

# STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING AN ORGANISATION WITH A SOUL

*Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu*





## credits

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# contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>About the authors</b>	<b>08</b>
<b>Appreciating those who have 'built' before us</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>How the guide is organised</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>For activists in a hurry – Hope and Rudo in conversation</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Chapter 1: The soul song</b>	<b>22</b>
Our understanding of organisations	23
Thinking about organisational souls	24
Seeing and Presence in soulful organisations	25
Self-care, love and power	26
<b>Chapter 2: Exploring an organisation's soul</b>	<b>34</b>
The story of Muhame Women's Organisation	35
<b>Chapter 3: Strategies for identifying and nurturing organisational souls</b>	<b>42</b>
The story of Awakening	43
<b>Chapter 4: Setting the stage for change</b>	<b>57</b>
Change management dilemmas	58
Creative ways to solve dilemmas	60
<b>Chapter 5: Challenges that contract souls and ways to counter them</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Soul challenges</b>	<b>66</b>
Soul challenge #1: Staying attentive to seeing and presence	67
Soul challenge #2: Undiscussables	73
Soul challenge #3: Lack of creativity and routine ways of working	79
Soul challenge #4: Low balance sheet of trust	87
Soul challenge #5: Ideological contradictions in working spaces	93
Soul challenge #6: Bankruptcy in an organisational love bank	98
Soul challenge #7: Embracing diversity and inclusion	104
Soul challenge #8: Woundology syndromes	110
Soul challenge #9: Managing stress and family pressure	116
Soul challenge #10: Staying in tune with your soul song	122
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>Annex: Doing an organisational 'soul check'</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>Further reading</b>	<b>127</b>

# preface

*Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul* is an organisational development guide with a difference. Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu, two experienced and wise African feminists, have produced a guide that focuses on the 'what' and 'how' of organisational leadership rather than organisational management. It is a manual that offers a context for organisational sustainability that goes beyond financial and institutional structures and systems, to highlight how we need to address, reflect and nurture the heart of our visions and missions if our organisations are to thrive and survive. It's focus on power relationships, on 'care' and on putting values and principles at the heart of organisational systems and activities introduces new ways of thinking about how organisations operate effectively and with meaning.

The African Women's Development Fund understands the power of individual but also organisational leadership in the struggle for social change, equity and justice. We believe strongly that if we have strong women's rights organisations, those organisations will drive a truly transformational and catalytic feminist agenda around the promotion and achievement of women's rights in Africa and globally. We need strong organisations, but we *don't* need strong organisations that have no politics. I mean 'politics' in terms of progressive, feminist ideas around breaking the discriminatory systems that women live and work in. I mean organisations that enshrine equality and justice not just in their rhetoric, but in their actions. That is not going to happen if women's rights organisations simply attend one of the many management training courses in existence, and return to tick boxes about being able to develop strategic plans.

With this publication, Hope Chigudu, Rudo Chigudu and AIR bring greater integration between values and principles around social justice and equity with the kind of systems and leadership that those organisations need to thrive with integrity. I hope this guide will help individual women leaders, but also women's organisations to lead with vision and drive around social change and social justice agendas in organisations that reflect the principles and values that they espouse. The authors focus on notions of collective and individual self-care as components of our understandings of power and sustainability – agendas that are often too narrowly focused. It is both intriguing and illuminating to see them weave their histories as important and effective African women's rights activists into both the content and the style of this guide. AIR must be commended for ensuring that these committed feminists and development specialists have a platform for telling their stories and promoting their concepts, and many of their tried and tested methods in an organised and well documented manner.

It sometimes feels as if the world is obsessed with notions of leadership. There is a lot of talk about women's leadership, however it is very often leadership

conceived in a social and political vacuum or within systems that are not designed to help them thrive or promote transformation. We then wonder why the few individual women who do get into positions of influence do not succeed in making the change that we want to see. With leadership systems greater progress and achievement is possible if we support training and activities that help women and organisations strongly resonate with their core purpose, and identify how to weave those social justice and social change values and principles into their everyday activities.

I hope *Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul* will help us see change within organisations and lead to activists who are happier, who work more strategically, who can stay the course without 'burnout' and who show leadership in every aspect of the internal operations of their organisations. At the same time, that principled, values-based leadership should spread outside of individual organisations and help us change the policy and decision-making spaces, and other spaces that women and women's organisations work in.

We need leadership that has a greater purpose – that isn't about being given a title and then telling other people what to do. If we truly believe in social justice, if we truly believe in social change, then we have to exemplify those values and principles as individuals, but also as organisations. I am certain that this AIR guide will help organisations on that journey.



**Theo Sowa**

CEO, African Women's Development Fund

# glossary

**Authentic self** The unique self that is made up of a person's inner capacities, insight, expressions, and gifts (as opposed to the self defined by external frames such as job titles, professional roles or social identity).

**Feminisms** Political frameworks and social movements that identify patriarchal power as a fundamental source of injustice and inequality, and hence call to transform gender power relations in all domains. Feminisms are diverse in their origins and expressions, and include analyses and actions around how patriarchal power intersects with other systems of power such as race, class, heterosexuality and ability; and in a range of contexts such as language, the environment, technology, popular culture, and all areas of social, political and economic life<sup>1</sup>.

**Civil society organisations (CSO)** An organisations that is independent of government (non-governmental). It is used here to refer to the various forms of organisations and organising around women's rights, health, justice and wellbeing including, advocacy organisations, community associations, service delivery and support groups.

**Intersectionality** A conceptual framework that makes visible the multiple discriminations that people face, the ways in which systems of oppression (e.g. those framing gender, race, class, sexuality, ability) interact with each other, and thus the activist imperative to name and challenge multiple inequalities as part of seeking justice for different constituencies of women<sup>2</sup>.

**Organisation** A social unit of people that is structured and managed to meet a need or to pursue collective goals.

**Patriarchy** A system of male authority which legitimises the oppression of women through political, social, economic, legal cultural, religious and military institutions. Men's access to, and control over resources and rewards within the private and public sphere derives its legitimacy from the patriarchal ideology of male dominance. Patriarchy varies in time and space, meaning that it changes over time, and varies according to class, race, ethnic, religious and global-imperial relationships and structures<sup>3</sup>.

**Power celibate** Refers to the shying away from power or denying oneself power and control.

**Power** Ability to cause or prevent an action, make things happen; the discretion to act or not act.

**Power to:** refers to the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world. When based on mutual support, it opens up the possibilities of joint action, or power with.

<sup>1</sup> Horn, Jessica. 2013. *Cutting Edge Pack on Gender and Social Movements*. Sussex: Institute for Development Studies

<sup>2</sup> Horn, Jessica. 2013. *Cutting Edge Pack on Gender and Social Movements*. Sussex: Institute for Development Studies

<sup>3</sup> African Feminist Forum. 2006. *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists*. Accra: African Women's Development Fund.

**Power over:** is a traditional relationship in which one person has power over another person or one group over another group or one nation over another nation. It is a traditional relationship in the sense that dominance and coercion are used time and again before other alternatives are sought.

**Power with:** refers to the synergy that can emerge through co-creation, partnerships and collaboration with others, or through processes of collective action and alliance building.

**Power within:** refers to gaining the sense of self-identity, confidence and awareness that is a pre-condition for action.

**Soul** This is the deepest, truest part of the authentic self. It is that core, the main seed, which remains when all is stripped away but which, if overexposed, can start cracking, shrivelling and contracting. In the document we sometimes refer to a soul or souls.

**Organisational soul:** An organisational soul is a powerful entity that longs to recognise its true authenticity, tap into its true potential, stretch, learn and continue to grow.

**Soul song** Refers to the force that keeps the rhythm of an organisation. Like a heartbeat, it keeps the 'blood' pumping in an organisation, keeping it vibrant and alive. The song is like a mantra that affirms and keeps the organisation on course.

**Soul bite** This is like a sound bite for the soul. It is a power nugget that summarises key elements from a story or exercise. If one cannot remember much else from the story or exercise they may at least remember this statement.

**Well-being** Well-being is a state where an individual or group feels balanced and at peace in body, mind and soul. Well-being is realised when we are able to acknowledge the conditions of our lives including aspects that may be unfair, and yet also nurture dreams and take decisions to change or improve these conditions without harbouring anger.

**Woundology** Woundology refers to the condition of constantly pitying oneself and playing the victim. This happens at individual and collective levels with the collective version of this leading to an unhealthy atmosphere or constant complaining.

# about the authors

## Hope Chigudu



Hope Chigudu is a renowned women's rights activist, organisational development strategist and coach. After a start in the corporate world, feminism opened Hope's eyes and she joined the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Zimbabwe 'a changed woman'. Later, recognising the need for women's autonomous spaces, she became a founding member of the Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network. She worked with European funders and the United Nations, before she set up her own consulting organisation, Hope Africa.

Hope has worked for 25 years as an organisational development consultant, applying her expertise in many African countries, Asia and the Caribbean and working closely with women's funds on the African continent, in India, Nepal and Bangladesh. Hope has sat on the governance boards of Just Associates, The Global Fund for Women, Urgent Action Fund-Africa and currently serves on the boards of OXFAM South Africa and the Global Fund for Community Foundations. Known for her creative approach to organisational development and coaching, Hope provokes and encourages organisations to peel off layers of jargon, dig deeper, remain aware, hold their energy in the centre so as to avoid falling into boredom, routine and organisational erosion. Hope is the co-author of *Reviving Democracy: Citizens at the Heart of Governance* (Barry Knight, Hope Chigudu and Rajesh Tandon eds) (Earth Scan, 2002) and editor of *t* (Weaver Press, 2003). She was born in Uganda and lives in Zimbabwe.



## Rudo Chigudu



Rudo Chigudu is a feminist, activist, and artist who is committed to social justice and human rights, particularly women's sexual and reproductive rights. She has worked for nearly a decade with young women on issues of sexuality and leadership, using creative arts as a feminist popular education tool to politicise women's sexuality and its linkages to broader political discourse. Rudo has a keen interest in international law and human rights specialising in sexual and reproductive rights in Africa. Combining rights knowledge, an understanding of the African context, and creative arts, Rudo has engaged in social justice for women in the social, economic, and political arenas.

Driven by feminist rage at the injustices experienced by young Zimbabwean women she was part of a network of young women to collectively organise around sexual and reproductive rights leading to the formation of the organisation Katswe Sisterhood. The experience of co-founding an organisation and nurturing it to grow while riding the waves of an unpredictable political and economic national context, shifting global funding priorities and attempting to model a none hierarchical organisational structure helped to ground Rudo in some understanding of the challenges experienced by organisations and also what alternative ways of organising can enable in terms of successes. Rudo has also worked as a consultant to young women's organisations and collectives on movement building and organisational development. Rudo has made significant contributions in the use of the arts as both an organisational development strategy as well as a feminist popular education tool in movement building.

## appreciating those who have 'built' before us

The guide was inspired by and combined from organisations that we have worked with on the African continent. There are too many to acknowledge in a comprehensive list, but we will mention a few: Just Associates for its work on power frameworks; Kvinna till Kvinna and Urgent Action Fund and the Integrated Security framework that they have supported, Urgent Action Fund global and Urgent Action Fund-Africa for their pioneering work on well-being and sustaining activists and the African Institute for Integrated Responses to VAWG & HIV/AIDS (AIR) that is advancing a transformative feminist framework for emotional well-being and mental health including for women's rights defenders. We consulted many documents, individuals and manuals as reflected in the references and in the Further Reading section at the end of this document.

# how the guide is organised

## For Activists in a Hurry

We open with a summary that highlights what it means to build an organisation with a soul. The two people in dialogue – guide authors Rudo and Hope – raise and respond to some critical questions that are likely to be in the reader's mind. The conversation invites the reader to think seriously about some of the elements that erode the soul and those that build it.

It's hoped that those colleagues who don't have the time will read this piece and see the need to take their organisations through a path that challenges management dogma and outdated systems. We also hope that they will be motivated to address issues related to well-being.

## Introduction

This section relates the approach taken by the authors in developing this guide. It summarises the reasons for developing the guide and explains the thinking of the authors. It provides a brief background as well as the context in which this guide has been developed.

## Chapter 1

This chapter is the soul song. It indicates who the guide is meant for, whose song it is. The chapter lays the ground for concepts underlying this guide – our understanding of organisations, soul songs, 'seeing and presence', self-care, love and the different dimensions of power.

## Chapter 2

This chapter uses the case study of an organisation to examine how an organisation builds and manages its soul song, and elements that can disrupt its song. It also shows how interrelated internal and external factors can affect an organisation's balance and challenge its leadership.

## Chapter 3

This chapter focuses on how to create, nurture and revive an organisation's soul. Using a story, the chapter highlights different elements of an organisation working with a soul and the growth, challenges and changes that can happen over time. The story itself provides examples for creative ways of re-imaging and building organisations that nourish the people that work in them and produce innovative programming.

## Chapter 4

This chapter looks at how we set the stage for change. It identifies common arguments and forms of resistance to working on organisational soul, with indications of how these can be addressed.

## Chapter 5

This chapter identifies soul challenges – what we know to be the most common syndromes that haunt organisations and eventually lead to the contraction of the soul. We lay them bare and suggest strategies and activities that can be used to enhance or revive an organisation's soul song.

# introduction

This guide is about people being brave, acting bold, and addressing issues that are normally neglected in the development and human rights sectors. It's about developing an organisation that ignites positive energy, promotes well-being and ensures that a soul song can be heard in everything the organisation does. It provides some tips for sustaining activists and their organisation. We often speak about organisational sustainability, and see this as essential for maximising impact of activist organisations. However, in saying this, the definition of sustainability is usually limited to financial resources and systems and structures. This guide ventures further in demonstrating that sustainability of organisations and the ability to thrive and survive rests equally on well-being of individuals and their relationships in bringing organisations to life and in implementing their work and visions.

Think back to (or imagine) a time you were energised, fulfilled, motivated, and vitalised by the work you did. Remember the beautiful office with a breeze that brought you peace and made your whole body vibrate with joy. Think about your colleagues and how you worked in a positive team, very well knowing that you were shaping the future collectively. Remember the way you worked alongside your constituency and really witnessed the positive changes, and how those changes made you blossom and feel energised. Work was fun and meaningful. You were making a difference in the world and at the same time you took care of your well-being. You had a song in your heart that made you as sustainable as your organisation. Such work environments are real, they do exist. Why are we sure? Because for the past few years, we have been researching, writing and speaking about organisations with souls that bring these practices to life. Our search has intensified.

Today across the world, many activists are asking: 'How can we create organisations with souls, where impassioned people go to work every day, inspired by working in an environment that increases both their well-being and productivity?' Clearly activists are still hungry for knowledge and interested in learning from unconventional methods and organisational cultures that forge working in soulful organisations. If you are one of these people, we think you will love this guide.

The call to invest in activist and organisational well-being, in self-care and working in environments that nurture individual and organisational souls has become increasingly prominent over the last few years, particularly amongst women rights activists. Examples of publications on the subject include Urgent Action Fund's book, *What's the Point of a Revolution if We Can't Dance?*<sup>13</sup> the subsequent *Integrated Security Manual*<sup>14</sup>, and the *Self-Care and Self-Defence Manual for Feminist Activists* by Alejandra Sardá and Monica Alemán<sup>15</sup>. These guides were written as wake up calls for activists who take fatigue, self-sacrifice, fears, grief, pain, loss and constant 'grind' as an expected part of their work. In the process their soul song is muted and the dance of the revolution ceases.

<sup>13</sup> Barry, Jane, and Jelena Đorđević. 2007. *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?* Boulder: Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights.

<sup>14</sup> Available online at [www.integratedsecuritymanual.org](http://www.integratedsecuritymanual.org)

<sup>15</sup> CREA, Artemisa, Elige. 2008. *Self-Care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists*.

**“Today across the world,  
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If you are one of these  
people, we think you will love  
this guide.”**

The guide is our offer to all the activists who do too much sometimes at the expense of wholeness. It's for defenders of rights defenders, for development practitioners, service providers and leaders of civil society organisations, that want to be well and happy while treading the demanding grounds of activist life. It is for people who are keen to make their organisations more effective while taking care of themselves. The guide is for those organisations that want to work in a dynamic, healthier, and richer life-giving environment and for the leaders who face an array of demands, which grind the soul and tire the body. If you are reading it, it's for you.

