

# Wildfire Project 2022 Lessons from Practice



This year a number of our lessons had to do with decision-making—specifically the ways that decision-making is not just a logical and linear process, but a relational, embodied, and emotional one.

Our friends at [Training for Change](#) introduced us to a framework that’s deeply shaped how we understand and design meetings and workshops. Currently, they call this framework **curriculum-centered vs people-centered** design. In the past they’ve called it **logical vs. psychological** design. From their [materials](#):

*When putting together a workshop or meeting, there is much to consider. One consideration is the curriculum: does the content of each activity build on the previous in logical ways? Another is the people and their knowledge, situation, and preparation: does the design respond to the psychological needs of the participants in order to access the content?*

*These are different design approaches and sometimes compete. The field of “curriculum developers” trend towards highly curriculum-centered, building from one core competency to another. However, these designs fail if they do not account for people’s psychology.*

*...*

*[The people-centered approach] thinks about the questions: How do people think and work? How do they make decisions? What would get in this group’s way? What sets them into the right tone for this session?*

This year deepened our understanding and application of people-centered, psychologically grounded decision-making.

## Some of our top-line lessons on people-centered/psychologically grounded decision-making:

- In any decision-making process (any conversation at all, actually), there are least two levels playing out:
  - the words being said, the explicit content of the conversation (what's being said)
  - the emotional and embodied experience of the conversation (what's being felt)
- Our relational needs, the states of our nervous systems, our deeply held beliefs and contexts shape every decision-making conversation we have. The more we account for this, the better (more effective, good-feeling, connected) our decision-making processes become.
- Some examples of psychological needs that bubble up in decision-making:
  - Do I feel like my input on this decision matters/will be considered?
  - Do I have a meaningful place in the goals/strategy/structure we're deciding on?
  - Do I understand what we're discussing? Do I have the full context and considerations?
  - Does it feel like I'll be less valuable to this group if I don't understand?
  - Do I feel like I'll be less valuable to this group if I disagree? Do I think the group can hold my disagreement?
  - Do I trust the group to carry out/implement this decision?
  - Do I need to try and preempt certain difficult group dynamics?
  - Do the people I think are the most important stakeholders have a place in this decision?
  - Do we/I have capacity for this?
  - Will this cause division within the group?
- Whenever an org debates goals, strategy, or any kind of proposal—even basic structure proposals—they will take longer than a logical, curriculum-centered agenda allows. This is because psychological needs always set the pace of decision-making. The most effective decision-making designs account for those psychological needs directly. They are rarely expressed directly unless space is made.
- The bigger/higher stakes a decision is for the life of the group, the more the psychological/emotional needs of group members will emerge to be engaged.

In addition to these top-line lessons, we had two more specific domains of lessons on this topic:

1. Regulation before negotiation
2. Iteration supports alignment

## 1. Co-regulation before negotiation

By (co)regulation, we're referring to emotional regulation, or our capacity to collectively feel, respond to, and move through our emotions and aliveness. We recognize that the word "regulation" sometimes carries connotations of control or bypass, and, at the risk of oversimplifying some significant psychological complexity, want to focus this point on one question/metric:

As we move through this decision-making process, is a majority of the group feeling emotionally safe and connected (regulated) or emotionally unsafe, disconnected, and scanning for threat (dysregulated)?

It can be surprisingly easy to skip over this question, ignore feelings of disconnection or scanning for threat, and assume it's just "the way it is" or not something we have any power over.

But the truth is that when our nervous systems are feeling emotionally unsafe, disconnected, and vigilantly scanning for threats, our decision-making is oriented toward immediate survival (even if our "logical" brains know we're not in danger). We are not well-positioned to make long-term, values-aligned decisions when we're dysregulated.

Our important decisions deserve the time, practice, and attention it takes to return to a sense of emotional safety and connectedness—a state from which we can deeply access and embody our values.

