

Laila Gold & Taylor Kinnell

How To Prevent Burnout in an Ever-Changing Collaborative Community Through Balance and Radical Realism

NASCO Institute

2025

Before We Begin!

We want to thank you all for your attention and choice to be here. We are super excited to share this information with you! That said, our goal is to make you feel comfortable and empowered here. Please accommodate yourself as you see fit and feel free to interrupt us with questions as we go.

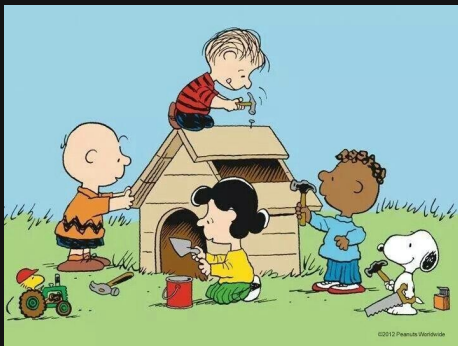
Our first section is a lengthier powerpoint and our latter feature activities and discussions. We have worked to make this as accessible as possible, and we recognize there may be needs we still need to meet.

While we did bank a break in the middle of our session, please feel free to take your own/leave the room if needed.

Thanks for coming!

- Laila & Taylor





Who are we? Why are we here?

Go-around:

- Name
- Pronouns
- Affiliation(s)
- QUESTION

← Us Working Hard at the Co-ops!

CONTENTS

SECTION A

- 1) Hierarchy & work distribution
- 2) Grounding the group & acceptance of imperfection
- 3) Communicating with clarity & kindness
- 4) Accessibility of information
- 5) Evaluations

SECTION B

- 1) Reflective journaling
- 2) Turn & talk
- 3) Modern solutions for the modern co-oper!

Hierarchy & Work Distribution

Hierarchy & work distribution

Power imbalances and hierarchies are going to exist in most contexts because of the dominant ontologies that we live in and uphold. This leads to some traits, capabilities, identities etc becoming socially valued over others. In the same way that we must recognize positionality when it comes to identity, we must also recognize positionality when it comes to factors that can influence organizations, like explicit power structures, seniority, capacity, and passion, especially as they interact with implicit identity-based hierarchies.



We both fall on the more-involved ends when it comes to our respective co-ops, so learning to be the person to communicate, delegate, and speak to hierarchy has become central to our efforts to have more balanced/equitable work distributions.

Hierarchy & Work Distribution

Hierarchy itself is **not** a bad thing. Sometimes it can help an organization to be more accountable and in larger groups, it can be useful to keep things structured. Hierarchy that is not intentional or not acknowledged, however, can easily lead to burnout and toxic (living and/or working) environments.

Two years ago, Earthfoods was cliquey and overly controlled by a senior member who held power that they were not willing to address. They made it an unkind work environment for others, abusing their power as a main holder of knowledge while manipulating other more senior co-managers to do the same. This made multiple people quit (or almost quit) the co-op.



So how do we address issues like this, before they become organization-wide conflicts?

Hierarchy & work distribution

Negative hierarchies and unnecessary power imbalances need to be consistently kept in mind. One way to do this is through communicative practice-taking the often used meeting guideline of “move up, move back” to heart.

During our All Staff meetings, Earthfoods uses stack. One way we try to address hierarchy is to rank stack, meaning that people who have spoken less will get moved up in the order of speaking. We also tally our stack. This tally (with everyone's names on it) gets sent out post-meetings as a self-reflective measure, with the goal of encouraging people to step up or back in future meetings if they deem necessary.

This requires trust in the stack-keeper and in each other. It can feel overly prescriptive, but can also be helpful, depending on your context.

Hierarchy & work distribution

Intentionally bringing typically unheard voices into the conversation more can also be helpful. This is why facilitation can be so important.

Ensuring that anyone who facilitates feels confident in their ability to make calls, assign tasks, summarize points, and run meetings without holding overly partisan affect, is important for the functioning of any group. Running meetings confidently with tasks taking the forefront while space is simultaneously made for feelings and emotions (so as to not discount them).

