



An Executive Book Summary by Alex Robertson-Boersma

The Empowerment Manual

By Starhawk

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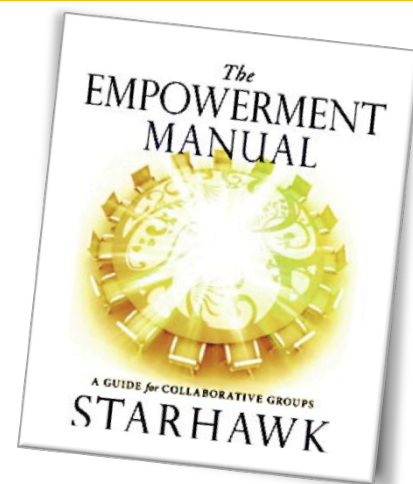
What is The Empowerment Manual about?

“It is my hope that *The Empowerment Manual*” will be helpful to those who wish to connect and conspire to build new world on a foundation of justice, harmony with nature and love for one another.” (Starhawk, 2011)

Starhawk’s goal for her book is to be a guide for anyone who wants to help their organization avoid disagreement and disillusionment. The guide dives into topics for those seeking to bring trust, accountability and responsibility through shared

power and bottom-up leadership.

The book showcases that if a group can develop cooperation, efficacy, and commitment you are more likely to succeed.



Collaborative Leadership

“Collaborative groups share power, and healthy groups assure that their members have equal opportunity to earn social power.” (Starhawk, 2011)

GROUPS

More inside!

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Summary of *The Empowerment Manual*

Have you ever been or are you currently in a collaborative group that ran into disagreement and conflict, which really harmed the group or dissolved the group completely? Or are you possibly looking at starting up a collaborative group? Then Starhawk's *The Empowerment Manual* is exactly what you need. This book guides the reader through a fictional ecovillage mired in conflict, called RootBound. Through RootBound's journey to a successful ecovillage Starhawk uses her personal expertise of working in and with collaborative groups to guide you on how to work and lead within a collaborative group.

Starhawk starts the guide off by defining what a collaborative group is and how this book can help. "Organizations exist within the mass, and groups at the center provide inspiration, direction and momentum, but there is no command structure to issue orders to protestors, no head of opposition to cut off, no leader to assassinate." (Starhawk, 2011) Collaborative groups work together as a team for a common goal.

The book then leads into the introduction of



How the Book is Structured

The book is structured in a manner to allow the reader to see all sides that make up the success of collaborative groups. Factors the book looks at are what makes collaborative groups thrive and what makes them fail.

The discussion of "equal" does not mean "identical" is explained, along with how to lead a leaderless group. The book also looks at how to embrace conflict and dealing with difficult people.

Starhawk brings in real life examples and case studies throughout the book to explain the important factors of collaborative groups.

Within the book is also a variety of experiential exercises and sets of questions and ways of working the material that go deeper than the intellectual.



About the Author

Starhawk is a committed activist for peace, global justice and the environment. She travels the globe lecturing on her passions. She has written or co-written 11 other books, including *The Last Wild Witch*, which was the winner of the Nautilus Award.

Currently Starhawk is working with Yerba Buena Production to bring her novel, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* to the screen.



Key Concepts

Throughout the book Starhawk lays out several key concepts. Each concept is presented as a chapter. This is the list of the chapters. The concepts will be described throughout the article.

1.

A New Era of Empowerment

2.

RootBound Ecovillage and the
Talisman of Healthy Community

3.

The Circle of Vision

4.

Axis of Action

- Power and Responsibility

5.

Axis of Learning

- Communication and Trust

6.

Leadership Roles for Leaderless
Groups

7.

Group Conflict

8.

Dealing With Difficult People

9.

Groups that Work

RootBound. Eli Stern and his wife Ella were looking to solve a problem the two faced as a couple and a family. They felt the loss of connection and community due to their busy lives. They came up with the idea to create a cohousing community that would bring back a sense of community and connection.

