

# Anarchic Agreements

...considered as embodying the rights of the society  
**Constitutionalising** (kən.stɪ'tʃuː.ʃən.ə.laɪzɪŋ) *noun* 1 The  
continual process of defining and redefining the identity and  
ethos of a community and developing and changing the rules that  
govern the behaviour of the community and its members.  
**Constitutive** (kən'stɪtʃ.ə.tɪv) *adjective* 1 having power to enact  
...the word for constituent (sense 1).

**consensual**  
**changeable**  
**conscious**

A guide to the process of  
constitutionalising and  
group forming

# Contents

- 1. Key principles.....2
  - 1.1 Consensual.....2
  - 1.2 Changeable .....3
  - 1.3 Conscious .....3
- 2. Key areas of constitutionalising.....6
  - 2.1 What is the group?.....6
  - 2.2 How are decisions made? .....6
  - 2.3 How do we get things done?.....7
  - 2.4 What policies do we need? .....8
  - 2.5 How can we make the group empowering? .....9
  - 2.6 The importance of group culture.....10
- 3. Putting it into practice ..... 11
  - 3.1 The process of 'constitutionalising' ..... 11
  - 3.2 New members joining ..... 12
  - 3.3 Regular review of the agreements ..... 13
  - 3.4 Building an empowering culture ..... 14
- 4. ... there's always a but ..... 16
- 5. Further reading ..... 17

This guide was co-written by Seeds for Change and researchers from the Anarchy Rules research project. For more information, see [seedsforchange.org.uk](http://seedsforchange.org.uk) and [anarchyrules.info](http://anarchyrules.info)

“According to the constitution...”

“That’s against the rules...”

“Our media policy bans us from...”

“The correct procedure is...”

For many people, the language of constitutions, policies and procedures is associated with having to play by someone else’s rules. Social and environmental justice groups often resist the many powers in the world that are telling us what to do, so creating new rules may feel like the last thing we want to spend time on. Can rules and constitutions play a role in creating groups that are liberating and empowering to be part of?

This guide looks at the questions that need to be answered when we transform from a series of unconnected individuals into a collective that can use the words ‘we’ and ‘us’ to describe itself. For example: What is the purpose of the group and what are its core values? How are decisions made? How do different tasks get done in the group? What rules and policies does the group need? How can the group make sure it is empowering to be part of?

We call the process of answering these questions **constitutionalising**. This isn’t necessarily about creating a written constitution. It could simply mean working out a shared understanding about who the group is and how it goes about doing things. The decisions a group makes about these kinds of questions makes a big difference to the experience of the people involved and to what the group can achieve. In some ways, the process the group goes through in order to make those decisions is even more critical. This guide looks at how we can make **constitutionalising** an empowering process for groups to go through.

# 1. Key principles

Broadly speaking, the agreements a group makes will be more empowering for the people involved if they are **consensual**, **changeable** and **conscious**.

## 1.1 Consensual

Often our association with rules are of being told what to do by people who have authority over us, from the adults who raised us, to school, to workplaces, benefits agencies, landlords, social norms, the council, the government... Many of us get very little chance to have a say in the rules that dictate what we can and can't do.

On the flip side, a complete free-for-all also leaves many of us with very little control over what happens to us. If our housemate smoking inside affects our asthma, most of us would think it was alright to ask them to go outside. Some people would pre-empt the issue by talking about it when they move in, along with other issues like bills, cleaning and shared food.

Consensual agreements are created by the people who are affected by an issue. To be genuinely consensual, everyone should be able to shape the agreement, or at the very least have their needs taken into account. It isn't always easy to find a solution that works for everyone, even on a simple question like what day of the week to have a meeting. But if everyone is part of shaping the agreement, the answers we reach are more likely to be fair.

The main pitfall of trying to be consensual is that it can take a lot of time. The energy it takes to create inclusive decisions on every question affecting how the group works may make it hard to do anything else. Protracted meetings about policies could lead to the group losing the people who are most keen to get things done. This can also exclude the people whose time is most limited, whether because of health, caring commitments, work or simply because they have a lot of other things going on in their lives. Many groups need to prioritise carefully to ensure that important decisions get

everyone's consent without the whole group getting so bogged down that it grinds to a halt.

## **1.2 Changeable**

If a group sets up agreements or rules that everyone consents to there is still a need to revise those agreements over time. If new people join, established members alter their views or circumstances change the agreements may need to change too in order to reflect that.