Try hosting a facilitation training session (there are many resources for this)!

As a facilitator, there are different strategies for getting others to participate or engage:

- Ranking stack
- Go-arounds
- Directly calling on people who have not spoken
- Checking in with people who have not spoken after meetings to see if they have thoughts they were not able to share
- Emphasizing during meetings that people should not be afraid to ask questions or share ideas even when they may be nervous to

Hierarchy & work distribution

Depending on the structure of your co-op, trying to be more intentional around equitable work distribution can help to prevent burnout. Everyone should have a stake in making the co-op function, which means having stakes in each other and the division of labor.

One way to look at this is through **committees**. Ensuring that there are not too many/few people on each committee based on the committee's need, that certain people are not on too many committees, and that tasks within committees are divided up allows a diversity of perspectives and responsibilities to emerge.

Peoples Market, for example, realized last semester that a group of 5-7 people were doing the majority of the “have-to-do” work to keep doors open. This meant that over half the co-op was still doing work, but it wasn't a fair distribution of labor nor was it creating learning opportunities for everyone. We decided that each member of the co-op would have to be on at least ONE “core” committee (like Purchasing, Payroll Management, Bookkeeping, etc) meaning that each person has a stake in keeping our doors open and running. While nobody is on a team alone, everyone is on something that contributes directly to our space being open.

Similarly, Earthfoods has implemented committee “caps,” where one person cannot be on more than three committees and everyone has to be on at least one. This allows for flexibility while keeping hours worked more even.

Another way to look at this is through **facilitation**. Many groups (including Peoples Market, Earthfoods, and A Yard & A Half) use rotating roles to conduct meetings. One week, someone will keep stack, another person will timekeep, another person will note-take, and a final person will facilitate. Each week, this rotates, to give everyone a chance to improve their different facilitative skills.



**Grounding the group &
acceptance of imperfection**

Strategies for Grounding

Having these in your back pocket and at-the-ready for utilization in meeting spaces can create a foundation for (good) change to come! Aligning people on intentional goals with specific follow-throughs is key.

★ Goal-Setting

- In the beginning of transitory periods, assist the group with intentional decision-making and a narrowed focus on what matters most. There is often more we want to do than what we can do, so focusing on equal parts passion and purpose fuels co-op spirit in different ways.

★ Sharing Stakes

- Making sure each person has jobs/work that are vital to co-op success and development, and that they are trained well enough to both do the job and ask questions.

★ Meetings and Facilitation

- Training everyone to feel confident in different roles helps lower burnout!
- How do we do this?
 - Training committee, easy access to information (more later!)

Grounding the Group

Centering ourselves before challenging or emotionally taxing discussions can be important, as it helps to unify the cooperative under a common goal, as well as help each individual feel that their voice and their listening are vital to a well-rounded discussion.

Creating space for our emotions *before* we begin discussing can help us do a couple things:

1. It allows us to be in touch with our feelings, or to “feel” the feelings before we need to start formulating thoughts.
2. It lets us begin from a clearer head and a cleaner point of view.

Grounding the group doesn't necessarily mean we are forgetting about our emotional reactions, but rather making room for them as integral parts of our discussions.



Some Top Tips!

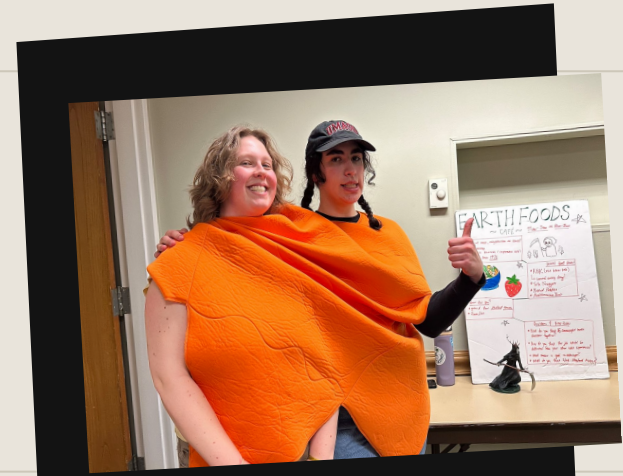
1. Adding in “Minute of Silence” before starting the meeting
2. Leading folks in breathwork
3. Including restorative practices regularly in meetings

Making the Call

You don't need to be anti-deliberation, and you do need to learn how to make a call.