RootBound gets off to a great start, however conflict and disagreement quickly arise as the community grows. The book begins to take the reader on a journey of working through disagreement and trouble within collaborative groups. Starhawk uses real-life case studies to bring in the reader and discuss important aspects that make collaborative groups successful. The presentation of *The Talisman of Healthy Community* allows the book to begin to discuss deeper topics that make up collaborative groups. Such as Power, Responsibility, Community and Trust.

The book then begins to discuss other factors that may disrupt the groups such as, Leadership Roles for Leaderless Groups, Group Conflict, and Dealing with Difficult people. In these sections of the book examples are given through case-studies to describe how to work through these concepts. The book wraps up with discussion of Groups that Work, which talks of real true stories of successful collaborative groups.



The Talisman of Healthy Community

The Talisman of Healthy Community is a means of understanding how a collaborative group should work. It starts with a circle, which represents community. This circle contains the group's vision and core values and is called the Circle of Vision. From the circle, there are two lines, which lay within the circle.

First we have the vertical line, which represents North and South and is the Axis of Action. North is earth, solidity, and it represents responsibility. South is fire, the energy and passion and it represents power. To make a healthy group power and responsibility are balanced. Power must be earned through responsibilities.

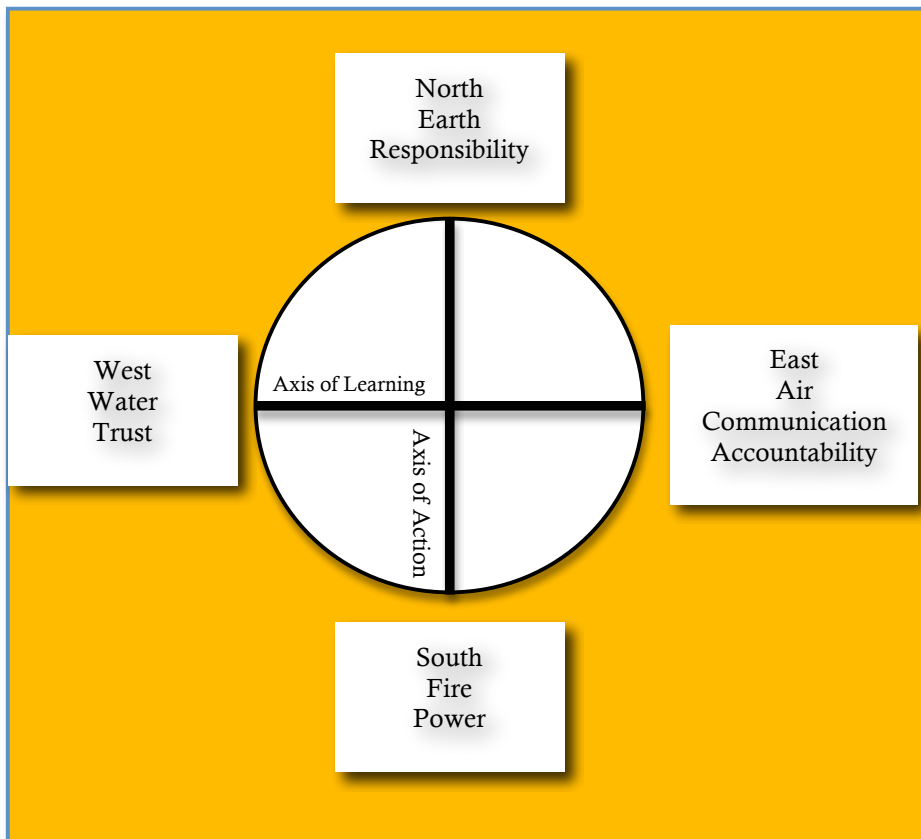
Second is the horizontal line, which crosses the first line. This is the East and West line and is called the Axis of Learning. East is air, clear sight, the mind, oversight and represents communication and accountability. West is water, emotions, feelings and this represents trust.