Well-being matters. It has been demonstrated that without it, individuals as well as organisations involved in work that is difficult, traumatic, demanding and challenging will eventually collapse and fragment or they will produce results without a soul. This guide seeks to find creative ways of altering this reality or at least prompting the kind of conversations and experiments with practice towards that change.

As we present this guide, we acknowledge variations in the contexts in which individuals and organisations might be operating, including complex external environments of armed conflict, economic marginalisation and social and political turmoil, and organisational environments with restricted or low donor funding, security threats and other pressures. These variations may of course impact on the ways in which individuals, organisations and other collectives are likely to manage relationships amongst colleagues and with their organisations. The guide is therefore offered in the spirit of encouraging new thinking and innovation in how we exist, manage and grow the organisations that are central to our work.

### **The storyline**

This guide 'speaks' through story-telling and less through structured guidance in the form of exercise because the authors want each organisation to choose what action to take depending on its stage of organisational culture, ability to engage in uncomfortable conversations, growth and other needs. Using stories, the authors give the reader an opportunity to 'see' the experiences of others, a choice to place themselves or their organisation in a similar scenario and reflect on what this means for their current circumstances and what positive changes they might need.

The stories shared and examples given all originate from real but combined experiences from a range of organisations and are written in such a way that none reflect a particular organisation or individual. If any of the stories resemble your organisation or an organisation you know, it shows that the issues you are facing are common problems – and can be transformed!

The guide is structured in **chapters** that stand alone, each putting a specific idea across or offering suggestions on ways to build and sustain well-being. Therefore an organisation might choose to use a chapter at a time depending on their needs at that moment and take time to assimilate it. This approach might be more helpful in achieving gradual application of ideas as well as creating room for individuals and organisations to construct new ways of being as opposed to rushing through the entire guide. In some places, the narration is in the first person and others third person. The voice shifts depending on who is telling the story. We also use the gender pronoun 'she' as universal – so 'she' in the text refers to all genders.

Each chapter ends with soul bites and a moment for reflection. **Soul bites** provoke the user into considering issues they might not have thought about before. Finally, the guide uses **moments for reflection** to pose questions designed to get you thinking about implications for your own work – whether through dialogues in groups or in thinking about the issues raised by yourself.

**This guide is your song.**

The guide is based on reflections and exercises from the field, and our own experience as organisational development practitioners. It is your song, from us to you. We hope that it can inspire you to compose your own organisational song, one that you can connect with and sing as a collective.

In order to start off that journey, we need to take a moment and talk about organisations.



## for activists in a hurry...

Get set for an intergenerational conversation between Hope and Rudo that kicks off our offer in the form of a guide. We see this guide as an exchange of information and hence its tone is not academic but conversational. The conversation explains why organisations need to (re)ignite the fire of well-being in their practices. This comprehensive conversation summarises this guide. It's meant for extremely busy people who may not have the time to read the whole document. On its own, it can be used to kick off conversations in any organisation.



## RUDO AND HOPE IN CONVERSATION

**Rudo** *Makadini*, Hope. (Shona greeting meaning “what is your state of being?”)

**Hope** *Ndiripo* (Response meaning “I am present”). Thanks for your interest in my well-being.

**Rudo** What I am going to say needs you to be present. I have to be quite honest with you. It’s difficult for me to figure out what might emerge from your work regarding wellness, self-care and promoting organisations with souls. Do you know that your ideas are scary? You are trying to cause a shift in our ‘tribal’ consciousness as activists and people that work in civil society organisations, and resistance might be extremely high. You want to change our way of being, thinking and acting. Worse still, it seems you want to derail us from the urgent and important issues of serving communities.

**Hope** Important and urgent issues?

**Rudo** Yes. We are living in violent times – the world is on fire with unending nightmares. Violence against women is on the increase, we need to communicate, organise, and mobilise. We need activist energy, passion and fire *now*. The present moment is the only moment we have. Self-care is not a priority for us, it is only for the rich.

**Hope** I agree. The world is on fire, and this is why we need this guide to help us navigate difficult political terrains.

**Rudo** Do we need a guide? In our movement (I guess other movements will speak for themselves) we have our own many shamans and guides with their unique powerful forces. I’ll mention a few; in one corner we have professors who theorise for us and ensure we work with strong conceptual frameworks. Go to Uganda and ask for Sylvia Tamale. Who does not know her? She has removed lids from many pots of sexuality<sup>4</sup>. In another corner we have Srilatha Batliwala<sup>5</sup> with her work on building feminist movements. We have organisations that give us the tools to use in our work. For example, Just Associates provides a framework for understanding power<sup>6</sup> and Isis-WICCE’s model of empowerment<sup>7</sup> guides us as we navigate the difficult journey of working in conflict and post conflict countries. A revolution needs funds. Urgent Action Fund-Africa and African Women’s Development Fund and other funds are doing what they can to provide resources. And lest I forget, our work is guided by strong values and ideology. We have our *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists*<sup>8</sup> guiding how we do this work that we love.

**Hope** So why are you blaming me for changing your tribal consciousness when your own shamans have already done so? I know the people and organisations on the list you have given me and I’ll add more. The Stephen Lewis Foundation and the initiative they have supported The African Institute for Integrated Responses to Violence Against Women & HIV/AIDS (AIR) is showing the world the importance of building a community of trauma healers, documentalists, and feminist counsellors. Jessica Horn has broadened spaces for cultural life, through her revolutionary

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Tamale was the dean of the Faculty of Law and Jurisprudence at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, from 2004 to 2008. Selected publications: 1999 *When Hens Begin To Crow: Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Uganda*; 2011 editor *African Sexualities: A Reader*

<sup>5</sup> [wunrn.com/news/2008/05\\_08/05\\_1908/08/051908\\_feminist.htm](http://wunrn.com/news/2008/05_08/05_1908/08/051908_feminist.htm)

<sup>6</sup> [www.justassociates.org](http://www.justassociates.org)

<sup>7</sup> [www.isis-wicce.org](http://www.isis-wicce.org)

<sup>8</sup> [www.africanfeministforum.com/the-charter-of-feminist](http://www.africanfeministforum.com/the-charter-of-feminist)

artistic expression. She captures, poetically, some of the horrors you have talked about. Here is her soul enriching and powerful lamentations that she sings from the Ruwenzori Mountains in western Uganda (where her ancestors hail from).

*arms are meant for embracing  
minds to cultivate dreams of flight*

*I see you blackchild  
ebony skin and white teeth  
resident of shadowlands  
the carcass of Gulu town*

*morning has mothered no millet  
afternoon no tea  
howling belly full of gunfire  
rumbling like raging sky<sup>9</sup>*

So Rudo, many of us, including you, are already questioning and defying what society taught us; that is to be 'power celibate'<sup>10</sup> when it comes to our own wellness. We have to give ourselves the permission to compose our own soulful songs that emphasise the importance of wellness.

**Rudo** You mention power but what does it have to do with wellness?

**Hope** Power is the root of human experience. We need to continue learning to reclaim our power to love ourselves, to fight for our wellness and our right to happiness, to work in nurturing and supportive environments. Remember that claiming rights and dignity is a journey. In every tour we should create sanctuaries that don't just lift consciousness around social and political issues, but also expand our ability to care for ourselves. If we are unsettled internally, we will not have the security and the power we need for the external battle. Am I exaggerating when I say that we work and work, with no time to stop and think about what it is we deliver so diligently? No time to speak amongst ourselves, no time to listen to our bodies, hearts and minds and no time to listen to our own organisations? Perhaps one of the things we are really missing, at heart, is the kind of conversation you and I are having right now, maybe the lack of such conversations is what makes us refuse to listen to our bodies, hearts and minds. We need to learn to be present in the world and really soak it in; this brings vibrancy to our daily lives, our work and organisations.

**Rudo** Ohooooooo! I hear you but am still wondering. To seriously talk about self-pampering while there are women on the brink of death and the verge of collapse. Can we really do that Hope?

**Hope** Hope what? Our work can sometimes seem to be at odds with our bodies, but should it? The work of activism is heavy, on a daily basis we are immersed in a horrifying picture of humanity at the edge of an abyss as you have said. So we absorb all the negative energy that comes from such work. And then you know what? Eventually this work that we love leaves its mark on us. We find our spirits and organisations woven into negative things. Souls of our organisations start shrinking because they are not being fed with nourishing food. Our inner power begins to shrivel and with it our collective power. We stop seeing all we are capable of because we have loved the self out of us leaving us with little if anything at all to give.

<sup>9</sup> Horn, Jessica. 2006. 'Lament in ebony' in *Speaking in Tongues*. London: Mouthmark. Available online at [www.badilishapoetry.com/jessica-horn](http://www.badilishapoetry.com/jessica-horn)

<sup>10</sup> The term power celibate refers to the shying away from power or self-denial of control.

**Rudo** This conversation makes me scared, organisational souls? Isn't that blasphemy?

**Hope** Are you afraid? Fear is dangerous. It steals your dreams, weakens your resolve, paralyses you and hinders you from pursuing awesome ideas. It is even worse when fear grips an emerging leader like you. The result is toxic. It creates a frightened culture where people can't cough without seeking approval from the leader. Fear strangles creativity and chips away at the soul.

An organisation's soul pushes it in the toughest times and gives it an energising song. But an organisation born with limited soul dies easily for lack of a song. Even if it does not die, instead of enhancing its creativity, it becomes a shell, a carbon copy looking externally for best practices but not engaging its own unique contributions. Once it identifies those practices, it tries to emulate. Then it's on its heels being forced to play a constant game of catching up. Besides, those best practices will one day become obsolete. An organisation with a shrinking soul does not value people whether they are employees or its constituency. The organisation might look sweet outside but inside it is bitter. There is no space for draining out the sourness. Eventually those who work in such an organisation leave scarred, burnt, bitter, tired and angry.

I can see that you are dying to ask me how one sustains the soul of an organisation. Learn the power of rituals. As much as our bodies require food and nourishment, our souls (be they personal or organisational) require rituals to stay whole. Rituals are also necessary because there are certain problems that cannot be resolved with words alone.

**Rudo** Where on the organisational organogram should the soul be?

**Hope** You are boxed in organograms! I have always said that our organisations will never transform until they change their organisational organograms and structures. Rudo, the soul is not a human being. As Parker J. Palmer says so beautifully:

*The soul is like a wild animal — tough, resilient, savvy, self-sufficient, and yet exceedingly shy. If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is to go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we are willing to walk quietly into the woods ... the creature we are waiting for may well emerge, and out of the corner of an eye we will catch a glimpse of the precious wildness we seek<sup>11</sup>.*

In organisations you will see the soul in the culture of the organisation (the way they do things) the courage and resilience they show in their work, the way they take a stand and risks to transform the world for the better, originality of work, commitment to the constituency, language used, spaces for reflection and renewal, room for artistic expression retooling and regaining energy.

**Rudo** Ok, I get it. I finally understand what you mean but who will take us seriously? Already money going to women's rights work has been reduced tremendously<sup>12</sup>, what if the donors hear that some of us spend valuable time in nature, drumming, making fire and burning incense, apologising to our bodies for neglecting them, dancing and singing in the name of wellness? In a strategic plan, what would be the indicators of wellness? With your craziness and love of the absurdity, I can see you

<sup>11</sup> Palmer, Parker. J. 1999. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. New Jersey: Jhn Wiley & Sons.

<sup>12</sup> Data and analysis from the Association for Women in Development (AWID)'s Resourcing Women's Rights initiative available online at [www.awid.org/publications/beyond-investing-women-and-girls-mobilizing-resources](http://www.awid.org/publications/beyond-investing-women-and-girls-mobilizing-resources)

writing: 'Indicator 1 – Apologised to five parts of my body for treating them poorly while I worked like a donkey'. Your wellness concept is a tough sell against our organisational priorities of fundraising, project implementation and report writing.

**Hope** Civil society organisations and donors! Wellness is not an additional responsibility or luxury. It's actually *the work*. It's about an organisation being so well that it has the energy to produce sustainable results for its constituency. It's about enabling all of us to break free of limits created by power dynamics, resentment, suspicion and brokenness. This, Ms. Rudo, means immense individual and organisational change. I swear. It demands a fundamental shift of mind, resources, and energy! It also requires courage, humility, re-alignment of heart, mind, body and soul. We have to dare to go where we have never been, for example introducing rituals that ensure that we are in touch with our organisations and our bodies. And yes, push for unusual performance indicators.

**Rudo** I am listening with my mouth open. Souls, immunity, wounds, rituals! Hope the language you are introducing our civil society world will make sisters think you are a witch.

**Hope** Rudo, are you afraid of witches and the power of words? Witches are wonderful creatures and language is a clear indicator of who we are. We need to ensure the language we use is congruent with and reflects our intentions. Activism itself is a unique journey that should never ever follow the well-travelled road.

Anyway Rudo, we need to get to the work of writing a guide on developing organisations with souls. The guide will explore the dynamics that fragment us as activists at individual and organisational levels and suggests ways of healing and rejuvenation. The guide will be based on our collective experiences and it will give other activists a chance to agree or disagree with us, add and subtract. After all so much well-being work is being built all over the world, we can only add a brick to what already exists.

Before you go, let me remind you that the mystery of building organisations with souls is love; love of the work that we do and the people we do it for, love of colleagues, and every one that we serve, and above all, self-love, the most powerful energy in the universe.

So let's get on our computers and work!

*And it was in this spirit that this guide was written.*

**“Wellness is not an additional responsibility or luxury. It’s actually *the* work. It’s about an organisation being so well that it has the energy to produce sustainable results for its constituency.”**

## Chapter 1

# the soul song

In this chapter we explore the core concepts underpinning our approach to thinking about and working to build organisations with souls. We outline our understanding of organisations, the concept of a soul song, the principles of seeing and presence, and the role of love, self-care and power in building and sustaining organisational souls.

## OUR UNDERSTANDING OF ORGANISATIONS

Organisations can be defined, at their simplest, as people grouped together and managed in order to achieve collective goals. In the world of human rights, development and social justice the pressure that both donors and civil society organisation culture places on focusing on collective goals means that we rarely invest in thinking and working on the people that make up organisations, and on the ways in which they are grouped and managed. In our experience as both organisational development practitioners and as feminist activists we have learnt that organisations are not just inanimate machines. They and the people that create, populate, earn a living from, sustain and even undermine them are shaped by power relations, complex interpersonal dynamics and other relationships.

Individuals who work in organisations matter, not in the self-serving sense of tools to deliver on organisational 'outputs', but in the sense that each staff person, volunteer and board member contributes their unique expression, which in turn contributes to the growth of the organisation. If we are going to speak about organisations with souls then, we need to consider not just the well-being of whole organisations but also the well-being of its individual parts.

Organisations are like living beings. We often think of organisations as created to deliver outputs. However organisations are not just functional – they are physical, emotional and spiritual. They have souls, and it is each organisation's soul song that keeps its rhythm going, energising and inspiring growth. It is these soul songs that act as a lullaby putting anger and conflict to sleep. Without a song in an organisation to motivate and energise people, to bring all stakeholders together into one rhythm, fragmentation and disintegration ensue. In actuality organisations are like living beings – they are created by and sustained by people who bring to them life, energy, ideas, skills, visions and financial resources – and combined form a collective soul. The soul of an organisation is not related to religion in any way, it is that deepest, truest part of its authentic self. It is that core, the main seed, which remains when all is stripped away. The soul is not stagnant, it grows and it learns. Nevertheless when the elements that protect it are stripped away, it starts to shrink and shrivel and it forgets its song. It might even try to sing other organisation's soul songs and inevitably, this results in terrible discord, disharmony and fragmentation.



## THINKING ABOUT ORGANISATIONAL SOULS

### *soul songs - beginning to sing*

Every soul has a song. The song pushes it in the toughest times and gives it energy it did not know it possessed.

In our *Beinika* clan, when a woman feels that it's time to conceive, she goes away and spends time in a forest alone. She calls on the spirits for guidance, inspiration and creativity. She then composes a most powerful, soulful and well-being song for her baby about to be conceived. This woman teaches the song to all her peers and sisters and together with her, and throughout her pregnancy they sing it to the unborn baby. On the day the baby is born, the song is the first thing she hears. This song guides her child from birth to death. It also motivates, energises, assuages the soul's cry and pain and increases mindful presence. It's a song that enhances power within and supports the soul to withstand processes of rusting and erosion. All her peers know her song and she knows theirs. When they are happy and when they are down, they sing for each other.