Groups will need to find a balance between the benefits of a stable group and the benefits of a group reflecting the views of all its members. Usually, new people are invited to join on the basis of a clear agreement about what the group is for and what values it holds. This helps create stability, by limiting the changes a group needs to consider. An anti-nuclear power group wouldn't be expected to become pro-nuclear because someone joined the group and then said they didn't agree with what it was all about.

Even if a group doesn't change its fundamental principles easily, it can be flexible about how those principles are achieved. For example, a group which was committed to non-hierarchical organising might think very carefully indeed before introducing a system of elected leaders. However, they could experiment with different methods for reaching decisions with the input of the whole group. In some circumstances, a group will need to make more fundamental changes. For example, a single-issue campaign might expand its scope to take on related issues.

## **1.3 Conscious**

It is common for a group not to be particularly conscious of the 'decisions' they make when they are first starting out. For example, the group might form with a 'feeling' of affinity and shared purpose and never discuss things like their aims, purpose and values. A feeling of shared purpose is an important glue holding people together, but it has its limitations. Conscious conversations usually end up with a clearer shared understanding, which can avoid the

bad feeling and wasted time involved in disappointed expectations and misunderstandings.

The same is true for more practical decisions. Groups can slide into habits which shape how the group works without consciously making agreements. For example, if the same person sends out emails and manages social media for a group over a period of time, they may in effect become the 'Communications Officer' without the group deciding they want one person to do this role. Having a conscious conversation about how to organise communications mean it's possible to consider the implications of different options and choose the one that works best.

Conscious agreements are also easier to communicate to the rest of the world and to new members. This can help the stability of the group as well. In the case of the 'Communications Officer' example, all the conversations about how the role works will be useful notes and guidance if someone else takes over the job.

Less conscious decision making can tend to favour the people who are already most empowered in a group. For example, someone who has a lot of confidence is most likely to explain how they think the group works to new people who come. Even if other people had different ideas that person's explanations may start to define how the group works.

However, conscious and explicit decision making can also favour the people who are already most empowered. These people may be more likely to put forward their views, more likely to fight if their ideas are opposed and more likely to assume that their suggestion was agreed if no-one spoke against it. When these suggestions are written down as policy, or passed on to new people when they join, then they look like the group consensus, even if not everyone was happy with them.

Conscious conversations about policy or group aims require extra care in order to be accessible. More people are likely to respond to 'Shall I check the group email account?', compared to 'What

guidelines do we need for the 'Communications Officer' role?' The second question is harder for people to input on if they don't have a lot of experience in groups. Plus, this second question is more abstract, which might be more difficult for some people than others. Using concrete examples and everyday language, rather than abstract and bureaucratic terms, can help a wider range of people participate. This in turn means the agreements are shaped by more members of the group, and in a more genuinely consensual way.

## 2. Key areas of constitutionalising

Exactly what questions a group needs to work out will depend on their context. For example, in a workers' co-op that provides its members with a wage it will be important to work out how to come to decisions that everyone finds fair. In this scenario, the decisions will have a fundamental impact on people's livelihoods. In a community bring-and-share meal there may be a lot less decision making to do and the decisions themselves will affect people a lot less. In this case, the group may never agree a decision-making method and simply have an informal chat at the end of the meal if an issue comes up, for example, when to have the next meal.

However, these five areas cover the bases for most groups:

### 2.1 What is the group?

**Sample questions:** What is the purpose and aims of the group? What principles and values do we share? What do we need to do to achieve our aims? Who can join the group?

These questions are at the foundations of any group. However, it is very common for a new group to dive into 'doing stuff' without taking time to think about these questions. For example, if neighbours get together to fight gentrification in their area, they might assume that the reasons were obvious. But they could get a much clearer picture of where everyone is at by asking questions with fairly concrete answers like 'What are examples of the things we want to stop?', 'What impacts will these things have, and which ones are we worried about?' This conversation would give a much clearer picture of how much people had in common, and form the basis for setting out the purpose and values of the group.

### 2.2 How are decisions made?

**Sample questions:** How does the group make decisions (e.g. by consensus, by voting)? Who needs to be involved in what kind of decisions? What decisions need to be made at regular

meetings and what can be decided outside of those meetings?

