

**Note:** We recognize that this discussion of organizational culture is based on a non-profit paid staff model of organization. We believe there are many ways to effectively and dynamically organize and that this piece has useful contributions for a wide variety of organizing models.

## Organizational Culture

### Introduction

What is an “organizational culture”? An organizational culture is the often unwritten, undocumented practice of members in the organization which creates overall organizational practice. An organizational culture is not what is written in the personnel policy manual, in the brochure, or in the newsletter – it is the everyday functioning of the organization

What kind of organizational culture needs to exist in order to foster empowering supervision? SOUL utilizes the following principles to inform our supervision model, our attempt at answering this fundamental question.

1. People Who Care About the Work
2. Direct Communication
3. Democracy and Collectivity
4. A Developmental Orientation
5. Organizational Clarity
6. Leadership is Valued
7. Development and Growth: Both Sides of the Coin
8. Learning Orientation and Problem-Solving Approach
9. Commitment to Reflection and Criticism, Self-Criticism

Clearly, no organization can uphold these principles flawlessly. What is necessary is not a flawless upholding of these principles, but rather a commitment on the part of all staff members to understand, believe in, and strive towards them. It is important to articulate these principles when bringing in new staff members. This articulation should start before the person accepts the offer of a job to work at SOUL. New staff members must be interested in being a part of building an organization where these principles are upheld and must be willing to do their part to uphold them. All staff members, especially senior staff members and staff members who are in supervisory roles, must actively work to uphold these principles in their own personal conduct, and must actively call out violations to these principles in other staff members.

### People Who Care about the Work

An empowering supervision model does not work effectively when staff members are not invested in the work they are doing. It is true that investment is built over time, however staff members must have a baseline investment in the work they are doing to be a part of SOUL, or any movement organization. This model of support and accountability does not work with people who don't particularly desire support in their workplace and don't care to be held accountable.

SOUL is primarily a political organization; it is more than just a job. This means that SOUL is a hard-working organization where people are not just clocking-in and clocking-out and doing the minimum amount necessary to get by. We are motivated primarily by our commitment to our communities and to the struggle for liberation. There is not room in that vision for people who just want to collect a paycheck and

who don't feel invested in SOUL's role in the movement and our vision for the world. Although we are also a workplace that needs to respect employment requirements (e.g. labor laws, work accountability), our primary nature is political. SOUL must always be staffed by people who do not see their work as "just a job." We believe it is an immense privilege to get paid to build the movement and serve our communities; we don't take that privilege lightly. Staff members must understand that there will be times when they are pushed to work beyond their job description for the betterment of the organization, the staff, and the movement as a whole.

### **Direct Communication**

In order for an organization to be healthy and functional, it must be a place where staff members are encouraged to communicate with each other directly and constructively. A culture of communication between staff members about "small things" (e.g. input on curriculum or advice on how to deal with a workshop request), fosters a culture of communication about larger things (e.g. conflict between staff members, calling each other out on perpetuating oppressive behavior, etc.). In the society we live in, most of us are taught to deal with things passive-aggressively (e.g. sucking up and dealing with it), or to deal with them unproductively (e.g. talking trash). And both of these "solutions" are destructive to organizational communication and growth. Therefore, it's critical that political organizations actively work to foster open communication where people can be honest with each other and open to hearing each other.

An important method to promote this culture of communication is that staff members should always be willing to talk informally with other staff members. SOUL is an organization in which conversation and dialogue is a normal part of the daily routine, on all levels of the organization. Fostering an environment in which it is normal for staff members to sit down with each other to discuss ideas, get input, discuss challenges, and work out problems helps to create a dynamic where issues are worked out progressively instead of getting built up. At any time, any staff member can ask to sit down with a Co-Director of the organization (and vice versa), and this should not be seen as strange. This constant dialogue enables all staff members to deal with things as they come up in a productive and principled way.

Additionally, we work to promote a culture of direct communication between staff members *about* the organization. SOUL's leadership must make it clear at all times that they are willing to engage in conversations about the organization, including its weaknesses and challenges. Staff members should not – however - be under the assumption that their concerns will be immediately remedied or that the responsibility of solving organizational challenges is solely the responsibility of the organizational leadership. This leads to SOUL prioritizing building a culture of collectivity.