As the child grows up, the song plants itself in the garden of her soul, remains there a lifetime, and blossoms anew with each passing year. Every now and again, the words of the song remind her to stop and live, to allow herself to be distracted from the cult of productivity and the busyness of life. The song also reminds the owner to create time to imagine and dream impossibilities and generally be free from the fear of trying new things. It nudges her to move away from the tendency to conceive of life as a series of tasks to be accomplished rather than moments to be filled with living. It's a song that pushes its owner to create wholeness in a fractured world. It provides the tools for solving social conflicts and contradictions and gives her the societal support to discover and fulfil her life mission and unique contribution. When the earthly life is over, the song supports its owner to let go in a graceful, gentle but powerful way.



## SEEING AND PRESENCE IN SOULFUL ORGANISATIONS

In growing an organisation with a soul, the concepts of **seeing** and **presence** are key. In South Africa, Zulu language speakers use the greeting *sawubona*, which literally translates to 'I see you'. The response is *sikhona* meaning 'I am here'. Maybe to them it is just a greeting, but it's loaded with meaning. In Shona, spoken in Zimbabwe, the greeting is *makadini*, which means 'what is your state of being?' And the response is *ndiripo* which means 'I am present/I am here'.

Seeing and presence are key elements of being human in African cultures. Seeing is a sign of acknowledgement that you matter. It signals that I know your name, I respect you and not just as an object but as a person that I see with both physical and spiritual eyes.

Presence is equally important, not just as being physically present but being present with heart, mind and body. It means that you are conscious of what is going on within you and around you. You are able to know what your subconscious is doing in a conscious way.

Some organisational cultures are such that people don't see each other or ask about each other's state of being. There is hardly any conversation, or acknowledgement of each other. They sit in their individual cubicles or offices and do their work quietly, sometimes meeting in the collective kitchen where each makes her own tea and goes back to her desk. They don't think, 'What effect does my action have on the energy of people around me?' It is also common in both organisations and the social movements that the only people who are 'seen' are those with official power. Singling out heads of organisations or individual leaders and celebrating them, without acknowledging that their success was a result of team work, and collective thinking, action and bravery happens in many organisations.

Some heads of organisations never 'see' junior staff, younger people or people who carry less official authority, and therefore do not connect to them as fellow humans. Those who are not seen eventually internalise their 'non-existence', and stop dreaming for the organisation. They become robots focused only on the work they were hired to do (without ownership of the organisation) and waiting for the day when they will leave and go where they can be seen. In an organisation where people are not respected and acknowledged, there is no sense of a collective presence.

The behaviour of not seeing or asking about another's well-being confuses those who come from cultures where people care about each other. Eventually those not seen may lose their inclination to greet and connect as they are immersed in the hostile and alienating silences of their workplace. Presence is also affected, in that people feel less heart-felt commitment to their work and to their teams, which impacts on the quality of work and contributes to low morale and a lack of dynamism.

## SELF-CARE, LOVE AND POWER

**Self-love is where self-care starts.** Complementing seeing and presence in engaging other people, is the capacity for self-care – of seeing and being present for yourself. Yet many of us have been brought up to love others but not ourselves. Loving the self has nothing to do with being selfish, self-centred or self-engrossed. It means that you accept yourself for who you are and that you accept responsibility for your own development, growth and happiness. It means that because you have enough for yourself, you also have something to give others. You can't give what you don't have. Self-love flows inwards to the deepest parts of the self and it ignites and radiates. It increases happiness. Self-love means having the power to defy, to challenge and to choose. It is about having inner power that enables us to discard things that do not work for us.

Self-love invokes the power of presence or self-awareness. It supports the soul song to be captivating and the soul to flourish and to unfold in a wonderful and refreshing way. It's up to each individual to ask themselves what makes them happy and fulfilled, and to invest in it.

**Self-care is a political activist strategy.** It is important to note that self-care is not a separate methodology but a political activist strategy underpinned by the understanding that well-being is the ultimate goal of the work that many of us do. Self-neglect depoliticises activist work. Given the negativity that surrounds activists, in a world full of pain, poverty, trauma, disease, war, violence and suffering be it at the hands of the extended family, the media, the socio-economic climate or political experiences, it becomes more than a political act to reclaim our power and use it for well-being. Then self-care turns into an act of revolutionary warfare as Audre Lorde<sup>15</sup> called it or revolutionary love as Jessica Horn<sup>16</sup> calls it.

**Love:** We should not fear using this important word in our organisations. As many people have argued, love is the ultimate motivation of a great transformative and radical leader. In an organisation, a leader should consciously and intentionally cultivate love in order to generate boundless energy and inspire courageous activism. And she must provide proof that it is all worthwhile, proof through the experience of phenomenal success as well as glorious failure.

<sup>15</sup> Audre Lorde was a Caribbean-American writer, radical feminist and outspoken lesbian activist who famously wrote "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." (in Lorde, Audre. 1988. *A Burst of Light: Essays*. New York: Firebrand Books)

<sup>16</sup> Horn, Jessica. 2013. Speech given at Ted X Euston Salon, London, 3 April.

“*Seeing* and presence are key elements of being human in African cultures. *Seeing* is a sign of acknowledgement that you matter. It signals that I know your name, I respect you and not just as an object but as a person that I see with both physical and spiritual eyes. Presence is equally important, not just as being physically present but being present with heart, mind and body. It means that you are conscious of what is going on within you and around you.”



## THINKING ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND LOVE

I once talked about importance of love to a Director and she jumped as if stung by a bee. She leaned forward and whispered, "this love thing...how do I talk to my staff about love and remain professional at the same time? Care yes, love no my sister". I too leaned forward and reminded her that relationships in the world of activism are won by paying attention to the needs, desires, hopes and aspirations of everyone who touches or is touched by our work. That is love. "We need to use our judgement to know when to stand firm on principle but also when to sacrifice some of our own short term needs in order for the organisation to be successful in the long run. If we say that love has no place at work, we are saying that human beings have no appropriate place at work. We bring our hearts to work. It's not like we arrive at the office, leave them throbbing at the gate and pick them on our home. Let us use the precious organ effectively. Without calling and commitment of your heart, there is no good reason for you to take a stand, to take a risk, or to do what it takes to change the world for the better". Her face softened and she sat comfortably in her chair. I guess the idea of leaving her heart throbbing at the gate frightened her.

## POWER AND TRANSFORMATION

Our attitude and belief patterns, whether positive or negative, are all extensions of how we define, use –or do not use – power. For us to be well, to take care of ourselves, we need to have an internal concept of power, a power *within* that fuels our capacity for action. Drawing power from external sources is not enough. We may be trying to cope with feelings of inadequacy, or powerlessness, or we may be trying to maintain control over people or situations that we believe empower us. Whatever it is, our relationship to power determines the degree to which we take care of ourselves. Our ideas of power also heavily influence how we interact with others and how we engage as part of a collective.

Self-care, self-love and presence are central to building and manifesting power within. As we begin to get more in touch with ourselves and appreciate the beauty of well-being, we begin to feel our power and know it's not power over others but a personal power glowing inside. This kind of power extends to our organisations and movements so that together we are stronger and able to resist. Indeed our movements are born out of resistance to the forces and forms of power that dominate, subordinate and oppress and it is this kind of power we equip ourselves to challenge and transform, when we nurture and nourish our organisations and movements through self-care and well-being.

Comprehending the different forms of power is one way of raising our own political consciousness. We learn what makes us strong, what weakens our spirits and how to prevent loss of personal power. We also learn how to re-create ourselves, particularly when we have gone through a rough patch of a disempowering context. Therefore, the women's and other social movements should be anchored in a deep analysis of power and an understanding of how power dynamics play out in private and public spaces to form women's realities. Understanding, harnessing and transforming of different forms of power is essential in the struggle against oppression, domination and exploitation. This understanding and positive use of power emphasises the harmony of the soul song and keeps the song in tune.

It is also important to note that different forms of power come together to form the solid base of our movements. When human bodies fragment, these forms of power, especially power within, power to and power with fragment as well. A fragmented movement/organisation produces excessive and brutal power over. It can also produce paralysis because no one is willing to give in for the sake of the greater good.

Organisations and movements that engage in practices that sustain them are much more likely to be conscious of their actions and the impact they have on others. Instead of operating from fear and bitterness, they engage confidently. Problems are inevitable, however by being attentive to an organisational soul and the dynamics that frame and sustain it, we argue that it is possible to identify potential organisational crises, to prevent them from occurring or to resolve them successfully. Working with a healthy organisational soul also has important qualitative impacts– including less absenteeism, higher morale, openness to innovation, genuine caring for constituencies and communities the organisation works with, and for one another, improved leadership and overall performance.



## THINKING ABOUT POWER IN SOULFUL ORGANISATIONS

**Power to** – capacity to take action is not just ‘agency’, it has to do with physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological wellness; a sense of boldness and creativity. As activists and leaders we require ongoing healing lest we bring bitterness into our spaces. The very state of our bodies and health matters so we are in a position to do the work that needs to be done. Most of the issues we are confronted with on a daily basis make us brutally sick. Lack of power to take care of ourselves not only makes us bitter, sick and angry but can also be paralysing. Shifting our individual and collective behaviour and embodying these changes in our work with partners, we will seed ground on which they and the broader field of community organising can evolve.

**Power within** – a sense of one’s own dignity, capacity to thrive and profound sense of empowerment is always undermined by doubt, shame, guilt produced by the fragmentation and exhaustion of our lives, by societal and organisational dos and don’ts, religious dogmas, lack of choice and by taboos and stigma regarding issues of sex and sexuality. Power within is the ultimate driving force, the fuel in our engines. How can we create organisations that do not kill self-esteem, authenticity, pride and creativity? How can we build organisations that create fulfilment and a sense of empowerment and liberation? How can we let go of the victim mentality and seize our own power?

**Power with** – we cannot construct sustainable collective power if we are unable to recognise and respect our differences, deal with competition and the need for recognition, all of which emerge from our deeply held emotional, psychological and spiritual deficits and traumas. Collective power comes from honesty and truth telling, accepting creative tensions and the contradictions we sit with without letting them cripple us. We need to get over individual egos and experience collective inner wisdom. Cultivating and practicing self-awareness, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, practice communication skills, and innovative thinking and applying these skills to create a more integrated, nimble and visionary organisation that seizes upon the creative capital of all involved.

Inspired by the Just Associates power framework<sup>18</sup>

**“Organisations are like living beings. We often think of organisations as created to deliver outputs. However organisations are not just functional – they are physical, emotional and spiritual. They have souls, and it is each organisation’s soul song that keeps its rhythm going, energising and inspiring growth.”**

<sup>18</sup> Miller, Valerie., VeneKlasen, Lisa., Reilly, Molly and Clark, Cindy. 2006. *Making Change Happen: Power.* Washington D.C.: Just Associates.

# soul bites

Every organisation has a soul song. It is up to the organisation to guard it so well that it does not allow itself to be diverted from it.

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The capacity to see ourselves and each other is central to affirming our presence and role in the world. Nurturing the ability to “see” each other in an organisation is critical to composing and sustaining the soul song.

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Self-care is central to individual and organisational well-being, and it begins with self-love – on being able to see and be present to yourself.



# a moment for reflection

01

What is your organisation's soul song? Do you feel like everyone in the organisation knows it, and enjoys singing it?

02

What are some of the elements that can cause discord and make you forget the lines of your song? Have you experienced these in your organisation?

03

How is power exerted in your organisation? Is it balanced more towards nurturing power within and power with? Are there many examples of dominating power over? How does that affect your organisation's soul song?

04

In your organisation does everyone feel seen? Do you feel seen? How does that affect presence in your individual and collective work?

## Chapter 2

# exploring an organisation's soul

In this chapter we show how organisations across the African continent working for women's rights and well-being juggle different demands from their constituencies, donors and contexts and in the process stammer their soul songs. The chapter is based on the story of Muhame Women's Organisation (MWO). The case study provides a snapshot of the realities and kinds of organisational practices that exist, and the individual and collective impact of failing to create an environment in which the soul song grows and thrives. The story of MWO shows that when activists do too much, they lose their joy in the doing and only see work and deadlines. They stop seeing the song in their work.

## THE STORY OF MUHAME WOMEN'S ORGANISATION

Muhame Women's Organisation (MWO) was established in 2008 to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325<sup>19</sup> on women, peace and security. It was born against a backdrop of crisis in Kenya after incumbent President Mwai Kibaki was declared the winner of the presidential election. Supporters of Kibaki's opponent, Raila Odinga of the Orange Democratic Movement, alleged electoral manipulation and violence erupted especially in Western Kenya. The crisis left a trail of horrors – torture, death, missing persons, widows and a broken society.

The approach taken by MWO to implement UNSCR 1325 provides a snapshot of the kind of endless political work that many CSOs do, the opportunities and constraints as well as associated fatigue, burn out and trauma that eventually shrink organisational souls. It shows that if there is no coherent strategy that addresses activists' spiritual, psychological, physical and safety needs it is hard to sustain the energy to work for change. This in turn also affects the vitality of the constituencies and movements that organisations engage as well.

**The organisation:** When Wanjiku realised that the circumstances in Western Kenya demanded a response in the form of a 'baby', she went to a forest and composed a song for her unborn organisation, MWO. She taught the song to other women whom she persuaded to co-create MWO. When MWO was born, it was received with a song. It was hoped that the song would guide it throughout its lifetime.

MWO's aim was to ignite women's leadership in the contexts of insecurity and militarism so as to ensure peace through implementation of resolution UNSCR 1325. The Resolution was the result of sustained lobbying by feminist groups in the United Nations. Seen by many as a positive measure in response to a call for greater engagement with the core principles of the Beijing agenda in relation to security, UNSCR 1325 provides a useful starting point for discussions about women's position in processes relating to armed conflict, peace, stabilisation and post-conflict reconstruction. The organisation standpoint is that there will never be lasting peace, after conflict, unless the needs of women are met; not only justice for the victims and survivors of crimes of war, but their active involvement in creating a society in which their rights are respected and their voices heard.

**Starting point:** "We were really, really scared. It was a big project and we were not sure where to start, where to draw the first line. We had no money but were sure the spirit of our song for MWO would support her" Founding Director Wanjiku.

Wanjiku, the founder, a young woman with the capacity to think big and the courage to act boldly, was raised from an early age to consider the needs of others and nothing would stop her. She sold her car and got the initial resources. Eventually the organisation submitted 86 proposals, all of which were rejected apart from one. A sympathetic funder who was willing to take risks provided seed money.

MWO started its work by carrying out research to understand national interpretation of the main objectives of Resolution 1325, and explore the government's position on gender – and by association equality – in the country. The research uncovered the values of key actors especially the biases of the state

<sup>19</sup> The United Nations Security Council (UN SC) adopted resolution 1325 on women and peace and security on 31 October 2000. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Resolution 1325 urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts.

apparatus in relation to the tension between 'hard politics' (security and defence) and 'soft politics' (social and public policy). After the research, three staff sat to think of creative ways of challenging mainstream responses to women, peace and human security.

**Changing strategies:** After two years, the organisation realised that peaceful possibilities are impossible without transforming the underlying structural and political dimensions of poverty. It had no choice but to begin the monumental task of including microfinance in its programmes and strategies. They were not really convinced about the gender politics of microfinance, and the approach was not their song, but how else were they to put money in women's hands? Promoting microfinance requires skills different from those of promoting peace, so staff members were trained in this new area while a new person was recruited to be in charge of the programme. However there were no resources for investing in new infrastructure for learning to incorporate microfinance in on-going programmes. The organisation made many mistakes but did not give up.

**Gender, culture and power:** Wanjiku confided: "In our rush to solve practical problems, we abandoned our song many times. We did not have the time to reflect on and theorise our work. We grabbed at strategies some of which neither addressed structural and fundamental causes of the problems nor stretched our thinking in important directions. After all without an underlying theory, how could the strategies be otherwise? So we were working for transformation especially at household level, the seat of patriarchal power, but did we know what was on the other side of that transformation? Some of the single women, especially widows, started earning money but for the married women it was impossible. Fights with partners and husbands for the little money they were making became common with patriarchal cultural traditions being invoked to justify control of women's income. Then the organisation knew that it had no choice but to address issues related to power, gender, culture, and patriarchy". MWO embarked on another fundraising venture, hardly succeeded but found a way of taking money from another programme. A consultant who did not understand their song was hired to train all staff members, and succeeded at least in starting a conversation within the organisation. In the meantime, work became too much for existing staff, and an additional staff person was hired.