Decision making is critical to how a group puts its values in practice. For example, a network that exists to support local groups affected by the same issues might have the empowerment of those local groups as one of its core aims. It would be contradictory to then have a top down decision-making structure, where a central committee in the network told the local groups what to do. Instead, important decisions in the network might be made by representatives or delegates of all the local groups coming together a few times a year. The network might also decide that each local group has complete autonomy to do what they want, provided that no-one uses the network's name to do things that go against core shared policies.

See Seeds for Change resources for more on decision making:  
<https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/resources>

### **2.3 How do we get things done?**

**Sample questions:** How often do we meet? Are there regular social events? How do we communicate between ourselves outside of meetings? How do we communicate with those not part of the group? Are sub-groups or individuals responsible for certain tasks?

The practices a group sets up to get things done could range from a monthly meeting, to having nominated signatories on the bank account, to holding a regular stall in town on Saturdays. It could also include how the group socialises – having a bring-and-share meal to start each meeting or going on trips to national gatherings of people interested in the same issues.

The answers to these questions have a big impact on the experience of being part of the group, and how effectively it gets things done. Talking about how to organise can help a group find systems that are appropriate for their purpose and for the people involved. For example, many groups default to deciding everything in whole

group meetings and splitting up tasks in an ad hoc way because it seems more egalitarian, when a well thought through working-group system – with small sub-groups working on certain tasks – could in some ways be equally democratic and more efficient. Groups also often default into socialising in the pub after meetings, which could exclude people who don't drink alcohol perhaps for religious or other reasons, and don't think about more inclusive ways of getting to know one another as people. Ideally, group practices should reflect their aims and principles. For example, if a co-op aims to promote co-operation, in line with the core co-operative principles, it might join regional and national co-operative networks and work collectively to strengthen the whole movement.

## **2.4 What policies do we need?**

**Sample questions:** How will we respond if someone makes a complaint to the group? Can we introduce rules that make the group safer to be in, e.g. a commitment to supporting anyone who feels harassed or bullied? Is there a system that would make it harder for someone to steal group funds?

A policy doesn't need to be a five page document in carefully crafted legalese. It could include unwritten rules, like not letting dogs use the allotment as a toilet. In other situations it is important to have written policies that are worded carefully and to make sure everyone knows about them. Big public events often require that everyone reads and agrees to the safer spaces policy before coming in. Co-ops will often have a 'Grievance and Disciplinary Policy' that makes clear what behaviours are totally unacceptable and what processes should be in place before a member is asked to leave.

This area is particularly sensitive because there is a high risk that people experience rules and policies as restrictive or even oppressive. It is also hard to make a rule which fits all situations and recognises everyone's needs. It can help if people recognise that a policy isn't usually chosen because it is the only right way to do things, just a way that everyone can agree on. For example, there

are many systems for sharing the cleaning in a communal house, and many different ideas about what it means to be clean enough. Coming to basic agreements about the housework can ease a lot of tension, especially if the agreements are reviewed when new people join.

## **2.5 How can we make the group empowering?**

**Sample questions:** Are there particular groups of people who are likely to be disproportionately empowered or disempowered in the group? Can we introduce 'checks and balances' to make it harder for individuals or sub-groups to gain too much influence? What can we do to make it easier for people who are currently marginalised to take on roles and help shape the group?

To make empowerment a reality, it needs to inform all the other areas involved in 'constitutionalising'. Making decision making as democratic as possible is an obvious example. Other examples are creating systems to reduce the barriers to people getting involved, like paying baby-sitters so single parents can attend more easily, or choosing a venue that is as widely accessible as possible. Similarly, maximising empowerment can shape the aims of the group. For example, a trade union could prioritise issues affecting the lowest paid and most precarious workers.

The priorities of each group will depend on their situation and members, so it is useful to start by thinking through any dynamics that are specific to your context. If a homeless action group includes 'allies' who are securely housed there will need to be careful thought about potential power dynamics between them and the homeless people in the group. For example, they could think carefully about who speaks for the group in public, who has access to group resources and whose views shape decision making most. Similarly, in a project with a big budget, the finance team could easily end up with more than their fair influence over decision making. Steps to ensure everyone has a basic understanding of the

financial situation could help balance that power out (and help the whole group make better decisions overall).

There are practical tips on maximising empowerment at the end of this guide.

