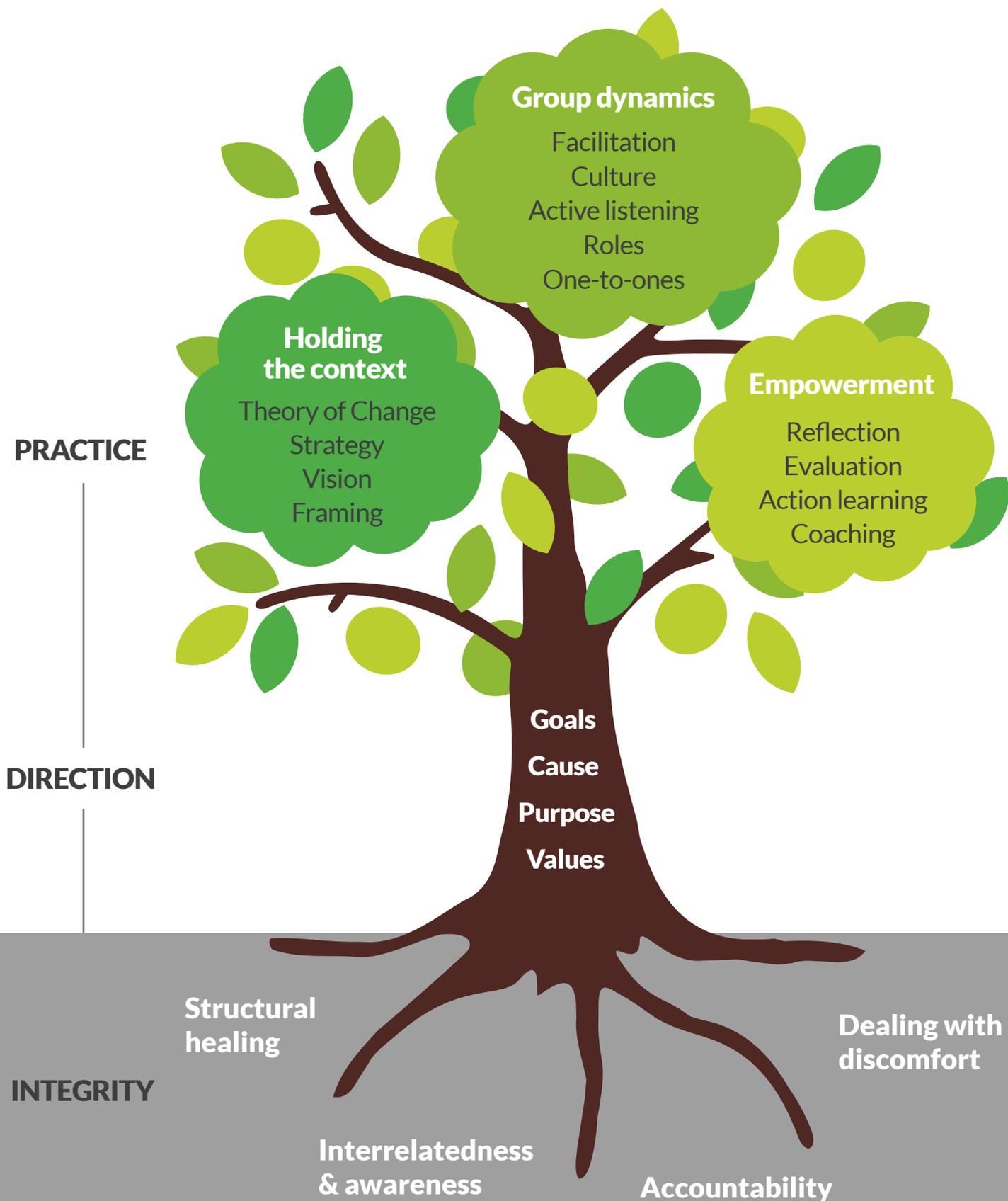


Collaborative leadership

Building collective power



GUIDE TO USING THIS MODEL

This model is not a fixed “answer”. It is the most recent summation of what we have learnt about the practices that help diverse groups work well towards complex and challenging outcomes. It’s meant to give you an introduction to the skills, commitments and understanding that collaborative leaders demonstrate.

