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Non-hierarchical structures: could it work for you?

Breaking down the usual power structures and responsibilities can help charities improve and achieve better results

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If I say 'collective decision-making' you might picture activists outside St Paul's taking turns to speak. And no wonder – collaborative, non-hierarchical ways of organising have recently been catapulted into the public eye through the [Occupy movement](#).

It's unsurprising that those trying to bring about a radically better world would want to break down structures of power and privilege through different ways of working. But these egalitarian approaches are spreading further than you might imagine – beyond protest groups to charities and even private sector organisations.

The new generation of entrepreneurs is less comfortable with hierarchy and more ready to embrace the creative chaos of collective working. The [Otesha Project UK](#) has spent six months transitioning to a non-hierarchical structure. From having one executive director, we've shifted into a team of five co-directors, alongside decently paid interns who have an equal say but don't take on any managerial or administrative responsibility.

So why choose this potentially risky course?

Even though we've always operated in a pretty egalitarian way, there were definite hierarchies in decision-making and responsibility. As a team, we became increasingly frustrated with the traditional structure implemented by our founding board as it didn't align closely enough with our values and ethos.

On our flagship cycle tours programme, for example, team members are taught to use consensus decision-making and rotate responsibilities, sharing leadership. At Otesha we take pride in walking the talk, so it became increasingly uncomfortable to be teaching ways of working that we weren't committed to.

We wanted to show that we value everyone's skills equally in our decision-making, governance and salary structures. Meanwhile, long hours and feeling single-handedly responsible for the organisation's success or failure was difficult for me as the founder.

Since going public with our new structure, other charities and social enterprises have been clamouring to know how it works.

The transition has allowed the whole team much greater ownership not just of their own silo but of Otesha as a whole. There's also more emphasis on learning, since every team member needs to understand our finances, evaluation methods, legal structure and everything in between to make informed decisions. It's been helpful to share the

workload, celebrate successes and talk through challenges, knowing that we all take equal responsibility for the outcome of any decision.

A word of caution, however: if you're pondering a non-hierarchical model, first take a long hard look at your values and your preferred ways of working to make sure it's what you really want.

You should avoid this route if you:

1. Don't actually want to let go of power. This might seem obvious, but it's worth having a profound self-examination. Co-operative working means those in management or leadership positions must be genuinely ready to let go of the perks of authority – being listened to without having to listen to others, expressing opinions which automatically hold more weight, being able to veto others' decisions and speaking for staff members without consulting them first.

2. Are very concerned with time. Especially while getting used to new ways of working, decision-making will take more time. Involving the whole team means planning stages will be slower and involve more discussion, questions, and exploring challenges from different angles. This results in much more thoughtful and effective results, but it takes time.

3. Are happy with how you're working now. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

If you do want to go flat, here are my tips for making it work:

1. Patience, patience, patience. As with any organisational transition, it takes time to adapt to new ways of working. And sometimes it will go wrong and need re-thinking.

2. Commitment to process. When held up against the urgent and important work of fulfilling your social mission, figuring out how meetings should be held or salary structures decided can seem like a distraction from the 'real' work. But if you don't spend time and energy on this, you won't have the systems in place to function well in the long-term.

3. Everyone on board. Everyone who matters needs to be involved from the start, and committed to investing the development time needed to ensure smooth working in future.

4. Clarify decision-making and roles. This is especially important for tricky decisions where the team just can't agree. Without a clear process there will be a tendency for some to pull rank or exercise informal influence, which leads to invisible power structures. In addition, since shared responsibility leads to blending roles, the more clarity you can embed the better – especially for administrative tasks. At Otesha, all co-directors have a core administrative role, from HR to finance to office management, which rotates every two years.

5. A team of great communicators. Prioritise team training in anything that builds communication, listening and facilitation skills. You will all need them.

6. A strategy for growth. Collaborative working is easy when teams are small. We're already starting to see the need to adapt our decision-making model for more efficiency. As we continue to grow, we'll need to find ways of sharing information and ownership without involving every single person in every single decision.

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