Cultivating Cooperative Culture in Community

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The culture of individualism we've been steeped in does not prepare us for living in community. We want a culture of cooperation and caring, but our hopes and dreams run counter to our training. This session will look at how cooperative groups can address the culture they want to leave behind and foster the culture they want.

Intro

Hey everyone, my name is Sky Blue.
Been involved with intentional community for over 20 years. My recent high profile stint was spending 4 years as Executive Director of the FIC
Currently living at VOV, which my father helped found.
I spent 14 years in two chunks at Twin Oaks, a large rural income sharing community in Virginia. Chavez, Tryon, Woodfolk in Charlottesville where I also spent time on cooperative businesses and community organizing as well as helped start Ecovillage Charlottesville, visited over 130 in US and Europe

> ***Exercise***: *Type into the chat the name and location of your community so we can see where we're all coming together from.*

A bit more on the technology here. There's going to be one other time that I'll invite you all the type things in the chat, and you can of course type in the chat anytime.

Also, there's going to be a few places where I'm going to ask for sharing. How I want to do this is when I ask for sharing, click on the raise your hand icon next to your name, and Neil will call on people and unmute them.

Even though we're in this virtual environment I want you to take a moment to think about the X people on this call from communities all over the place and feel a sense of connection. Here we are sharing and learning with each other out of our love for our communities and this movement.

Cultivating cooperative culture

First off, what the heck do we mean by culture? This may seem a bit wonky, but in an effort to help create a shared understanding of what we're working on here, here's what wikipedia has to say.

Culture (/ˈkʌltʃər/) *is an umbrella term which encompasses the* social behavior *and* norms *found in* human societies, *as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in these groups.*[1]

Humans acquire culture through the learning *processes of* enculturation *and* socialization, *which is shown by the diversity of cultures across societies.*

A cultural norm *codifies acceptable conduct in society; it serves as a guideline for behavior, dress, language, and demeanor in a situation, which serves as a template for expectations in a social group.*

So then what do we mean by Cooperative Culture. Cooperative culture is a term FIC used for a while, and here's one definition we've used.

> **Cooperative Culture:** *The sum of attitudes, customs, and beliefs among people that are characterized by sharing, empathy, self-responsibility, understanding and celebration of differences, peaceful conflict resolution, high regard for connection and relationship, interdependence, and care for how things are done as much as what gets done.*

It's the air we breathe. It's what we take for granted, what we assume, it's the way things are. So how do you go about bringing it into awareness and be intentional about what kind of culture you're cultivating. And if culture is something learned, then what do we do with everything that we've already learned that might be counter to what we're trying to create.

There's a very personal aspect of choice to this. I have to decide that "what is" isn't working for me, believe that something else is possible, create a vision for what that might be, and then have the capacity to take action to bring that into being.

And then there's the collective aspect of this. Culture is very much a function of groups of people. If culture defines what is acceptable there has to be at least tacit agreement about what

is acceptable. If we want to **change** culture there has to be explicit collective agreement about what we want to be different.

And the personal and collective aspects are two sides of the same coin, because if we want to change cultures there's a degree to which we have to become aware of our culture both personally and collectively, be explicit about how we want it to be different, each of us choosing to take that on, and actively reinforce those changes over time.

Personally, I would sum up cooperative culture as moving from a culture of individualism to a culture of interdependence. Rather than the focus being on how I navigate and negotiate in order to meet my own needs compromising where I have to, the shift is for me to see all our needs as being inextricably intertwined and recognize the impacts our actions have on each other.

> **Exercise**: Type into the chat some words that characterize cooperative culture for you. Now type into the chat some words that characterize the culture we're moving away from by living in community.

To editorialize a little, I find it fascinating and ironic that in this society that's taken this experiment in individualism to an extreme, we've created such a complicated and specialized society that we're more dependent on each other than ever, while still pretending like we're all independent individuals. And with the number of people we have on the planet consuming the resources we are, climate change and little things like viruses are showing us just how dependent and connected we really are. Not that we don't have individual needs. We are individual organisms having an individual experience. We need to eat when we're hungry, sleep when we're tired, etc. And we're social animals, human nature has as much to do with how we are in groups as how we are as individuals. Cooperative culture is about integrating these individual and collective experiences and perspectives and being together in a way that reflects that, and I think that's what community is all about.