If you put all these components together in balance the center will generate connection, love and community and eventually it will all grow over time.

The Circle of Vision

The circle that makes up the Talisman of Healthy Community represents the community's vision and purpose. These visions will embody the values of the group and will ultimately create a common bond between members.

It is important to have a clear vision however this is not always an easy process. "As articulated vision lets prospective members know what they might be choosing to join, and it creates a standard against which your decisions can be judged." (Starhawk, 2011)



Axis of Action

Power

“Groups need fire – they need the driving energy of passion to move forward.” (Starhawk, 2011)
In collaborative groups you find a variety of forms of power. The power you see is different than what we normally see. They foster *power-from-within* or empowerment, which is a creative power. When a group has power-from-within they can develop collective power or solidarity. Even though these are the main types of power within a collaborative group, other powers such as social power and celebrity power exist. As a group you need to make sure there is an even balance of power, and that it is earned through responsibility.

Responsibility

Responsibility is both the ability and obligation to act independently and make decisions, to respond to crises and to be accountable for consequences of our actions. In order for people to take on responsibility and be trusted they must do the following, doing what we say we'll do in a competent and timely fashion,



Group Conflict

“When we embrace conflict instead of fearing and dodging it, when we apply what we know about power and communication, mediation and transformation, when we approach our disagreements in the spirit of learning and compassion, then our conflicts can actually strengthen our group.” (Starhawk, 2011)
Conflict can allow groups to become strong by working through the conflict. If issues are solved while retaining love and respect for one another, a deepening of trust will happen. It is important that when dealing with conflict we deal with it in a fair manner. We can learn and grow from even the worst conflicts.



Privilege

Groups that want to succeed in bringing equality to all members of the group, need to pay attention and be aware of their privilege over others. Things such as who speaks, how often and how long, need to be noticed to challenge the norms that get presented by society in these situations.

asking for help and guidance, passing on tasks you cannot do, making sure tasks get done by others, handling crises when they arise and planning, strategizing and looking a head.

In order for the Axis of Action to work power and responsibility need to be balanced between one another. “When power and responsibility are in balance, they create a strong axis of action.” (Starhawk, 2011).

Axis of Learning

Communication

Anyone who has been a part of any type of group knows that communication is key to success, for it is at the heart of any organization.

Communication in collaborative and co-creative groups is far more complex than in a hierarchy. In a hierarchy communication comes from the top down and presents its self like a tree, where collaborative communication is a net (this is seen in the image below). There is no clear authority to make decisions for the group decides together, as a team. When we communicate with others we need to be aware of our privilege and make sure we do not step on others toes or take on to many of the communication roles. Communication can make or break a group.

Trust

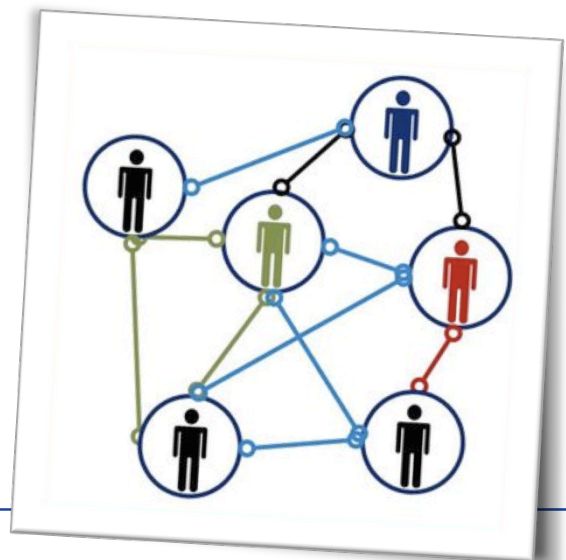
Good communication is the start to building trust in a collaborative group. “To invest trust, we need some way of knowing whether that trust is justified.” (Starhawk, 2011) Accountability is key to

Leadership Roles for Leaderless Groups

“Collaborative groups share power, and healthy groups assure that their members have equal opportunity to earn social power.” (Starhawk, 2011) If the power is not shared properly in a collaborative group it could bring resilience and conflict.