Ideally, we recognize the need for this work from the beginning and incorporate it into our decision-making processes—specifically for higher stakes decisions. Some practices that support us to co-regulate our way back to emotional safety and connectedness:

- Giving the process more time, spaciousness, and pauses/breaks than you think you'll need; urgency can breed disconnection
- Making room for playfulness, laughter, and creative collaboration (jokes, skits, games, dancing, singing, healthy competition, collective art-making)
- High-ranking people taking risks to be vulnerable and invite vulnerability from others, specifically when the group leaves with the belief "we can hold vulnerability"
- Incorporating big-picture values and vision (ritual, generational history, ancestors, descendents)
- Time with the land/nature
- Embodied practice (breath, stretching, physical games, singing, somatic practice)

- Skilled outside facilitation that can provide grounded perspective and pathways through strong emotion

As we named above, the higher stakes the decision, the likelier the groups will need to work through activation/dysregulation. Some specific kinds of decisions that often require this kind of attention:

- Leadership transitions, hiring and firing
- Major scaling up or down of work
- Ending a significant campaign or program
- Responding to public critique
- Deciding to work a conflict/tension that has been building over months or years

We recognize that taking the time to regulate together isn't possible for every moment, process, or group member. Some decisions can't be slowed down. Sometimes feeling threatened or disconnected is an appropriate response to what's happening in the room. Sometimes group members need more focused, individual support building regulation skills than is appropriate for the org to provide.

Without proposing a one-size-fits-all solution, we'd like to imagine a future where our movement organizations are clear that when we're able to bring our whole, emotional, embodied selves to big decisions, we make better decisions. Where regulation skills feel practiced, like second nature.

As these skills become successfully embodied, they offer us increasing levels of resilience and healing. Over time, bit by bit, an org with solid co-regulation practices will come to understand itself as a group that can make hard decisions, move through big emotions, and stay aligned with its vision and values. The range of what feels "too hard" will get smaller, and the group will know itself as capable and resilient.

## 2. Iteration supports alignment

A curriculum-centered approach often imagines goal-setting and strategic planning conversations as happening in discrete strategy sessions and moving in a straight line from start to finish.

People-centered design usually asks for a different shape. We've been experimenting with iterative goal setting and strategizing, meaning sessions that return to the same content multiple times, building in new insights and deeper alignment with each pass. We can

imagine iterative decision-making processes as moving in upward spirals instead of straight lines.

This might look like

- Designing a spacious agenda that spreads goals and strategy across multiple sessions, expecting emotional/relational needs to bubble up before we're able to land a decision
- Start the strategizing/decision-making conversation
- Tending to the underlying needs and values shaping the group's ability to strategize
- Return to the initial questions with new insight and deeper clarity
- Repeat this cycle until there's enough alignment to move forward

Here's an example of how the above played out with actual content for a group who asked us to support their strategy work.

- Spacious Agenda: We designed a spacious agenda, leaving entire sessions open for unplanned, emergent work.
- Intro Strategy: We started by introducing strategy tools and frameworks, and began to get on the same page about what good strategy is and isn't. Here we started to see the very beginnings of strategic alignment and divergence.
- Explore Rank: Next we pivoted into an activity exploring rank, leadership, and power dynamics within the group. As we supported the group to directly name its patterns and dynamics, the authenticity felt both buoying ("we can talk about hard things!") and uncomfortable ("there are still more hard things to talk about."). They were able to get a little bit of generative conflict practice under their belts.
- Apply Strategy: From there, we returned to strategy work, applying the tools and frameworks from the first session to their org's actual strategy, encouraging them to lean into conflict where it would support good strategy.
- Rank Erupts! Unsurprisingly, the rank and leadership dynamics surfaced in real-time, in the context of their live strategy tensions. We'd already aligned on frameworks/language about strategy and rank, established the importance of generative conflict, and even gotten a little conflict practice. Because of this, we were able to do some very deep, breakthrough work around those rank dynamics.
- Post-Storm Clarity: On the other side of the conflict, feeling the post-storm clarity, connectedness, and authenticity, the group was able to return to their strategy with a new level of ease and effectiveness. They were able to make some difficult decisions in grounded ways and leave feeling both more strategically aligned and relationally on the same team than they arrived.

