



CAPACITY BUILDING

6 group activities for trans activists



Capacity Building: 6 group activities for trans activists

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Introduction

What is Capacity Building?

TGEU works to strengthen trans communities' outreach, self-organising, and well-being within the trans movement in Europe and Central Asia. Capacity Building entails developing and strengthening the skills, resources, abilities, and knowledge of trans activists, trans-led organisations and trans communities. It vests to empower trans communities and organisations so they can take the movement wherever it needs to go.

Why this toolkit?

This toolkit is for any trans activist with an interest in community and capacity building. It is thought as a resource of information, tools, and tips, and is adapted for first-time activity organisers who wish to facilitate group activities in line with those of TGEU. The toolkit aims to:

- Support on how to run awareness activities with a set of group exercises;
- Support and provide resources on how to adapt and develop the training according to the needs of the participants and practical circumstances, with a focus on conflict dynamics and management.

Why these 6 activities?

The following activities were conducted during two trainings: one *Empowerment Training for Trans Black and People of Colour* (July 2019, France) and one *Critical Awareness Training for Trans Activists* (October 2019, Germany). The six following activities were selected for their constructive impact on participants and their group dynamics. We hope that this toolkit makes Capacity Building activities easier for you. We advise implementation of these activities taking into consideration TGEU's *Facilitation Toolkit: Tips and Tricks for Participatory and Empowering Facilitation*.

The following activities represent a mix of original and reproduced activities. When it applies, we will attribute the activity to its original initiator.

How should this toolkit be used?

The toolkit has as few assumptions as possible about prior theoretical knowledge regarding trans-specific issues or previous experiences in facilitation. However, the activities presented should be implemented cautiously and with a solid understanding of power dynamics, systemic violence, community conflicts, and re-traumatisation. Before conducting the activities, we strongly advise the organisers to self-assess their

organisation's and their own capacity and ability to hold a trauma-informed space. The lack of knowledge and understanding about the impact of trauma can get in the way of the activities, as trauma can impact both one's reactions as well as the interpretation of others' reactions. It can also impact other people's capacity to intervene without getting triggered. People who have experienced trauma are at risk of being re-traumatised. When re-traumatisation happens, it can leave participants feeling failed, misunderstood, or even blamed, contributing to the perpetuation of a damaging cycle that could prevent healing, empowerment, and growth.



BURNOUT IN ACTIVISM

2 activities

Group activity 1

“When everything you do is never enough, what do you do?”

Time frame: 30-40 min | Group size: 2-30 people | Facilitation level: Beginner
Comfort zone: Safe (emotionally), Safe (physically) | Material: none

Activity

- 1 Split the group down into smaller groups.
- 2 Ask the question “When everything you do is never enough, what do you do?” a first time (10 min), a second time (10 min), and a third time (10 min). Let the group think, reflect, be surprised – do not help them. Ask word by word the same question and do not say anything else.
- 3 Hold a group discussion to reflect on (10 min)
 - What happened?
 - How did you feel?
 - What was your first reaction? Did it change during the exercise?
 - What does it say about the activist culture?

Main takeaways

- Some participants do not even realise that it is the same question – Sometimes it is not acknowledged that unproductive patterns (mistakes, conflict dynamics...) are unconsciously repeated without taking time to step back and reflect on them.
- Most of the participants keep on answering and trying to find the “right answer” even though they know that everything they do is never enough - In activism, very few of us decide to stop answering. It’s never enough and there is no good answer, yet we keep on trying and feel responsible without stopping the process.
- Very few participants queried the question. In activism, self-doubt is frequently the first reaction: “did we hear right?”, “what did we do wrong?”. If we are told it is not enough, we blame ourselves before even questioning the setting and situation itself. Will it be ever enough?

Group activity 2

Trans activism, impacts on our life and strategies¹

Time frame: 45-60 min | Group size: 2-30 people | Facilitation level: Beginner
Comfort zone: Safe (physically), Medium to High (emotionally)
Material: flipchart, markers, pens, printed check lists

First step – Personal assessment

Activity (15 min)

- 1 Give the following list to each participant and announce that you are going to do a personal check-up on general well-being.
- 2 Give them 5 minutes to fill it out. Remind them that it's ok to leave the space if needed and that emotions are welcome.
- 3 Announce that this list is the list of some of the physical and emotional symptoms of anxiety, burn out and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- 4 Ask who answered 5 times or more "Yes".