Each of us is on our own journey and will need different support to grow. Not all areas are listed in the model but we have tried to cover the core competencies of collaborative leadership. Use it as a guide for thinking honestly about your own development and where you need to focus your attention over the next few years.

After reading it, you might want to set yourself some development goals—what would you like to work on in the next 6 months?

DEFINITIONS

Before we get into the details of the leadership model, here are a few **definitions** that should help set it in context.

What do we mean by leadership?

For NEON, leadership is the ability to build collective power in the face of adversity. This is inspired by the work of the US community organiser, Marshall Ganz (bit.ly/ganzmar), who says that leadership is “Accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve shared purpose, in the face of uncertainty.” To emphasise the collective nature of this work, we use the term “collaborative leadership”.

Who are the leaders?

We (NEON) don’t see leadership as a title, rather we see it as a practice that can be exercised by anyone who is helping their group achieve outcomes for social or systems change. Therefore it’s not used in a hierarchical sense - “leaders” are not some remote, elite group with authority; rather they are people embedded in the community or group that they are organising or working with.

Where did this model come from?

This model has been grown out of our practical experience of working with groups for systems change. Some of these groups are networks, some are more traditional organisations, some are community groups. We have also learnt a lot from different methods and traditions, to name a few: understanding and tackling power & privilege (NEON’s *Power & Privilege Guide* (bit.ly/neonpandp) is a great companion piece to this model), community organising, collaborative practices, action learning, Buddhism, innovation, social psychology. Please find a list of resources in the appendix.

IDENTITY

We need to reconfigure leadership as love, because, as Cornel West says, *“Justice is what love looks like in public”*.

Or as bell hooks says:

“Love is as love does. Love is an act of will - namely both an intention and an action... it is the will to extend one’s own or another’s ... growth ... important and radical changes are necessary, if love is to become a social and not a highly individualistic, marginal phenomenon [...] Embracing a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet.”

—bell hooks, *All About Love*

Interrelatedness & awareness

Transformative leadership starts with self, but without a sense of ourselves and behaviours in relation to other people and to power, we’re in danger of reproducing what we want to push past.

We are all implicated in heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism. A good starting point for overcoming that is awareness, in particular of the obvious and not so obvious power dynamics at play in our interactions with others.

“Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn”.

—bell hooks, *All About Love*

Awareness offers the opportunity to create the world we want to see, starting with our interactions with others, the community spaces we are part of and the organisations we create.

Critical questions

This section is to help you think about the intersectional spaces you occupy in the world, in relation to power, and with the recognition that privilege is relative.

- » What experiences are informing my world view? Think about your class, race, gender and sexual identity. Are you able bodied, do you have mental health issues?
- » How might this impact your ability to work with and in the service of others? How might this affect decisions made, strategy, budget allocation (if applicable)?

- » Given the focus of your work, and the lives impacted by the injustices you are tackling, what significant views may be missing?
- » How can you better collaborate with the groups most affected by the injustices are working to overcome?

Putting it into action: Pledge three ways that you will address gaps you have identified in your organisation in relation to this – what mechanism can you put in place to make sure that you are constantly critically reflecting on how your organisation/group is run?

**Structural
healing &
alternative
governance**

Reflection without change is futile. What will you build into your organisation after reflecting on your identity and relationship to power?

In whatever aspect of social change we are working in, we are trying to build something new, a world that doesn't exist yet, and one that doesn't carry the injustices we see today. There are no cast iron ways to do this, just improvising until you find something that works.

“That is, the undoing of privilege occurs not by individuals confessing their privileges or trying to think themselves into a new subject position, but through the creation of collective structures that dismantle the systems that enable these privileges.