**Some things that interactive decision-making makes room for**

### Deeper Needs Emerge

As we said above, psychological needs will set the pace of decision-making, whether we make room for them or not. We strive for agendas that recognize this and invite them into the conversation. Often, this adds new layers of depth, nuance, and buy-in.

As we move through a decision-making process and encounter an indicator that psychological/relational needs are showing up to be tended to (strong emotion, stuckness, stagnance, checking out, etc.) we ask “What is this person trying to take care of?” What is the larger concern underneath a specific contribution/intervention?

If we invite people to name what they’re trying to take care of through their contribution, a few options emerge: allowing them to name it so that they feel expressed and then move on, working their concern directly into the decision-making, or identifying the appropriate place for it to be figured out.

This orientation is a gateway into deeper awareness, choice, and effectiveness around psychological needs in decision-making.

### Testing Alignment → Deeper Alignment

Tested alignment is deeper and sturdier than untested alignment. Instead of a linear or abstract strategy session, iterative decision-making creates an abundance of opportunities to come at a decision from multiple angles and perspectives.

People are given the chance to bring what they’re taking care of into the conversation. We get to sit with questions like: Have people had space to really name and wrestle with what they don't understand? Do we actually have a clear picture of where the group stands on this issue? Have group members imagined themselves inside the strategy, implementing it? Have they applied or compared to other strategy touchpoints in their lives/experience?

The more opportunities a group has to test a strategy/decision and find themselves inside it, the more likely they will be to own and implement that strategy/decision.

### Post-Storm Clarity & Effectiveness

After a “storm,” or moment of group conflict, feelings of connectedness, authenticity, resilience, and clarity often emerge. The more well-held the conflict has been, the truer this is.

When people get to name what they're trying to take care of and meaningfully integrate that into a decision-making conversation, they're more likely to feel seen and taken care of by the group.

Because of this, we often find that previously laborious and strained decisions can happen remarkably quickly. Time taken earlier in the agenda to explore underlying needs and values yields both greater effectiveness and good feelings by the agenda's end.

### 3. Creativity requires parameters.

Another example of a potentially surprising psychological need is solid parameters.

Sometimes, particularly in justice-seeking groups, we notice a trend of starting a conversation with a "blank slate" approach, even if several people have put a lot of time and thought into the topic. Leadership might have already spent several hours discussing a proposal but feel afraid of taking up too much space, standing in their power, or negatively influencing the group's decision (see last year's Lessons on Rank for more about reluctant leadership specifically). This often has the opposite of the intended effect. It can feel ineffective or unclear at best and inauthentic or coddling at worst.

The (sometimes surprising) truth is that parameters increase creativity. A blank slate can counterintuitively be the worst condition for creativity. When anything is on the table, everything can feel hard. If you've put a lot of time and thought into a decision, it's actually a gift to the group to catch them up to your level of depth and invite them into a clear, specific decision with you.

Good agenda parameters start by making a grounded assessment of what a group most needs to discuss. From there, we eliminate whatever fluff we can. Some examples;

- Taking the time to make precise, thoughtful questions/prompts
- Presenting clear options for discussion and debate instead of beginning with a blank slate
- After a brainstorm, having small groups that will turn the brainstorm into clear proposals (as opposed to expecting a large, full-group to wade through that level of detail)
- Being clear on who specifically makes what decision (for example: this a consultation space, the coordinating committee will make a final decision)
- If something is off the table, being clear about that from the beginning
- Identifying what's irrelevant for a given discussion and/or already in alignment and taking that content off the table
- Naming expertise or hours of thought/consideration

In general, a group's sense of itself as capable, creative, and effective will increase when the right parameters have been set.

A group will also show you when it doesn't have the parameters it needs:

- A sense of overwhelm, like the conversation/decision is too big
- Frequent off-topic or random contributions and questions; confusion
- Going in circles without feeling like we're getting anywhere
- A feeling that things are taking much more time and labor than they should