**Intersectionality:** In neighbouring Uganda the Anti-Homosexuality Bill was signed into law by the government. Some of the colleagues working on sexual rights sought MWO's help and support. The Director agreed to host them while they worked out a strategy to be safe. All the MWO staff members were extremely angry and started a prayer group. They called themselves 'Prayer Warriors'. The Prayer Warriors waged a war against the Director's supposed 'immorality'. The Director realised that it was time to start talking about inclusiveness and diversity if indeed the organisation was to remain on the cutting edge of peace building. She also knew that one of her staff members was HIV+ so here was an opportunity to put HIV on the table. Again she invited a consultant to talk about the importance of diversity in a human rights organisation and the need to take an intersectional approach that acknowledged different forms of injustice and how they are linked. The consultant was not well received by staff. The land-lady heard about the

discussions they were having, and gave MWO notice to quit her house. She did not want her house 'tainted' by immorality. The struggle of finding new office premises took its toll on the organisation. They moved to a smaller room. Boxes were piled on top of each other. Human bodies were so close that there was no room for privacy let alone work without interruptions. The move created tension but the Prayer Warriors who started it all never apologised. At this stage, Wanjiku realised that when she recruited staff, she had not given time to discuss the organisational song. Consequently, each staff member sang alone and the result was disharmony.

**Programmatic expansion:** Within three years of its existence, the issues covered by the organisation kept increasing. They included peace building and trauma healing, microfinance, violence against women and girls, poverty, inequity in access to and control over resources, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. This young and small organisation was taking responsibility for things the government was meant to be carrying in light of its policy commitments. MWO was trying to move a mountain with a spoon. The organisation did not have funds and was overstretching existing staff. With growth, more complex internal strategies, systems and diversified skills, capacities and knowledge were needed. However, many funders were not willing to provide funds for staff development. This increased the workload of the Director but also led to some tension within the organisation. The Director was bitter that staff was not doing enough to fundraise and support her in other programmatic areas. Staff complained that she was making them work like slaves. They worked from Monday to Sunday. In the words of a staff member, "There are many times when I am overwhelmed with work that am forced to spend nights at the office". Unsupported by the vibrancy and energy emitted by a soul song, they were all so tired that by the end of the week, they could hardly talk to each other.

**Challenges related to the big picture:** While the organisation continued to register some impressive successes in its line of work, unfolding events in Nigeria including the abduction by fundamentalist group Boko Haram of over 200 girls, increased. Attacks by al-Shabab in Kenya, and civil war in South Sudan and the Central African Republic, fought largely along Muslim-Christian lines, among other violent events, pushed the organisation to re-think its strategies. In the words of the Director, "It was clear we needed to work with faith-based organisations on issues of women's rights (and our donors were really pushing us to do this) but then religion, and religiously tinged issues, intersect with every facet of political, economic, legal and social dimensions. So which issues should we take on board? Besides, religious groups are divided on positions towards specific issues of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights".

In the meantime there was growing tension, and resistance in the women's movement between faith-based/faith-inspired women activists and more secular-leaning women ones on how to engage religious groups. Managing such challenges without resources for team building was extremely difficult.

**Political environment:** As the organisation was struggling with its volume of work, in the world outside, levels of injustice and exclusion were increasing. Civil and political spaces were shrinking and there were numerous warnings for CSOs

to stay out of politics – an unrealistic demand. Indeed the political environment was becoming highly repressive and frightening. MWO co-organised with other civil society groups across the country to engage their local leaders, demanding accountability for public funds. The ability to protest was met with tear gas and police brutality. The organisation found itself in a situation where the work it was doing was deemed as illegal by the state. What they took for granted, such as a simple act of self-expression was heavily policed and regulated. MWO was almost immobilised by the size of the tasks they were carrying in a disempowering context. The Director said the situation needed to change, she kept pushing staff to join protests and they were really angry and lamented, “we are underpaid without medical insurance and on top of that she wants us to take risks”.

**Governance systems and collegial support:** The governance board was comprised of wonderful women but unfortunately none of them understood the song of MWO. They meant well but without an understanding of the soul song were unable to provide strategic direction to the organisation and often failed to respond when the Director sent information. There was also very little support from other sisters within the movement and interaction was limited to meeting at workshops and cocktail parties. In order to create space for interaction the MWO Director and other Directors formed a Directors Forum to create a mechanism for support. However it was taking time to generate its own song and momentum.

# soul bites

Soul songs are designed for an ensemble, they cannot thrive if they are not sung in unison by all within the organisation. Ensure all staff members know the soul song and are happy to sing it.

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When a context is hostile it is easy to feel helpless, however building up a base of support and seeking it when needed can help to re-energise change. This means that establishing networks with shared values is an important part of growing a soul.

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Remembering the organisation's soul song is critical as you make choices about what issues to take on and what issues to leave for others to work on.

# a moment for reflection

01

The journey of MWO is like that of many other organisations. Thinking about the story of MWO, consider the questions below:

- What did the organisation's soul look like to begin with? What changed?
- What are the different ways that staff responded to challenges?
- What do you think lay behind their different responses?
- How did the external political, social and economic environment affect what was happening within the organisation?
- How did the non-stop juggling of too many issues affect the well-being of the organisation?
- What strategies might MWO have applied that would resonate with their 'soul song'?



## 02

Returning to your current role in your organisation, consider the questions below:

- What similarities exist between MWO and your own organisation?
- What could be done to prevent the MWO story from becoming the story of your organisation?
- What would need to be done and by whom?
- What is the soul song of your organisation if you do not have one what would you like it to be?
- How can a soul song be retained during conflict?
- How can it be retained when there are increasing priorities and competing demands as an organisation grows?

## Chapter 3

# strategies for identifying and nurturing organisational souls

This chapter explores how to create and nurture an organisation's souls and allow it to thrive and expand. It also shows how an organisational soul can contract and shrivel if not nurtured. It's not a prescription but gives an idea of what is possible.

The narrative below tells a story of an organisation called Awakening. It is offered to provoke you to imagine what an organisation with a soul would look like, and how it would function. It is told through the voice of Tuka, a staff person at Awakening. Although a fictional narrative, the building blocks of the story are extracted from actual experiences of organisations that we have worked with. In the narrative, Tuka shares her experience of working in an organisation with a soul. She reveals different ways of identifying and nurturing an organisational soul and the processes through which the organisation developed and enhanced its ability to function effectively. Tuka, the storyteller, goes on to explain what happened when those elements that protected the soul were stripped away one by one until it was exposed.

## **THE STORY OF AWAKENING**

The story of Awakening reveals how an organisation created by visionaries of all ages, who were not bogged down by conventional ways of doing things and trusted deeply in the intelligence and character of their staff, composed and sang a soul song. The organisation had one of the most creative and productive staff in the world of civil society. They brought a fresh, 'whatever it takes', collaborative, fun loving spirit to the vision. Awakening nurtured creativity, love of the organisation and ability to function on the edge. The process of building this organisational culture took years to seed, germinate, grow and bear fruit. There were many failed experiments, moves that were frustrating and those that worked but the organisation kept learning from different disciplines and flourished. It continued to perfect its soul song.

Long after Awakening was no longer in existence, its constituency sustained its soul song.

The approach the organisation used was unique and interesting but is not a blue print. Others have built organisations with souls in their own ways. Each organisation determines what it considers to be soulful. This organisation learnt that realistic planning – having the courage to do less, but to do it really well was great for staff and the constituency. It was not necessary to load itself with so much to do and very little time to be and reflect! It also learnt the importance of different spaces to accommodate all and it got rid of structures that stunt the soul. Every human being in the organisation was seen and hence was present and productive.

## TUKA'S JOURNEY AT AWAKENING

**Being hired.** I worked in Awakening, the organisation I am writing about, for ten years. Externally and internally it was vibrating with colours and images, mostly African prints, and filled with good music and luscious pot-plants. The external conveyed the soul of the organisation. It was this external beauty that made me knock and ask if they were recruiting – a very unusual way of finding a job but thanks to the power of synchronicity, it worked. The interviewing or getting to know me process took a week, was deep, educative and fun. I responded to questions in various ways; I told stories, wrote essays, conversed, and painted. I told myself that even if I did not get the job, I had enjoyed the 'get to know you' week and learnt a lot in the process.

I got the job. My job title was Awakening Technical Storyteller. I was given an office and an afternoon to turn it into what I wanted. I made sure that I decorated in such a way that it generated energy, audacity and well-being, the kind of 'nest' I looked forward to going to every morning.

There were many things to learn and to unlearn, lessons to share mostly based on the community in which I grew up and new insights to gain.

**Immersion.** The immersion or induction was thorough with a programme and a budget to support it. It was done in a creative manner. The whole experience reminded me of my own community and how we gently induct young people and visitors into our culture by sharing our totem in the form of songs or poems until they understand who we really are – our authentic selves in rituals and symbols.

The founders of Awakening and all staff did a history of the organisation by creating a timeline that summarised its birth and growth, the different phases it had gone through, how it had grown, learnt and changed over time. They blended the history and heritage of the organisation in order to explain its present norms and beliefs. They told me about the key actors, the constituency, partners and allies. The founders shared some important organisational systems that I needed to know but explained that the same systems were not stuck but alive and developing all the time. The timeline helped me gain an understanding of the underlying values and assumptions of the organisation and what motivated and drove the behaviour of those within the organisation.

I was introduced to the organisation's ideology and political stance in the world. A three month course was organised for me. The aim was to ensure that I was grounded and conceptually clear. The staff and board shared their current most innovative strategic plan or 'compass' as they called it, the culture of the organisation, major triumphs, setbacks and turning points encountered during its implementation. The energy and passion were such that I felt as if I was listening to the organisation talking to me and to itself. Clearly, an immeasurably stimulating exploration of thinking had been invested in the strategic compass. It was light, nimble, oozing with love, sense of ownership and clarity of thought.

During the induction, what emerged again and again was that there was a strong sense of organisational self-awareness and amazing connection and relationship with the constituency. The organisation was youthful, re-inventing itself all the time, with clear mechanisms for self-renewal and creativity. It was also learning from the inside, not just responding to the outside. Its ability to take learning and reflection to a much wider

audience and hence build new conversations and constituencies for social justice in the public at large was unique.

**Being economical.** The organisation did not have much money but whatever was available was used carefully. We did not promote a culture of distributing t-shirts, serving unhealthy expensive food, promoting excessive use of paper, printing brochures that nobody read, and using expensive hotels when there were alternatives. There is nothing wrong with these practices if an organisation can afford them, however we could not.

**Terms and conditions of service.** Staff remuneration was oriented towards self-improvement and family responsiveness. There was an education allowance for children, medical insurance and a little contribution for self-advancement. It was possible to take a sabbatical after five years of service. During the first year of employment, coaching regarding retirement started for everybody in the organisation. The organisation also made it clear that, as part of a healthy growth process, we were all going to work in other organisations, do other things or employ ourselves. So every now and again we discussed future possibilities and opportunities. We contributed a little money towards lunch and ate together, leaving our computers and phones so that we could enjoy our food together without rushing. What was amazing was that though we had a comprehensive medical insurance, we rarely called in sick.

**Organisational structure.** During one of our reflection meetings, we realised that there was a disconnect between our organisational structure and our values. The values were vibrant but the structure rather disempowering because it mirrored conventional hierarchies, and did not express the value that each staff position contributed to the organisation. We needed to go back to the drawing board.

We had fun creating our organisational organogram and innovating job titles and descriptions. We committed to know people behind the mask of their job title, roles and functions. We did not want structures that robbed and stripped people of their dignity, abilities, responsibilities and initiatives. Imagine a situation where, every day, you see yourself on the organisational organogram, positioned menacingly at the bottom of the hierarchy, as an Office Messenger or Cleaner. What does that do to your esteem? There is nothing wrong with cleaning or being a messenger, but there is something wrong when one provides essential services but remains at the bottom and invisible at the same time. We ensured that titles were respectful and reflected the real value of the work that people did. For example, the person who was responsible for cleaning offices and preparing refreshments gave herself the title of Happiness Manager. She loved her own naming, took pride in it and developed indicators, at least her own understanding of indicators, to monitor and evaluate the organisation's state of happiness. The title of our Director was Chief Steward. We did not think that a title such as Chief Executive Officer represented what the organisation stood for. She was not an isolated heroic leader but one who ensured that each one of us was leading in different ways. She was deeply committed to transformative change in herself and the organisation and to creating an environment for continual innovation and knowledge generation.

The title for the Office Messenger was Envoy. She read all that there was to be read about envoys and wrote her job description. You should have seen her face beaming with pride whenever she introduced herself, "My name is Karungi and I am the Envoy of

the organisation”, and then people looked really puzzled and confused. That gave her the opportunity to talk about her work.

**Leadership and decision making.** Our head of organisation, Chief Steward, was clear that leadership is about learning how to shape the future *collectively*, especially if feminism is about building a movement with shared values. She inspired us to action and encouraged us to give our best. She recognised and valued everyone’s participation, rather than requiring recognition for herself. Decision-making was collective; there was a strong sense of ‘we’ – signifying collective leadership. Diverse people in diverse positions contributed vitally to the way that our organisation shaped its future. Whenever the organisation ‘cried’ we all heard, woke up and tried to discuss and understand the cause and hence find possible solutions. We did not believe in top down quick fixes.

**Leave and resting.** We were not always successful but we tried to go on leave when we were supposed to. There was nothing like accumulated leave days and pay in lieu of leave. The Chief Steward set an example by going on leave whenever it was time to do so. Our Human Resources Manager (known as the Shepherd) was extremely strict about rest. We rarely worked during weekends unless there was an emergency.

**Working with our constituency.** We were a feminist organisation without any apologies but we did not work with women alone, we worked with families and communities. By the time we left a community there would be enhanced leadership from children to parents and grandparents. This kind of leadership was used to transform families and communities by ensuring that a family had access to water, sanitation, fruit trees, sufficient food, a decent house, ability to harness alternative sources of energy, safe and clean pit latrines, medicinal plants, renewable energy and a few animals mostly for milk and meat. Having basic necessities made it possible for them to have a sense of future possibilities.

Uprooting patriarchy proved to be difficult. We initiated schools. They were not ordinary schools although they offered functional literacy. They were known as Dignity Schools. These schools were meant to build on the power that the communities already had, support them to regain confidence in themselves and use whatever available resources to build wholeness. We also hoped that through discussions and recreational activities, they would eventually appreciate that inequality fragments families, communities and societies. As can be imagined, initially it was difficult discussing issues of difference, culture, class, religion, gender, and ethnicity. We used poverty as an entry point to discuss and understand issues of inequality. This strategy worked because the majority saw themselves as poor. It was equally difficult to move away from the mentality of waiting for external donors. We asked them to take the time and discuss how our ancestors who did not have donor support survived in harsh environments.

Our Dignity Schools were mobile. Sometimes they happened by the fireside, under trees, in banana plantations, forests and kitchens. It was interesting to see a group of people following each other, talking excitedly, headed to the sessions.

We introduced the idea of family meetings, distributed files for recording and keeping minutes. The growth especially of children was tremendous, they started demanding

accountability from their parents and likewise, parents demanded accountability from their children. As a result, alcoholism among older family members reduced, school grades improved and so did communication. Families learnt the power of budgeting, no matter how little the money. They also learnt the significance of team building at household and community levels. All this meant reclaiming one's power, recovering consciousness of self and asserting dignity eroded by poverty, exploitation, patriarchy and many years of colonialism and dependence.

At Awakening we did not see ourselves as the ones who knew it all. Our role was mostly to facilitate, encourage, work with and accompany, and stoke the fire especially when it was waning. We walked alongside our constituency and raised questions that deepened political consciousness and discussions. Different interest groups emerged; they engaged in sport, music, art, writing, cooking, and entertainment. We had organisers too. Most interesting were groups that stood against violence of any kind and organised different festivals related to cultural events.

We saw young people developing a passion for learning rather than a hunger for approval. The whole community was in search of vibrancy, new sparks, equality, discovery, creativity and openness. In the process, a domain was created in which communities continually deepened their understanding of reality and became part of unfolding of new reality. Of course there were some families that resisted and never joined.

