

STRATEGY

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Balancing Accountability and Grace: Introduction

by [Jennifer Disla](#) · April 14, 2022



Varied sources can guide our movements in learning how to build relationships while holding ourselves to high standards.

I've been an organizer for a long time now, and I've faced some difficult times. Sometimes the hard times have come because our work is so challenging and the opponents are ruthless. But some of the hard times come from challenges inside our movement. The movement is imperfect, and sometimes we have conflict with the people we work with. Our demands cannot wait, however. We have to keep organizing. The demands cannot take another delay. Therefore, how do we continue to build? How do we build trust in the moments of contradictions and moments of conflict?

We have some tools and teachings to turn to for how to deal with internal problems. When I was in a conflict with a comrade in 2019, I was faced with the pain of how to stay in the movement. A member of the Organization for Black Struggle gave me a copy of "[Combating Liberalism](#)" by Mao. I was amazed and inspired. Mao argues for us in the struggle to live up to principles of accountability.

The principle of accountability threads throughout the document, calling for internal and external accountability for the sake of unity. Unity isn't always agreeing or compromising; rather it's about gaining clarity on how our comrade came to their conclusions and actions. In practice, we take the space to be in principled struggle to understand, rather than gossip or alienate others.

This clarity on what may seem to be surface interpersonal relationships is core to our strategic development. As we learn to be curious with each other-, we develop our muscle for being curious about creating new paradigms of governance. Most importantly, we are building together in our most authentic forms.

'The first revolution is internal'

I am overwhelmed, for how can I live up to these principles? Most importantly, how do I hold others accountable to lean in as well? I am learning more and more that "the first revolution is internal" ([PICO Principles](#)). Today, I ground myself by remembering that in order to have good strategy, we must lean into both our own internal transformation and that of our comrades.

I also learned from [adrienne maree brown](#), who teaches us that our relationships need to be grounded in love. In her writing she calls on us to love Black women leaders. In capitalism, society tends to give grace towards the corporations and banks. For example, the government bails out large corporations when they get in trouble. But communities are left out. Workers are left out. They are not granted grace when they are in trouble. And in social justice spaces, we sometimes fight with one another and don't give grace to each other. We must get better at giving grace to one another and ourselves. But how do we balance giving each other grace with living up to and expecting high standards in the movement?

[Yotam Marom](#) also teaches us about dealing with conflict inside our movements. We cannot avoid direct conflict, or we will not grow in our organizations and as leaders. We may try to agree with everyone and reach consensus but that could mean we don't make the hard choices we need to make in order to be more strategic. He says that we have to deal with the inner emotions of those in our organizations through generative conflict. We have to say what we mean, ask follow-up questions if we sense tensions, and try to tell the truth even when it is hard.

Compassion and accountability

We must find a balance between building relationships and loving one another, and demanding higher standards of each other. Our capitalist society is deeply rooted in white supremacy and discounts Black and Brown people. It promotes individualism. We must go against this dominant system and build our collective work even in times of internal conflict. We must push ourselves and our organizations to address conflict in a collective and loving way. Can we learn to hold ourselves compassionately when we make mistakes, even while we take accountability?

How do organizations lean into these tensions? What are lessons learned and how do we move forward to continue to build movement after these moments of crisis? The upcoming series will explore these questions and many more. I will sit with leaders of organizations I respect to learn how they answer them, how they provide grace and take risks in their movement spaces.

We must continue to build the movement centered on our relationships to build a good strategy. The people-centered strategy is core to our liberatory strategy. We must rise to the internal transformation and build a community grounded in love with the application of grace.

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Jen Disla currently serves as Co-Executive Director for Detroit Action. A Center for Community Change GenChange alumna, Jen started organizing in 2008 with the Healthcare for America Now Campaign in Missouri, then went on to work as a labor organizer with SEIU Local 1, where she worked on contract campaigns in Ohio, Michigan, Missouri, and Indiana. She is a member of Organization for Black Struggle, Missouri Jobs with Justice and Missouri Immigrant and Refugee Advocates.

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