“Rather than focus simply on one's individual privilege, address privilege on an organizational level. For instance – is everyone who is invited to speak a college graduate? Are certain peoples always in the limelight? Based on this assessment, develop structures to address how privilege is exercised collectively. For instance, anytime a person with a college degree is invited to speak, they bring with them a co-speaker who does not have that education level. They might develop mentoring and skills-sharing programs within the group.

*“To quote one of my activist mentors, **Judy Vaughn**, “**You don't think your way into a different way of acting; you act your way into a different way of thinking.**” Essentially, the current social structure conditions us to exercise what privileges we may have. If we want to undermine those privileges, we must change the structures within which we live so that we become different peoples in the process”*

—Andrea Smith, *‘The Problem with “Privilege”’*

Critical questions

- » Think about an area that your organisation might be struggling with at the moment (for instance, outreach and recruitment or perhaps the analysis guiding the work you do). How might you change the way your organisation is structured to address this?
- » How could you incorporate principles of mutuality and interrelatedness into your organisational structure and culture?
- » What might change in your strategic approaches in relation to these principles? How could you adapt your decision making process(es)?

Integrity - values & actions

Talking about change is meaningless if our actions don't reflect what we say we believe in.

"If you go door to door in our nation and talk to citizens about domestic violence, almost everyone will insist that they do not support male violence against women, that they believe it to be morally and ethically wrong. However, if you explain that we can only end male violence against women by challenging patriarchy, and that means no longer accepting the notion that men should have more rights and privileges than women because of biological difference or that men should have the power to rule over women, that is when the agreement stops. There is a gap between the values they claim to hold and their willingness to do the work of connecting thoughts and action, theory and practice to realize these values and thus create a more just society."

—bell hooks, *All About Love*

To understand President Sankara's 'Exceptionalism', one has to go back to the foundational attributes of transformational leadership, which involves, among other things: a governing philosophy underpinned by a high sense of integrity, the ability to articulate a clear vision and translate it into reality to change people's lives for the better, the courage to identify and confront the dominant contradictions at each point in the development process, and, of course, frontier thinking – the ability to anticipate and lead on major development issues likely to greatly impact future generations.

—*New African Magazine*, December 2012

Critical questions

- » Revisit some of your core values. Now think about the area(s) of injustice you are trying address. How could you go deeper in tackling this injustice and build your values more deeply into the way the work and / or the way you run your team / group?
- » Think about your power here. It's likely that you can offer a lense or resources to progressive movements that others don't have - and that's powerful stuff. What are you adding to the movement within which you are operating (this is applicable even if you are not in a group)? What can you add that is missing - to set an example for others?

Accountability

Especially in positions of leadership, we should think about who and what holds us to account for the work we do and how we do it.

Critical questions: *Who are we accountable to?*

- » Who are we accountable to at present? Who lets us think we've done a good job? Who do we get feedback from right now? E.g. Other activists from a similar background to us? Funders*? Press? (*of course we are accountable to funders! But this question is to get us to think about how this might impact the way we meas
- » Who, given the focus of our work, should we be accountable to? What would the most vulnerable people have to say about our work? Who are we **helping/serving** what do they have to say?

Dealing with discomfort

Sometimes certain situations, people or dynamics can cause us to feel considerable discomfort.

If you feel shame, anger etc... that's ok, sit with it, interrogate it. But be mindful of:

Making anyone else do the emotional or intellectual work for you

Letting your own discomfort blind you to where you might have hurt, offended, or misunderstood something

Critical questions

- » Remember: acknowledgement and confession means nothing without this also translating into action
- » How does my privilege affect this relationship? And on a societal level, where is the balance of power?
- » Does the emotion I feel help uphold or dismantle dominant oppressive structures?
- » What can you do about these emotions?
- » How you listen more actively?
- » Where can you go to learn more/educate yourself?
- » Are you learning from your mistakes?

