



Case study The 'Occupy' movement

On the face of it, Kalle Lasn (b.1942) and Micah White (b.1982) appear to be unlikely bedfellows. Lasn is a 70-year-old Estonian filmmaker now living in Canada, whilst White is of mixed race and edits a magazine called *Adbusters*, based in California. However, they are the drivers behind a global movement that has activities in over 80 countries worldwide and has countless hours of newsreel coverage. Their organization is called the 'Occupy' movement and it has, at various times, shut down areas of New York, London, and Madrid. The purpose of the group is to protest against what they see as an unsustainable economic system that disadvantages everyone but a very few rich and powerful people. Their motto of 'we are the 99%' is a reflection of their cause, which sees them trying to create publicity for their mission by staging sit-ins and camps in major financial districts such as Wall Street and Paternoster Square in London. The group states that it is 'leaderless ... by the people and for the people'.

In terms of decision making and leadership, the movement has an unusual model that attempts to allow as many people as possible to participate in the group's processes. At the heart of it is the General Assembly which, according to their website,

is a gathering of people committed to discussing issues and making decisions based upon a collective agreement or 'consensus'. Anyone is free to propose an idea or express an opinion as part of the General Assembly. There is no single leader—everyone's voice is equal.

This devolved type of decision making takes the form of a large debating circle where a proposer outlines a particular issue and invites comment from the audience. After a debate there is a vote decided on by a show of hands. To add some subtlety to the process, the group uses a number of different hand signals to communicate their thoughts to the collective. To ensure everyone can hear what a particular speaker is saying, the group employs a technique known as the 'People's Mic' (as in 'microphone'; see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-p3zt8hP-g> (accessed 7 September 2016)). To use this technique, the main speaker speaks half of a sentence which is repeated loudly by the first few rows of the audience. This can be repeated if necessary to create a ripple effect, ensuring the information reaches the very back of the audience. If there is no physical gathering, the group uses the internet and local websites to communicate with its supporters.

If there is a particularly important decision to be debated, the group splits into smaller working parties and reports their thoughts back to the main group. It is proposed by the group that this leads to consensus decision making and involves many more people in the activities of the group. An added layer of sophistication comes with the concept of the 'progressive stack'. Normally, those who wish to speak are added to a list and called to speak in the chronological order in which they were added to the speaker's list. In a progressive stack, the order of speakers is determined by a different criteria—that of belonging to 'under represented groups'. So-called 'stack keepers' keep order and it is alleged that this process encourages women, gay people, and coloured people to speak by allowing them priority over young white males.

Critics of the group suggest that the group is run by a hard core of anarchists who turned the movement into a version of *Animal Farm*, a novel by George Orwell that satirizes revolutionary leaders. There are also reports of fall-outs between members over the allocation of funds donated by well-wishers, and some disagree over who actually founded the movement in the first place. The progressive stack is attacked for being a 'forced' process that imposes a new form of discrimination on the group. Campaigners against the group also point out the cost of cleaning up sites after the protests. One such site in London is said to have cost £100,000 to return it to its pre-camp state, with nearly eight months of human detritus spread over the ground needing to be removed.



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Questions

1. What do you make of the claim of the organization to be 'leaderless'?
2. What do you make of the 'progressive stack' and the notion of 'stack keepers'?
3. What does this case study suggest to you about leadership?