The Self-Organising System in more detail

How the SOS empowers rebels and enables us to operate within our principles of being based on autonomy and decentralisation, and of mitigating concentrations of power. How the system distributes power and makes decisions

- Empowering the Movement
- Organising your meetings

Empowering the Movement

XRUK's Self-Organising System (SOS)

There's a climate and ecological emergency. We can't waste time. We need to organise in the most effective way to achieve our demands, to be the most successful we can be.

So what works?

XRUK has adopted the self-organising system, because we recognise that this is the best option available to us. It empowers everyone to contribute, it enables people to work autonomously but with accountability to our Principles and Values and to each other. It allows for agility and flexibility, so we can respond to events quickly. XRUK needs empowerment and it needs flexibility.

Let's learn from those who have gone before us in other civil disobedience movements. A huge amount of research has been done, on all the major civil disobedience movements of the last 100 years. Four main principles seem to be universal:

1. We need to be large and broad based. We need many more people to join us, and when they do we will need a robust system that can absorb and empower them.
2. Non-violence is much more effective than violence. The SOS enables us to build a non-violent culture in the way we work and communicate with each other.
3. We need a large variety of non-violent methods. XR is good at being creative, different, eye-catching, and that is why so many people are drawn to us.
4. We need to be highly organised, maintain discipline, and maintain our organisational infrastructure even under pressure. This is where the SOS comes into its own.

The importance of structure

Well-known feminist Jo Freeman has written a lot about this, the tyranny of structureless groups, and how informal structures allow for informal hierarchies to develop. Small groups may be able to organise themselves effectively, but when about ten or more people are trying to organise, they need a structure. And we have to actively choose the right structure before the wrong structure chooses us.

Mitigating power

Having the right structure is important because number 7 of our Principles and Values says that we actively mitigate power. We are against hierarchical power, which we are all familiar with, from

school, from work and many other places, and it takes a change of mindset to work in a different way. We need a cultural shift. We can't swap the structural power of hierarchy for a vague idea, it simply won't work. We have to find something equally powerful to act against it. Without that, what tends to happen is that the loudest voices in a group rise to the top, and with no system, it's difficult to change that. If an unelected person is running things, people will become unhappy and start leaving the group. We have to actively work for group cohesion, because without that we will achieve nothing.

In fact we can't mitigate power. Power exists. Power exists in groups as much as anywhere else. It's power concentrated in just a few hands that's damaging, because it means everyone else is disempowered. If power is spread to everyone, that is empowerment, which is good. 'Power to the People' we say. The self-organising system is about spreading power through the whole movement, so that the people doing the work have the power to make decisions. We don't have bosses. We are all in charge, which means we have to work things out together, which can be hard sometimes, but it's worth the effort.

Autonomy and decentralisation

Number 10 of our Principles and Values is about autonomy and decentralisation. These things are at the heart of the self-organising system, and in fact we need a self-organising system in order to live according to this principle.

So how do we go about this?

What non-hierarchical options are there? We could work by consensus, where everyone has to agree to every decision. Again with a small group this can work, but with a large group it is very slow, cumbersome, laborious. With the thousands of rebels we have in XRUK as it is this clearly wouldn't work, and as we grow bigger it would obviously be daft.

Distributing power

The self-organising system works by spreading power to different roles or working groups, who can make decisions within their roles. They have complete autonomy within their roles, while being accountable to the shared purpose we have, and our principles and values. We see XRUK as a circle (The Hive), with smaller sub-circles within it (e.g. Operations circle), and yet smaller circles within those (eg Actions circle, which again breaks down into more specific roles). The nations and regions of the UK are also sub-circles of the Hive, and the local XR groups are smaller circles within them. The smallest circles communicate with the next widest circle, which communicate with the circle above them and so on. Circles within circles, each having power to fulfil their specific roles. The bigger circles set up the smaller circles, give them roles, written down as mandates or role descriptions, and give them the authority to perform their role.

