Mutual Aid by Dean Spade – Cliff Notes

Part One: What is Mutual Aid?

"Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them."

1. **Three Key Elements of Mutual Aid**
   1. **Mutual aid projects work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need.** They help break stigma and isolation, meet material needs, fire people up to work together for change. We organize to give each other what society withholds. [Examples: free breakfast, free ambulances, free health clinics, rides for the elderly to run errands, schools for a rigorous liberation curriculum, feminist health clinics and activist run abortion clinics, gay run health clinics, childcare collectives, tenant's unions, community food projects, pooled resources for health care/life insurance, aid in burials, support for widows/orphans, public education.]
   2. **Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements.** People often come to social movements when they are in need. Using political analysis to educate people about how/why we got here and addressing their real material needs helps them get support from a place that puts the responsibility on systems, not people. This can help them move from shame to anger and defiance, bringing them into a movement based in the belief that those on the front lines know the best way to solve problems and collective action is the way forward.
   3. **Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors.** Helping to develop skills for collaboration, participation, and decision making. Mutual aid is inherently anti-authoritarian, demonstrating how we can work together and organize human beings without coercion. Through mutual aid work we can generate boldness and the willingness to defy illegitimate authority, helping us build the world we want to see.

2. **Solidarity Not Charity**

   The current charity model originates from Christian European practices of rich people giving alms to the poor so they could buy their way into heaven; it's based on a moral hierarchy that says those who have wealth are more moral, more righteous, and those who don't are lazy, immoral, etc. Modern charity often comes with humiliating and degrading restrictions and requirements like sobriety, piety, curfews, participation in job training; this method is used to decide who "deserves" help, and even the rules that are enforced, are usually based in racist and sexist tropes. Charity does not threaten the

status quo, but actively reinforce it by never actually solving the problems of those in need and only giving them just enough to keep them exactly where they are. Charity is often contracted out to the massive non-profit sector which allows rich donors to run the show and provide them tax shelters; the modern ballooning of the non-profit sector was a direct systemic response to the mutual aid efforts of anti-racist, anti-colonial, feminist mutual aid efforts of the 1960s and 1970s. Non-profits often replicate the very harms they claim to be fighting by being run like a business in a top-down hierarchy. The charity model encourages the separation of politics/injustice from ordinary life and consumption in support of a cause which demobilizes our movements, hides the roots of injustice, and keeps us passive and complicit. In contrast mutual aid projects: mobilize lots of people, avoid restrictions and requirements that stigmatize people, are integrated into our lives, cultivate a shared analysis of the root causes, and connect people to social movements that can address the root causes.

3. **We Get More When We Demand More**

Disasters present us with an opportunity to show the cracks in the system, mutual aid is how we can help people while mobilizing them and deepening their understanding of the root causes of crisis and inequality. The system will attempt to co-opt and/or criminalize the work that we do, but studying other other mutual aid groups experiences/methods of evading police, securing electronic communication, and sheltering the most vulnerable can be beneficial in the face of this. Co-opting our methods can seem like a win (ie: USDA providing free breakfast at school for kids prompted by the success of the Black Panther's free breakfast program) but it's important to remember they can shrink or cancel these programs on a whim. Strong mobilization efforts have often only achieved minimal concessions; the efforts of the mass movements during the Great Depression and Civil Rights era have only net ungenerous, stigmatizing welfare benefits. So while we will be discouraged from asking for more than "reasonable" or "winnable" demands, we must refuse to limit our vision to win real change. Mutual aid helps us to envision a world where we don't have to rely on a beneficent savior government, where we can practice meeting each other's needs based in shared commitments to dignity, care, and justice. We don't need to be saved by some outside organization or government, we can save ourselves. Local mutual aid is more effective at meeting people's needs in a variety of situations because those with the most local knowledge are going to be the best at meeting those needs and when we are participating in making the decisions that affect us. Scaling up these efforts means building more local mutual aid groups, copying each other's practices and adapting them for our areas, inter-group coordination, sharing resources and information, having each other's backs, and coming together for bigger actions.

Part II: Working Together *On Purpose*

"Mutual aid work is important for meeting people's survival needs *right now*, and for mobilizing hundreds of millions of people to join struggles for justice and liberation."

Some Dangers and Pitfalls of Mutual Aid

Mutual aid groups can fall into four dangerous tendencies by inadvertently slipping into the charity model: dividing people into those who are deserving and undeserving of our help, practicing saviorism, being co-opted, and collaborating with efforts to replace public infrastructure with private enterprise and/or volunteerism. The best way to avoid these pitfalls is to stick closely to the core principals of what mutual aid is and relying on the radical work of the groups fighting for liberation that came before us. We must remain constantly vigilant in avoiding pitfalls that disconnect us from the root-cause work of the mutual aid model.