Before we get into specifics, a disclaimer. What I'm presenting here are general ideas that can look lots of different ways. I'm not so much saying what to do as I'm offering a way to think about this. A best practice for one community won't necessarily work in another, or will need to be tailored. So as I'm sharing this see if it helps you think about your community or particular situations in new ways.

I also think it's good to be clear that cooperative culture is not some monolithic thing that's going to look exactly the same in each group. Some groups are going to have a more formal culture, others more informal. Some are going to be more driven, some more relaxed. Some very warm and fuzzy, others more reserved. Some super tidy, others more tolerant of mess. It doesn't mean one is cooperative and another isn't. Your cooperative culture is still going to be a unique

expression of your community, and it's more about it being the culture that you're creating together, whatever it looks like.

Okay, let's get into the areas of community where culture manifests. And after each section I'll be asking for some sharing, so think about whether something that's coming up for you is something you want to share about.

Purpose and Values

Most groups have statements that articulate vision, mission, purpose, values. This is a foundational aspect of creating culture. I think about the opening words of a certain document, "we hold these truths to be self-evident." What do we believe? What are we doing together? What's our reason for being? We have an opportunity with our Bylaws, Operating Agreements, HOA and membership agreements to create a shared understanding of how we want to be together.

The process of crafting them in itself is a practice of cooperative culture.

Even if your basic reason for creating and living in cohousing together is simply to be good neighbors, well what does that mean?

Of course a lot of times these documents get created, filed away, and aren't really referenced unless there's a conflict and people are trying to use them against each other. The opportunity is to have them be living documents, things that you think about and reference on an ongoing basis. They can also be crucial in inculturating new people joining the community.

Posting statements in your common house that have been lovingly and thoughtfully crafted, maybe in a beautiful and artistic way can be a good way to help keep them present.

They can also be revisited when disagreements arise, but the key again is not to use them against each other, but to take an approach where you say, oh, we clearly have a different understanding about what this value means, let's explore that.

> **Sharing**: *Someone share an example or experience of well crafted statements that helped foster or support the culture of a community?*

Governance, decision-making, communication

This is a big area, and I'm going to go into more detail here than others, because I think how this stuff is done says a lot about the culture of your group, and is also pretty core in fostering or impeding your efforts to create the culture you want.

This is an area that has a lot to do with structure, but I would say that structure and culture are also two sides of the same coin. When groups are dealing with issues it can be useful to look at how the culture and structures are interacting or reinforcing each other, for better or worse.

For example, *participation* is a common issue, as in, differing levels or low levels of participation. The inclination is often towards a structural fix, change the policy, make it more detailed, create new expectations, accountability systems. And these can be good things that may well be what's called for. But I also look for underlying cultural issues, and whether or not the structures being proposed are in alignment with the culture of the group. This can be challenging because part of what's going on might be some misalignment about what people want the culture to be. There be interpersonal tensions or conflicts at play, which maybe have been simmering unaddressed for a long time. But if you don't do the work of addressing that stuff you run the risk of new structures or changes not being followed or adopted properly and just exacerbating rifts or conflicts in the community.

I see a tendency in communities to make things more complicated than they need to be and that people really have the capacity to deal with. This can show up in trying to craft policies, trying to control for all the contingencies and variables and accommodate all the concerns about specific hypotheticals. Consider simple guidelines within a clear process for addressing actual issues as they arise.

It can also show up in governance structures, with lots of committees and roles, which can create the need for a lot of formalized protocols that can be cumbersome and time consuming, especially for people with busy lives. Again, not that these kinds of structures are bad. They can make sure that there's accessibility and transparency in any decision-making process, which is essential for people to trust that things are happening in a good way. But I think the problem comes when groups try to make up for a lack of trust with bureaucracy. Does your governance system encourage people working things out or does it enable people to use the bureaucracy to intermediate their relationships?

What I think we're going for is fostering a culture where people who are taking initiative have a clear sense of how to take care of the group, when they need to ask for input or involve others in decision-making inside a clear decision-making process, and others can provide input, trusting that it's going to be considered.

You want to make sure your processes are clear, that there is faith in the process, and that there aren't interpersonal conflicts getting in the way.

Do people feel like they can address issues and get their needs met within the processes and systems of the community? If not, they will start taking things into their own hands which is bound to create frustration and resentment.

