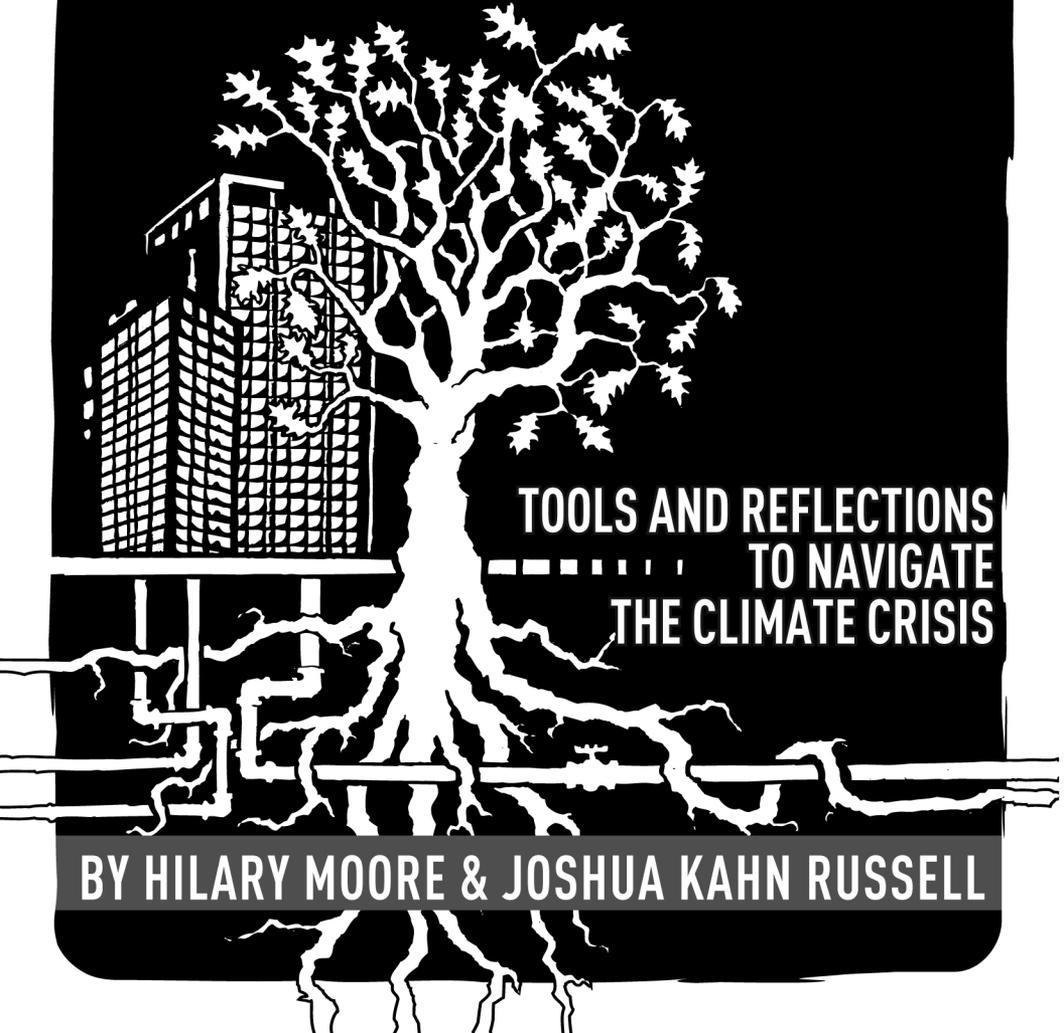


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# ORGANIZING COOLS THE PLANET



TOOLS AND REFLECTIONS  
TO NAVIGATE  
THE CLIMATE CRISIS

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## TAKING DIRECTION

Okay, so you've found your frontline and are trying to act in solidarity with a frontline community. But *who* in the community do you "take direction" from?

It's tricky. Communities do not speak from one commanding voice. They're messy and full of people who don't always agree. One way to effectively navigate these tensions is to seek guidance from political leadership. **Political leadership** can take shape in a group of people, or perhaps a few organizations that are trusted by, (and most often from and accountable to) their community.

