An affinity group is a circle of friends who understand themselves as an autonomous political force. The idea is that people who already know and trust each other should work together to respond immediately, intelligently, and flexibly to emerging situations.

# How To Form an Affinity Group

## Essential Building Blocks of Anarchist Organization

No Trace Project / No trace, no case. A collection of tools to help anarchists and other rebels **understand** the capabilities of their enemies, **undermine** surveillance efforts, and ultimately **act** without getting caught.

Depending on your context, possession of certain documents may be criminalized or attract unwanted attention. Be careful about what zines you print and where you store them.

**How To Form an Affinity Group: Essential Building Blocks of Anarchist Organization**

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notrace.how/resources/#affinity

to do. Get in the habit of discussing what you want to see happen—and making those ideas reality.

Without a structure that encourages ideas to flow into action, without comrades with whom to brainstorm and barnstorm and build up momentum, you are likely to be paralyzed, cut off from much of your own potential; with them, your potential can be multiplied by ten, or ten thousand. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world," Margaret Mead wrote: "it's the only thing that ever has." She was referring, whether she knew it or not, to affinity groups. If every individual in every action against the State and status quo participated as part of a tight-knit, dedicated affinity group, the revolution would be accomplished in a few short years.

An affinity group could be a sewing circle or a bicycle maintenance collective; it could come together for the purpose of providing a meal at an occupation or forcing a multinational corporation out of business through a carefully orchestrated program of sabotage. Affinity groups have planted and defended community gardens, built and occupied and burned down buildings, organized neighborhood childcare programs and wildcat strikes; individual affinity groups routinely initiate revolutions in the visual arts and popular music. Your favorite band was an affinity group. An affinity group invented the airplane. Another one maintains this website.

*Let five people meet who are resolved to the lightning of action rather than the agony of survival—from that moment, despair ends and tactics begin.*

provides are usually our greatest advantages in combat with a better equipped adversary.

## Bottomlining

For affinity groups and larger structures based on consensus and cooperation to function, it is essential that everyone involved be able to rely on each other to come through on commitments. When a plan is agreed upon, each individual in a group and each group in a cluster should choose one or more critical aspects of the preparation and execution of the plan and offer to bottomline them. Bottomlining the supplying of a resource or the completion of a project means guaranteeing that it will be accomplished somehow, no matter what. If you're operating the legal hotline for your group during a demonstration, you owe it to them to make sure someone can handle it even if you get sick; if your group promises to provide the banners for an action, make sure they're ready, even if that means staying up all night the night before because the rest of your affinity group couldn't show up. Over time, you'll learn how to handle crises and who you can count on in them—just as others will learn how much they can count on you.

## Go Into Action

Stop wondering what's going to happen, or why nothing's happening. Get together with your friends and start deciding *what will happen*. Don't go through life in passive spectator mode, waiting to be told what



Turbulent times are upon us. Already, blockades, demonstrations, riots, and clashes are occuring regularly. It's past time to be organizing for the upheavals that are on the way.

But getting organized doesn't mean joining a preexisting institution and taking orders. It shouldn't mean forfeiting your agency and intelligence to become a cog in a machine. From an anarchist perspective, organizational structure should maximize both freedom and voluntary coordination at every level of scale, from the smallest group up to society as a whole.

You and your friends already constitute an affinity group, the essential building block of this model. An affinity group is a circle of friends who understand themselves as an autonomous political force. The idea is that people who already know and trust each other should work together to respond immediately, intelligently, and flexibly to emerging situations.

This leaderless format has proven effective for guerrilla activities of all kinds, as well as what the RAND Corporation calls “swarming”[1] tactics in which many unpredictable autonomous groups overwhelm a centralized adversary. You should go to every demonstration in an affinity group, with a shared sense of your goals and capabilities. If you are in an affinity group that has experience taking action together, you will be much better prepared to deal with emergencies and make the most of unexpected opportunities.

[1] https://rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1382.html

This guide is adapted from an earlier version that appeared in our book Recipes for Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook.[2]

## Affinity Groups are Powerful

Relative to their small size, affinity groups can achieve a disproportionately powerful impact. In contrast to traditional top-down structures, they are free to adapt to any situation, they need not pass their decisions through a complicated process of ratification, and all the participants can act and react instantly without waiting for orders—yet with a clear idea of what to expect from one another. The mutual admiration and inspiration on which they are founded make them very difficult to demoralize. In stark contrast to capitalist, fascist, and socialist structures, they function without any need of hierarchy or coercion. Participating in an affinity group can be fulfilling and fun as well as effective.

Most important of all, affinity groups are motivated by shared desire and loyalty, rather than profit, duty, or any other compensation or abstraction. Small wonder whole squads of riot police have been held at bay by affinity groups armed with only the tear gas canisters shot at them.

[2]https://crimethinc.com/books/recipes-for-disaster



glad of your affinity group's participation or intervention in a situation, rather than resenting or fearing you. They should come to recognize the value of the affinity group model, and so to employ it themselves, after seeing it succeed and benefiting from that success.