### **Democracy and Collectivity**

SOUL has a democratic organizational culture and collective orientation to decision-making. Although we are not a fully-functioning collective, we believe that the strongest decisions are made when we all participate in the decision-making process. Collective decision-making builds everyone's investment in the organization. We also believe that leadership is best held accountable when everyone is actively involved in

organizational processes and decision-making. Finally, participation in decision-making helps to develop all of our staff members' capacity to lead on all fronts, and not just in their particular program area.

SOUL's leadership works to set up deliberate processes to engage the whole staff in organizational decisions, balancing the importance of democracy and collective processes with the need for efficiency and the ability to continue our program work. Running an organization that values collectivity and democracy is difficult. It takes a high level of coordination and time. It takes all staff members to take the responsibility of collectivity seriously; and it takes a commitment by SOUL's leaders to allow others to help make decisions. All staff members have the authority to bring questions and concerns to the entire staff. All staff members are then also expected to participate in helping to develop solutions to organizational challenges. This will be addressed more in the later section on SOUL's Learning Orientation and Problem Solving Approach.

### **A Developmental Orientation**

Our work is centered on the belief that we need to honestly assess the current situation in the world and understand that things can change. Similarly when we see individuals, we must not only see who they are but also who they can become; this is a developmental orientation. At SOUL, we have to create a place where people can learn and ask questions. This applies to everything from learning how to use Microsoft Word to asking about neoliberalism. We have to create a place where it's all right for people to make mistakes (even big mistakes), as long as they learn from them.

Having a developmental orientation should not be mistaken with being tailist (i.e. a political orientation that doesn't challenge unproductive behaviors or beliefs, effectively "tailing" behind them); it is not an excuse to allow unprincipled or counterproductive behavior. Having a developmental orientation understands that people are in a constant process of development, that people can learn from their mistakes. It understands that there are always deeper stages of development, no matter how "developed" a staff member may already be.

### **Organizational Clarity**

It is very difficult to uphold this model of supervision in an organization that is not clear about staff roles, mission, vision, and work. Staff members, in order to do their work well, must be clear about what is expected of them, what others in the organization are doing, and how their work fits into the larger organizational mission and vision. Though it may seem obvious, every staff member should have a job description and workplan. Every program should have goals and outcomes. The organization itself should have a mission and core values.

This is not to say that there is ever an "arrival point" in the journey for clarity in an organization. As the organization, staff, and conditions in the world change, SOUL changes its staff roles, mission, vision, and work. This level of development and change is normal and necessary. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to make sure the staff member at all times is clear on role, work, mission and vision, and to remind staff of this ongoing process of development and change.

## **Leadership is Valued**

An organization that values leadership is an organization in which staff are willing to recognize the leadership of others and willing to take leadership themselves. Staff members must recognize that being a supervisor is a form of taking leadership at SOUL and that sometimes taking leadership is a scary thing. Sometimes supervisors are put in a situation where they need to make difficult interventions, hold people accountable, and raise criticism. This is a difficult role to play in an organization, especially an organization of peers. Staff members who have supervisors must be willing to actively support the leadership of others, which includes actively supporting the leadership of their supervisor.

Valuing leadership also means that people are willing to look at themselves as leaders or developing leaders – both in their program work as well as in the organization. Leadership development is a central component of empowering supervision. If the staff members are not interested in working at developing their own leadership, then one of the central goals of the supervision relationship is unattainable. Sometimes recognizing ourselves as leaders is a difficult thing, especially given that for many of us, we spend our entire lives hearing from people in authority that we are not leaders, that we are nothing. This is as much of a personal process of self-discovery as well as an organizational process, and it is the role of the supervisor to help the staff members along in that process of recognizing themselves as leaders.

## **Development and Growth: Both Sides of the Coin**

When staff members are not interested in growing and developing in the job that they have, it makes the job of the supervisor extremely difficult. This is fine for a supervisor who sees their primary role as a disciplinarian. However, when a supervisor sees their role as a person who is responsible for investing in the support and growth of a staff member, their job is attainable only if the staff member is invested in their own growth. Fostering an organizational culture in which people are interested in their development and growth also takes a willingness on the part of the organization (and the leaders of the organization) to invest in their growth.

SOUL is committed to developing the leadership of its staff members, politically and practically. SOUL's leadership must always make it clear that people's personal and political growth is important to us and that it benefits the organization. This is especially true for staff members from oppressed communities: women, people of color, working-class people, queer people and transgender people.

This leadership development takes place through the program work, supervision and staff study and through participation in organizational processes. And as staff members develop, we try to increase their formal positions of leadership in the organization. This priority needs to be balanced with the need to accomplish our program work; we do not prioritize the internal development of staff over the external development of the movement.