Building in support for vulnerability

Critical question / possible action routes:

- » What do you have in place for when people (including yourself) feel triggered, upset or alienated?
- » What can you do in your organisation/group to have open, caring conversations about the ways in which difference can cause hurt and discomfort – what will you build in?
- » How can you build in a loving, respectful culture of accountability?
- » Could you establish circles of support, that then **feeds into the wider culture** of your group or network if you are in the minority? For example, if you are part of a group of people from a marginalised background and you create a support group, could you agree with leadership to give the group space at meetings so that your voice is heard and incorporated into your work?
- » Do you have safe spaces or an agreed way of dealing with conflict mediators who can help resolve conflict when it arises?
- » Consider practices of self-care that help you develop self-awareness and compassion for yourself - e.g. meditation, yoga, journaling (recording your thoughts and development), therapy.
- » Learning to take care of yourself – mentally, physically and emotionally – will help you become more open and balanced and a positive influence on those around you.

A few of you have asked for tools for dealing with trauma triggers, here's a tool from JustJasmineBlog.com that is focused on race-based trauma, but has useful pointers for everyone to use!

STEPS TO SELF CARE AFTER EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA

Race-based trauma can create symptoms and experiences much like PTSD. Repeated race-based trauma puts your emotional, psychological, and physical well-being at risk

Mindful Isolation
Disconnect from triggering interactions or other situations that might elicit the fight-or-flight response

Discharge Energy
Find ways to exert physical energy. go for a brisk walk or run. Find (safe) ways to discharge intense anger that includes physical movement.

Ask For Help
If you find yourself unable to cope, find a trauma support group or therapist to assist you. You matter.

Community
Connect with people who you've identified as your empathetic and open support. Process your feelings with them.

Well-Being

- Feed yourself well
- Get good rest
- Avoid toxins
- Breath deep

JustJasmineBlog.com

Outcome: Integrity

DIRECTION

"Life is very short and what we have to do must be done in the now."

—Audre Lorde

The scale of the challenges we organise around are huge – how do we ensure that we're focusing our limited time and emotional energy effectively? We've all experienced the opposite – burnout, lack of energy and fragmentation. We can do this by working out a purpose, values and goals for our work. This gives us a clear personal compass for selecting and shaping projects, teams and ultimately our approach to organising. This kind of focus can help us apply our strengths in a way that does not diminish us, but gives us energy and helps us grow. It also makes you a much more positive and productive teammate!

Values

Build your moral compass – the values by which you want to live.

- » Identify the 3 most important values to you (e.g. solidarity, care, democracy).
- » What are the behaviours associated with these values? These are the behaviours that you can encourage in the teams and projects you are in – and can act as the red lines which, if crossed, lead you to walk away from a team.
- » This can also give you clues as to what behaviours and situations may trigger you (in the previous section).

Purpose

Identify your core contribution to anything you engage with (work, personal projects, etc.). This isn't suggesting that you just do one thing; rather it is the main thing that draws your attention.

- » When do you make your most effective contribution – what are you doing? (e.g. empowering others, creating coherence for groups).
- » This is less a learnt skill and more something you do naturally – it can be hard to spot it, so ask colleagues, friends, family to help.
- » You will find it is something you are naturally drawn to learn about and get better at.
- » It doesn't feel exhausting to do this, instead it gives you energy.
- » You can often identify it by something that frustrates you if it is absent from a project or you are impeded from doing it.

Cause

This is the area to which you want to apply your purpose.

- » What problems are you most passionate about solving? (e.g. a just climate transition or building the power of trade unions).
- » This can often be strongly linked to something you have personally experienced – look to your own life experiences for clues.

Goals

How do you want to grow and develop over the next 1-3 years?

- » This helps you identify priorities and stop doing things that might be a distraction but are difficult to leave behind e.g. a job.
- » Identify what you want to achieve in different realms of your life – work, emotional, physical, spiritual.
- » Where possible, seek out opportunities – in work and beyond - that will help you meet these goals – a strategy for yourself.