Consent-based decision making

Most decisions are made within the roles or working groups, but decisions about how we organise things need to be made by the whole group. These decisions are made by **consent**. If someone

wants to set up a new role or working group, the group asks not 'Do we all like this?', but instead 'Is it safe enough to try? Will it cause harm?'. Harm, here, means that it will prevent someone fulfilling their role, or will act against the shared purpose we have. By saying 'Is it safe enough to try?' we set the bar low for proposals to get passed, and decisions can be made quickly. The person given the role can then go and work on their role with confidence, autonomy, and creativity, and be innovative. They have no power over anyone else, and no-one has power over them. Everyone knows who's doing what, which should avoid confusion and the things that need to be done falling between the cracks. If things don't work, we can change them. A role holder can ask advice from those with more expertise than them, or from people who might be affected in their roles by their decisions, but if we take the advice process too far we end up with a consensus type of working, which will slow us down.

Keeping the self-organising system healthy

Once a self-organising system is set up, it will need constant revision. Needs will change, capacity will increase or decrease, but the system is designed to adapt to change. It is fluid, evolving, and like a garden it keeps growing and we have to choose what work we're going to do in it, and how it's going to look.

Healthy Groups

Healthy ways of working lead to healthy groups, where every voice is heard. Inclusivity is important in XRUK. Groups have meetings. The way we conduct our meetings is fundamental to a well-running self-organising system. Some people feel more confident at speaking up in meetings than others, which may be to do with culture, language, personality or background. A good **facilitator** will make sure that the meeting is efficient, so as not to waste people's time (we don't have time to waste), that everyone has their say, and the meeting isn't dominated by a few people.

Groups also need good coordination, and should elect an internal **coordinator** to manage the good functioning of the group and its roles, and an external coordinator to represent the group to the next widest circle. Elections every 3 or 6 months are important, as they allow for other people to take a turn at coordination, and prevent power building up with one person.

Building a Regenerative Culture

Good facilitation and coordination mean we can have a good working culture within the group. We need to take care of each other. This means thinking of people's needs, and spending time together socially, whether in person or otherwise. This is how we build a regenerative culture in practice. We say 'culture eats strategy for breakfast'. If we don't have a healthy working culture then however good our strategy is it won't work. We work at the speed of trust.

And more...

There is much more to say about the self-organising system, and the Self-Organising Systems team in XRUK can provide training, advice, and more resources.

Find our reception channel on Mattermost or email us at xr.mandates@gmail.com.

Let's organise to be the best we can be.

Organising your meetings

These guidelines and resources are designed to help you organise your meetings and keep a record of decisions and action points. They may help you establish a routine where, at the end of each meeting, you have a set of minutes ready to go for the next meeting… because, who likes to write up minutes after a meeting?!

The guidelines include

- a suggested agenda structure for your meetings
- notes on each point in the structure
- a template that you can copy and adapt for your own use

Agenda structure

Title

Usually your Circle/Team name and the date

Quick links

Make it easy for team members to find the links they will need most frequently:

- Time, date and zoom/teleconference link for regular meeting
- Link to Comms Hub page -- so it's easy for everyone to find the team's mandate, role descriptions etc
- Review dates for role elections and policies
- Link to team's agenda template, so it is easy to copy for each meeting -- some teams put it at the bottom of the minutes document.
- Archived minutes -- if you keep the current minutes document under 50 pages it should still run quite quickly (longer documents are slow to load and scroll).

Some teams keep their quick links on a single linked page, using start.me or similar services.

Here's the SOS team links for example.

A. Assign facilitator & minute-taker

It's best to name the facilitator at the end of the previous meeting so the facilitator has ample time to prepare. Reviewing the context from the last meeting may inform how the new meeting runs. If

this hasn't been possible then before the new meeting starts, make sure that you have chosen a facilitator and a minute-taker.

It's better if the minute-taker is on a PC/Mac for ease of access rather than a phone or tablet.

If you are the minute-taker, please type into your team's minutes document.

First, record who took which roles at the meeting:

Minutes:

Facilitator:

Present:

B. Check-ins

Everyone present checks in by saying how they are feeling, or what would make it easier for them to be present in this meeting today. This could also include any barriers/things that stop people from being fully present and therefore able to absorb everything including neurodiversity, sensory or physical impairment.

If not everyone knows each other, the facilitator may remind them to state their name and preferred pronouns.

Sometimes check-ins may include each participant mentioning one thing they're grateful for.

Check-ins helps to enrich the culture, build trust, deepen relationships and prepare the ground for richer, respectful meetings.