## Organize With Other Affinity Groups

An affinity group can work together with other affinity groups in what is sometimes called a cluster. The cluster formation enables a larger number of individuals to act with the same advantages a single affinity group has. If speed or security is called for, representatives of each group can meet ahead of time, rather than the entirety of all groups; if coordination is of the essence, the groups or representatives can arrange methods for communicating through the heat of the action. Over years of collaborating together, different affinity groups can come to know each other as well as they know themselves, becoming accordingly more comfortable and capable together.

When several clusters of affinity groups need to coordinate especially massive actions—before a big demonstration, for example—they can hold a spokescouncil meeting at which different affinity groups and clusters can inform one another (to whatever extent is wise) of their intentions. Spokescouncils rarely produce seamless unanimity, but they can apprise the participants of the various desires and perspectives that are at play. The independence and spontaneity that decentralization

preparing resources (such as banners, medical supplies, or offensive equipment), dividing up internal roles (for example, scouting, communications, medic, media liaison), establishing communication systems (such as burner phones[4] or coded phrases that can be shouted out to convey information securely), preparing general strategies (for keeping sight of one another in confusing environments, for example), charting emergency escape routes, or readying legal support in case anyone is arrested.

After an action, a shrewd affinity group will meet (if necessary, in a secure location without any electronics) to discuss what went well, what could have gone better, and what comes next.

## Tact and Tactics

An affinity group answers to itself alone—this is one of its strengths. Affinity groups are not burdened by the procedural protocol of other organizations, the difficulties of reaching agreement with strangers, or the limitations of answering to a body not immediately involved in the action.

At the same time, just as the members of an affinity group strive for consensus with each other, each affinity group should strive for a similarly considerate relationship with other individuals and groups—or at least to complement others' approaches, even if others do not recognize the value of this contribution. Ideally, most people should be

[4] https://notrace.how/resources/#burner-phones



## The Affinity Group is a Flexible Model

Some affinity groups are formal and immersive: the participants live together, sharing everything in common. But an affinity group need not be a permanent arrangement. It can serve as a structure of convenience, assembled from the pool of interested and trusted people for the duration of a given project.

A particular team can act together over and over as an affinity group, but the members can also break up into smaller affinity groups, participate in other affinity groups, or act outside the affinity group structure. Freedom to associate and organize as each person sees fit is a fundamental anarchist principle; this promotes redundancy, so no one person or group is essential to the functioning of the whole, and different groups can reconfigure as needed.

## Pick the Scale That's Right for You

An affinity group can range from two to perhaps as many as fifteen individuals, depending on your goals. However, no group should be so numerous that an informal conversation about pressing matters is impossible. You can always split up into two or more groups if need be. In actions that require driving, the easiest system is often to have one affinity group to each vehicle.

## Get to Know Each Other Intimately

Learn each other's strengths and vulnerabilities and backgrounds, so you know what you can count on each other for. Discuss your analyses of each situation you are entering and what is worth accomplishing in it—identify where they match, where they are complementary, and where they differ, so you'll be ready to make split-second decisions.

One way to develop political intimacy is to read and discuss texts together, but nothing beats on-the-ground experience. Start out slow so you don't overextend. Once you've established a common language and healthy internal dynamics, you're ready to identify the objectives you want to accomplish, prepare a plan, and *go into action*.

## Decide Your Appropriate Level of Security

Affinity groups are resistant to infiltration because all members share history and intimacy with each other, and no one outside the group need be informed of their plans or activities.

Once assembled, an affinity group should establish a shared set of security practices[3] and stick to them. In some cases, you can afford to be public and transparent about your activities; in other cases, whatever goes on within the group should never be spoken of outside it,

[3] https://notrace.how/resources/#what-is-security-culture



even after all its activities are long completed. It may be that no one except the participants in the group should know that it exists at all. You and your comrades can discuss and prepare for actions without acknowledging to outsiders that you constitute an affinity group. Remember, it is easier to pass from a high security protocol to a low one than vice versa.

## Make Decisions Together

Affinity groups generally operate via consensus decision-making: decisions are made collectively according to the needs and desires of every individual involved. Democratic voting, in which the majority get their way and the minority must hold their tongues, is anathema to affinity groups—for if a group is to function smoothly and hold together under stress, every individual involved must be satisfied. Before any action, the members of a group should establish together what their personal and collective goals are, what risks they are comfortable taking, and what their expectations of each other are. These matters determined, they can formulate a plan.

Since action situations are always unpredictable and plans rarely come off as anticipated, it may help to employ a dual approach to preparing. On the one hand, you can make plans for different scenarios: *If A happens, we'll inform each other by X means and switch to plan B; if X means of communication is impossible, we'll reconvene at site Z at Q o'clock.* On the other hand, you can put structures in place that will be useful even if what happens is unlike any of the scenarios you imagined. This could mean