And again, I think making your policies, processes, and structures as simple as possible is helpful, in part because there's a spectrum in any group with how much patience people have with this stuff. You're going to have the people who want to talk everything out and enjoy it, and the people who get frustrated sitting in meetings and just want to be able to do things. Neither are right or wrong, good or bad, this is just personality differences here, and rather than trying to get everyone to be the same, the goal is how do you find the middle path that works for everyone.

People like to ask what's the best decision-making method, and my initial response has become, the one that the whole group agrees on. There's debate about whether consensus is best, or some kind of modified consensus, or sociocracy. People will always find a way to sabotage the best system. I think each group needs to figure out what fits their culture and circumstances best, playing and tweaking and experimenting or trying something and throwing it out and trying something else. And especially for well established communities, the problem might not be your method but unresolved interpersonal conflicts, misalignment on vision or mission, things that have happened in the past that people haven't worked through, or maybe simply a lack of education amongst your members about how things work.

I want to wrap up this section with the concept of collective sense-making. We talk a lot about collective decision-making. The idea with collective sense-making is that you have to make sense of something before you can figure out what to do about it. A classic pitfall in cooperative groups is someone bringing a proposal forward before everyone is on the same page about what the problem is, or that there even is a problem, and what all needs to be considered in finding a solution. It can quickly become a that or not that argument. So the process of collective sense-making, or creating a shared understanding is the precursor to collective decision-making.

Steps of the advice process:
1. A member notices a problem or opportunity and takes the initiative, or alerts someone better placed to do so.
2. Prior to a proposal, the initiator may seek input to sound out perspectives before proposing action.
3. The initiator makes a proposal and seeks advice from those affected or those with expertise.
4. Taking this advice into account, the initiator or decision-maker decides on an action and informs those who have given advice.

Social events

This is kind of the obvious one, but having fun, regular activities where traditions develop that help people feel like they're part of something is key to creating culture. A lot of this happens naturally, celebrating birthdays, holidays, changing seasons. We don't have to reinvent everything. And obviously there's a long list of things that people in your communities probably do together, when you're not social distancing, or even to some extent when you are if you have outdoor common spaces where you can congregate 6 feet apart, yoga and crossfit on the lawn.

Cooking and eating together, sharing food, is obviously really important as well for building social connections and creating intimacy, which fosters culture.

Work parties too. Even during the pandemic if you're careful you can do gardening or landscaping together.

When you spend time around each other enjoying each other you kind of can't help but create culture. You're also creating the foundation for dealing with things when they're hard. And it's all of this together, the good and the bad, that make community what it is and make the culture of your community unique.

Validation Day

Rituals of initiation (birthdays, big milestones for kids, new people joining) and grief (deaths either in the community or when members lose loved ones, or some other terrible thing happening). Initiation and grief I think are things we're really missing in our hyper individualised disintegrated compartmentalized culture.

Sharing: What are some unique expressions of culture that have developed in your community through social events?

Caring economy

A big cultural shift that happens in community has to do with valuing things that aren't usually valued, particularly the work of caring for each other. Caring for children, elders, when people

are sick or injured. Making the work of caring visible and appreciating it is a big part of cooperative culture.

In cohousing you own your home but you essentially own the land together, you manage common facilities, and these things require that you deal with each other in a way that naturally creates intimacy. This kind sharing and the trust it requires creates a fundamentally different kind of relationship with people and place, moving away from rigid notions of individual control, and helps foster cooperative culture.

Sharing meals, gardening and landscaping together, carpooling, bulk food buying, shared tools, workshop. These are all things that are economically beneficial and create interaction, which helps develop a sense of interdependence, that we're doing this together. They are places where we get to practice cooperation with each other, because learning to be cooperative, having a cooperative culture, it's a practice.

> *Sharing: What are some unique expressions of culture that have developed in your community through sharing resources or managing shared facilities?*

Conflict resolution

I mentioned earlier about the process patience spectrum. I want to bring that back here because it's a place where people can get into fights about who is and isn't being cooperative.

"They're not following our agreements." That may be true. The question is how do you deal with that?

"They're not open to feedback." Again, that may be true, it's probably more complicated than that, how do you deal with it?

Most of us tend to be somewhat conflict avoidant. And living in community means rubbing up against each other a lot in ways that aren't comfortable, in part because we're not inculturated to live together like this. So of course it's going to be challenging at times, and even the most process patient people don't want to spend all their time processing about every little thing that happens.

