

## **Building Resilient Organizations: Toward Joy and Durable Power in a Time of Crisis Article– Discussion Guide**

Social justice organizations are in the midst of enormous upheaval and change. In his article *Building Resilient Organizations: Toward Joy and Durable Power in a Time of Crisis*, Maurice Mitchell, National Director of the Working Families Party, offers an assessment of the current dynamics within social justice organizations and pathways forward to realize “...movements that exude joy, build power, and secure critical victories for the masses of working people.”

This article is a call to action, raising the alarm about continuing along our current path and calling on each of us to learn from our mistakes and shift from a focus on problems to a focus on solutions: “*What can we learn from our errors and our attempts to correct these errors in service of sustainable solutions? How can we shift from a posture that simply analyzes the problems into one that is working to solve them?*” To do this, Maurice states:

*We must go through a humbling but necessary period of change to achieve it. We must learn how to synthesize lessons from the past and observations in the present. That means sitting in an awkward both/and place. We must call out fallacies that weaken us, even when it’s hard and we face criticism for it. And we must meet our problems with grounded solutions that are drawn from a sober assessment of the larger time, place, and conditions we find ourselves in. None of this, of course, will be easy. In fact, much of it will cause great discomfort. However, on the other side of the uncomfortable journey is an abundant, playful, and powerful home for our freedom dreams. Will we choose it?*

This Discussion Guide is intended to help organizations and the individuals within them productively grapple with the assessments and solutions offered by Maurice, and build upon them according to unique organizational experiences and needs. It’s also intended to help organizations move from discussion to action so we can collectively build the movements we so desperately need.

The Guide is organized in parallel with each of the sections in *Building Resilient Organizations*. For each section, it highlights major themes and then offers discussion questions. These aim to help individuals and discussion leaders probe the analyses presented in the article and draw out what participants think is useful for their own organizations.

## **Introduction**

The article makes the case that social justice organizations and activists need to make space to discuss tensions internal to the movement. It states, *“This essay describes the problems our movements face, identifies underlying causes, analyzes symptoms that flow from the core problems, and proposes some concrete solutions to reset our course.”* Publicly sharing internal tensions and problems comes with risks.

- What reactions do you have to Maurice Mitchell sharing his analysis in a public way? Is this article helpful to you in your work and to our movements?

## **Roots of the Crisis**

This section puts the dynamics within social justice organizations into a larger context. It pushes back against the focus on conflict between individuals and outlines the considerable external forces that influence our current experiences—including ongoing efforts to dismantle and disempower movements, the successful neoliberal project of delegitimizing institutions, the expansion of corporate and billionaire power, philanthropy’s broken funding model and scarce support for Black people, people of color, immigrants, women, queer, and gender non-conforming leaders. Context matters as it can *“allow for more compassion for our comrades as well as clarity about the urgent mandate at hand.”*

- This section is making the simple but critical point that context matters. What other external forces are impacting dynamics within social justice organizations? What external forces are specifically impacting the dynamics within your organization?
- How does it feel to place the experiences at your organization into a larger historical and global context? Does it shift your perspective or make you think differently about the pathways forward?

## **Common Trends**

This section outlines common tendencies within social justice organizations that are symptoms of the larger context in which we’re operating. It describes ten *“common tendencies that flow from the larger conditions we find ourselves in and the fallacies underlying those tendencies.”* The ten tendencies include:

- 1) Neoliberal Identity
- 2) Maximalism

- 3) Anti-Leadership Attitudes
- 4) Anti- Institutional Sentiment
- 5) Cherry Picking Arguments
- 6) Glass Houses
- 7) The Small War
- 8) Unanchored Care
- 9) Disproportionality
- 10) Activist Culture

- How do these common trends resonate with you? What feels familiar? How have you experienced, observed or perpetuated these tendencies?
- What doesn't resonate with you or feel familiar? What feels challenging and/or uncomfortable and what does that say to you?
- What trends are you experiencing that are missing from this section? Or how would you define and analyze these trends differently?
- How does naming, defining and analyzing these trends help or hurt the current dynamics within social justice organizations?