Regarding our added value to the community, we always asked them if there were skills they had learnt, those that supported them to effect change, as a result of our co-creation. They were honest; sometimes it hurt and other times we felt our endeavours were worth it.

**Knowledge.** We shared and exchanged knowledge with our constituency. At the same time, we honoured and respected knowledge that we knew resided among the people we were working with. With or without formal education, they had their healers and sources of medicine, knew how to raise their children, understood nature, how crops grow and the importance of building a community. What we wanted to know was how they passed on knowledge from generation to generation.

**Rituals.** Back in our nest (the office) every morning we grounded ourselves using exercises that helped us to rebalance our bodies and reconnect with neglected parts of ourselves. We appreciated the importance of engaging the whole of ourselves and not simply the head.

We were reminded to take care of our joints so that we remain flexible as we age but also metaphorically to be flexible and rooted in our approaches to work and live without compromising our values. After every two hours, the Happiness Manager rang a musical gentle bell to remind us to stand up, stretch or just take a break. No one was really forced but we knew it was good for us. I come from a ritualistic community and felt at home with these practices. Some other colleagues were harder to convince, however it was a voluntary activity and those who chose not to were respected.

**Grounding sessions.** Once a week we had what were known as grounding sessions.

These were fun, learning and reflection conversations meant to raise our consciousness and keep us informed in a variety of ways. We began with a 15 minute power dance and then organised reflections on our work and issues that touched it through discussion, debates and skits. Each person spoke or got involved. If there was a consultant she was asked to talk about herself, share her experience and explain why she thought she was the best person for the job. Donors were included, and if they were visiting they would be invited to speak about the sources of money, accountability mechanisms in their own organisations and the extent to which they walked the talk. We wanted to know if they understood our song even if they did not have to sing it.

We also used grounding sessions to step back and reflect on the bigger picture and hence contextual perspectives were shared, questions surfaced and deepened, practices were described and approaches debated. We invited 'unusual suspects' to our grounding sessions – for example a mathematician who led a discussion around organisational structures that are flexible and adaptive.

With extraordinary intellectual elegance, she interrogated the things we took for granted and challenged us to think otherwise.

During grounding sessions, we educated ourselves on issues that had not been politicised in the organisation, for example those related to Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Intersex (LGBTI) rights, abortion, religion, power, ethnic bias, classism, political party affiliation and other contested issues.

The sessions always ended with eating together; symbolising the importance of sharing a meal in African cultures. Having started on a high note, we then went about our business of the day.

**Celebrations.** We had long realised that the more we worked, the more our work increased. We knew there would never be free time unless we created it and we did. Friday afternoons were for fun. So we found something to celebrate; whether it was our own development, or a colleague from another organisation or an interesting event or birthday. We created altars (not associated with religion) as energising spaces where we deposited our inspiring 'offerings' throughout the week and come Friday, we would all share by explaining what had inspired us using items at the altar. Throughout the week we waited excitedly for Friday. The Friday celebrations helped us to start our weekends fresh, ready to have fun with friends and family instead of feeling tired and looking forward to sleeping during the weekend.

**Using space to support new cultures.** Awakening had an Immune Boosting Room where people met to talk about their differences. The room was painted in four colours symbolising the diversity amongst us, as well as the elements that make up the earth: red (fire), green (earth), yellow (air) and blue (water). The name of the room reminded us that sitting on unhappiness is a great recipe for ill health and fragmentation. We extended the services to other organisations who felt they needed such a space. In that room, we were able to name and to work through difficult dynamics within the team, which made us more aware of relating to each other in positive ways.



We had also had a Wild Minds Room which was open to people from outside the organisation who were fascinated with new experiences and insights, those who wanted to innovate, experiment or just share out of the box thinking. The room was designed to welcome all those who mainstream society regarded as weird but were actually brave people willing to move towards the unknown. They imagined the future, they created, explored, blazed new trails, they made us come alive at work. Indeed it was a room for theorists, seed carriers of new ideas and practices. Great ideas that transformed our approach to work were born in this room. It was mostly their ideas, inspiration and engagement that kept Awakening young, courageous and an interesting place to work.

**Staff retreat.** Staff retreats were organised on a quarterly basis. On such days, we abandoned phone calls and emails and left the office. Our retreats were in forests, mountains or some other areas we felt we could sing our soul song. I waited for these creative retreats as I thought of the magic of imagination, radical stillness and staring into space, the way it was when I was a child. During our retreats, spaces were created for both reflection and contestation and for rigorously embracing theoretical work and reading. This was also an opportunity for us as stewards to catch up on work experiences, innovative strategies and those that had not worked, family, current technology and ways of renewing the organisation to keep it glowing and growing. It was also a time for providing support for emerging leadership.

The week long retreats brought soul to our intellectual debates, with a focus on the very real need to look after ourselves, to nurture and look at our sources of inspiration lest we become overwhelmed and burnt out. They also provided holistic support in the form of health and well-being focused activities and facilities. This included sexual health services such as pap smears for cervical cancer screening, and various types of mental and physical exercises that enabled bodily and emotional rejuvenation. We drew on approaches to healing that fostered networks of trust and solidarity not just in the organisation but also in our network and in the women's movement. We reconnected with nature as an alternative approach to healing. We set aside time for artistic expression and soul enrichment by bringing together poets, musicians, psychological researchers, healers and lovers of life together to motivate and wake us up.

We were encouraged to keep individual and organisational journals as tools of keeping track of our work, thoughts and reflections. We could not have done all this without being well organised. Hence internally we practiced what we were trying to do in the world.

**Enhancing the mission and feedback mechanism.** Our collective energy drove the organisational mission. We welcomed feedback from friends outside the organisation on how we could improve our work. We wanted to know if we were making a difference to the world and if the world needed anything different from us. Sometimes the feedback was discouraging, other times it was energising. We always welcomed all feedback as part of our organisational growth.

**Language.** We wanted to free ourselves from the mainstream, dry language and paradigms common in our sector. We did not want to use tired, and ungrounded words that neither we, nor our own constituency, felt connected to. We wanted our constituency to see themselves in the words. For example, one of our colleagues

was trying to explain to her grandmother that she was doing 'human rights' work. She explained at great length with different words and phrases but the grandmother remained blank. At long last the grandmother smiled widely, "Ah! I get it. You are promoting good manners, and encouraging people to be good and respectful. You don't want people to harm others or harm the environment. Why didn't you say so? Thanks my child for spreading love". We learnt from such conversations and as much as possible, we tried to use words that stemmed from our communities, places, experiences, context, and cultures that we were working in. I found this refreshing and liberating. In my community I grew up knowing that every language is a world of its own and that language really defines who we are.

**Reports.** Our organisational reports and documents were alive, they had 'soul' and you could identify our song in each word. The reports focused on our constituency; their ability to heal, learn, raise children, give birth, marry, die, provide means for living, feel a sense of worth and understand knowledge, construct meaning and how we were building on what they were already doing. The reports were honest, they told stories of change; what had worked and not worked. Our own personal reflection regarding the lessons we had learnt in the process of working with people were included.

**Budgets.** When it was time for budgets in Awakening the passion that staff had for different activities shone through. The Happiness Manager would come with her requirements, the Envoy wanted red and blue paints for her bicycle – we all presented and justified. Everything was budgeted for in terms of money, energy and emotions! Of course we always had money put aside for contingencies. If you read our budget, you would straight away know our values and our stance in the world. The budgeting process worked well because one of the things we did from the beginning was to ensure that people in administration and finance understood the work of the organisation beyond figures. They were part of everything we did including field visits and staying with communities for learning purposes.

**From silos to interconnections.** Awakening was learning from its constituency and allies. We were rooted amongst the people we worked with. We documented experiences and resources available in the community and set up a centre that became a hub of credible information to inform communities, service providers, scholars, feminists, politicians and leaders from all walks of life, politicians and leaders.

**Growth and change.** The organisation grew and so did the rest of us. For example, I started in the role of Technical Storyteller but by the time I left I was a credible, competent, radical, visionary and a feminist storyteller.

In my storytelling work, I engaged different audiences: my colleagues, the governance board, stakeholders, the donors and the world at large. I influenced behaviours, feelings and emotions. I told stories, so compelling that they told themselves. My stories that challenged the organisation to think differently. They were simple and vivid and as they travelled they assumed a life of their own. They instilled confidence in the team and injected fresh vigour. They were stories of ordinary people who made the extraordinary attainable. I conveyed critical information in parables, riddles, and proverbs and in the process many in the organisation became awesome activists and champions for our cause.

**Staff transitions.** Not all stayed with the organisation. Although the turn over of staff was generally low, some new colleagues resigned during the week of induction thinking that we were not professional. They said that they were educated and were not in the organisation to sit with communities and listen to their stories. There was also resistance from those who thought there was only one way of doing things. Nevertheless, the organisation continued to attract happy, loving and energetic positive people who took their work seriously but also balanced it with their needs.

**Donors.** Singing our song and attracting funders at the same time was difficult. We fundraised locally and from friends with resources around the world. Working with the youth in the community, we built a backpackers' hostel and it generated some funds for us. We also started an organic farmers' market, which supported our constituency to sell their products. Seeing our successes, some funders who had turned us down came back to ask for partnerships. Some funders supported us because they wanted to use our organisation as a case study regarding how to do things differently. They talked about 'best practices' but we always reminded them that it took time to build the organisation's soul song.

**Sustaining innovation.** It took a special kind of leadership to have the power of conviction to continue innovating. We experimented, failed, tried again, learnt on the job, involved many people as co-creators and learners, and kept innovating. At no time did we ever feel that we had reached our 'best'.

Some organisations visited, learnt, wrote notes in huge books and went back but nothing changed. Some dismissed our story as 'too good to be true', there must be a catch somewhere and others learnt and introduced some changes in their own organisations.

**Bringing it together.** Awakening was vibrant with the capacity to bring forth life from its soul. This organisation was a catalyst. Those it trained broke through the tough, patriarchal, class, sexual orientation and geographical artificial, culturally imposed rind and released the sweet, creative feminist juices. Those that were part of it stunned the world with remarkable redirection of energies, of possibilities. I am happy that I was part of the miracle that made that which was deemed impossible possible.

#### **And then something happened...**

No one knows for sure what triggered it. It may have been the shift in the political and economic environment which forced most of the board members to move on to paid governance positions. It could have been the new governance board which came in with a different soul song and started questioning our approach to work and even mocking our rituals and different reflection and learning spaces? I remember a Board Member asking disapprovingly, "A wild minds room? Why don't you just turn this into a holiday resort?"

Was it that growth and complexity outstripped organisational capacity, and important needs were no longer being met? Did we stop reading our context? Was it the change of job titles that demotivated staff? For example Happiness Manager went back to being called Cleaner and felt deflated. I remember the Chair of the new Governance Board

**“It took a special  
kind of leadership  
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to continue  
innovating.”**

shouting, "If I want happiness I won't ask the likes of you for it", pointing her gold ringed finger at our reliable and most efficient Happiness Manager. Happiness was sad and eventually abandoned her nurturing work. Her bell reminding us to rest was silenced as was her voice and we concentrated on the outer. Our organisation, sunk into an eerie silence.

"Who in the world started this nonsense of a job title Head Steward. You call yourself a Director? Go and serve food on an airline!", rebuked our new Board chair. "Are you witches or nuns, what's with the altar?" she questioned. Those were some of the many disempowering comments made by the new powerful Chair of the Governance Board. She totally refused to see other ways of doing things or exercising power. The issues she attacked were less tangible but more meaningful, intrinsic forces that really shaped what we did and the way we did it. Our doing, thinking and strategising which was based on the language of conversation; a language that brought soul to the intellectual was destroyed. We were told that we were not working, but wasting time and organisational resources.

One would wonder why the organisation attracted a chair whose values and those of the organisation did not mesh. On face value, it had appeared that the new board chair was progressive but she proved to be otherwise.

Slowly but surely, there was loss of purpose, decline in clarity of intention, a sense of overall malaise, a lack of rigour and vigour. It was likely not only the Chair who sang a different song but as the proverb goes, 'fish starts rotting from the head'. Money, money and money! Everything became money and it was like we could not do anything without it. Money became our oxygen and our water. With limited financial resources, we dried up and started suffering from thirst. There were many things we could have done without it but we did not. Unhappiness intensified. The much loved and precious organisation turned away from its path, it meandered and was lost in the forest of bureaucracy, power dynamics, and fear. Its organisational immune system continued to deteriorate. Important spaces and activities were ignored and all the self-care programmes stopped.

Our Director resigned. The Governance Board appointed a new Director but nothing changed. Human resources consultants were hired and produced a huge report that resulted in nothing. With a poisonous working space, the number of people who used to frequent the organisation reduced. Our work and personal lives became more fragmented with increasing workloads, stress, and compromises to personal and family values. We were always sick or complaining about one thing or the other. There was no sewage system to drain away the sourness and bitterness. Sourness and bitterness can surface in any environment but what is paramount is a mechanism of confronting this and allowing it to drain away but in our case, that space was no longer available. Eventually, scarred, tired and angry, staff started leaving.

Our organisation was becoming destructive to the very people who built it, egos were fighting each other and there was hardly any learning or adaptation to the changing context. The Board was disengaged and had ceased to achieve a quorum for several months. The Chair of the Board, after disrupting us, stopped coming to the organisation. We were organisationally orphaned.

**Rebirth.** We tried to hide what was happening to the constituency but eventually told them the truth. Our constituency decided to leave us, but did not give up on us but not themselves. They had enough resources and inner power to make it on their own. The young leaders in the community were resilient; they held several gatherings and challenged the community to carry on with the activities. New leaders emerged; they made some mistakes but in the process grew from strength to strength. Today they have built a rural university, have a community radio, a girls' boarding school and an agricultural extension service. They have learnt the power of co-creation and hence are working with other like-minded national and international people. We can confidently say that Awakening did not die but recreated itself. was lost in the forest of bureaucracy, power dynamics, and fear. Its organisational immune system continued to deteriorate. Important spaces and activities were ignored and all the self-care programmes stopped.

## soul bites

Transformation is not born out of rigid, conservative and bureaucratic ways of being. An organisation cannot create within the world what it can't create within itself. The audacity and boldness to challenge oppressive power, embrace diversity, value respect and fairness starts with you.

# a moment for reflection

01

**Reflecting on the story individually**, consider the questions below:

- What did you find most striking about the story of Awakening?
- What would it take to create an organisation such as this one?
- What did you like most about the organisation and can you see how this could be possible within your own organisation?
- What do you think went wrong in the organisation?

## 02

**Reflecting on the story in a group**, consider the questions below:

- What did you find inspiring or useful about the strategies that Awakening used to build, nurture and strengthen its soul? Could any of these be used in your organisation?
- What were the dynamics around the challenges in Awakening? Are there any elements that you should be paying attention to in your organisation?
- Awakening did not die – how was it revived?
- What other lessons can be learnt from this story?



## Chapter 4

# setting the stage for change

The last chapter presented a story of an organisation with an active and a vibrant soul, one that sang its soul song clearly, effectively and loudly. In this chapter, we look at common arguments used against work that involves changing power dynamics, investing in well-being and self-care and building soul, and we look at ways to respond to this resistance.

## CHANGE MANAGEMENT DILEMMAS

Many organisations and individual activists are committed to self-care and organisational well-being but do not always know what steps to take to create collective agreement around the importance of well-being, and understanding of how well-being and maintaining a healthy soul connect with larger organisational mission, goals, and strategies.

Below we explore a set of common arguments that may emerge as staff and teams resist the process of building organisations with souls, followed by ideas on how to anticipate and respond to them.

### **Holistic well-being is not serious/ not a priority.**

"This well-being stuff is a waste of time; we are not here for therapy! We are here to work."

"We are not attracting new donors yet they want us to spend time naval gazing and thinking about ourselves?"

"Now we are being told to make our stance in the world clear, that it will enable us to engage authentically, assertively and courageously with government as well as our constituency and donors. 'Authentically' my foot! Is there any organisation that is authentic given that donors encourage us to keep using existing models and 'best practices'?"

"Let them increase money for our health insurance that is more important for our well-being."

"Our political leadership is tainted with disrespect, citizens are arrogant and there is an overwhelming culture of corruption. Instead of concentrating on this big picture, they want us to spend time in nature? That is for Europeans. I grew up with nature. Did I go to school so that I can go back to that?"