C. Culture Reminders

As collective preparation for the meeting ahead, we generally have a reminder of how we aspire to treat ourselves and each other in our work and relationships. We have a series of reminder texts:

- Regenerative Cultures Reminders
- Vision Reminder
- empowerment reminder.

These are included in the meeting template. Please decide within your team which you would like to use. Some teams use this space to do short guided meditations or other regenerative exercises.

The facilitator of the meeting asks someone to read out the reminder or lead the experience.

D. Name the purpose of the meeting

The facilitator checks for broad consent on the purpose of the meeting:

- to go through as many agenda items as possible?
- Or get deep into one?
- Or maybe team connection is more important today?
- Or reviewing the way the circle is working?
- Or what?

E. Actions Review of the Minutes of the last meeting

To check that all oustanding action points are in hand and identify steps to deal with any that are not.

This should not develop into a discussion. The facilitator may propose that an agenda item is added for action points that are stuck and defy a quick solution, but then move on, rather than searching for a solution.

The minute-maker may strike through action points that have been resolved -- to do this quickly, select the Action Point and then (PC) press Shift+Alt+5, or (Mac) Command+Shift+X.

F. Feedback from external coordinator on wider circle meetings

To pass on anything relevant to the group's mandate that has come up at other meetings the External Coordinator has attended.

To save meeting time, the External Coordinator may write a short update into the minutes document before the meeting starts.

The the discussion need only cover any clarifications or reactions to this update. If there are none, the update is noted and the meeting moves on.

G. Feedback from link roles

Some teams have roles with a mandate to link to other teams whose work is frequently related to this team's purpose.

As with (F), the Link Roles may write a short update into the minutes document before the meeting starts, to save meeting time.

H. Project updates and reports from subgroups

Again this is not a discussion. Nor is it an opportunity to explain what's been keeping them busy -- *unless*

- they have been stuck with an issue or tension that the team may be able to help with (this issue may be added to the agenda if it cannot be resolved on the spot) or
- the project is likely to have an impact on others in the team.

Again short written project updates in advance of the meeting can help make the most of meeting time.

I. Build and work through the Agenda

In line with the purpose of the meeting (see D above), the facilitator supports the meeting in integrating and prioritising agenda items

- left over from previous meetings,
- added by participants before the meeting, and/or
- arising from E, F, G or H above.

Items can be prioritised on a scale from 1 (most urgent) to 4 (least). Normally priority 1 & 2 items need to be resolved today; priority 3 & 4 items may be held over to a future meeting without harm.

The name of the person who proposes an item for the agenda needs to be added next to their agenda item.

It really helps if the person bringing an agenda item is clear whether they are just sharing information, looking for feedback or suggestions, or asking the group to make a decision.

The facilitator may request that each agenda item is 'time-boxed', e.g. 10 mins - to avoid one item dominating the meeting. Time-boxing gives everyone an indication of whether something is taking too long in the context of the limited time available for the meeting.

As the meeting works through the agenda, the minute-taker needs to type in a summary of the discussion under each of the Agenda points. (This can be rough at first and cleaned up afterwards).

The minute-taker can stop the discussion and ask for clarification if they need to.

J. Date and time of next meeting

Before you close the meeting, always set the date and time of the next meeting and ask for a volunteer to facilitate the next meeting. This allows for ongoing group continuity. The internal coordinator of the group will set up the next meeting and inform/remind the group via Mattermost (and if still using them - Signal/WhatsApp/Telegram group chats, Basecamp etc.), and this will also inform any absent team members when the next meeting will be held. If you have a Telegram group, you can schedule messages so the reminder can be composed right after the meeting and sent later. Just hold down the send button and the option will appear.

K. Culture reminders

As with C above, the facilitator asks someone to read one of the reminder texts, included in the meeting template, to bring the meeting to a close .

L. Closing round

Closing round sharing gratitude for something that has happened in the meeting. (This can just be 1-2 words if time is short.)

M. Preparing for the next meeting

It's helpful if the minute-taker can set up the template for the next meeting. This might include

- collating the action points from the meeting into a list
- copying the blank agenda template and writing in the next meeting date in the title area
- copying the list of action points into section E
- copying any agenda items not discussed into section I