The more time we spend deliberating on an agenda item, proposal or thought we are spending less time learning from a mistake or a success. Taking opportunities to learn is at the forefront of improving our cooperative atmosphere, and that often involves individuals being okay with making a decision that they are a little hesitant about from time to time.

This doesn't need to happen all the time, but co-ops as a whole can work on getting comfortable with being uncomfortable in simply trying things. If we wait forever to make the perfect decision, we'll never make one because we won't have allowed ourselves to make mistakes.



Think about it: What holds your co-op back from making key decisions? What propels you all forward in your decision making?

Making the Call Part 2!

This has often happened to me in People's Market- I'm ready (alongside a few others) to jump the gun and make a decision, while many members of my co-op are nervous about deciding something, or want to continue the deliberation.

In my experience, assuring people only gets me so far. Reminding folks that we are **allowed** and even **supposed** to make mistakes is more helpful than providing a safeguard for the future. Sometimes we don't know if the choice we make is right- but we do know our people, our spaces and our goals. If we can always remember to come back to them, we will find our places again and have better insight for our decision making!

However, that ONLY comes from trying! Dare to try and be wrong!

Harder said than
done- but we got
this!





**Communicating with clarity
& kindness**

Talking to People; It's a Thing!

Ever been nervous to bring an idea to your cooperative? Worried about how your thoughts will sound to the group? Nervous to bring something emotional or personal to the space?

●● We got you! And you got you!

●● It's always possible that someone will take what you have to say personally, or the wrong way. It happens all the time and is simply a fault of how we communicate with each other, as well as being imperfect people.

●● While sharing intention can *sometimes* shed light on the conversation or situation, it **rarely** makes a difference when it comes to what is actually said, heard and felt. How do we change this?

Communicating, a 2-step Dance

- ★ Step 1: Clarity
 - When you have a message to share think about how you will deliver it. Speaking about something tricky, emotionally distressing or difficult is **not** harmful. It's important for people to get the facts.
 - Do you know what you want to communicate?
 - Have you written it down?
 - How will you share this? When and where?
 - Who needs to be present for sharing?
- ★ Remember! It's good to keep people in the know about happenings in your co-op and the community at large. Share information with confidence.



Communicating, a 2-step Dance

★ Step 2: Kindness

- After thinking critically about what you want to say, THEN think about the delivery. We can only make statements we feel good about when we are in clear headspaces. Think about the following:
 - Have I made time to process my emotions before delivery?
 - Do I need someone else to help me speak on this?
 - How can I make sure I am delivering this efficiently?
 - How much time/Do I need time for other's input/voices?
 - This is often a big **YES!** in our spaces but doesn't *need* to be present in every single discuss

- ★ Remember! Delivering information once you feel confident and have processed things helps us share things with clearer heads & kind hearts.

Essential Steps

1. **Write down** what you want to say before you say it. This can help you flush out your ideas before you get going and get any thoughts that you maybe don't want to say outright out of the way. Once you get down your idea, you can be attentive to the speaker and practice being an active listener!
2. **Remember** who your audience is. These are people who have come together to join in this type of work/housing function with a goal, just like you. Though you may not know everyone as well as you'd like to, being mindful of their place in the space can help you realign what you want to share with them.
3. **Clarity + Kindness** are the top two tools for communication. Share what you need to clearly. Don't sugar-coat or beat around the bush. Do so in a way that is respectful and kind. This can sometimes be very hard, so we have provided some extra steps + examples!