Outcome:

Focus

PRACTICE

“We all have dreams. But in order to make dreams come into reality, it takes an awful lot of determination, dedication, self-discipline, and effort”

Jesse Owens

Develop the practical skills that help you support diverse groups to achieve outcomes in the face of adversity. These skills are the bedrock of building empowering and effective groups, organisations and movements. They are often the overlooked part of your toolkit, as they are about the indirect enabling conditions that create impact, rather than the direct creation of impact, e.g. speaking on panels, direct action, running the campaign. These are the skills that help you work with others effectively. As popularised by the Black Lives Matter movement, this is “low ego, high impact” (bit.ly/egoimpact) work. As your role morphs and change you will most probably focus on different areas of this work.

Holding the context

This is about helping the group to create a shared understanding of its purpose: why it exists and what it wants to achieve. Here are some of the core steps that can help here (you can read more about some of them in NEON’s Systemic Campaigns Framework)

- » **Theory of change** is about the group creating a shared understanding of the problem they are seeking to address and their shared assumptions about how this could change.
- » **Strategy** is about the group committing its resources to a specific set of activities, with a specific audience or community to create outcomes that they think will contribute to the theory of change identified.
- » **Vision** is about the group moving beyond resistance. Resistance is important but it is empowering and can give the group agency to create a sense of what they want to create in the world, rather than solely focusing on what they are fighting against.
- » **Framing and storytelling** is about communicating your theory of change, strategy and vision in a compelling way that connects with people’s emotions and inspires them to support or join the group’s cause.

Group dynamics

Groups are an interplay of human energy. This energy is affected by all sorts of things: from people's backgrounds and experiences, to how safe people feel in the group, to individuals feeling a clear sense of ownership and energy over their roles and responsibilities. Here are some key aspects to consider. NB a number of these are drawn directly from NEON's *Power & Privilege Guide* (bit.ly/neonpandp):

- » **Facilitation:** is the practice of adopting a neutral position within a meeting or workshop to help people move through a process together and draw out the opinions and ideas of group members. When you become a facilitator, you can ensure that everyone in the room has the chance to participate.
- » **Culture:** is the emotional bedrock of the organisation. A healthy culture empowers, while an unhealthy one constrains. Intentionally developing a culture helps people articulate their assumptions about how we should treat each other. An organisation creates shared norms about what is and isn't okay about the way we are with each other. It also creates a shorthand for new people about the behaviour expected of them.
- » **Active Listening:** is where the listener remains silent until the speaker finishes, then feeds back to the speaker what they have heard - this will help confirm what has been heard and allow both parties to ensure they have the same understanding. Active listening is a key practice to make sure certain voices are not dominating in meetings, workshop spaces, etc. It's a great habit to practice if you've ever caught yourself talking over someone else.
- » **Setting roles and responsibilities:** is key to building up individual agency and ownership. Without setting this clearly, group members will get confused about who is doing what, how they fit into the group and they run the risk of duplicating efforts. All of this can lead to frustration and confusion in the group and a dissipation of energy and impact.
- » **One-to-ones:** are conversations between 2 people that are about understanding each side's motivations. Once we understand each other's motivations, it is easier to structure the collaboration so that people can have some of these motivations met. When we work in line with our motivations, we are much more likely to commit to the group and generally make more of an effort.

Empowerment

A core principle of collaborative leadership is creating more leaders! For complex, systemic change, we need distributed leadership – lots of people taking connected, effective action to tackle entrenched, systemic problems. At the heart of this is making learning a core part of your culture and approach.

People have to feel safe to learn and grow: to take risks, try out new things and make mistakes. Accept that things will go wrong and you will make mistakes.

Develop reflective practices and embed them in your way of working, so everyone can learn quickly and adapt strategy in light of what is working and what isn't.

As the *Agile Manifesto* (bit.ly/agilefest0), an approach to software development that prioritises innovation and learning, states it's about "responding to change over following a plan."

Here are some practices that can help here:

- » **Personal reflection:** The habit of thinking about the words you've said and the actions you've taken, considering what happened next, and using that experience to improve your response to similar situations in future.
- » **Project evaluation:** Making time to reflect as a group on an ongoing basis on what's working, what you could do differently, how you are working as a team and agreeing how you will adapt your strategy based on this learning
- » **Action learning:** Small groups that coach each other to resolve problems group members are facing.
- » **Coaching and mentoring:** Actively developing the skills and capacities of others in the movement, especially those who might not have access to support.