Leadership in collaborative groups is not invested in people but instead is a set of roles and functions that any one person could step into or back from. Leadership roles are earned by members of the group through dedication and the amount of responsibility they have taken on for the group. It is important that collaborative groups devote time to train and apprentice other members, for part of the leader’s job is to sense when to pass on power.

Mentoring is an important part to leadership in collaborative groups, and it is important that the leader train their successor while they are still in love with their position and they never want to give it up. For that is the best time to teach someone.





Dealing with Difficult People

Collaborative groups need to have strategies to protect themselves against difficult people. These strategies will need to take steps that are supportive of difficult people. In order to bring change to help difficult people, we need to use one of the best tools out there, being, support of one another. This can be done in a variety of ways. One way is peer coaching. This type of practice forms a bond and an opportunity to share our vulnerabilities. There is often a reason for why a person is difficult to deal with, and that is trauma and power-under. This trauma can come in varying degrees. First-degree trauma might be the assault, the pain we suffer ourselves. Second-degree trauma comes from witnessing an assault or beating. Third-degree trauma is when we hear of a traumatic incident. A group can support their members through a caring community, with active listening and emotional sharing. In turn we become healers for one another. However, in some situations it would be extremely draining on the group to help difficult people through the trauma they have suffered. In this situation it's best that the person remove themselves from the group and seek help from professionals.

building trust within collaborative groups. Since the communication is connected through a net style, members need to be accountable for transmitting and communicating with all other members to insure no one gets left out.

Trust is built in a variety of ways. Groups need to have fun together, building relationships is important and having fun with others is a great way to do that. Trust is also built in times of crisis, however crisis can also be the ultimate test of trust. It is also important that trust is built by including the spirit. This is done through sharing rituals and celebrations that honor and create opportunities to connect from the heart as well as the head.

Groups that Work

At the end of the book Starhawk gives a variety of examples of real life successful collaborative groups. Through these stories she emphasizes how if groups are successful and able to work through difficulties that arise from conflict, they can grow into strong organizations. If organizations have a strong set of ideals and values they will work as a driving force for members to organize together. What made most of these groups successful was the group's balance and unity with anatomy. There needs to be minimal structure as possible, but there does need to have enough structure that holds a unifying vision and set of core values. The beauty of collaborative groups is that they are leaderless. Instead of one head leader, everyone in a way is a leader. "And in spite of all pitfalls and frustrations, collaborative organizations allow people to band together in ways that honor core worth, the creativity and the potential in each of use." (Starhawk, 2011)

Thoughts and Possible Application of the Book

For anyone who is part of a collaborative group, or any group for that matter would benefit from reading Starhawk's *The Empowerment Manual*. The way she uses a fictional story to play out different issues a collaborative group may confront, was a great method. It allows for anyone to understand and even relate to the situation. The practical value to this book adds to the books usability. The exercises are easy to find, and easy to understand.

For people who are soon to be teachers, this book will also be of value to you. In a sense when we run a classroom we are running a collaborative group, especially when we get up to the secondary level of our education system. There is a push for teachers to be collaboratively working with their students to create the structure and goals of what the class should cover over the term. This guide fits these new and exciting concepts that several divisions are pushing. When adapted, this book could be very useful for teachers.



Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been part of a group where this information could have helped guide you through a difficult time? Explain the situation and how it could have helped.
2. Being a soon to be teacher could you see your self-adapting some of these concepts and strategies in your classroom? How would you use them and for what purpose?
3. Do you think the collaborative group model is a stronger structure then hierarchical group structure? Explain why you think either is a stronger model.



Reference

Starhawk. (2011). *the empowerment manual*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.