OPEN KNOWLEDGE FOUNDATION DEUTSCHLAND

Activism from within

October 2025

Introduction

In the day-to-day work of NGOs and non-profit organisations, the focus is on social impact: the projects, campaigns and initiatives that we promote externally in order to change the world. **But what often gets left behind is looking inward.** Yet this perspective is fundamental: If we are truly serious about what we proclaim externally, we must also live it within the organisation.

In this series, we share experiences, challenges and tools for implementing our social demands internally.

We address topics such as power, decision-making and conflict, and describe how we deal with them structurally. We describe small steps and concrete measures in everyday work.

Organisational development is never complete, and we still have a lot of room for improvement. But it is worthwhile to share unfinished, imperfect things in order to open up a conversation and grow together.

We also want to encourage other associations, NGOs and activists to take a look inward and share their experiences.

The series is written by our organisational development specialist Sonja Fischbauer. Feel free to send an ***email to Sonja*** *if you have any comments or questions. Get in touch with us, we look forward to hearing from you!*

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Part 1

Developing decision-making structures – How we organise our collaboration

In this article, we show how we organise ourselves internally. We describe the structures we use to promote co-determination and distribute power.

In our work, we strive for a democratic, sustainable and resilient future based on openness, participation and transparency. In order to live up to this aspiration within our organisation, we need to organise our internal collaboration accordingly: we need a solid governance model.

A governance model is a plan for how people in a group make decisions. It regulates questions such as: *Who is allowed to decide what? Who is responsible for what?*

Our governance model should express our values and fit our complex structures.