Accessibility of Information

Accessibility

As a new member of a cooperative, there can be a lot of issues that come up. Some people aren't as familiar with the people-over-profit and participatory mindset that many co-ops employ and in some co-ops (particularly worker co-ops), it is necessary to participate in capitalist economic structures that work extra hard to keep people in loops of "productivity." This causes more senior members to have to perform more labor in times of mass onboarding- both in running the cooperative and in training others to be able to do the same. For this reason, making information accessible, while also avoiding burnout, is a lot easier said than done.

Other issues of (in)accessibility can come up too, especially when it comes to physical, mental, and linguistic ability.

- *If your housing co-op is not physically accessible, how is a wheelchair user or someone with a physical injury supposed to feel/be included?*
- *If your (US-based) consumer co-op that seeks to provide support for migrant families only uses English to communicate, how can non-English speakers be actually supported?*
- *If your worker co-op intends to provide livable wages for workers and don't review its pay regularly, is the intention really effective?*

Surfacing these types of questions of accessibility is necessary for the longevity of a cooperative.

Linguistic Accessibility

At A Yard & A Half, language barriers have created power imbalances over time which has caused some members to feel disempowered and have an increased lack of knowledge or access to knowledge.. Because certain members had to focus on interpreting between speakers of different languages while also participating in the work, burnout and frustration became a lot more common.

But because of the role I held, I was able to focus on making things more accessible to all members:

- Hiring interpreters for meetings and General Assemblies
- Making all documents bilingual, including the co-op bylaws, employee handbook, and all agendas
- Encouraging skill sharing and communication, despite language differences
- PATIENCE

Passing on Info

At Earthfoods and Peoples Market, there is a lot of turnover because they are student-run, so there has to be a frequent emphasis on training. This frequently leads to more senior members (ourselves included) experiencing burnout more quickly, which also contributes to information not always making its way to everyone.

In A Yard & A Half, the pre-existing burnout led to certain documents (such as the Employee Handbook) not being updated, which led to more disparities in knowledge levels.

This is why it is so important to write things down and to keep any fundamental documents updated as frequently as possible. Making things readable/digestible and findable is key.

- **A frequent sentiment in Earthfoods: “If all 15 co-managers at Earthfoods Cafe quit right now, another group of people should be able to read all of our documents and training information, and should be able to restart the business.”**
- Even taking handwritten notes and transcribing them (translating, copying, taking pictures and uploading, etc) into digital records is always more helpful than you may think!
- To do lists and “follow throughs” also help to keep people on track. Our dedication to each other can be enough to keep us accountable, but other forms of accountability (like HR committee structures) are often necessary too.



Evaluating Our Spaces

Evals!! (Evaluations)

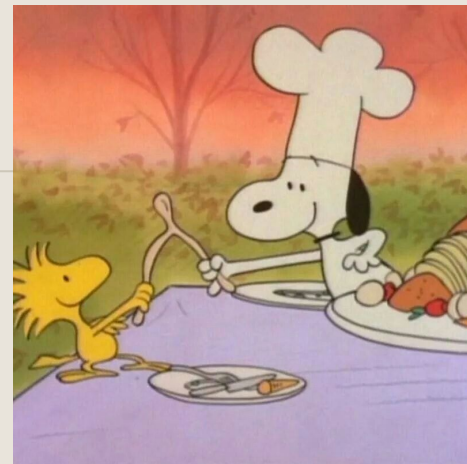
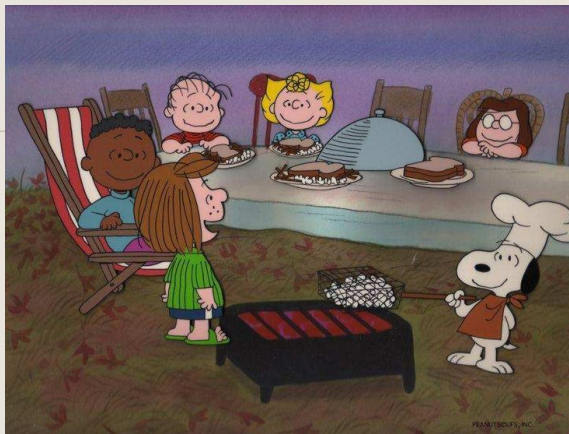
Something that the UMass Student Co-Ops do during the middle or at the end of each semester is Evaluations or “Evals” for short. These can be seen as retreats or as extended All-Staff meetings that last between 2-4 hours. They feature things like:

