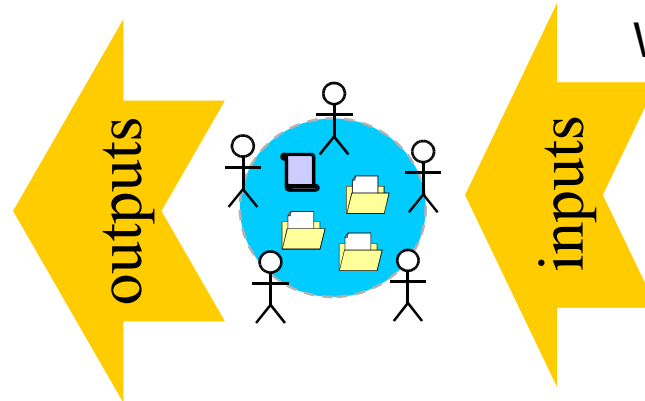
Consider the **outputs** and **inputs** of your work

Who is affected by group's work, positively or negatively?

How can the affected people have a say in what the group does?

Have you set goals that actually benefit the people you intend to benefit, i.e. do you solve the right problem?

Will people become so dependant on your work that if you then disappear you're leaving them in the lurch?



What materials, information, or other resources does the group's work require?

Some time your group is the beneficiary of work done by other groups, so all the same "outputs" questions apply.

If you are using a public good, will your use of that good hinder others' use of it? what would happen if that public good disappeared, and what you could do to prevent that?

Monitoring your interdependencies, and acting to keep them healthy, could be one of your group's projects