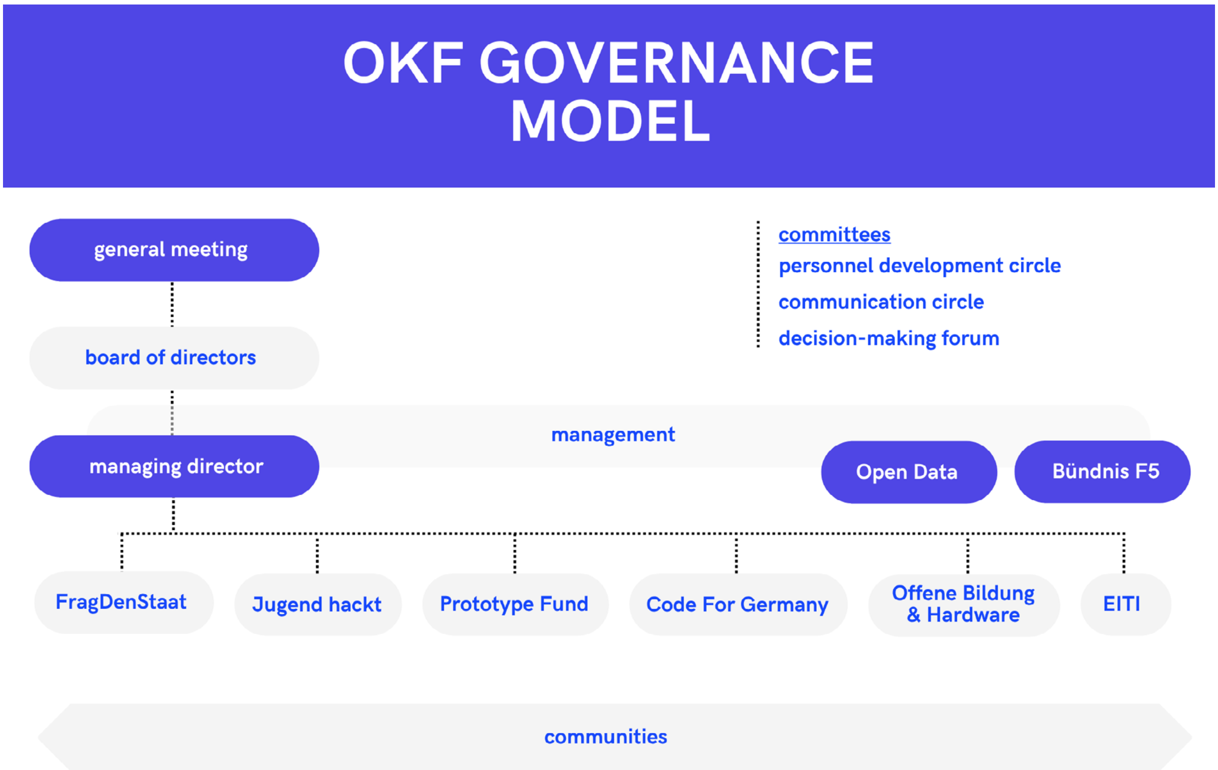

Image: The current OKF governance model (2025)

Structure: Association, team, projects & communities

The **general meeting** and **board** are the statutory bodies for our registered association under German law. The general meeting takes place once a year. Our volunteer board advises on strategy, provides input, monitors and supports the management.

The **management team** consists of the **managing director** and a small team that takes care of organisation-wide finances, human resources, technical infrastructure and organisational development.

In addition, the management's Policy Team works on open data and democratic digital policy, e.g. with other organisations in the F5 alliance. They regularly make policy demands and publish position papers, among other things. The management team brings together insights and experiences from all projects and derives strategic and operational measures.

The majority of our colleagues work on our major projects **FragDenStaat**, **Jugend hackt** and **Prototype Fund**. These areas operate independently: they have a strong identity, their own communities, raise their own funds, set strategic goals and decide on their own staffing. We have set out in writing how decision-making powers are divided between management and project management. The large projects are partly like organisations within the organisation. In addition, there are also **smaller projects**, e.g. on open education and hardware, and the **Code for Germany** network.

In our diverse **communities**, there are many people who are not part of our organisation but are an integral part of our everyday life: long-standing project partners, committed volunteers, supporters, national and international networks.

Instruments for co-determination

To enable participation at all levels, strengthen projects and relieve the burden on management, we have set up cross-project committees.

The **personnel development circle** deals with issues relating to cooperation in the office, the organisational climate, team activities, further training and employee benefits.

In the **communication circle**, communication officers from all projects regularly exchange ideas on campaigns, public relations and tools.

Each circle has around six voluntary members (all major projects and the management team are represented) and meets for an hour every two weeks in the office or online. The circles have the mandate to make small decisions themselves, such as establishing rules for cooperation in the office. For larger issues and decisions with financial implications, the circle prepares a basis for decision-making. The circle members collect requests and suggestions from the team, develop proposals and forward them to the relevant departments, such as management or the decision-making forum (see below for more information).

In our experience, the circles work well as a peer-to-peer learning space, a forum for exchange between projects, an innovation tool and a crisis instrument. However, the circles are not suitable for managing ongoing, critical infrastructure or carrying out large conceptual work. This requires dedicated positions, which are located in our management team.

The **decision-making forum** makes cross-organisational decisions that go beyond the direct area of responsibility of the management, such as proposals from circles or large project initiations. It consists of senior representatives from all areas and the management. The committee can vote asynchronously in writing or meet for a call.

Guidelines and exchange formats

We have a number of policies and guidelines. These include our **code of conduct** and our **whistleblowing policy**.

Our internal **handbook** and accompanying guidelines contain as much information as possible in writing: from the contact details of our caretaker and best practices for grant applications to an overview of our salary model. The management team maintains the handbook, but every team member can access it, correct errors and make additions (and notify the caretaker immediately if, for example, a ceiling light in the conference room is broken). This reduces the workload of our small administrative team, makes knowledge less dependent on individual employees and helps new colleagues find their feet more quickly.

We have special exchange formats to maintain and discuss our organisational culture and gauge the mood: we learn from each other at the Know Lunch, discuss complex issues in a discussion forum, and go on an annual OKF team retreat to the countryside.

Our internal structures are never finished; they evolve with us. We have to continuously reflect and adapt. By the time this article is finished, we may already be trying something new.

Why all this?