Main takeaways

- For those who have 5 or more "Yes" it maybe means that what they thought to be regular sensations and feelings, are actually physical and psychological alert signs. These could be consequences of their mind and body being regularly impacted by situations of high-level stress and anxiety.
- Added to that, we may face challenges and form of violence that we face at work, on the street, in private relationships... It makes it difficult to function in a daily routine and to take care of our mental health.
- *"It's not on you. It's ok. You are not alone nor dysfunctional."*

¹ Partially based the workshop "Conflict and Power" run by the organisation global e.V. Berlin in 2018.

Check "YES" when the following statements apply

I'm not a person who gets easily relaxed.

- YES
- NO

I often have trouble concentrating.

- YES
- NO

I have already experienced panic attacks.

- YES
- NO

I frequently have headaches.

- YES
- NO

I easily get irritated, or I feel on the edge, most of the time against my own will.

- YES
- NO

I often feel like I cannot catch my breath or that my chest is too tight to breathe.

- YES
- NO

I often feel that my breath is short and fast.

- YES
- NO

I have difficulty falling asleep.

- YES
- NO

I am always tired, sometimes even after a long night of sleep.

- YES
- NO

I often have digestive problems.

- YES
- NO

I often feel pains in the chest or unexplained muscle pains.

- YES
- NO

I regularly catch minor sickness (cold, infections...).

- YES
- NO

I often feel like my mind goes blank.

- YES
- NO

In social setting (discussions, group activities...), I often feel dissociated.

- YES
- NO

I often have difficulties recalling what I did the day before.

- YES
- NO

There are large parts (months, years...) of my life that I cannot remember.

- YES
- NO

I often feel dizzy.

- YES
- NO

TOTAL YES: /17

TOTAL NO: /17

Second step – Breathing exercise

Activity (5 min)

- 1 Introduce a breathing exercise to relax the atmosphere
- 2 Remind participants that it is ok to leave the space if needed. Note: It happens frequently that activists cry during the exercise. Remind them that emotions are welcome.
 - *“Close your eyes.*
 - *Breathe in through your nose. Let your belly fill with air.*
 - *Breathe out through your nose.*
 - *Place one hand on your belly. Place the other hand on your chest.*
 - *As you breathe in, feel your belly rise. As you breathe out, feel your belly lower. The hand on your belly should move more than the one that's on your chest.*
 - *Take three more full, deep breaths. Breathe fully into your belly as it rises and falls with your breath.*
 - *Open your eyes.”*
- 3 Hold a short group discussion
 - How did you feel before the assessment?
 - How did you feel after the assessment?
 - How do you feel after the breathing exercise?
 - At which stage would you have felt able to address conflicts better?