## **2.6 The importance of group culture**

The success of all these agreements depends as much on the group culture as on what the agreements actually are. The culture is the norms, attitudes and behaviours of the group. It is partly shaped by the rules a group makes, but not exclusively. For example, a group might introduce a grievance and conflict policy to encourage group members to raise issues with the whole group or the people concerned rather than complaining to their friends or simply leaving. This policy will only work if people are prepared to raise issues and they receive a constructive response when they do. In other words, it will only work if the group culture supports the policy.

We cannot simply decide what culture we want to have. But it is not totally beyond our collective control either. Individuals can help build a culture that is in line with the agreements they have made. In the case of the conflict policy, individuals could model the process with a minor issue, make an effort to ensure all sides are supported when a conflict does come up and ask direct questions if someone seems to be unhappy. The group can choose practices which help build the culture they want. For example, a 'niggles and appreciations' session as a standard item in a meeting or regular debriefs of how it is to work together can help build a culture that is more open and accepting about conflict.

### 3. Putting it into practice

The process of creating and maintaining empowering agreements and rules comes with some challenges. All the general tips on how to run effective and participatory meetings apply – see the Seeds for Change Consensus and Facilitation guides. Here, we've fleshed out some of the specific challenges of constitutionalising and included some suggestions for how to deal with them.

#### 3.1 The process of 'constitutionalising'

If rule-making is to be based on consent, the process of making and reviewing the rules and agreements needs to be genuinely participatory. This can be challenging in a number of ways: it takes time; sometimes talking a lot about how to do things is off-putting for task-focused people who want to get things done; and abstract conversations can be alienating.

Here are some concrete ideas for making the process of group forming as genuinely inclusive as possible, bearing in mind these challenges:

Take it one step at a time. Hold meetings which combine a couple of practical agenda items with one or two questions about how you want the group to work. This will help task-focused people stay engaged in the group.

Make the discussions as context-based as possible so there are more people who engage with the need to discuss the questions. For example, 'Let's have a social media presence' could be combined with 'What shall we put in the 'about us' section' (e.g. What is the group? What are our principles?)

Use concrete details (a) to make the discussion more accessible and (b) to check you aren't talking at cross-purposes. For example, when you say the community shop will promote 'local' food do you mean food from a 10 mile radius or a 100 mile radius?

If the group doesn't address every question at the very beginning, look for opportunities later. More people are likely to engage in reviewing how things work once something has gone wrong. Alternatively, schedule in discussions that you run out of time for in the beginning.

Prioritise and split-up tasks. It may be there are some things people can consent to, even if they weren't involved in drawing them up. For example, small groups could take on the task of writing one policy each, and then the whole group could suggest any fundamental changes. By contrast, everyone might want to be involved together in a question like 'What's the purpose of the group?'.

### **3.2 New members joining**

If new people join after all the agreements about the group have already been made, then there is usually much less scope for them to input into what those decisions should be. This poses some risks. The new people may experience those agreements as rules imposed from the outside and either feel resentful or simply ignore them because they never got a chance to shape them. Sometimes new members never find out about previous agreements or the reasons for them which can lead to carefully thought through systems sliding into disuse. Or the new person is only told when they've done something wrong, which is disempowering.

Bearing these challenges in mind here are a few techniques groups can use to integrate new members:

Key points can be explained at the first meeting when new people come. Whenever possible this can include an explanation of *why* the group came up with the agreement in the first place. For example: 'We use consensus decision making, which means we discuss each item till we come up with a way forward that everyone can consent to. We believe that this shows the most respect for each person involved and encourages us all into a co-operative mindset.' Giving reasons

can help new people understand and respect the group's agreements. New people can also be invited to give feedback on how the agreements work for them and told if there is the possibility of changing them.

More formal groups such as workers or housing co-ops often have an induction process and probation period to work out whether the new person and the co-op are right for each other. Of course, in this situation there is a massive power imbalance between the established members (who already have a secure job/home) and the new member who is dependent on the others deciding whether they are in or out. The relationship will be a little more balanced if the new member knows any criteria they are being judged by, how the decisions will be made and where they can go for support.

In all groups, it is good to make sure that new members know how they can suggest changes to the ways the group operates. As well as simply explaining the processes (e.g. 'This is how to put something on the agenda'), try inviting feedback. For example: 'Here are all the things we do to try to make our events accessible, do you have any tips to improve it?'; or 'Let's take 10 minutes at the end of the meeting to hear how it worked for everyone. It'd be especially good to hear from people who've joined more recently because you'll be able to see everything with fresh eyes.'