Political leadership doesn't guarantee one "correct" answer though. For instance, a church can have just as much weight in a community that a social justice organization does, but that doesn't mean they're going to agree on a particular issue. We don't have the answer to such a predicament, but questions worth asking are: "Do we agree with this one position simply because it's an affirmation of what we already thought?" and "Is that relevant to what's actually needed?" All too often activists simply seek out groups within a community that affirm what they previously wanted to do anyway.

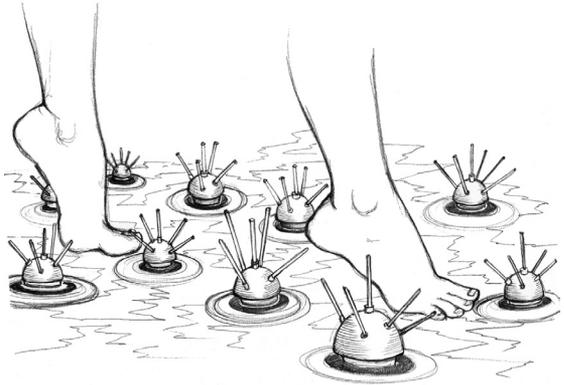


The Capitol Climate Action was a mass direct action that happened in Washington DC in 2009. It reached out "beyond the choir" to bring 4,000 people, many of whom had never been to a protest before, to sit-in at the coal-fired plant that powered the U.S. Congress. In an effort to take the wind out of its sails, Democratic Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced that the plant would be converted from coal to natural gas a week prior to the action. This was an immediate predicament for the organizers, because some in the local community that lived around the power plant wanted to declare victory, and initially thought the action could be transformed into a celebration. Yet other frontline communities across the country are suffering because of natural gas exploration and hydraulic fracturing (called "fracking"). Organizers knew that while we were doing our best to serve the priorities of the local community, we were also accountable to a larger politic and movement and had a responsibility to negotiate with the community around clarifying the demands of the symbolic national action. This particular challenge resolved itself through conversation. We put out a press release saying that our protest would continue, and Pelosi's decision validated the efficacy of our methods...but the experience illustrates common complexities of what it means to follow "the" community, particularly for those of us who often help with national and international actions. What would have happened if we couldn't resolve the issue through conversation? National and local priorities can be at odds with one another, and sometimes there aren't easy answers. Sticking to agreed-upon process is sometimes the best we can do to navigate tension.

There isn't necessarily one right answer for challenges like this. In fact, the principles and process of working for Climate Justice have taught us that the best solutions come from collaborative, shared work. Solutions are conditional to a variety of factors in the local environment. The more you get to know and understand that environment, the powers at play, and the people on all sides, the more effective you'll be. In the end, the exercise of taking direction from a community defaults to the degree to which you cultivate *accountable* organizing relationships.

## ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability means that individuals and groups are answerable to their decisions and actions. It also means that even as an individual, you are part of something larger than your own work. We usually only talk about accountability in the negative: when someone is "being unaccountable." That conversation



can feel like a field of landmines. This is why we promote *active* accountability, the kind we *want* to take responsibility for. Our good intentions can complicate accountability because, in a field of landmines, it's intimidating to take risks and to innovate. In that way, we no longer need to look at it as black-and-white being "accountable" or "unaccountable" but instead as a path we are all constantly walking as best we can.

Clayton Thomas-Muller from Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN) shares what accountability means for them when aligning with environmental non-governmental organizations: "IEN has...always tried to be very principled about how we work with non-Native organizations. One of the ways that we do this is to insist that these organizations engage with Native communities in ways that are respectful of our unique needs as Native people. We need to be sure that they are not tokenizing our community leaders in campaigns and initiatives that build the profile and power of that particular NGO instead of helping to build the power and profile of the community... We push them to develop mechanisms to make sure that the free and informed consent of Indigenous communities is respected, and to make sure to involve all community stakeholders (I hate this word but will use it for lack of a better one), including our traditional people, our hunters, our women, our youth, and not just the council governments."<sup>40</sup>

Building a practice of active accountability is a core component of *aligning your frontline*, because it can help:

- to build trust between groups that the social, political, and economic powers want to keep divided;
- to be consistent with stated and shared goals;

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40 From "Just Environmentalism?" <http://www.rabble.ca/babble/environmental-justice/just-environmentalism-interview-clayton-thomas-muller>