But the danger is that we start putting each other into boxes. "So and so is just that way." And this can lead us to relate to each other out of our perceptions of each other rather than what's actually happening or where the other person is actually coming from. This really isn't different from any long-term intimate relationship. You start to get sensitized to each others patterns and create dynamics between you. Lucky us that we get to do this with a whole community of people. There's no easy answer to this, it's just part of the deal, and it can be part of what builds

closeness and intimacy. It's just an ongoing process of tending to the relationships and making sure that negative feedback loops don't get started, or that when something unaddressed is flaring up, particularly in the context of some other kind of process or issue, that you have the support systems in place to address it.

In more extreme situations, a person's behavior is challenging enough to enough people or to the functioning of the community that it really does become a community issue. It's really tricky to know sometimes when someone is being pathologized or demonized unfairly and when there really does need to be some level of intervention or confrontation with the person because their behavior has actually crossed a line. This gets into the basics of what culture is all about, what's acceptable. Do you just have a difference in what you want the culture of the community to be that you need to work out, or is someone really behaving in a way that's contrary to the shared understanding of what the community is all about?

And if a person has crossed a line and isn't willing to acknowledge or address it and modify their behavior, what can you even do about? In other kinds of intentional communities there are usually ways that a person can be expelled, which no one wants to do, but that's not so much an option in cohousing where they own their home and there's only so far the HOA agreements can go to enforce things. I don't have an easy an answer for you here. I think the solution is relatively simple. You keep mustering as much compassion and empathy as possible, both for the person that people are struggling with, and for the people who are struggling, and keep looking for ways to engage that create openness, understanding, and reconciliation. It's simple but it's not easy.

One thing I do want to advocate for is some kind of regular process that helps bring out tensions before they have a chance to blow up or become entrenched. Again, we tend to be conflict avoidant, so even if we value direct communication and working things out, it's just way too easy to let things slip by. Again, differences in process patience, this can't be too cumbersome where people feel like they're being forced to talk to everyone about everything. Honestly I don't know of examples of this in cohousing, I'm more familiar with this being done in other kinds of intentional communities and cooperatives. So in a minute this will be a thing you can share on.

One more idea I want to throw out here, I've noticed what I think is a pattern of people making things personal when they're not personal and not making them personal when they are. Meaning, I think we have a tendency to interpret things people do that we don't like as being about us. Or, again, we've got someone in a box because of something they said or did to us at some point, and we make something they're saying or doing about that when it's actually not and end up complicating the situation. On the other hand, again, I think our conflict avoidance has us tend to not want to just go and talk to people when we think they might have feelings about something, whether or not those feelings might be about us. Or we go for structural changes or new policies to try and maneuver around issues people are having with someone or some long standing interpersonal conflict between two people, which again just ends up complicating the situation. I think a part of cooperative culture is about noticing when we're

triggered and making something personal when it might not be, and checking it out in an open and direct way. Doing the hard thing and just talking to each other can go a long way in helping address the personal or interpersonal issues in a situation that might be what's really creating the impasse.

> **Sharing**: *What are you hearing? What are you seeing about your community? Any insights, questions? Good practices for clearing up tensions before they build up? Success stories of addressing entrenched interpersonal conflict or issues around a particular member?*

Learning & Unlearning

I want to wrap up by saying a little bit about trainings and education. I think this is an important underemphasized area for communities. We're doing a lot of things differently, and I have this sense that we think that because we hold these different values and are expressing them by creating and living in our communities that we'll just automatically know how to do it. But culture is something so deep within us, so intertwined with our sense of self, some things we learned early may be with us forever and can conflict with the practices and processes we want to use in our communities.

There's a lot of great resources and trainers out there, particularly around things like group process, decision-making, interpersonal relationships and communication, and conflict resolution that can really help. Not that everyone in your community needs to engage in it, but simple things like having an annual facilitation training and one on whatever your decision-making method is can go a long way. Reading groups, going to workshops and conferences. I realize I'm kinda speaking to the choir here. You showed up to this conference, so you clearly see the value in this. But I just want to encourage you to not be shy with the people in your community about this, organize things for whoever is interested, get money budgeted, and maybe even see if the community can agree to regular trainings.

> **Time for last sharings?**

Cultivating cooperative culture is an act of personal and collective transformation, and it's something you're not just doing for yourselves and your community. This is for the world. Thank you for doing this work.