A good governance model…

… reflects our complexity. We have self-sufficient project teams, numerous networks, cooperation between full-time and volunteer staff, and diverse communities. The individual elements in our governance model help us to coordinate everything and hold the organisation together as a whole.

… distributes power. The model distributes decision-making power, reduces dependence on individuals and allows decisions to be made on the basis of broad knowledge.

… is resilient. A wide range of tools helps us to respond quickly to changes such as new projects, crises or issues of trust.

… continues to evolve. Governance is a tool that we constantly question, evaluate and adapt. It is a living framework that moves with us instead of holding us back.

… conserves resources. The model saves time and energy because we don't have to renegotiate every decision, but can fall back on existing structures and processes.

Part 2

Uncovering power structures – An exercise for talking about power

In this article, we share instructions for an exercise we developed to facilitate conversations about power structures in our organisation.

For a democratic, sustainable and resilient future, we demand transparency, participation and cooperation on an equal footing from politicians. In our organisation, we strive to not only represent these values externally, but also to live them internally.

It is important to talk openly and calmly about power structures so that we can fulfil our demands for transparency and justice internally. This is an honourable approach, but one that is often difficult to implement in practice. Even if we have flat, transparent hierarchies, unspoken power relations and routines will form outside the official channels. The less they are addressed, the more entrenched they become. We must review formal structures to ensure that they have sufficient counterbalances and control mechanisms. We must recognise and name informal power so that it is not distributed unfairly.

We have developed a small exercise that reveals power structures within a team. We have repeated this exercise at our annual team retreat. It helps us to create a common understanding of current structures and allows us to address power relations that are otherwise often taboo.

Power is not automatically bad: power means you can make things happen. Every organisation needs centres of power so that decisions can be made. However, these centres of power must be as transparent and open as possible so that no one is excluded.

Guidelines for discussing power structures

The aim of the exercise is to identify the power structures, instruments of power and other factors relating to power within the organisation. The point is to discuss these issues. We do not need to find a solution, and this exercise does not aim to change anything at this point. The value lies in making these issues visible and addressing them.

The exercise takes 60 to 90 minutes, depending on how many people you are and how much time you want to spend on the discussion.

You will need a surface that you can divide into four quadrants (you can do this with pens on a whiteboard, chalk on the floor or tape on a table – anything is possible), cards or large sticky notes, pens and, optionally, adhesive dots, tape, pins or magnets to attach the cards.

Divide the space into four quadrants by drawing two axes. One axis runs from informal (not written down) to formal (officially agreed), the other axis runs from inside (how it works internally) to outside (what can be seen from the outside).

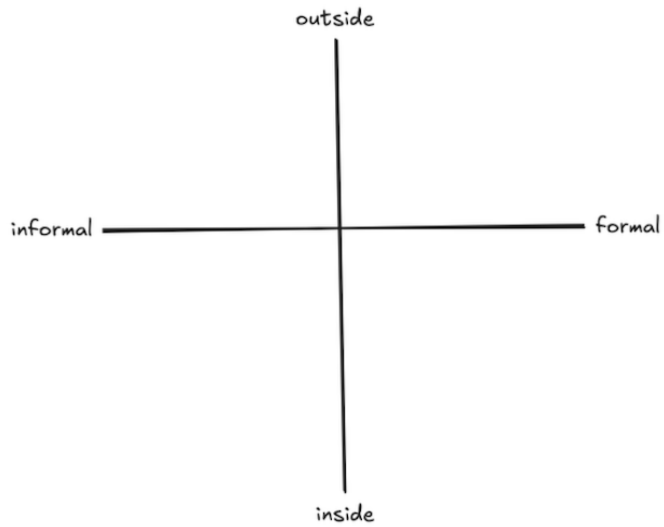

Illustration of four axes: outside-inside, informal-formal

After the introduction, you divide into small groups of up to four people. Write down on the cards any structures, instruments and other factors that come to mind that grant power in your organisation. Record your observations as neutrally as possible.