Some questions to help avoid the dangers and pitfalls:
Who controls our project?
Who makes decisions about what we do?
Does any of the funding we receive come with strings attached that limit *who* or *how* we help?
Does any of our guidelines about who can participate in our work cut our stigmatized and vulnerable people?
What is our relationship to law enforcement?
How do we introduce new people in our group to our approach to law enforcement?

There is no single correct model for mutual aid, so keeping in mind the general themes that distinguish mutual aid from other projects can help us make thoughtful decisions while maintaining the efficacy and integrity of the work we're doing.

No Masters, No Flakes

Since we live in a capitalist society people are unfamiliar with creating horizontal power structures, our lives are mired in hierarchy and it's often the primary way we think to organize. Building robust structures help us mobilize people and save lives; a strong, efficient, participatory, transparent decision-making structure allows everyone to feel a sense of co-ownership of the project keeping them around to continue doing the work. Clear structure helps us stick to our values under pressure, too, which is important to avoid the pitfalls and dangers. Three main tendencies emerge in mutual aid work that can cause problems [note: I would argue this is actually around 9 tendencies but the author lumps them together as written below]:

1. Secrecy, hierarchy, and lack of clarity
A lack of clear structure and little thought towards caring, emancipatory culture can result in participants not knowing what's going on, who is making decisions, or having all the decisions made by one person/clique. This risks group dynamics and can destroy a group.

2. Over-promising and under-delivering, non-responsiveness, and elitism
Biting off more than we can chew, or indicating we can cover a community need without the capacity to actually do so. These can be exacerbated by things like grant funding, because of money being at stake, or when an individual promises assistance for something without consulting the rest of the group to see if the work is even possible. Remember who we serve, calls from the community should come first and well before calls from the media, elected officials, or elites.

3. Scarcity, urgency, competition
Avoiding a scarcity mindset can keep us from inadvertently competing with other groups or people within our own group. The urgency is real but rushing will result in not doing our tasks well, and forget to be kind to one another which can lead to conflict or mistakes that harm our communities.

Group culture is important, and it's a dynamic thing that changes with each new member added to the group or as our conditions change. Taking the time to reflect on our interactions, keeping an open dialogue, and making intentional decisions can help us to support participants in doing the work, to be well, and to build generative relationships.

The most central group activity that we will do is decision making, that's the hinge that makes all of the work possible so finding a decision-making process that works best is essential. Spade's recommendation is consensus decision-making, arguing that it helps avoid the worst parts of hierarchies/majority rule (abuse of power, demobilization of most people, inefficiency). Consensus decision-making is based in everyone getting a say in decisions that affect them. It's cooperative instead of adversarial, encouraging us to hear out everyone's concerns and attempt to find a path forward that addresses them all. Anyone can block a proposal, and anyone can stand aside to indicate they disagree with the proposal but are not interested in blocking it. This can, and usually does, take place over the course of several meetings. None of this means that every decision needs to be made by the entire group. Consensus works best when everyone has a ***common purpose***, trusts each other, understands the process, a willingness to put the best interests of the group at the center, a willingness to spend time preparing and discussing proposals, skillful facilitation and agenda preparation.

Basic steps to consensus: Discussion > Identify Emerging Proposal > Identify Any Unsatisfactory Concerns > Collaboratively Modify the Proposal > Assess the Degree of Support > Finalize the Decision OR Circle Back to Steps 1-3.

Advantages of consensus: better decisions, better implementation, bringing more people into the work and keeping them involved, prevents co-option, learn to value and desire other people's participation.

To make consensus efficient and effective, Spade recommends five practices to set new mutual aid groups up for success: creating teams, creating a decision-making chart, practicing proposal making, practicing meeting facilitation, and welcoming new people. As the size of a group grows complexity is introduced so breaking off into teams to work on short- and long-term projects, prepare and submit proposals to the larger group, do quick tasks between meetings, delegate work to, and prevent decision-making from getting bottle-necked at the whole group level if they are authorized to implement certain parts of the work according to our principals. A decision-making chart as a working document can help prevent conflict while gaining efficiency and productivity from the task specific teams if they can look to it to figure out which decisions can happen in teams, which are whole-group decisions, and how to handle fast paced decisions.

A decision making chart can be as simple as answering the following questions: what is the decision being made, who initiates the decision process, who needs to be consulted, who can finalize the decision, who needs to be informed and how does that happen.

Proposal template: What is the problem being addressed? What is the solution being proposed? What teams might the proposal involve, and should it be run by them before involving the whole group? Is there any research that could help flesh out the proposal before people consider it?