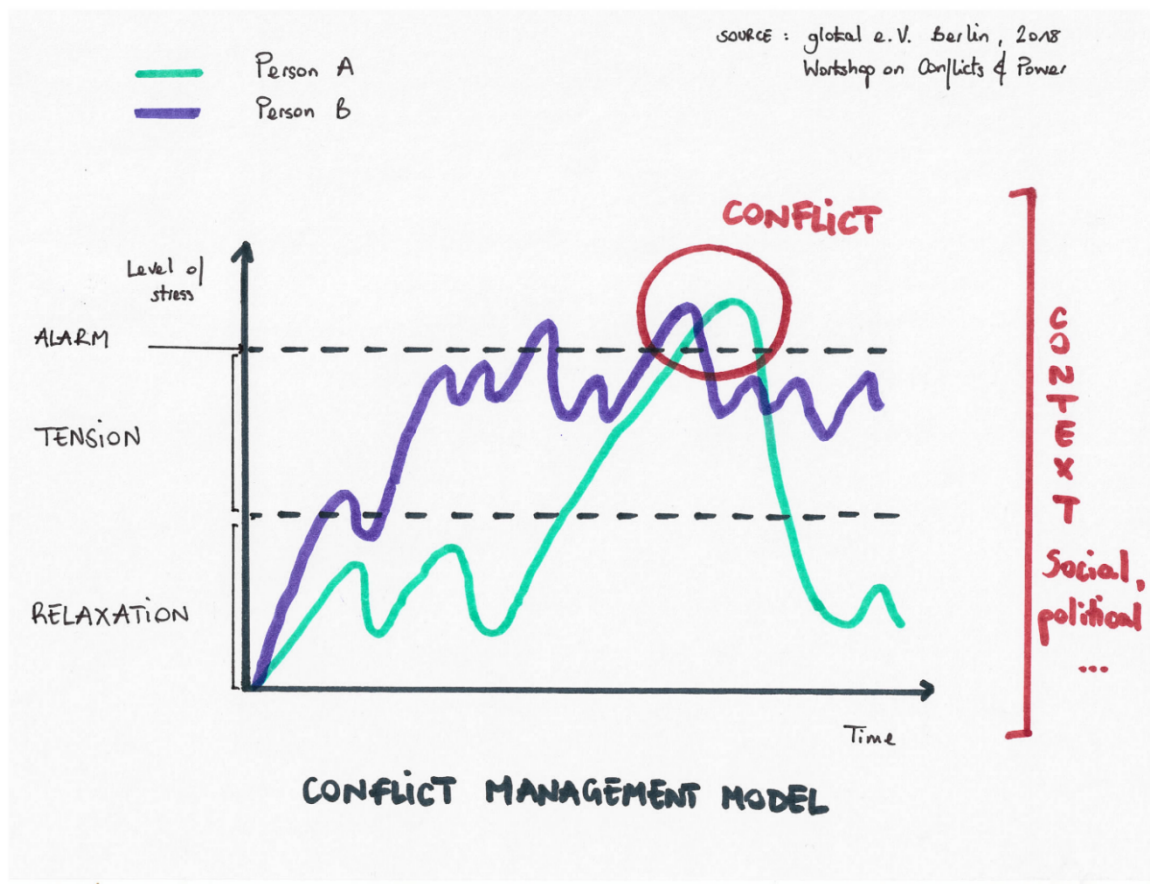
Main takeaways

- Burn out and PTSD leads to a point where we enter a survival mode (shutting down all non-essential body and mind functions, autonomic body processes appear). In the meantime, we are trying to build communities. In such a mindset, it is extremely difficult, or even impossible, to function and be community-driven without harming ourselves and others.
- In a stage of stress and without stepping back, it is impossible to address conflicts constructively.

Third step – Conflict management and conflict resolution

Activity (20 min)

1 Draw and present the conflict management model



- Every conflict comes within a systemic frame, (a social, political, cultural, generational, environmental...), a personal context of build-up dynamics [red hook]
 - Within a conflict, each person (A or B) carries their own level of stress and has their own patterns [levels of stress within time]
 - Conflicts happen when two or more person's level of stress reach a peak of tension at the same time [red circle]
- 2 Hold a group discussion and ask questions to the group
- How does Person A feel? What does Person A feel? Towards whom?
 - How does Person B feel? What does Person B feel? Towards whom?
 - What does Person A want?
 - What does Person B want?
 - What can Person A do?
 - What can Person B do?

Main takeaways

- Even though the first reaction could be to focus on the red circle only, every conflict comes within a systemic and dynamical framework. The conflict is only the tip of the iceberg; the context and each person's level of stress and patterns must be considered.
- Violence, discrimination, and oppression impact our daily level of stress. The more oppression one faces daily, the more under pressure they are; the more privileges they have, the more relaxed they can be.
- Person B is used to being tense; it is not an uncommon feeling. Person B rarely experiences relaxation; hence B will not even focus on going back to relaxation.
- Person A is not used to be tensed; it is an uncommon feeling, hence the escalation. Person A's primary goal is to go back to the relaxation phase; resolving the conflict is secondary.
- Solving the conflict without considering the general context and general level of stress (mental health) of Person A and Person B will only temporarily ease the situation. Person B will remain in a general state of tension.
- Strategies:
 - 1 Breathe and take a step back;
 - 2 Stop reacting (3 minutes – 180 seconds per day to react to what upsets you, use them how you want);
 - 3 Collectively and individually reflect on what happened;
 - 4 Act or move on.The order is as important as the steps. In most conflicts, we (re)act before taking a step back and reflect.



GROUP DYNAMICS

2 activities

Group activity 1

The colour dots²

Time frame: 20-40 min | Group size: 10-30 people | Facilitation level: Intermediate
Comfort zone: Medium (physically), Medium to High (emotionally)
Material: coloured dots stickers (3 colours, as many stickers as there are participants)

Note:

- This activity is especially relevant in a group where participants do not know each other.
- For blind participants or participants with visual aids, explain the exercise beforehand and check with them if they want to participate. If not, do activity 2.