### **From Problem to Solution**

This section offers solutions to address the problems organizations face and calls on us to *“shift from a posture that simply analyzes the problems into one that is working to solve them.”* But who is responsible for these changes? Throughout this section, Maurice discusses the different kinds of leaders and leadership that will be required to tackle the problems.

- Whether you are in formal leadership or not, does the broader description of leadership resonate with you? Can you give some examples of how leadership shows up at all levels of an organization and in our movement?
- If you are an organizational leader, how does this make you think about your own leadership within your organization and across the movement? What are some challenges for leaders in collaborating across organizations? Does anything in the article inspire you to do things differently? If so, how?

- If we accept that we are all leaders in some form, are there things that came up in this article that you want to examine or change to strengthen your work?
- If you are in an organization with a working class constituency or grassroots membership base (or one that seeks to represent the working class), what are the ways in which you listen to or are led by your base? Do you agree with Maurice's point that being accountable to a working class base would help reduce some of the tendencies described in the article?

The solutions offered in the article span four dimensions—structural, ideological, strategic and emotional — and range from suggested practices, policies and structures to how individuals see themselves and relate to each other.

- Do you find the “four dimensions” categories a helpful way to approach solutions? Do they clarify anything for you? Are there some dimensions where our movement organizations/formations seem stronger? Less strong?
- What solutions resonate the most with you? What are you inspired to focus on within yourself and/or your organization? What could that focus and action around it look like in the months and years ahead?
- What solutions would you add? What's missing? What do you want to explore more deeply/learn more about for yourself and your organization? What do you need to deepen your understanding and learning?

## **A Vision of Joy, Power and Victory**

This concluding section reflects on the intentions of this article and offers a vision for what our movements can feel and look like:

*I believe our people deserve mass movements that exude joy, build power, and secure critical victories for the masses of working people. Such movements would be irresistible. People associated with these change projects would themselves exhibit liberatory values, including the practice of radical compassion and humility. They would work from a grounded understanding of power. Leaders would invite accountability, act with rigor, and speak with clarity. Problems and contradictions would be met with curiosity instead of judgment and finger pointing. Harm would be addressed with seriousness and an eye toward reparation, remediation, and healing. And we would build power with relish and let our successes and failures breed innovation.*

- What are some ways we can practice joy in our work? Do you think those practices could strengthen our movement? If so, how?
- What is the role of humility and curiosity in our work? How does it show up for you personally in the work you do? What about discomfort?
- What are some of the challenges to admitting our mistakes or changing our behavior? What are some of the rewards?
- If we addressed these problems together, would the future we are trying to build look different? How?

### **Some Additional Reading & Exercises**

- Yotam Marom, "[Moving Toward Conflict for the Sake of Good Strategy](#)." *Medium*. Jan 13, 2020.
- Bryan Mercer and Hannah Sassaman, "Embracing Conflict Didn't Tear Our Organization Apart, It Transformed Us." *Convergence*. 2022. [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).
- Daniel Martinez HoSang , LeeAnn Hall, and Libero Della Piana, "[To Tackle Racial Justice, Organizing Must Change](#)," *The Forge*. January 4, 2022.
- Joshua Kahn Russell and Michael Strom, "[Healthy Group Accountability: Learning How to Learn](#)," *Convergence*. August 6, 2021.
- Jen Disla, "[Organization for Black Struggle on Conflict: Know Your Friends From Your Enemies](#)," *Convergence*, 2022.
- "[Combat Liberalism with Olufemi Taiwo, Mindy Isser and Zachary Hershman](#)," The Dig podcast with Daniel Denvir. April 16, 2021.
- adrienne marie brown, "[Disrupting the Pattern: A Call for Love and Solidarity](#)," and [We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice](#).
- Auburn Seminary, "[Nurturing Relationships, Navigating Conflict](#)" - a 4 to 6 hour workshop (can be broken up over a few sessions)