Group dynamics benefit from roles like facilitation, time keeping, note taking, etc. are rotated so no one feels overburdened, folks learn new skills, and power dynamics don't become rigid or stagnate. Facilitation is key to helping make decisions together, ensuring everyone feels heard and included, prevent and resolve conflict, celebrate our accomplishments and wins, grieve our losses, and become people who can be together in new, more liberating relationships. Basic elements of a making a meeting good are starting/ending on time, writing out an agenda that can be given to everyone ahead of time (ideally), assign a note taker, assign each agenda item a time amount, have a time keeper, consider opening with a go-round check in (consider additional go-rounds when discussing things that are especially important) and establish agreements about how the meeting will move forward (ie: "three before me" – no one speaks again until at least three other people have spoken).

Bringing new people into the movement is mutual aid's strongest path to the power to make the change we want to see. Letting new folks have a chance to share why they care about the issues and joined in the first place facilitates this; many are isolated in their feelings about the current state of the world and letting them express that can help. Meeting discussions should be as accessible as possible so provide background of the problems we're addressing and activities so far; avoid jargon, acronyms, and theoretical/overly technical language. Transparency in the facilitation process keeps new folks from feeling lost. Have a team, or at least several members, who touch base with each new person to see if they have questions, how they want to plug into the work, and if there's anything else that can be done to make them feel more welcome. Have an orientation meeting for newbies.

Avoid making free content for social media, and keep the self out of the center of the work. Redefine leadership away from individualism, competition, and social climbing. This may be a life-long practice of unlearning because we've all been shaped by a system (capitalism) that makes us insecure, approval-seeking, individualist, and shallow.

Some groups work without raising money, others do their work by grassroots fundraising in their communities (small donations). Choosing to handle/manage money comes with pitfalls and logistical issues that can cause stress and take up time (ie: consider the IRS or legal problems). Our social relationship to money under capitalism is problematic and rife with opportunities for otherwise amazing people to become suspicious, secretive, or feel shame and desperation. Groups can also lose their autonomy, feeling like they owe it to their financial supporters to direct their work in a particular way or put time into measuring their work and reporting it to the supporter's demands. Sometimes groups want to pay people to do the work, without staff it can make it difficult to do anything during the typical work day/week but weighing the benefits of paid staffing is important. To acquire funding some groups may become non-profits, or get a non-profit fiscal sponsor so they can receive grants and/or tax-deductible donations. This requires financial tracking and administration skills, and can concentrate power in the hands of the people with these skills (often white, with formal education/professional experience). Ultimately, all steps involving money should involve caution along with transparent and accountable systems regarding budgeting, planning, decision-making,

Burnout is frequent in this kind of work and often the result of group/individual conflict, hurt, and dissatisfaction with the results of the work being done. It's a combination of resentment, exhaustion, shame, and frustration; it can make us need more than just a break from the work or group but to completely remove ourselves from it. Burnout can happen or worsen when we are feeling disconnected from others, mistreated, misunderstood, ashamed, overburdened, obsessed with outcomes, perfectionist, or controlling. Signs of burnout include: feelings of resentment, disrespecting group agreements or processes, feelings of competition, feelings of martyrdom, feeling overwhelmed or experiencing depression/anxiety, feeling compelled to do everything, inability to let others take on leadership roles, hoarding information or important contact, paranoia and distrust, feeling disconnected/alone or that it's "me v others", scarcity driven decision-making, having no boundaries with work, being flaky/unreliable, being defensive, shame about experiencing any of these things. Prevention of burnout means making internal group problems a top priority, ensuring new people are welcomed and trained to co-lead, establishing mechanisms to assess the workload and scale, building a culture of connection, rotating facilitation of meetings, and as a group recognize the conditions that create a culture of overwork.

Conflict is a normal part of group and relational dynamics, not an indication that something is wrong. Most of us are socially trained to be conflict avoidant by becoming submissive or attempting to dominate others to get our way. By normalizing conflict we can address it and come through it stronger rather than burning out and leaving the group/movement or causing damage. Some strategies we can use to help with conflict in a way that aligns with our principals: 1. getting away for a quiet moment to figure out our internal feelings, which can including talking to a friend or writing it down 2. Remember

that no one *made* us feel this way, but we are having strong feelings and they deserve our caring attention 3. Get curious about our raw spots, realizing that those spots belong to us and that we are not their hostage. Additionally asking ourselves "What else is true?" about a conflict; thinking of the member/groups positive qualities, ways that we benefit from their actions, things you might be unaware of that might be contributing to the situation/behavior, what else about our lives that counterbalance the situation, asking ourselves if this situation/person is our responsibility or something we can control, does this have to do with our own history/experiences. Avoid negative gossip/accusations, instead using direct communication as much as possible to avoid worsening existing conflict.