Activity

- 1 Ask people to close their eyes and put a coloured dot on everyone's forehead: create 3 colour groups: one colour with more than half of the people, one with a few people, and one with only one person. Keep on using the word "colour" while explaining the game.
- 2 Ask people to open their eyes and give only one rule: "*Without talking, create groups*". Participants are not allowed to talk, write, or mime.
- 3 Let them form groups, observe, and take notes. Once the groups are settled, ask for the collective consent (by raising their hands) that the created groups are as they should be. Wait until all participants raised their hands and repeat the question until all are done.
- 4 Hold a group discussion
 - What happened?
 - How were the groups created?
 - How did the participants feel while forming groups?
 - How did it feel to be in the bigger group? In the small group? Alone?
 - What did you observe?
 - Did you observe roles (follower, leader, dissident...)?
 - How were you behaving towards the facilitator?
 - Did you guess your colour before or during the game? How?
 - What does it say about our daily lives?

Main takeaways

- Most of the time, groups are formed according to the colour of the dot, even though at no point the facilitator mentioned that it should be the case. The only trick is that the facilitator was sure to use the word "colour" frequently enough for the participants to be conditioned – we are socialised to think in terms of

² Partially adapted from "The Dot Game" as presented by Kiwanis Builders Club (Kiwanis International). See <https://www.buildersclub.org/Files/The%20Dot%20Game.pdf>

groups, categories, and clusters. Participants could have formed groups according to the colour of the clothes or sizes, but it does not echo any socially constructed group in our society – colour does. Daily discourses (media, advertisement, movies, political speeches...) predispose us to think in terms of categories. As groups are constructs, the in-/exclusion matrix depends on what features we collectively choose to base groups' foundations.

- No one saw the colour of their dot; yet, most of the participants guessed their colour. Groups and the sense of belonging to a group do not exist *per se*. It is the way people treat us (accepting or rejecting us) that makes us understand where we should (not) belong.
- Differences in the various group sizes leads to power dynamics. The largest group in number usually feels empowered, like they are “winning” and are happy to be part of this group. The participants in the smallest group usually feel sceptical but accept to be part of the group. The person who is alone feels overwhelmed and excluded. Although the groups are fictional, the feelings raised are real.
- The groups usually look up to the facilitator, perceived as an authority that would have the correct solution. We, as trans activists (of colour), are rarely in position of power and leadership, and we might get confused when we are not told what to do. Most of the times, participants feel pressured by the facilitators to form groups but do not go against the given instructions.
- During the exercises, participants usually have different way of engaging with the group: there are people who lead (e.g. show other participants where they should go, take their hands to pull them towards a group), people who follow (e.g. when they are being pulled) and sometimes people who disagree and choose to be in another colour-group. Most of the times, those people are being sanctioned by the big group and put back in their colour-group. On the one hand, individual ideas are lost in the mainstream; on the other hand, people hesitate to act against the mainstream out of fear of being alone.
- We are used to adopt to instructed forms of communication. In addition, we are neither used to act on our own terms, nor are we trained to question or influence collective actions. In the activity, participants are suddenly not allowed to talk without getting permission – these are similar difficulties that we face in societies that do not recognise our existences and the terms we choose for our self-determination. When there is no common means of communication, it is difficult to organise ourselves.

Conclusion: Inclusion/exclusion in group-making process never stops unless we conscientiously and constantly question it. Even in a small setting during a 15 minutes simulation with activists, who may share political ideas and values, we reproduce it.

Group activity 2

Forum theatre³

Time frame: 60-90 min | Group size: 4-30 people | Facilitation level: Intermediate
Comfort zone: Medium (physically) Medium to High (emotionally) | Material: none

Activity

First step – Preparation

- 1 Split the participants into groups of 3-4. Give them time to brainstorm ideas on a short-acting performance that they will have to play. Theme: “I know now it was transphobic and I wish I had reacted differently”.
- 2 Encourage them to base their performance on a real story. The idea must relate closely to them and can be played only if at least one participant has experienced it.
- 3 Encourage them to draw the scenes or write up a description to help them enacting.
- 4 Keep moving from one group to another to see how they are doing.