"Well-being? That is for women and youth who are emotional and sentimental! Can you imagine me – a scientist – taking time to breathe or to stand on one leg doing this thing they call yoga?"

"All this talk about reflections, promotion of sports for staff, theorising our work, bringing artists to help us with our reports – I think we are going to lose our professionalism and respect in the community."

"Our new human resources manager has really fallen for this soul idea – she is setting aside time for a staff retreat and we are meant to leave our computers, is she crazy? How will I continue doing my work while we are away?"

"They want us to creatively engage with what they call 'silenced voices' but how can we waste time when we have to deliver on our mission? What does 'silenced voices' mean anyway? Is that what the other consultant called the intersectionality approach? I am suspicious."

**We should not speak about souls  
in organisations.**

"When I was employed, I was not told the organisation had a soul otherwise I would not have accepted this job. Working with soul – isn't that against my religion?"

**The leadership does not practice  
what they speak.**

"They are not walking the talk, they encourage us to eat fruits, drink 'vegetables' and water during office hours but you see them eating unhealthy food in their offices!"

"They are asking us to make so many changes, but who is in charge anyway? We should advise them to employ someone to take charge of this."

**This approach challenges  
my own power.**

"They want us to be on first name terms as if they worked for my PhD. Where is the respect? I am a Doctor. No cleaner is going to call me anything else."

"We are asking to be part of collective learning. Me, a senior staff person, learn with the office messenger?!"

## CREATIVE WAYS TO SOLVE DILEMMAS

The earlier an organisation anticipates resistance and challenges the easier they are to deal with. The following suggestions are meant to free people in organisations from stiffness, shyness and inhibitions so that they can embrace the unusual.

There is no simple recipe that can explain what to do because organisations and circumstances are different. The ideas explored here may be helpful in engaging resistance, and building momentum for positive change in the organisation.

**Make the desired results crystal clear:** Build trust before beginning so that individuals don't feel targeted. Engage in a discussion about how nurturing well-being helps the organisation accomplish its broader goals by creating a work environment conducive to high performance, innovation and positive relationships with colleagues and external communities and constituencies

**Get involved:** To initiate the process of building soul, create a process that gets people excited and helps clarify concerns. Sending out a memo is unlikely to stimulate interest! Use language that brings soul to the intellectual and the practical, and listen deeply to what people have to say.

**Work on organisational culture:** An organisation, just like a community, does not exist in a vacuum. It has a collective sense of identity, rites, rituals, values and traditions that shape how new ideas are handled. Culture isn't something that is peripheral to the organisation's mission. It touches, influences and affects everything. It's important to understand the culture the organisation has and how to build on what is already there.

**Creating your own language of well-being:** As part of building your organisational well-being culture, find and create words that resonate with staff. If people are uncomfortable with the word, 'soul' you can find another word that evokes the same principle. Also develop language for other practices and rituals within the organisation that hold collective meaning.

**Organisational Infrastructure:** The infrastructure is the means through which organisations get the resources (money, time, leadership support, information, contact with networks, tools, access to media etc.) that they need to enable them to do their work. An organisation that wants to institutionalise well-being needs to consider how this affects its infrastructure and what is needed from it. Well-being needs to be factored in as a serious concern with appropriate time, space and other resources if it is to have an enduring impact.

**Process:** Avoid quick fixes. Increasing well-being of an organisation consciously requires a thoughtful process. If done mechanically without deep political thinking, its precious seeds will fall on barren soil.

**Don't push, build:** Don't push people to embrace well-being and self-care. Indicate the connections with the health of individuals, organisations and movements and then transformative change. Often making small changes to existing practices is the best way to begin. Inspire others by starting with the introduction of enjoyable activities or those activities that bring people together and are easier for everyone to embrace.

**Tools and methods:** Share tools, methods and challenge others to share what they know, what they imagine will work for them or has worked for them. Emphasise the importance of creating rather than reacting.

**Sensitivity:** Be sensitive to people's diversity, their beliefs and needs but still finding what they have in common – that which unifies and humanises them. Ask people if they have anything to contribute before engaging in exercises.

**Improvise:** Organisations go through different stages. What might work when an organisation is young might not when it gets older. Combine materials and tools to fit a particular phase of growth or the context.

**Be comfortable with not knowing:** Do not be afraid to admit that you do not know how to explore or engage certain barriers or blockages in the process of cultivating soul. Once you acknowledge that you are in a place of 'not knowing' you open up a more adventurous process for finding a resolution. Explore the problem and experiment! This in turn can open space for the new and creative ideas to emerge.

**Document progress and challenges:** Keep and use good records of everything tried during the process. This could be in the form of short written reflections by staff, or periodic group discussions where you reflect on well-being and the state of the organisation's soul. Records provide valuable data for future efforts.

**Monitor changes, publicise and celebrate success:** Monitor change so that you catch that which is not working and prevent it from becoming bigger. Then as you have successes, publicise them and celebrate. The road to well-being is constantly under construction. Without celebration of milestones, the journey can begin to feel overwhelming.

# soul bites

Resistance is a likely part of any organisational change process, particularly when transforming the underlying culture of an organisation. Anticipate this and remain open to both the challenges and the possibilities for changing how you each think and work together in positive ways.

# a moment for reflection

01

People rally around boldness and specificity. Is your vision for building the organisation's soul specific and bold? Does it cultivate a culture of thinking differently about what is productive and what is not?

Who are the people that think differently in your organisation? How can you draw inspiration and strengths from their boldness as you envision introducing a different way of working?



## Chapter 5

# challenges that contract souls and ways to counter them

In this chapter we explore the day-to-day human dynamics that underlie the work of organisations and often lead to the contraction of their beautiful souls. For better or worse, when people work together their energies are occupied by more than just their tasks. Suggestions for preventing individuals, organisations and movements from imploding are shared to accompany each identified challenge but these are by no means exhaustive. Individual organisations are encouraged to identify those forces that contract the soul of their organisations and think of their own relevant healing and transformation rituals.

It's important to remember that organisations and movements are not static. They all go through different phases of growth. They are born, grow, cohere, mature, they protest and succumb, they battle, they ebb and flow and they might even die or renew themselves. As they go through these changes, there are different demands and challenges that can shrink the soul and erode organisational ability to have fun, flow and function on the edge. During different phases, an organisation should have processes of identifying those elements that erode its soul and create disharmony in its song.

## SOUL CHALLENGES

There are many factors in the daily lives of organisations that divert their souls away from their songs. Each organisation has got its own challenges and power relations and practices that disrupt the soul song. Below are some common soul challenges that we as activists and organisational development consultants have identified. Each soul challenge is followed by ideas and/or strategies for exploring and addressing it, as well as points for reflection. The suggestions and strategies are not prescriptions but rather tips to ignite your own ideas depending on the context, type and stage of growth of the organisation and its leadership, mission and values and most of all, culture.


Before you implement a strategy, you need to consider the following:

- The stage of growth of the organisation and whether it's ready for whatever action or if the action might cause more chaos.
- Be open to shifting contexts, what works today might not work tomorrow.
- Assess the level of trust, safety and confidence in the organisation.
- Understand power dynamics, including who holds the power to make a difference, and what kind of power they exercise.
- If you decide to be the champion that takes on the cause, prepare to be courageous, honest, open and vulnerable.
- Challenge behaviour not individuals so that the criticism does not become personalised.
- Be willing to lose a friend but not throw away people you don't agree with. When someone offers a criticism treat it as a gift rather than an attack.
- Be action oriented. The atmosphere around you must be dynamic. Everyone in the group must be energised by the call to action.
- Take time to celebrate. Every time there is a significant achievement, create an atmosphere of celebration around it. Work and nothing but work will eventually deplete people's enthusiasm. By celebrating signposts along the way to final success, you give everyone a taste of that success in advance.

## Soul Challenge #1:

### *staying attentive to seeing and presence*

As discussed in Chapter 1, being seen (having your existence and gifts acknowledged and affirmed) and seeing others in return is a central part of what we understand to be human across African cultures. It is also a central factor in feeling welcomed and valued in the context of your work and your activism. Seeing is related to presence – once a person feels ‘seen’ by another they become more present, more actively engaged in their work and in interpersonal interactions, and more confident and willing to offer their gifts, ideas and energies to their work.



## A STORY OF HIERARCHICAL LEADERSHIP AND THE FAILURE TO 'SEE'

In one organisation a Director was infamous among staff for two incidents that epitomised her management style. Once at a general staff meeting, she had stood up and said, "Talk all you want but I am the Director here, this is my show. If you don't like it pack your bags and go home".

Around the same time of her little speech, apparently a few colleagues were in her office offering their valuable insights about creative ways of fundraising. In the middle of the conversation, she held her glass of water and put her tiny index finger in it. She said, "when I stick my index finger in this glass the level of my water does not change. This is you, you're this index finger, get out of my office".

Then something happened. One Saturday morning, when no one was at work but the cleaner, she collapsed in the toilet. She would have died were it not for the cleaner who was busy cleaning sinks. The cleaner loosened her skirt, tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, called for help and that is how the Director was saved. Later when the Director was told the story, she was so embarrassed that she resigned. She was shocked by being rescued in that way by a low-ranking staff member. Staff members were extremely angry with the way she treated them, and are still telling the story ten years later.

A soulful activist leader is a powerful force. She sees people and believes in their capacity to do the awesome. She communicates her humanity and she aids human connection, affirming the presence of those around her. She limits the use of 'power over' or building walls and creating embarrassing distance between herself and other human hearts.

## **ACTIVITY** **CULTIVATING** **SEEING AND** **PRESENCE**

**Focus:** To explore how seeing and presence operates in your organisation

**Process:** One person is chosen to observe a team/organisational meeting in order to understand how the team is interacting. The observer does not participate in the meeting. She simply watches for specific behaviours during discussions and takes note of them.

At the end of the meeting or during some designated discussion time, the observer may report their observation. For example answering, who was silenced? Who was not seen, or heard? Who was not present? The reporting has to be done humorously so that it does not erupt into a quarrel or some people are not hurt unnecessarily.

Invite questions and comments on the observations. Remember the information collected can have many interpretations. Also remember that a pattern observed in one meeting does not mean a problem exists. All the same, this exercise, if well conducted, can raise some critical issues in an organisation and eventually lead to major changes.

At the end of the exercise discuss seeing and being seen, presence and what it means.

**“A soulful activist leader is a powerful force. She sees people and believes in their capacity to do the awesome. She communicates her humanity and she aids human connection, affirming the presence of those around her.”**

# soul bites

Strengthening an organisational soul song begins with seeing and presence. If you see, you act and become more present in your work.

---

Once you see, share your passion and conviction. There has to be something so vibrant in you that it brings others to life and makes them remember their soul songs.

# a moment for reflection

01

Does everyone in your organisation feel equally 'seen'? If not how do you think this affects their sense of presence? What could be done to change this?

02

Do you feel that your organisation sees over the horizon? Are you building an organisation that has a sustainable soul, one that will be present for the next generation?



## Soul Challenge #2:

### *undiscussables*

There are many undiscussables in organisations. One of these is organisational masks. Masks are found in almost all organisations and some are more opaque than others. We'll use the metaphor of rain to demonstrate what we mean by masks. When it rains heavily, pools of water form in various places. Given the state of roads in most African countries, the pools cover all the potholes and ditches. As the pools dry up, the potholes (symbols of anger, fear, bitterness, and frustration), and all things that should not be on a well-maintained road appear. All the elements were there all along. Everyone knew they were there. But somehow they were covered and people forgot about them.

An organisation can go on with business as usual and pretend that they don't see the 'potholes' that have haunted the organisation for years. They discuss the issues privately in ways that reinforce their own hopelessness and resignation. Staff tell each other that these things will never change and there is no point in bringing them into the open. They become undiscussable. New staff members might be more alarmed but the old ones see the cracks as the norm. They are not interested in openness because they don't see where it will take them. They are not sure that they can handle the storm that putting them on the table would cause. Indeed, fear and anxiety might well be the most frequently mentioned challenges in strengthening organisations' souls.

## STRATEGIES FOR DISCUSSING THE UNDISCUSSABLE

Undiscussable issues are potent. Naming and opening them up for debate enables the undiscussables to be challenged and transformed. However, undiscussables also exist in the realm of invisible power. They are kept 'undiscussable' intentionally because they help to reinforce unequal or unfair practices or relationships. It is vital to consider all the potential outcomes (good and bad) and plan for these, and to create a space where the terms of discussions are agreed beforehand. Engaging an undiscussable requires some trust and must be handled with great care, the values of a healthy organisation must include communication that is open and honest but that is done with love and respect. The preparation of this process is essential for both those raising the issue and those to whom the issue is being addressed. Given the framing of the exercise to follow there is no set initiator and respondent to the process as this arises during the process so all individuals must be prepared to state an undiscussable but also to be willing to hear one that you have a role in. This should be made clear to all before the exercise begins. Remember that undiscussables relate to behaviour rather than individuals, and so should not be used to target particular people.

The following raises some undiscussables that we have encountered in different organisations:

The Director has been in the organisation for twenty years. We need to talk about a succession plan but do not know where to start from.

Our Director is not open to dialogue. She must always have the last word, even if people are joking, so no one talks to her about what is important.

All of our performance reviews are three to six months late. We have a problem with people burning out, but when I try to get more time for myself, or more resources to do my work well, I'm treated as if there's something wrong with me.

The Director uses the organisation vehicle to pick her children from school while staff members use bicycles or public transport to do urgent organisational work.

An entry point for identifying an undiscussable could be in a staff meetings where a leader leaves out cracks or important issues that most people are concerned about. Staff members may not know what to do which makes it impossible to think about solving the issues. If you have a similar situation, the following activity could help.

## ACTIVITY PUTTING UNDISCUSSABLES ON THE TABLE

**Focus:** To ensure that an organisational song is not stifled by undiscussables.

**Process:** The following exercise can be performed by someone internal or external to the organisation. In either case, preparation as well as a follow-up plan (which might involve external support) is vital.

Agree upon the following ground rules before beginning:

- Respect the fear that accompanies this exercise.
- Reflect and take notice of your initial response to each undiscussable as it is read aloud.
- Listen for what is said and not said
- Challenge ideas and assumptions, not people's motives

**Step 1: Gathering data.** Each person on the team is given five small blank cards and writing tools, so everyone has the same colour ink or pencil. Without discussion or collaboration, each person writes one undiscussable statement on a card, describing it in enough detail for any reader in the room to understand. If someone's behaviour is part of the undiscussable, then refer to that person by job title and not by name, because the undiscussable is intended as a statement of a problem, not as an attack on another person.

**Step 2: Dealing the cards.** There are two ways that you can distribute the cards:

**The blackjack option:** Someone collects the cards and either shuffles and shares them or puts them in a stack, face upon the table in front of them and allows individuals to pick three cards.

**The treasure hunt option:** At the end of five minutes, everyone leaves the meeting room, holding their cards. One at a time, team members re-enter the meeting room and hide their three cards. Two cards should not be hidden in the same spot. Once all the cards are hidden, everyone re-enters the room. Each person finds three cards that are not their own, and sits down. The process of looking for cards is useful as it plays out the reality of the hidden dynamics that may be debilitating the team.

**Step 3: Uncovering common themes.** Each person in turn, reads aloud the three cards from step 2, and then posts them on the wall. When all cards have been read, team members group them to reflect common themes. The team must also decide how many themes will be tackled in this meeting and how to deal with the rest. Leftover undiscussables should be discussed soon, before they go underground again or even deeper.

The facilitator should start with a relatively 'easy' undiscussable if possible. This builds the team's ability to talk about more difficult topics. Some cards may provoke long discussions and so every thirty minutes, pause to decide how much more time the team wants to spend on this topic before moving on to the next card. Time checks keep the dialogue on track, and help the group determine its progress.

These questions may help guide the dialogue:

- What is the threat behind the undiscussable?
- What is politically incorrect to question in your organisation?
- What mental model has allowed this hidden structure to persist?
- What has kept this issue from being discussed seriously?
- What are the unintended consequences of the undiscussable, in the past, present and future?
- How does this undiscussable support or block our ability to learn as a team?
- How does this undiscussable fit with our espoused vision and values?
- What do we want to do about this undiscussable?