Staff members are expected initiate and lead the process of their own development, and SOUL is here to support them. Formal supervision meeting spaces are excellent spaces to dialogue about a staff member's development process and practice. When staff members are not interested in growing and developing in the job that they have, it makes the work of developing staff members' leadership difficult.

### **Learning Orientation and Problem-Solving Approach**

We exist within a movement culture that often sees organizational problems as spaces for destructive critique and reasons to bring organizations down. Therefore, it can feel scary to clearly recognize and confront organizational challenges. We need to overcome this fear, look clearly at our challenges, learn from them and find constructive solutions. This requires honest and constructive engagement from everyone involved: organizational leaders, staff members, and community allies. This includes supervisors and staff members.

SOUL is very clear that we are not perfect and that we are constantly learning and growing as an organization. Even when we solve one set of challenges, the new challenges of the next stage of development will arise. This shouldn't be seen as a problem, but as an opportunity to deepen the organization's work and to increase the engagement of all staff members in building the organization. Staff members are expected engage in identifying problems and challenges, communicating them in a constructive way and working actively to identify solutions to the organization's challenges. The organization's leadership is – in turn – expected to be open to feedback (whether it is to the individual leader or to the organization as a whole) and to engage in work to solve internal problems as well.

These two principles – “learning organization” and “problem-solving” - go hand-in-hand with SOUL's collective orientation. Collectivity means that the all staff members in the organization share in the triumphs and accomplishments of the organization and are expected to take responsibility for dealing with challenges in the organization.

This is particularly important in dynamics between organizational leadership and the rest of the staff. When a staff member raises a complaint or concern about the organization, it is not the sole responsibility of the supervisor to fix the problem. The role of the supervisor in that situation is to engage in a problem-solving dialogue and to strategize (together with the staff person and the staff as a whole when necessary) to think about ways to address the issue. Without a culture of collectivity, leadership can become a dumping ground for staff member concerns and create a dynamic where staff members do not have to take ownership of the organization or play a role in addressing concerns.

### **Commitment to Reflection and Criticism, Self-Criticism**

It is easy to be defensive when people give you criticism and feedback. This is in part because in many places in society, people criticize with the intention of bringing you down, as opposed of bringing you up. At SOUL, we believe that criticism is an integral part of our growth process. As an organization, we have mechanisms that allow us as an entire organization to receive feedback and criticism. We prioritize participant and facilitator evaluations in our trainings. We sponsor community input sessions, and continuously elicit feedback on our work from our allies. We use this feedback to improve our programs even while they're in process. We solicit feedback from our allies to shape and adapt our work. We believe when an organization invites feedback and criticism on a regular basis from those external to the organization, it sets a model for people internal to the organization as well.

SOUL engages in regular Criticism and Self-Criticism (C/SC) with each other – as staff members – to help us grow and develop as individuals in service of the movement. We see C/SC as an important tool and significantly different from formal supervision evaluations; C/SC is more of an exchange between political peers and comrades (regardless of formal organizational position). C/SC requires self-reflection, and it is a space where criticism is given and received reciprocally by your peers. This staff-wide C/SC is done at the end of each staff meeting, through one-on-one conversations, and more in-depth at our intensive retreats at the end of the year and additionally as needed.

We strive to make criticism a positive thing. Our intention in sharing criticism is to help build each other up – to give our co-workers positive feedback about what they do well so that they can continue to do these things well and to give them critical feedback so that they can make plans for how to improve on their weaker areas. By having a positive framework for criticism, we are able to reframe how people should feel when they receive criticism. In this framework, receiving criticism is receiving feedback from someone who cares about you and your involvement in the movement and is offering this feedback in the spirit of investing in your growth as a movement leader.

Fostering an organizational culture in which people are open to criticism is a challenge. Modeling is very important in this – if the leadership of the organization is defensive or closed when other staff offer criticism, either about their work performance or the organization as a whole, then it serves as counterproductive example and is indicative of disempowering leadership. Leaders must conduct themselves in the way that they would want staff members to conduct themselves when they receive criticism from their supervisor.

*(In the Addendums section of this manual, there are Tips to giving Constructive Feedback, in addition to How to Use Evaluation.)*

## **Conclusion**

Building a healthy organizational culture is a difficult task that must be worked at every day. At SOUL, we pride ourselves on being an organization that does good work, is welcoming to new people, is humble and open to criticism, having a staff that cares about each other, are clear about what we do and that we are always growing and evolving, and is run democratically.