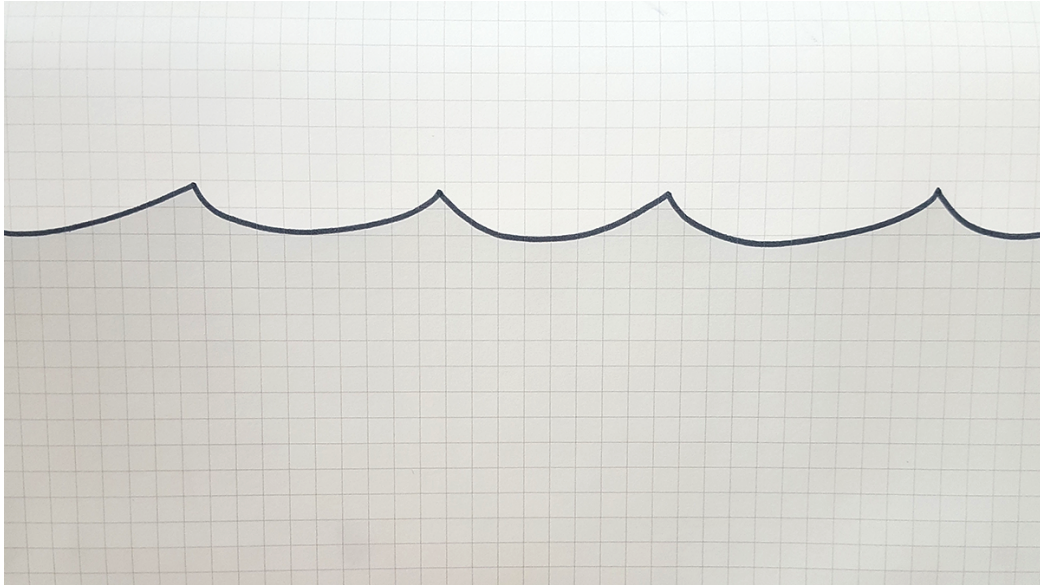**MINIMUM-VIABLE-STRUCTURE**

MINIMUM VIABLE STRUCTURE: ORGANISATIONAL SCAFFOLDING TO GET OUT OF EMERGENCY MODE

How to run a marathon when all you know is sprinting.

water level rising

I had a phone call last night with a friend in Houston. They're doing emergency relief work in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. In their words, West Street Recovery is:

"a grassroots organization of people from diverse backgrounds, collaborating to leverage our skills and personal networks toward immediate disaster relief. We're now transitioning to long term building of inter-community solidarity, information sharing, and inter-organizational collaboration with the goal of carrying the lessons learned from this disaster forward to make the communities in this city more prepared and more resilient to face the next inevitable catastrophic event."

We talked about the excitement and challenges of this transition moment. The organization needs a little structure to get out of emergency mode, and into a form that can support them for the long road ahead.

There's a lot of goodwill in the group, but right now they're feeling the pain of doing consensus decision-making using chat + long meetings + a little bit of email. Meetings are overloaded with huge agenda topics. It takes a long time to get

people up to speed and make a decision. It's hard to keep the flow of conversation going between meetings. Important information is lost in the flow of group chat. *Where was that insurance form again? Oh yeah, just after the funny picture of a cat...*

After the call, I sent through my notes. On reflection, I decided to turn them into a blogpost, as this advice applies equally well to any consensus-oriented organization that is trying to step up from the sprint into a marathon, whether they're activists, NGOs or startups.

1. Prioritise the vibe!

That means relationships, wellness, care, fun, kindness, peace, healing, trust, solidarity, shared purpose, belonging, harmony. If you are looking after each other, and you're working on something that feels meaningful, that's the endgame. Congratulations you win! There's nowhere better than that.

A foundation of mutual care and trust is the best resource for all your upcoming challenges.