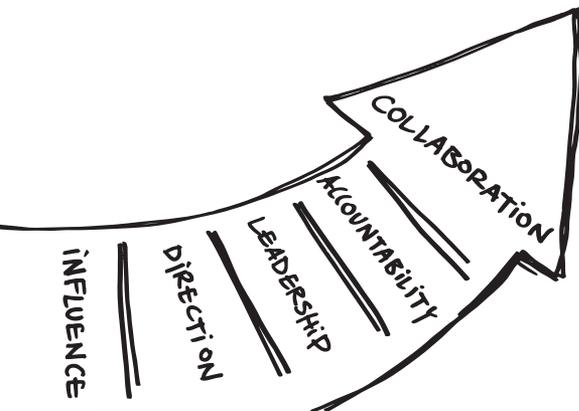
- to ensure that our actions and decisions do not exacerbate existing inequalities and injustices; and
- to build relationships that repair our social relations across difference. So often we've been socialized with destructive behaviors or ideas that undermine our ability to build collaborative social and political power.

## Principles of Accountability

Sometimes people who think of themselves as “allies” misunderstand the idea of accountability and think it means just doing what you're told. But accountability is reciprocal and cyclical, it's not something

that flows *at* you. Below are four principles necessary to working for accountability.

- **Transparency** means being clear about your politics, organizational structure, goals, desires, and even weaknesses. The point here is to be as open as possible about the perspectives and motivations we bring to begin working from the same understanding.
- **Participation** is about actively and equitably contributing especially in regards to decisions that affect people directly. Most often participation refers to the abilities to contribute to decision-making.
- **Reflection and Deliberation:** the commitment to developing the process of accountability, as it will shift and change in time and with different people. Deliberation means that every part of the accountability process is open for discussion, which account for the practices and mechanisms put in place for accountability, but also the culture and knowledge that surround accountability.
- **Response:** the ability to make amendments, adjustments to issues raised by the Reflection and Deliberation principles.



Notice that we've used a circle to represent accountability principles. More than aesthetics, it's meant to represent the fluid relationship between each piece. While we don't think there's a formula to this stuff, below, we're proposing a pathway to frame our approach to accountability:<sup>41</sup>

**Influence** means finding an organization or a form of political leadership that inspires ideas. This phase doesn't involve a

41 This section is built around a model developed by Rafter Sass of Liberation Ecology Project, with the help of fabulous contributions from Rafter.

direct relationship, or even a specific project. It's more about identifying the sources of our inspiration, our ways of looking at the world, our motivations, and our strategies. If I am starting from a point of not knowing where to look, or who to look to, for leadership and accountability, then mapping out the people, projects, and communities that are influencing me is a way to begin the conversation. This may seem basic, but it is also fundamental. This part of the work deserves discussion, because it's a necessary precondition for everything that comes after—and a perfectly legitimate place to begin! This mapping of influences can help identify missing links, as we ask ourselves: are we being influenced by the people on the frontlines? Are we being influenced by the people we're hoping to be relevant to? If that answer is *not really*, then it's time for some homework. What can we read, what can we listen to, who can we talk to? Starting from wherever we are at, we can begin to get familiar with the perspectives of the people on the frontlines, whether that's in our home community or further afield, and use that influence to guide our next moves.

Developing the ideas generated in Influence, the **Direction** phase involves getting specific about how the perspectives of frontline communities are shaping our work. Like Influence, it doesn't necessarily involve a direct relationship; it can be as simple as responding to a public call for action. By clarifying the relationship between what frontline communities are asking for, and *what we are actually doing in our frontline*, we can identify a mandate for our work. Making the commitment to identifying a mandate, in the sense of democratic authorization for our actions, and letting that mandate shape our decision-making, creates the needed foundation for forging more direct relationships later on.

Jumping off from the mandate developed in the Direction phase, **Leadership** requires *establishing* a relationship, either interpersonally or organizationally. Communication can begin to shape and guide the development of complementary perspectives and strategies. Relationships deepen that encourage participation across groups, producing work directly shaped by the identified group.