### ***3.3 Regular review of the agreements***

The agreements a group makes in the first few weeks of getting together might become less appropriate as the circumstances change and new members join. Therefore, for practical reasons as well as democratic ones, everything about a group needs to be open to review. At the same time, there are benefits to stability and groups protecting the core of what they are about.

Change is a common area of conflict in groups, because the process can be draining and/or because established members are resistant.

Respect that people sometimes have strong feelings about change on all sides. Take time to understand the reasons why a policy was originally made, as well as why people want to change it.

Instead of assuming that the existing agreement stays until everyone is ready to change it, try looking for new solutions which work for everyone. This might be neither the suggested change nor the old system but something else entirely.

Some people will find it easier to review agreements in answer to a broad question like 'How well is this group working for you'. This means they can pick the bits that are most relevant to discuss.

Alternatively, try having a rotation of areas to review as part of regular group meetings. This could mean that different topics are covered more systematically and might get better attendance than a 'let's review our policies' meeting.

### **3.4 Building an empowering culture**

Groups usually need to work on building a culture that puts their values into practice. We live in a society where power is very unevenly distributed, and power imbalances in our groups can be deeply entrenched. Prioritising empowerment in the constitutionalising process is a good start, here are a few ideas groups have tried to build a more empowering culture:

Sometime unhealthy power dynamics can shift a bit simply by varying the contexts in which group members interact. Not everyone thrives in meetings. Seeing other sides of each other can build more rounded relationships which make the meetings healthier. Try getting together to do the chores, paint a banner, construct an access ramp for the office or go to a self-defence class. Or do things just for the sake of socialising together. As with many things, variety is key because we all have very different comfort zones.

Changes in the distribution of the workload in the group may help more people feel actively involved and able to shape the group. Try regular skill-shares and buddying to make it easier for people to take on new roles; having several people involved in every influential role so no one person takes over or becomes indispensable; or rotas and jobs lists to rotate unpopular tasks.

Talking about power directly can help to identify issues, build understanding and try out new ways of working. These conversations can be uncomfortable for everyone, but there is a risk of the biggest emotional burden falling on the people who are already marginalised. People who are affected by similar issues can get together to share perspectives on how the group affects them and support each other through the process of raising issues. People who are already empowered in the group need to be ready to listen and try to understand feedback they are given. Building supportive but challenging relationships with people in a similar position can help you look after yourself without making things any harder for the person who brought the issue up with you. When looking for support from people who are also empowered, be careful not to reinforce each others' defensiveness!

Tools that groups use to shift dynamics include the practice of 'calling out' which involves challenging oppressive behaviour. 'Calling in' delivers this same challenge in a supportive way. 'Calling in' has the benefit that the person being challenged may find it easier to hear and change their behaviour. A potential drawback is that if a group encourages 'calling in' it can give the message that raising issues is only acceptable if it is done politely. It is important that people are listened to when they bring things up which directly affect them – even if other people don't like the way they say it. Politeness shouldn't be the most important thing in these conversations. People should feel able to raise issues and should be listened to even if they can't do so without being impolite. Another tool is 'Step Up, Step Back', which encourages people to reflect on the space they are taking up in the group and either put themselves forward more or take a step back accordingly. This could also

involve encouraging other people to take a step back if self-reflection isn't working.

#### **4. ... there's always a but**

Setting up and maintaining a group will always be an experiment, and one that changes all the time as people join and leave and the external circumstances shift. One of the best tools a group has is the willingness to reflect on how things are going and try out new ideas to address issues.

## 5. Further reading

*Anarchy in the USA: five years on, the legacy of Occupy Wall Street and what it can teach us in the Age of Trump*

<https://theconversation.com/anarchy-in-the-usa-five-years-on-the-legacy-of-occupy-wall-street-and-what-it-can-teach-us-in-the-age-of-trump-68452>

*Iceland's crowd-sourced constitution: hope for disillusioned voters everywhere*

<https://theconversation.com/icelands-crowd-sourced-constitution-hope-for-disillusioned-voters-everywhere-67803>

*A consensus handbook. Co-operative decision-making for activists, co-ops and communities*

<https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/handbookweb.pdf>

*Effective groups. A guide to successful group organising, from starting up groups to keeping them going*

<https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/effectivegroups.pdf>

*Facilitating meetings*

<https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/facilitationmeeting.pdf>



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