- Workshops on topics important to the business
- Extended “get-to-know” each other, “opening go arounds” to gauge how everyone’s semester was
 - This will be where people talk about things outside of their work, like school, health, other jobs, etc.
- Self-reflection circles, peer reflection, and committee reflection circles
- Journaling, meditation or helpful healing practices!
- Fun bonding activities and games!

A Few Examples of Evals Topics:

- ★ Food Sovereignty and Access to Natural Foods
- ★ Sharing Work Responsibilities and Task Delegation
- ★ Creating new Committees
- ★ Yoga Workshop
- ★ Reforming All-Staff Practices

Steps for a Successful Evals



1. Talk to your co-op about why this is helpful. What are the benefits for the members and for the group?
2. Think big when it comes to restorative workshops, presentations or games.
3. Be creative and lean into the “play” that this space can provide you!
4. Center your Evals around something your co-op needs: Rest, Connection, Information sharing, a larger discussion, etc.

Evals Workshop > To the Now

At our last Evals, People's Market HR committee proposed changing our method of record keeping when it came to our accountability system. We came to a conclusion to have functional systems in place for improving co-manager relationships and encouraging people to be honest (and clear) in "dotting" each other.

In the past, our "dots" and "stars" had gone unnoticed as there wasn't much of a plan to work on improvement unless someone's behavior got extremely detrimental.

Moving forward, we now track these regularly as a function of our HR committee. A certain number of "dots" results in connection check-ins to make sure our folks are doing okay, and see if any assistance is needed.

For context:

A "dot" (People's) or "bug" (Earthfoods) is used when someone didn't complete a task or responsibility.

A "star" or "fruit" is what we use to highlight people going above their normal responsibilities or taking on additional tasks.

Ok..Break Time!



Thank you for your attention! Let's take a 5 minute break, use the restroom, get water, do the macarena and then we'll come back together for a few activities!

Journaling

Let's do some reflective journaling on a few topics we covered. We'll go through a few questions and then share with a buddy.

We'll give a heads-up when it's time to move to the next one, but please take the time you need to wrap up your thoughts.

Journaling Questions

2 minutes each

1. What contributes to your feeling of true balance within your collective?
What makes you feel heard/safe/empowered?
2. What skill have you most benefited from learning that you did not initially anticipate learning upon your time in your co-op? What skills do you feel you or others could stand to learn for the long-term benefit of your co-op?
3. What roles do you hold within your co-op? What struggles (if any!) come with these roles?



**Turn + Talk to a neighbor for 5
minutes about your answers!**



Modern Solutions for a Modern Co-oper & A Co-Op Toolbox

Tools-To-Go

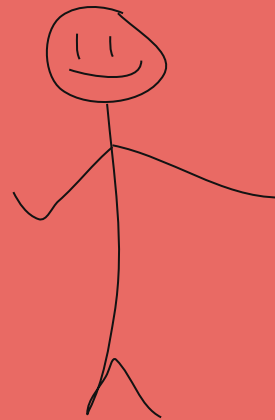
Phew- that was a lot of info! To give you some solutions to take back to your spaces we'll do an activity to create personalized "resource toolboxes" y'all can take with you.

Please take as many as you would like!

Co-Op Toolboxes!

1. Grab a "toolbox" from the pile
2. Take the resource cards you feel are most useful to you (or take them all if you're a paper-lover!)
3. As we were sharing as a group, Laila and I documented some phrases or tools from y'all! Take a few blank cards to add those, or your own!
4. Decorate your toolbox! Have fun!!

Thanks for joining us!



You



Us