

NO Leaders? or ALL Leaders

What is the difference between saying **none of us is a leader** and saying **all of us are leaders**?

At first glance these two phrases may seem like two ways of saying essentially the same thing. We believe in organizing in a way that is more horizontal than vertical. We believe in equalizing participation and resisting social hierarchies.

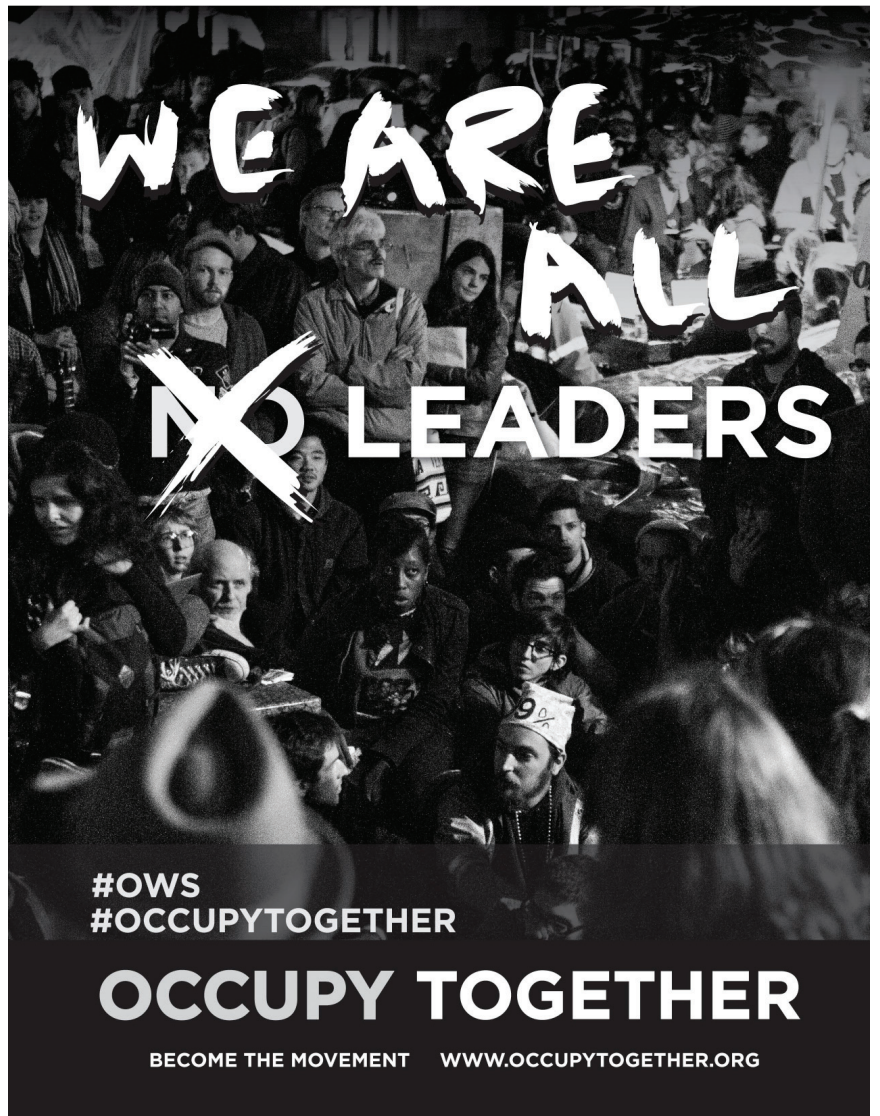
But the word *leadership* can mean a lot of things. There are things we associate with leadership that have nothing to do with hierarchy. *Taking leadership* can mean taking *initiative* on moving a project or task forward. It can mean looking for what is needed in a group, and stepping up to do that thing.

These positive group-serving associations with leadership are the reason why there's an important difference between the idea of “no leaders” and the idea of “all leaders”.

If we are part of a group that talks about having *no* leaders, this phrase can inadvertently make us overly hesitant about stepping up to take initiative. It can create a group culture where as individuals we become reluctant to be seen as moving something forward — because our peers might see us as a “leader”, which would be a bad thing.

But if we really want to change the world, we will need *a lot more people stepping up to take initiative*. The more initiative we each take in our work together — the more skills we learn and hone — the greater our collective capacity will be. Building our capacity means increasing what we are capable of achieving together. It means building our *collective power*. And building up our collective power is one of the most important challenges of grassroots organizing.

We need to build a culture where we're all invited to step up. That means stepping up in ways that also make space for others to step up — where others feel invited to step up and take initiative too. Stepping up can mean actively listening and learning from others. Stepping up can mean taking time to reflect on how different people can be socialized differently around leadership. For reasons that often have something to do with socialization around our genders, “race”, age, economic class, or other aspects of our identities, some of us are predisposed to speak confidently and to take on more visible leadership roles. While others



are often predisposed to speak less in the group, or to take on less visible roles. So, stepping up can also mean recognizing and valuing many different forms of leadership in the group. And it can mean looking for leadership potential — for strengths within the group that are latent, waiting for the opportunity to become active.

If we're all leaders, we can also take leadership by stepping up to support each other and hold each other accountable in our work together.

But if we stay in the framework of thinking we should have *no* leaders, why would we be inclined to seek to develop more leadership in our movement? If all leadership is viewed negatively, we may develop a “circular firing squad” group culture, where we tend to cut each other down and we hold back because we're afraid to stick our heads up.

We need a movement where we are constantly encouraging each other to step into our full potential and to shine as individual leaders who are working together collectively for a better world.

So, let's all be leaders. Let's step up and do this.