Building on the relationship formed in the Leadership phase, **Accountability** involves raising the stakes on that relationship, developing and deepening trust. Becoming answerable for our actions and getting feedback are the critical components of this phase. And through the trust we build, accountability means that the groups are beginning to share priorities, in work practices and political vision, as well as interpersonal values.

- **Collaboration** means that the partnership has developed to actively and cooperatively create original work.  
Points to take home:
- **Standard of Accountability:** Notice that accountability isn't the end goal; rather, the end goal is collaboration. This is because accountability should be a standard rather than distant objective. In this way, the pathway proposed displays the arc of collaboration among different frontlines.
- **Practice:** Take some time to honestly consider where your project or organization is located on the pathway. What necessary steps can you identify to help move toward collaboration?
- **Cumulative:** Hopefully it's obvious that working for accountability, toward collaboration focuses heavily on relationship-building. This also means that working for accountability is a cumulative process that can't be done overnight, although there might be substantial, quick actions that can be taken now.

- **Collective:** Do you know *why* you'd want to build relationships across different sectors of the movement? How does it move the work forward as a whole? What is the strategy in aligning frontlines? This question is useful to break away from the “everything is fixed by having relationships” stance.

## Obstacles We Face

Taking these ideas seriously means confronting a lot of assumptions, insecurities, and sometimes lies we tell ourselves. We also believe that each phase is going to be harder than the one before. In fact, truly collaborative work is the work of creating new sets of rules, new kinds of social relations—basically creating the world we know is possible. In our booklet feedback process, Rafter Sass from Liberation Ecology Project shared this:

Just because accountability is our watchword, and collaboration is our ultimate goal, doesn't mean that influence, direction, and leadership are second rate. Each phase of the relationship includes, builds on, and deepens the foundation created in the phase before, while it creates the conditions for what is to come. We can start wherever we're at, and feel good about our work, and at the same time keep the goals of accountability and collaboration firmly in our sights. And we have to, because at this moment in history, influence, direction, and even leadership just aren't enough. The inequality we face is so profound, and the wounds in the social fabric are so grave, that nothing less than a new way of making change is required of us. We all have to work together across the boundaries thrown up between our communities, between power-holders and those who have historically been disempowered. And before we can truly collaborate across the boundary, we've got to put in some work. Those who have been granted power by this system must become accountable to those who have not.

That's not to say that accountability and collaboration aren't possible right now. Quite the opposite! We're building pockets of this work that exist in tension with the status quo, the bigger world. Navigating that tension is part and parcel to finding and aligning your frontline. What's more, we have to find ways to translate these skills and ideas out to more people, empowering them to find what's relevant, beyond our political circles.

With that said, some of the most common obstacles within this work, that we've faced, come from being uncertain and not having space to talk about this stuff candidly. This is a goal of ours: to start talking more intentionally about what accountability *is* rather than *isn't*.

## Inactive and Active Accountability

We began this section by writing about the need for “active” accountability that we *want* to take responsibility for. Sometimes working for accountability can be a scary exercise in simply avoiding criticism, which inhibits risk-taking and stunts movement growth. In order to foster a culture of active accountability, we can build practices that avoid some of the pitfalls groups commonly trip over:

<b>Moving From Inactive to Active Accountability</b>			
<b>INACTIVE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>BRIDGE</b>	<b>ACTIVE</b>
"Tell us what to do"	A meek reaction to "taking leadership from frontline communities." Possible sources: feeling defeated or uncertain.	<b>Take yourself seriously.</b> Likely you'll feel conflicted as to what your role or contribution is to this work. This means having confidence in your skills while maintaining lightness to your seriousness.	<b>"What is our strategic political moment?"</b>
"Just trying not to step on any toes"	As long as my work doesn't make anyone mad, I can do what I want.	<b>Skill share!</b> If you're working more or less independently from collaborative projects, try exploring how your skills, if shared, could amplify collective struggles.	<b>"In our political landscape, this is what we have to leverage"</b>
The dreaded check-box	This happens when a fair amount of organizing takes place without all necessary players, and people then "check in" too late. Often, prioritizing logistics over accountability gets us here.	<b>Pump the brakes.</b> Understand that not everyone is on the same timeline and work collaboratively to meet in the middle. It's better to have a project on hold than a project that stunts existing work.	<b>"Now that we're all here, let's map out our options!"</b>