**Step 4: Summary and resolution.** The facilitator will need to judge how best to close the session in line with the nature of the dialogue. In all cases it is important to acknowledge people's honesty in airing issues of concern, and to highlight the key issues and critically also the strategies that people suggest to address the undiscussable. The session can end with a summary of actions that the group has suggested to take to deal with any of the undiscussables. If heavy issues have been raised it may also be appropriate to close with a short ritual of celebration for having been brave to explore difficult territory, or a ritual of togetherness to communicate that the group as a whole is willing to work to address the collective undiscussables.

# soul bites

Every staff member in an organisation is a problem solver, innovator, and change agent. Help them to live up to their creative potential by ensuring that there are no undiscussables in the organisation.

---

Organisational immunity can be eroded by undiscussables and the fear that surrounds them. Make increased organisational immunity a strategic priority not only among senior members but across the organisation. Invite some energising, disparate, invigorating and unpredictable people to become friends of your organisation and ask them to look at it; leadership, programmes, cultures, services, from an outsiders perspective. They should be people whose values and ethics are aligned to your organisation.

# a moment for reflection

01

What are the elements that drive your organisation that are taken for granted?

02

What do people in the organisation believe is absolutely impossible?

03

What is politically incorrect to ask in your organisation?

## Soul Challenge #3:

lack of creativity  
and routine ways  
of working

Predictable and routine ways of working can wreck individual and organisational souls. Reproducing the same old strategies or documents is not likely to transform society and excite staff. Injecting fresh energy by getting staff out of the most-travelled ways of thinking so as to stimulate them to be more curious and explicit about seeing things differently is important.

Everything in our socialisation teaches us to think within lines and parameters. The formal education systems on the African continent, still very much influenced by colonial education models, can turn people into carbon copies of each other and individuality is squashed and destroyed. Children quickly learn to shy away from being different and respect conformity (take for example the fact that still in some schools even being left handed is discouraged or punished). In most African institutions including homes, if you are different you are rebuked for bad manners and for embarrassing the family. Our true sense of self is diminished and replaced by a socially sanctioned identity. With that sense of self goes unique individuality and self-esteem. People begin to look outside of themselves for affirmation and when they do not get it they are torn and broken.

Creativity has not been given as much attention as it should, it is thwarted often and we regurgitate the rhetoric of the prevailing discourse. Without unleashing and reigniting the creativity trapped within each person, dreaming is difficult. Creativity is the doorway into a transformed future and that begins with creating workplaces that nurture this through brainstorming together, reading, watching others, engaging in debate, dreaming, dancing, drawing, painting, writing, singing, whatever unleashes energy and imagination.

Although not all creativity manifests as artistic expression, art is a vital part of stimulating and communicating imagination and challenging our routine ways of thinking and doing. People also thrive and work better in spaces that are beautiful and visually and mentally stimulating.



**“Without unleashing and reigniting the creativity trapped within each person, dreaming is difficult. Creativity is the doorway into a transformed future and that begins with creating workplaces that nurture this...”**



## INTEGRATING ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN A CONFERENCE SPACE

In 2009 a Uganda-based feminist peacebuilding organisation and a Kenya-based women's rights donor organised a conference around HIV+ women's organising in conflict-affected communities. The conference brought together HIV+ women from initiatives in Liberia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe with representatives of donors, United Nations agencies and other urban NGOs. Rather than having a rapporteur, the organisers invited a Kenyan woman artist and her band to be part of the event. The band opened and closed each day with songs that integrated comments and issues that participants had raised. Introducing music acted as means of democratising the space – levelling the power dynamics that existed between the 'rural, less formally educated' community activists and the 'urban, middle class' staff of donor and policy making agencies. Skilled at using music and song to mobilise, the community activists often took leadership in the space – leading the group in dance and song with greater skill than the NGO and donor representatives. This 'positive disruption' of the culture of the conference created an environment where everyone's expression was appreciated and engaged.

## STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING CREATIVITY IN YOUR ORGANISATION

Create space within the organisation, call it 'creativity' room so that people with new and innovative ideas can organise to meet and brainstorm. Ensure that the creativity room or space is a vibrant and stimulating area where free thoughts and all kinds of ideas are respected.

Set aside regular time for 'blue sky thinking' sessions where everyone lets their imagination run free. Don't put down any sign of creativity and imagination. Don't point out obstacles, budgetary limits, or impracticalities so that people can dream and feel safe.

As part of designing, planning, implementing or evaluating your work always factor in practices that encourage imaginative thinking and reflection. You can use techniques such as brainstorming (where people voice all ideas that come to mind in response to an issue or problem without editing or censoring, and then engage in dialogue around the ideas), or inviting a guest who is less familiar with your work to observe and offer comments and ideas in response to what they hear.

Brainstorming: Write a word related to the brainstorming theme. Allow individuals to draw, write, perform, or represent with a symbol the very first idea that comes to mind. For example you could take the word 'security' or 'well-being'. Discussing it will enable staff within an organisation to understand how each of them perceives a concept that is central to your work. You can also do this exercise with your clients or the communities you engage. Use these images, text, symbols and any other representations to inspire and to inform the actual development and framing of whatever you want to re-frame.

Build in opportunities for people in the organisation to experience new contexts, professional spaces and dialogues – for example participating in and attending events outside the organisation or attending cultural events together where issues you work on are being explored through other forms of expression and traveling where possible.

Ask about and encourage your colleagues to share their passions and hobbies, and see if there is a way for them to bring these into their work. People are happiest when they are doing what they love!

Consider new ways to communicate your work to each other and to communities outside, including in spaces such as annual reports (where you can integrate art, photography and), and/or Annual General Meetings and board meetings (incorporating creative methods such as theatre, poetry, movement and creative dialogue).

## **ACTIVITY** **IDENTIFYING** **AND ENGAGING** **PEOPLE'S** **CREATIVITY IN** **ORGANISATIONS**

**Focus:** To explore individual and organisational sources of creativity and energy for innovation.

**Process:** Individual exercise

Sit alone, with a pen and notebook and reflect on the following questions:

- Where do your creative juices come from?
- What generates your energy? How do you get the nourishment you need to meet the obstacles and challenges you face every day?
- Do you create the time to visit the nourishing fountain? If not, what excuses do you give for not doing so often? How can you overcome the excuses?

Your source of energy is your life-giving force, it's your soul song. The more often you go to the source of energy, the more you keep yourself 'irrigated' with self-love and energy and hence the easier to connect with others and to love them. Love increases productivity because it generates positive energy. This level of reflection energises and creates a reference point for future reflections allowing the individual to be more fully self-aware and observe any changes taking place within them.

**Process:** An exercise for leaders

Remember, we are all leaders in different spaces and circumstances. This exercise is not limited to organisational leaders.

With a pen and piece of paper, find a quiet place and engage with the following questions:

- If we talked to people who know me as a leader, what would they say?
- What are my energisers? How often do I pay attention to them? What are my energy suckers? In which way do I feed them?
- How do I enhance my energisers while I get rid of energy suckers?
- How do I cultivate love in my life? Love for myself, colleagues and the cause I work for?
- What effect do my actions have on the people around me?
- What are the unnecessary, time consuming, procedures, activities and habits that suck my energy?
- What should I change in order to make the organisation a more interesting and exciting, space to work?

# soul bites

Break through innovation comes from thinking creatively. Wild ideas will radicalise and transform your organisation and even the whole sector/movement. What seems bizarre today could be tomorrow's norm. You could either lead that change or be swept along by it.

---

Consider building an expanded network of resources that go beyond the traditional boundaries of an organisation to tap into the talent of outsiders and widen the competence base of creativity; bring new perspectives into new ways of thinking.

# a moment for reflection

01

Does your organisation set aside time for encouraging creativity? Do you make change happen through you? Or do you just get stuck in routine and let change happen to you?

02

Think of ways to incorporate creative expression into your everyday work. For example, can you use images instead of words to explain the work of your organisation?

03

Look at other organisations in your sector that are successful in their mission and building momentum. How do they incorporate creativity to support innovations? What can you learn from this?

## Soul Challenge #4:

# low balance sheet of trust

We all carry secrets, fears, anger and pain. These elements can erode trust. In an organisation where the balance sheet of trust is low, people fight about small things such as “who drank my water?” Both personal belongings and collective organisational information may be hidden out of a fear that others will take them. Backbiting, gossiping, competition, anonymous letters and emails and accompanying lethargy and frustration may become the norm. Yet the quality of ways of working in a civil society organisation should be different from the quality of doing of state bureaucracy. Where the bureaucracy assumes, through its rules and regulations, a mistrust of individual motivation and ability, the organisation thrives on such freedom and personal responsibility. In the world of CSOs – it is the quality of relationships between people, their authentic selves, which enables the vision to come alive. This is what should be nurtured above all else.

**“Where the  
bureaucracy  
assumes a mistrust  
of individual  
motivation  
and ability, the  
organisation *thrives*  
on such freedom  
and personal  
responsibility.”**





## A STORY ABOUT SUSTAINING TRUST

In one organisation, every person wrote a 'love note' to each team member on a weekly basis. They listed the finest qualities and greatest achievements. They reflected on why they appreciated those qualities and achievements. Then they gave the note to whomever they had written it to. In this manner, it became easier to 'air' whenever there were misunderstandings. The 'airing' was deemed to be coming from a place of love.

## ACTIVITY RESTORING TRUST BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS

**Focus:** To restore trust between individuals where it has been lost or was never properly established as trust between individuals leads to organisational trust.

**Process:** Note – In facilitating, it is important to ensure that the ‘airing’ is done in a spirit of trying to resolve problems, rather than to add to an existing grievance. It needs to be done from a place of love. If individuals are not ready, they should not ‘air’.

The offended party can request a private ‘airing’ session with the colleague and speak openly but lovingly about their concern.

The two can then engage in a conversation till they have cleared the air after which they can perform a burning ritual. Should the two feel they need a third party to mediate they can arrange this as well.

If the burning ritual is for a collective then each individual prepares a symbol of what needs to be released (anger, fear, resentment, betrayal, neglect etc.). It could simply be a piece of paper where they have written what needs to be thrown away.

The group builds a small fire. One person is chosen to be the facilitator of the process.

The group stands around the fire to form a bond. The facilitator indicates the purpose of the ritual.

Individuals, if they wish, will tell the group what they want to overcome but they can also talk to the fire quietly. Putting the problem into words destabilises it and loosens the grip on the psyche, making it possible to give it over to the fire for transformation.

After the burning a group can move forward together. A fire ritual is a place where things that kill the soul are surrendered.

# soul bites

Trust can become one of your organisation's strategic weapons when viewed as a resource. Push the boundaries and test the limits of what you think can be achieved by building a trusting culture.

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Trust building starts with the top (for example governance board).

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Name and engage problems with trust before they become toxic and take over the organisation.

# a moment for reflection

01

What do you see as the benefits of working in a trusting environment?

02

What are the factors that undermine trust in your organisation?

03

When was the last time you acknowledged someone for working in a spirit of trust?

## Soul Challenge #5:

# ideological contradictions in working spaces

Ideological, political, religious and social contradictions and disagreements can cause friction in an organisation. People usually sit on the pain caused by contradictions, burn inside and eventually outside. If confronted, especially if they are in the minority, they might find it difficult to stand for what they believe in and hence back down.

An organisation with a soul lives with contradictions, paradoxes and possibilities but it holds a free and open space and flexes its inner muscles to be able to hold the polarities, and to build organisational forms capable of holding them even without resolution. An organisation with a soul stimulates and encourages itself and the people that it works with to *think*. A thinking organisation has the collective intelligence needed to handle contradictions that arise.

**“An organisation  
with a soul  
stimulates and  
encourages itself  
and the people that  
it works with  
to think.**

**A thinking  
organisation has  
the collective  
intelligence  
needed to handle  
contradictions  
that arise.”**



## THE STORY OF KAHA FOUNDATION

Kaha is a community foundation that promotes health and well-being among marginalised communities. During their first foundation meeting, some members were not ready to engage with issues related to sexuality. When a member introduced herself as a sex worker and another as a lesbian, a woman who had been asked to write the meeting report walked out of the room and never returned. A few others stood up and preached morality. The founders of Kaha Foundation realised that issues of sexuality had not been politicised and hence abandoned the pre-set programme and asked two knowledgeable people to talk about sexuality, culture and religion and connect the two to the broader aim of the foundation. After these sessions, some participants in the meeting confessed that no one had ever explained the meaning of human rights from a sexuality perspective to them before and that they were grateful for the clarity. The discussions that followed were powerful and flowed with energy. Individuals started talking about their personal lives. They put their private lives there in the open and the personal became political, and they aligned the values of respecting diversity and equality that are central to the foundation with their actual practices, including welcoming sex worker activists as members.

## STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH IDEOLOGICAL CONTRADICTIONS

It can seem difficult to let go of tensions, grudges and ill-feelings in an organisation arising from different ways of looking at the world. The following are suggestions of ways to encourage this process:

- Invent spaces for learning and debating and find ways of doing this in a creative way so that there is room for many possibilities and also for politicising controversial and difficult issues that most people fear talking about such as abortion, sex and sexuality, feminism, race, ethnicity, class and religion. This can take the form of reading circles where you read short texts and then discuss them, or choosing a topic monthly to debate and having an organised discussion around it.
- Identify a knowledgeable and objective party to facilitate dialogue sessions. It should be a person capable of encouraging people to surface existing tensions and prejudice while preventing the space from degenerating into one of insults, aggression and condemnation.
- Allow room for respectful and constructive disagreement. Treat every person with dignity even where opinions and ideologies differ.
- Encourage thinking together not just in the sense of analysing a problem, or creating shared knowledge but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not just to one individual but to the collective.

## soul bites

Encouraging learning spaces is one way of enhancing an organisational soul song.

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An organisation with an expanded soul should go beyond reflection on practice and rigorously embrace theoretical work, reading – reminding itself of the broader debates and thinking.



# a moment for reflection

01

Is the organisation's learning culture seamless and open to new ideas?

02

Do you routinely get diverse people together to share ideas and learn from each other?

03

Do the organisational culture/policies address issues of diversity?

## Soul Challenge #6:

# Bankruptcy in an organisational love bank

The more love in an organisation, the more productive the interactions, the kinder the environment and the healthier and more secure the connections. In a loving environment both colleagues and the broader community will give more of their time, their commitment and their creativity to the vision of change. However in many organisations the 'love bank' is depleted by conflict and lack of trust. In these cases it is important to replenish. It is about the love that generates energy, creativity, authenticity and audacity. Criticism from a place of love strengthens movements. Love increases a sense of wellness.

**“It is about the  
love that generates  
energy, creativity,  
authenticity  
and audacity.”**



## A STORY OF INCREASING LOVE

One organisation in Zimbabwe has a 'Love bank' account – a box in their meeting room with an opening for pieces of paper. Each person can 'deposit' on a regular basis what she considers to be acts of love she experiences by writing these down and putting them in the box. Next to this is another bank with un-loving acts. Individuals are also free to 'withdraw' non-loving acts and let everyone know that they have done so. Anyone can ask for a 'statement' any day but generally 'bank statements' are given on a weekly basis and critical imbalance discussed every Friday. This keeps people alert to their actions, the language they use, and other ways that they impact on the well-being of their colleagues.

Many activists are fighters and warriors; they laugh, and cry, scream, pull their hair out, disagree and yet love the work that they do. It's important to find ways that make it tolerable, bearable, fun and inspiring because, as the activist saying goes

"What is the point of a revolution if I can't dance?."

It is also necessary that as the work is done, organisations find the time and space to acknowledge the results of their work even if it is changing or improving the life of just one person. This means periodically the organisation must celebrate its work and the individuals that are making that work possible. These celebrations are themselves framed by an intention of love – to acknowledge the love given through work for health, justice and change.

## **ACTIVITY** **(RE) BUILDING** **YOUR** **ORGANISATIONAL** **LOVE BANK**

**Focus:** To let go of tensions, grudges and ill-feelings from past hurts and disputes

**Process:** Agree on an annual Love Week of amazing giving and receiving at the office. Each person plays a secret angel to someone else. Before Love Week starts, everyone draws a name of someone to be their secret angel without revealing their identity.

All the names are put in a hat and then each person draws out a name (at random), regardless of gender or rank. The name you draw is your Human, which makes you their Secret Angel.