Outcome:

Alignment and Impact

APPENDIX - RESOURCES

These are just a few of the resources that we've found useful when exploring the different themes of the leadership model. It is a "living list" and will grow and be edited as we find new sources. We are particularly interested in diversifying the resources here as much as possible, so if you have any suggestions, just let us know.

IDENTITY

- » **bell hooks:** bellhooksinstitute.com
- » **Angela Davis on healing:** yesmagazine.org/issues/life-after-oil/the-radical-work-of-healing-fania-and-angela-davis-on-a-new-kind-of-civil-rights-activism-20160218
- » **Madness and Oppression Guide:** Personal transformation and collective liberation through mental health: pdf-archive.com/2015/11/06/madnessandoppressionguide/madnessandoppressionguide.pdf
- » **Brene Brown, on working with vulnerability and shame:** brenebrown.com/
- » **Pema Chodron, Buddhist nun, with excellent resources for dealing with suffering.** Lots of articles and videos on her website. pemachodronfoundation.org. This book in particular, is excellent: *When Things Fall Apart*, bookdepository.com/When-Things-Fall-Apart-Pema-Chodron/9780007183517
- » Resources in **NEON's Power and Privilege Guide:** neweconomyorganisers.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/NEON-Power-and-Privilege-Guide.pdf
- » **Dealing with burnout:** plantothrive.net.au/resources & activist-trauma.net/en/downloads.html
- » **Psychotherapy and counselling (most in London)**
 - freepsychotherapynetwork.com/organisations-offering-low-cost-psychotherapy
 - counsellingforsocialchange.org.uk
 - recovr.co.uk
 - centreforbetterhealth.org.uk
- » **Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World:** franticworld.com
- » **London Roots Collective:** commonhouse.org.uk/whos-involved/london-roots-collective

DIRECTION

- » **Purpose:** actionforhappiness.org/take-action/find-your-true-purpose
- » **Values:** valuesandframes.org
- » **Personality type:** 16personalities.com/free-personality-test

PRACTICE

Holding the context

- » **Theory of change:** [aspeninstitute.org/publications/community-builders-approach-theory-change-practical-guide-theory-development](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/community-builders-approach-theory-change-practical-guide-theory-development)
- » **Vision and Strategy:** [wellstone.org/resources/organizer%E2%80%99s-guide-galaxy-strategic-planning](https://www.wellstone.org/resources/organizer%E2%80%99s-guide-galaxy-strategic-planning)
- » **Framing:** storybasedstrategy.org/sbs-tools
- » **Storytelling:** workshops.350.org/toolkit/story

Group dynamics

- » **Facilitation**
 - Training for Change: trainingforchange.org
 - Seeds of Change: seedsforchange.org.uk
 - Art of Hosting: artofhosting.org
 - Facilitation tips: workshops.350.org/facilitation
 - Design thinking: designkit.org/resources/1
- » **One-to-ones:** s.coop/noirelationshipsguide
- » **Team building:** workshops.350.org/toolkit/organize
- » **Team roles:**
 - Belbin (team roles) belbin.com/about/belbin-team-roles
 - Six hats (ways of thinking): debonogroup.com/six_thinking_hats.php

Empowerment

- » **Coaching:** mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_89.htm
- » **Action learning:** actionlearningassociates.co.uk
- » **Active listening:** alifeofproductivity.com/active-listening-how-to-do-it

OTHER TOOLKITS WITH USEFUL RESOURCES

- » neworganizing.wellstone.org/2015/03/organizerstoolbox
- » workshops.350.org/toolkit/start
- » organizingcoolstheplanet.wordpress.com/for-educators/workshop-and-training-curriculum/

This model is the end result of a lot collective thinking and practice. NEON and Teju Adeleye led the synthesis of these insights to create the model, with the support of the Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC). PIRC designed the model and made it beautiful.

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