After about 30 minutes, everyone comes back together and places the cards on the quadrants. It is not always clear where a card belongs. For example, community members in positions of power can be placed either inside or outside, depending on how closely the community is integrated into your organisation. In this case, you can duplicate the card or decide on a field. It does not have to be perfect; some ambiguity is okay.

A few examples:

Internal, informal

· Friendships/relationships within the team; project founders (if no formal title is associated with this), a desk close to the boss and therefore a direct line of communication;

Internal, formal

· Financing structure; unrestricted funds vs. project funds with conditions; internal committees where decisions are made;

External, informal

· A strong community whose opinion influences decision-makers within the team; a colleague who is well known publicly;

External, formal

· Traditional roles and governance bodies such as the board, management, general meeting, team leads and project managers;

We have identified power through social privileges such as being *white*, origin, gender etc. as informal power, on the border between internal and external.

Photo: Team and board members do the exercise on power structures at our retreat.

Once all the cards have been placed, look at the overall picture: Are there quadrants with a particularly large number of cards, while others have very few?

In our experience, we have always collected more on informal power than on formal structures. We have very flat hierarchies on the outside, but are quite complex on the inside, with many stakeholders in large networks.

Informal power is exciting to explore because we talk about it less often, because it is not yet explicit. An exercise like this may be the first time that something is officially stated that would otherwise only be expressed in one-on-one conversations or in the office grapevine. At this point, it is important that everyone involved sticks to value-neutral statements and that the atmosphere remains relatively relaxed. The exercise is therefore not suitable as a measure in an acute conflict situation, but rather serves as a regular preventive care and maintenance of cooperation.

For reflection within the entire team, we mark cards (e.g. with sticky dots) that we want to highlight. Guiding questions for this could be: *Did anything surprise me? Does anything make me feel uneasy? What should we keep an eye on?* Afterwards, we talk about the observations in a discussion moderated by one or two people (from the team). We record the results by photographing the cards on the quadrants and writing down the observations that came up in the discussion in short sentences.

Even if there is no concrete outcome to the exercise, its value lies in the fact that we are talking about power. When we talk openly about power, we create a climate in which criticism is easier. It pays off to engage in this kind of reflection on a regular basis. Power relations change as the organisation, the team, society, our communities and the funding landscape change. We therefore need to check in regularly and reflect on our own structures, even if there are no particular problems at the moment. This creates a basis for discussion that helps us to respond better in the next conflict situation. Regular reflection on power relations also allows us to compare results over time and perhaps identify successes and improvements that are worth celebrating.

Why all this?

We uncover power structures…

… so that we can live up to our standards of **transparency and fairness** internally as well as externally.

… to check whether power is actually **distributed fairly** within our organisation, as we would like it to be in theory.

… to create a climate in which **criticism is possible and acceptable**.

… because power, when distributed well and used correctly, can **achieve a lot of good**.

Part 3

Dealing with conflicts – A guide to routinely resolving tensions within the team

In this article, we share our first version of a conflict routine: a guide on how to proceed when you find yourself in a conflict.

EIt is easy to let everyone participate when everything is running smoothly. It gets harder when tensions arise. That is precisely when it becomes clear whether our values hold true in everyday life. If we are committed to a democratic, sustainable and resilient future, we must also create internal spaces where conflicts can be addressed, endured and resolved. Conflicts can be an opportunity for personal growth, better cooperation and structural development.

As an organisation, we want to learn and are committed to continuous improvement. In the spirit of an open culture of error, we share what we are working on and welcome feedback, experiences and ideas. In our team survey in June 2025, 42% said that conflicts in our organisation are resolved fully or mostly satisfactorily, another 42% said partially, and 16% said not really. At the same time, most of our colleagues described the atmosphere as friendly, supportive, and helpful. It is therefore worthwhile for us to invest specifically in our conflict management skills. We believe that this is worthwhile for all organisations.

One systemic measure we have developed for this purpose is our **conflict routine**. It is designed to help identify tensions at an early stage, act constructively and in a value-based manner, and promote a safe working atmosphere.