Second step – Acting

- 1 A play or scene of a micro-aggression is shown twice. During the replay, any member of the audience is allowed to shout ‘Stop!’ Step forward and take the place of one of the performers, showing how they could change the situation to enable a different outcome.
- 2 The other performers remain in character, improvising their responses.
- 3 Several alternatives may be explored by different participants.
- 4 When you run out of ideas, do it again with a new group.

Third step – Feedback

- 1 Bring the big group together
- 2 Hold a group discussion
 - How did it feel like to be prepared to react?
 - How did it feel like to have the support of a group?

³ Based on the theatre methodology as formalised in Brazil by Augusto Boal. See Boal, Augusto. The rainbow of desire: the Boal method of theatre and therapy, London, Routledge, 1995.

Main takeaways

- Most of our stories look alike, but it takes time to identify patterns and realise that what happened to us is part of a bigger structure. We are not socialised or trained to identify, name, and defend ourselves against structural aggressions. It takes time and training to be able to do it. Even so, the stress and fear make it challenging to react as we theoretically wish to do.
- Sometimes, one person supporting the one affected is enough to counter-balance the power dynamic.
- There are no perfect reactions, only reactions that cost us less energy, ones that keep us safe, those that cost us more time and energy, and those that put us in danger. Reactions should aim at keeping you safe.



EMPOWERMENT

2 activities

Group activity 1

River of life & wall of accomplishments⁴

Time frame: 45-60 min | Group size: 4-30 people | Facilitation level: Intermediate
Comfort zone: Safe (physically), Medium to High (emotionally)
Material: paper, blue tape, pens, coloured pencils or felt-tip pen

Activity

- 1 Explain the metaphor of the river as a symbol for their life/activism (theme to be chosen depending on your focus). Indicate that a river sometimes flows slower, other times faster, that there are obstacles, etc. The task is to point out the significant elements (accomplishments) that have contributed to shaping their “River of Life” the way it is now.
- 2 Give them 15 minutes to draw their River.
- 3 Have them pair up and share with their partners. Make them extract 4 accomplishments from their “River of Life” and share with each other.
- 4 Gather them all back together and ask to complete the following sentence based on their “River of Life”: “Even though... I’m still here.”
- 5 Ask who wants to share with the group.
- 6 Ask everyone to hang their drawings on a wall.

⁴ Partially based the ‘River of Life’ exercise in Community Organizing curriculum published by New Mexico Department of Health, Public Health Division, 1994.

Group activity 2

“No, I won’t”⁵

Time frame: 45-60 min | Group size: 2-30 people | Facilitation level: Intermediate
Comfort zone: Safe (physically), Safe to Medium (emotionally)
Material: food (biscuits, or nuts, or chocolate), paper, pens

Activity

First step – Care giving, care receiving

- 1 Put in the centre of the room a plate of nuts, or biscuits, or pieces of fruits, or chocolate... Be mindful of each participant’s dietary needs.
- 2 Ask the participants to take two pieces and come back to their seats.
- 3 Ask them to slowly eat their first piece while thinking of one act of care they received and how it felt like.
- 4 Ask them to slowly eat their second piece while thinking of a moment when you needed an act of care but didn’t receive it, and how it felt like.
- 5 Ask them to turn and to pair up with the person next to them and share with each other the care they received or did not receive, and how it felt like.

Second step – 5 practicing saying “no”

- 1 Break the group into smaller groups of 2-3 people.
- 2 Ask participants to write down 5 questions starting with “May I” or “Would you”?
- 3 Ask each participant to ask their questions to their buddy.
- 4 Ask each buddy to clearly reject their requests with a full sentence. “No, you may not...”. No further explanation or apologies is allowed.
- 5 Alternate.

Main takeaways

- One common barrier to communicating about our needs is fear of being rejected.

⁵ Based on the workshop “Community Building Through Power and Privilege: Unpacking Needs, Boundaries and Shame” run by Zoya Honarmand and Shehryar Malik during TGEU Critical awareness training held in Berlin (2019).

- One common barrier to saying “no” is the pressure to please, the fear of being read as challenging or demanding as well as the fear of disappointing or hurting someone.
- Practicing saying and hearing “no” is a good training to resist unfair expectations made regardless of each person capacity.
- Practicing asking for something is a good training to access the feeling of being deserving.