2. Make explicit agreements about how you're working together.

Make agreements and update them regularly. E.g. at Loomio we have a Retrospective meeting every 2 weeks (what was good, what was bad, what will we do differently next time). Every 2 weeks there is some new process change: we are continuously improving and learning, turning tensions into positive changes. (The Retrospective Wiki has ideas for how to host these meetings.) If you're systematic about this, you'll hear frustrations early, while they're easy to deal with

If you're looking after #1 and #2, everything else will flow from that. At a guess, these are some of the next issues you're going to want to address:

3. Distinguish synchronous and asynchronous communication.

By the way, this advice applies to any team feeling the pain of using Slack. 😖

Synchronous is like "what do you think of this right now". Usually it happens in a chatroom or around the watercooler. It only makes sense now (not later) to the people who are there (no one else).

Asynchronous is like emails or Loomio threads: organised around a topic instead of a time. They're slightly more formal, with **context-setting** (this is what we know), **invitation** (what do you think?) and explicit **conclusions** (we decided to do X).

Think about the difference between a meeting transcript (sync), and meeting minutes (async). Your organisational memory is built from minutes, not from transcripts. We need summaries to make sense of the past.

Your group will step up a notch if they can distinguish between these two forms of communication. Use whatever language makes sense in your context ("sync"/"async" is geek-speak), e.g. maybe you could say "chat is for *responsive* and email is for *reflective* communication".

First get the two concepts clear in the group, then it might make sense to use 2 different tools to sort them out, e.g. *let's do our realtime communication in Slack and our deliberative conversations in Loomio.*

4. How to introduce a new communication tool without making things worse.

If you're going to introduce a new tech tool, be warned: this goes wrong more often than it goes right. Here's a recipe that can help.

1. Get clear on what **problem** you're trying to solve (may help to describe the desired future you'd like to achieve).
2. Give 2-3 people the mandate to **research** options, gather requirements, and come back with a recommendation.
3. Agree to a time limited **trial** of the new tool, say 1 or 2 months to give it a fair evaluation.
4. **Support** people up the learning curve (a stitch in time saves nine).
5. Expect to spend some time **reminding** the group to build the new habit ('hey we agreed we'd take these kind of conversations to Loomio…').
6. At the end of the trial, **evaluate**: is this better or worse?

5. Agree to a working rhythm and stick to it.

If you're used to being in 'always on' mode, settling into a reliable working rhythm makes the world of difference. *E.g. we meet every Thursday. We expect radio silence on Sundays and Mondays. Strategy meetings happen monthly. There's a daily status report at 10am.*

With reliable rhythms, you can get much more efficient about your decision making, with reliable paths for delegation, and clarity about what issues to discuss when.

6. Distinguish tactics from strategy.

It's hugely inefficient to mix tactics (what are we doing this week) with strategy (what are we doing this year). Both are important. You can settle a lot of unease and complexity by splitting the two categories of conversation into two meetings. This is a lot easier if you have a reliable working rhythm.

7. Practice delegation.

Sooner or later you're going to want to split up into working groups, sub-teams, committees… some way of dividing the whole group in to subgroups, so not everyone has to be involved in everything. I like Enspiral's working group template.

People are much more comfortable with delegating decisions, if you have a regular working rhythm. E.g., everyone has their say at the monthly meeting, then the working groups split out, making whatever decisions they need to. You can trust them to report back at the next monthly meeting, and get input before then if necessary.

8. Use advice when you don't need consensus.

If your relationships are good, you're in a great spot to try Advice instead of Consensus for some decisions. My understanding of the Advice Process: **anyone can make any decision, so long as they are willing to take responsibility for the outcome, and they have first listened to input from anyone who will be affected, or who has relevant expertise.**

Notice it says *listened to*, not *agreed with*. If your relationships are good, this gives you most of the benefits of consensus, at a fraction of the cost.

This decision-making approach is greatly aided by having some agreed process for dealing with tensions, e.g. regular Retrospective meetings, or Conflict Resolution Process (see Enspiral again for resources).

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So that's it: 8 lightweight structural interventions that I can recommend, based on my work with hundreds of decentralised groups this year. For the most part, I think of this as "organisational scaffolding": once the building is solid, you can get rid of it. It's an art and a science to find the minimum structure you need to support your group as it grows out of emergency mode, into the long haul.

Please let me know if it helps!

You can support West Street Recovery's fundraising here.

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