Area of application of the conflict routine

A central idea of the routine is that conflicts are not pleasant, but they are normal – hence the name 'routine'. It does not aim to eliminate all conflicts. It helps to identify tensions at an early stage, clarify responsibilities and strengthen psychological security. The routine is a framework with defined steps and roles that can be used for guidance, which is particularly helpful in emotionally charged or confusing situations. If at least one party to the conflict wishes to invoke the routine, the other party cannot refuse to engage in constructive discussion. In cases of serious behaviour such as discrimination, harassment or embezzlement, other instruments such as our code of conduct or our whistleblowing policy apply.

Step 1: Recognise the conflict and put it into words

The first step is to recognise the conflict – whether it is an uneasy feeling, recurring tensions or specific incidents. A **trusted person** can help with this: we have designated individuals from the team and the board who are available to provide support in cases of conflict. A trusted person listens, helps to classify the conflict and assists in formulating observations.

It can help to determine: *What type of conflict am I in?*

· **Structural conflicts** concern values, content, processes, roles or decision-making processes, e.g. differences of opinion about project strategies or unclear distribution of tasks.

· **Individual conflicts** are based on interpersonal tensions, e.g. communication style, power relations or expectations.

Classification helps to create clarity, even if the boundaries are fluid and a conflict often has several components.

Step 2: Address the conflict

The person directly affected approaches the other party, with the support of the trusted person if necessary. The aim is a respectful exchange in which all parties involved can save face and find a solution.

This can be a discussion or the introduction of new processes for cooperation and communication. Feedback rules help here: stay on topic, describe the effect, formulate a specific request. If a solution is found, the process is complete.

Step 3: Involve management

If the conflict cannot be resolved, management is called in. They are responsible for the process, can involve external moderators or internal committees, suggest formats and initiate transparent communication.

A sensitive issue is the balance between confidentiality and transparency. As a general rule, confidentiality takes precedence over transparency. However, openness can sometimes be a relief, especially if the team is already aware of the conflict. One option is to inform the team that a conflict is being addressed without going into detail.

People in leadership positions have a special responsibility: they should identify conflicts early on, moderate them neutrally and promote a culture in which criticism can be expressed without fear. If they are themselves part of the conflict, external or internal mediation is needed to balance power asymmetries.

Step 4: Seek external support

In complex, highly emotionally charged or systemic conflicts, or at the request of one of the parties, an external mediator or coach should be called in.

This is not a sign of failure, but rather a professional way of dealing with a challenging situation.

External support can also be sought at an earlier stage, for example when those involved reach their limits or neutrality cannot be guaranteed. In our organisation we provide financial resources for external support, as part of our conflict infrastructure.

Step 5: Resolve or escalate the conflict

A conflict is considered resolved when all parties agree that it has been resolved. If this is not possible, the conflict is escalated to the next level of management. Conflicts that escalate across multiple levels require a great deal of attention from management and must be taken very seriously. They have become so large that they have a significant negative impact on the daily work of many people. In such cases, external support can advise the responsible managers. Some conflicts cannot be resolved amicably. The routine then helps to identify such conflicts and to handle them responsibly.

Step 6: Derive learnings

All those involved are responsible for their actions in a conflict. People in leadership positions also bear responsibility for structural learnings. *What can the organisation take away from the conflict? Can we improve anything to prevent it from happening again?* It can be worthwhile to document conflict experiences (in a form that is independent of the people involved) in order to learn for the future.

Why all this?

A conflict routine...

... **normalises conflicts** as something that is part of everyday working life.

... provides **guidance**, clarifies **responsibilities** and strengthens **psychological security**.

... supports a team in not looking away and **addressing conflicts early on**.

... sees every conflict as an **opportunity for further development**, both as a person and as an organisation.

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OPEN KNOWLEDGE FOUNDATION DEUTSCHLAND

Editor
Open Knowledge Foundation Deutschland e. V.
Singerstr. 109
10179 Berlin, Deutschland
info@okfn.de
www.okfn.de

Author
Sonja Fischbauer

Designer
Yasemin Altınay

Illustrator
Anna Karetnikova

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