Your duty as a Secret Angel is to show love and appreciation for your Human throughout the week in creative, mysterious and secretive ways.

Remember that while you are a Secret Angel, someone else is also being a Secret Angel to you. So you too will be receiving love and appreciation from them all week long.

Your identity as a Secret Angel should only be revealed after Love Week ends.

# soul bites

Love won't just happen, like crops it has to be cultivated, nurtured and harvested on a daily basis.

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Create the kind of atmosphere that makes you feel good every day, surround yourself with your sources of inspiration, create time for winding and unwinding, write small notes of appreciation to individuals, compliment, be available for each other during difficult and happy moments. Remember that creating an open, collaborative and happy environment is conducive to soulful work and high performance. Celebrating achievements feeds this positive environment.

# a moment for reflection

01

Does your organisational culture reward people for trying acts of love, or does it discourage them?

02

How can you create the kind of organisational culture that makes everyone happy and comfortable? Are you brave enough to shake up parts of your organisational culture caught in the status quo of 'serious organisations don't celebrate'?

## Soul Challenge #7:

# embracing diversity and inclusion

Conflict in organisations is sometimes caused by inability to appreciate diversity. In this guide, our definition of diversity goes far beyond the traditional categories of race, gender, and ethnicity. It includes personal qualities and experiences that are usually ignored, as well as issues such as sexual orientation and disabilities. A healthy organisation not only supports diversity, it celebrates and invests in it, but also makes it a prerequisite for institutional success.



The character of any true organisation can be seen only when each of its members has been awakened fully and allowed to reveal their innate gifts and genuine self. The sum of all these unique identities then becomes the character and identity of the organisation. Inclusion opens a broader view and seeks a diversity of thought and perspective.

Individuals in an organisation might have all of the gifts and skills necessary to sustain the organisation. However, when these gifts are not known, or are not unleashed, then the organisation turns to creating hierarchies – looking to the senior staff for all answers and not innovating. An organisation should develop in such a way that the sense of responsibility involves every one. Each individual should be a gate-keeper with the responsibility of holding open the ‘gate’ of her particular gift, on behalf of the whole organisation.

Diversity is clearly articulated in the Charter of Principles for African Feminists which clearly emphasises a spirit of feminist solidarity and mutual respect based on frank, honest and open discussion of difference with each other. One does not have to identify as a feminist to use the charter. The principles challenge many of the things organisations think about but hardly implement. For example there are many cases of individuals and organisations in the women’s movement telling sisters in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI), and sex-workers movements that their issues are not a priority or are too contentious and a distraction. Classism often plays out in subtle and obvious ways, in particular in staff hierarchies and choice of leadership. These dynamics in turn lead to the fragmentation in organisational and movement spaces. Stigma, taboos and stereotyping all sustain these divisions. In any organisation it is therefore essential to create space for conversations about differing identities and mutual respect as the foundation for healthy team relationships.



## THE STORY OF INNER CONFLICTS

In one feminist organisation, issues related to women and religion were 'hot spots' of disagreement. There was a huge rift between those who, for example, wanted to start everything with prayers and those who thought that religion had no place in the organisation. What deepened the conflict was that one of the strategies of the organisation included counselling women survivors of violence. The religious staff believed in prayers for the survivors whereas others felt that this was inappropriate and that survivors needed practical legal and emotional support, and non-biased services.

A facilitator whom both sides of the conflict trusted was invited to intervene. She took the time to listen to both views and developed strategies to respond, discussing the values of the organisation in a participatory and analytical manner and looking at contradictions with staff behaviour. With this discussion and other negotiation procedures, the conflict was resolved. One person who refused to participate in the discussion eventually left the organisation.

It is important to make everyone in the organisation feel acknowledged, welcome and appreciated for their own identities and particularities. Making space to discuss issues with the team and open up understandings and awareness of diversity and how people may be feeling marginalised is critical.

**ACTIVITY**  
**OPENING UP TO  
THE RICHNESS  
THAT DIVERSITY  
BRINGS**

**Focus:** To enable staff to acknowledge and embrace each other's identities

**Process:** The following can be done in group work, within a work team or involving staff from across the organisation.

Allow each person time to sit and write a poem that begins with the statement 'I am'. The idea is for people to communicate their own ways that they think about and identify themselves. Ask each person to also write an affirmation 'I am' followed by four words that they feel most describe them. Write these words on a separate piece of card or paper.

Back in the group invite each person to read their poem and the affirmation, and to then stick the pieces of card on the wall. Once finished ask the group to say back to the person 'You are...' and then name the four words that they have identified. This symbolises that the group has heard and respected the names and identities that people choose for themselves.

Once everyone has read their poem and affirmation, the group can go to the wall of affirmations and say in unison 'Together we are diverse and strong. We are...' and read each of the words that has been placed on the wall. This symbolises an acknowledgment that each person brings attributes that together form the team as a whole.

# soul bites

Power and privilege can play out in organisational dynamics in destructive ways. For the organisational soul, challenge words that exclude and dehumanise some even if that some is one person. Be alert and conscious of classism, ableism, patriarchal tendencies, heterosexisms and other differences.

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Creating an environment that nurtures diversity is a journey, and the concepts of equality, diversity, and change cannot be learned in isolation from each other.

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Every individual pattern of thinking and expression is unique, rooted in her personal experience and if all are to work effectively in an organisation or movement; they have to learn to listen to all the voices.

# a moment for reflection

01

How bold and daring is your organisation with regard to addressing issues of diversity (diversity defined broadly)?

02

What deliberate measures can the organisation take to ensure inclusivity and respect for diversity?

## Soul Challenge #8:

### woundology syndromes

Sometimes organisations or individuals dwell on what wounded them and refuse to move. They tell the story of being wounded again and again as if that gives them energy. For example this could be the story of losing significant funding, of undemocratic leadership in the organisation or of a corrupt colleague. It could also be of having suffered a violation of rights, or of being marginalised. This habit of constantly referring to the wound spills over to the constituency, and becomes a way of speaking about the organisation. An organisation that can't let go of its wounds is a wound addict.

Back in the community people are paraded from one area to the other so as to share their woundology stories. In such an organisation, relationships are bound by wounds. How can individuals get over their pain without 'marketing' it? How can they stop investing in the authority of their wounds as opposed to actually healing them? If an organisation went through a traumatic period during the era of so and so, that should not be a song. Yes, they should share in their time-line this part of their history, lest they forget and it is repeated, they might even use the experience strategically but there should be no need to dwell on it at the expense of more positive stories.

**“Sometimes  
organisations or  
individuals *dwell* on  
what wounded them  
and refuse to move.  
They tell the story of  
being wounded again  
and again as if that  
gives them energy.”**



## THE STORY OF WOUNDOLOGY

One organisation working with women who are HIV+ encouraged them to be open about their status but not necessarily present HIV as second name. Why? You see, almost in all the meetings, workshops and gathering, the women had learnt to introduce themselves as; "My name is Kansiiime, I am HIV positive".

Activists might have started this culture to encourage people to come out but it reached a level where the women thought that it was not acceptable to talk, in spaces created by NGOs, without first making it clear that they were HIV+. Then those not HIV+ started believing that in order to get help and support, travel to major conferences and be seen on TV, you had to say you were HIV+. They started feigning it too. Going to workshops uninvited and declaring that they were HIV+ so as to get free food and per diem had become the order of the day.



As the story to the left suggests, uncritically building work around a wound can be problematic, as it can divert energy and attention from healing and justice and instead call for constant focus on the problem alone. To address woundology, it is necessary to move away from 'victim' as a permanent identity and gravitate towards healing. This needs to begin by identifying the original source of pain or wounding.

## ACTIVITY HEALING FROM WOUNDOLOGY

**Focus:** To name and let go of old wounds that linger in the organisation

**Process:** To begin the process of healing, ask each person in the organisation to identify the wounds they carry, their source and express these in whatever way they enjoy (for example they may like to write, paint, sing or dance them).

Once people have verbalised their wounds, get together and engage in a conversation. For example, what support is needed to encourage healing? Imagine how the organisation will be after healing and celebrate even if the healing has not happened.

Make a commitment to heal. Over the course of a week staff should each note carefully the choice of vocabulary and use of victim language. Bringing staff together again reflect on what people have noticed, and generate ideas for a different language in the organisation that does not rely upon 'wound power'.

If there is resistance to this process courageously and honestly confront why you and others might fear healing. For example do you feel that you won't get support? Is it that you won't have a strong and convincing argument for making your case in the world? That you will not have an excuse for under performance? (There are some organisations that keep blaming their past 'wounds' for their poor performance).

# soul bites

Support all people in the organisation to appreciate that words carry energy. If 'wounded' words are used all the time, negative energy is spread in the organisation. The organisational soul song loses its vitality.

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Build a critical mass of champions and believers in the power of positive language.

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Realise that even as you try to change language and practices, there are no quick fixes; expect fear, doubt, and hesitation to show even if they are disguised in resistance, and identify a strategy to deal with it.

# a moment for reflection

01

Do you have 'truth tellers', people who stand up in a meeting and say, 'this is not affirming vocabulary, let us use positive, energising and soulful words?'

02

How can you start using empowering and authentic words; words that give energy and enable you to sing your song loudly and energetically?

## Soul Challenge #9:

# managing stress and family pressure

Many activists are stressed by family, relatives and friends who don't appreciate that activist work is a 24-hour job. They miss funerals, weddings and other celebrations; don't visit relatives, even when they are sick and this makes them appear unfriendly whereas they are torn between work and other demands. The activist feels guilty about all this and the worst thing is getting bitter because of feeling unsupported. Stress takes its toll on minds and bodies, and makes one feel fatigued, irritable, depressed, and even ill.

Even without family pressure, activists tend to overwork under extremely difficult conditions; stretched financial resources, disempowering political context, extreme insecurity and lack of capacity and strategies to deal with these threats. In the process, their well-being is compromised. It does not help that in some organisations fatigue, self-sacrifice, and constant work are regarded as expected parts of the work of activists. As a result of overworking, they fragment and expose themselves to insecurity and ill health. Their soul song is muted.

**“Stress**  
*takes its toll on*  
**minds and bodies,**  
**and makes one feel**  
**fatigued, irritable,**  
**depressed, and**  
**even ill.”**

## STRATEGIES FOR BALANCING LIFE AND WORK

**Bringing children to work or creating a family exposure day:** One way of addressing this is to organise family and friend days at the office or in communities where work is done, where family members and close friends can gain a better understanding of staff members' work. The organisation Uganda Women Arise has a bi-annual family day called the Day of Atonement to showcase their work to family members and enable families to see the value of the work their relatives are involved in.

**Using festivals to celebrate and think alongside family:** Festivals have been used to expose family and others to the work of activists and to solicit support from major key stakeholders while they inject fresh energy, new ideas, passion and recommitment amongst staff members. The organisation Tanzania Gender Network Project organises yearly gender festivals. This is an open forum for family, friends, likeminded individuals and organisations to come together to share experiences and knowledge, to celebrate achievements and assess challenges ahead, to strengthen networking and coalition-building, to build capacity and to contribute to public debate and plan collectively for social change from a feminist perspective.

**Regular exercise and healthy eating:** At an individual level, taking care of our bodies is important in finding balance and averting or dealing with work-related health and well-being issues. Although diet and exercise may not always cure the full effects of stress, they certainly help to alleviate and build more resilient bodies. It is helpful if exercise is built into the culture of an organisation as this opens time for it and allows for mutual accountability.

**Freeing selves from overworking:** Organisations can plan to structure their time so that people are able to take their leave days and enjoy weekends and also have time during work hours to reflect and develop personally.

## **ACTIVITY** **FINDING** **WORK/LIFE** **BALANCE**

**Focus:** To explore how an organisation can support a healthier balance between work and personal life

**Process:** This is a group discussion and should help in laying the foundation necessary to ensure life work balance by working fewer hours. It should be made clear that one does not have to sacrifice family to be an activist and in fact if you are doing that, the organisation is not getting the best out of you. Some of the issues pertaining to work/life balance might be personal but must be discussed collectively. This requires superior dialogue and communication skills.

During the discussion/dialogue, a facilitator must continually bring forward people who have not spoken and prompt them to add their views and whatever is behind their thinking.

Introduce the subject of life/work balance and have a discussion within the team about what you really want both in terms of organisational results and in creating a culture that honours life/work balance.

As a collective, look in the organisational mirror and talk about the number of hours spent working compared to the number of hours spent doing other things. Engage in an honest discussion, which can consider the following:

- Is there a way of reducing some of the time wasters in the organisation? Is there a way of eliminating non-productive activities and to reduce the time spent in meetings, on emails, and social media?
- Given that we want a work/life balance, what areas should we focus on more toward what we want? What are some activities that can be reduced?
- What are ways of doing things and ensuring that there is life/work balance?

# soul bites

Daily activist struggles should never exclude proper work/life balance.

---

Family support is crucial for activists, particularly those who face threats and stress for the work that they do. Inviting family and friends in to 'see' the work is a way to build greater understanding.



# a moment for reflection

01

Do you feel that your family understands your work? Do they support you? If not, what can you do to solicit their support?

02

Does your organisation discuss the importance of creating a life/work balance?

## Soul Challenge #10:

### *staying in tune with your soul song*

Institutionalising and sustaining an organisation with a soul is not always easy. As organisations go through various experiences, there are ups and downs and sometimes they forget to pay attention, to their soul song, remain present and aware. Making creative use of rituals and symbols is a powerful way to help an organisation keep its focus and periodically 'align' itself to its core vision, its soul song.

## USING RITUALS AND SYMBOLS

Africa is a continent of rituals. There are rituals for birth, adulthood, marriage, eldership, and ancestorship, naming children, death and harvesting. Given the brutality of colonialism, African societies would not have retained some of their core values around community if it was not for rituals.

Rituals can be a profound tool for activists to rebalance and reclaim their own power. As much as our bodies require food and nourishment, our souls (be it personal or organisational) require rituals to stay whole. Rituals are also necessary because there are certain problems that cannot be resolved with words alone. The trauma of unfulfilled dreams, the pain of genocide, the sorrow of loss and the pain that is often experienced in some organisations, are not the kinds of feelings that just go away. When they are addressed in a ritual, there are possibilities of healing them. Rituals offer the opportunity to relieve tension in a way in which words can no longer release us. Complex problems can plague and cripple an entire organisation but by actively involving the members of the same organisation in a ritual, this can achieve deeper solutions than words and rhetoric alone provide. They draw attention to what is important and help to funnel ideas, thoughts, feelings and behaviours of organisational members.

Rituals are part of an organisational culture. They evolve over time and derive from the shared beliefs, values, and norms of the organisation. Rituals create an identity of an organisation and impart a sense of purpose and meaning, and make its members part of a larger whole. When new members join, they are welcomed into the existing rituals. Rituals can be expressed in a variety of ways, including symbols, ceremonies, and stories.

Rituals could include the following:

- Eating together at a regular time daily or each week
- Going out to social events together
- Group exercise
- Retreats in beautiful places during the year to reflect and build team spirit
- Starting every day with an activity/exercise that connects everyone
- Inviting a soul-healer periodically to motivate and re-energise
- Celebrating different events during the course of the year
- Organising annual festivals to showcase your work

## USING SYMBOLS

Symbols are important objects that may and may not necessarily be physical but hold meaning for the members of the organisation. The meaning of the symbol expresses in some ways the values the organisation holds dear. Symbols can serve as organising tools. They are easy to remember and spread. For example, a national flag is honoured and even saluted by some people although it is, in effect, only a piece of cloth. The human psyche reacts to symbols. Positive symbols make us aware of that world from which we draw our deepest connection and identity.

In an organisation symbols that bind people, those that invoke a spirit of love and joy should be displayed or used. Symbols can be powerful especially if they connect with organisational values, language, workspace, ideology and conceptual frameworks.

## SYMBOLIC CLOTH: KANGA WISDOM

A *kanga* is a bright, coloured piece of fabric popular across East Africa and is at a central symbol in everyday life on the East African coast in particular. Each *kanga* has a pattern or design but importantly also includes words of wisdom in Kiswahili – a proverb, a saying or statement. Whatever is written transmits a message to those who read it. The message could be about love, happiness, friendship, money, a joke, a blessing for good fortune, a threat, or statement about friendship. For example, the saying could read *Kupendana ni Baraka* (which means 'to love is a blessing'), or *Kupotea njia ndiko kujua njia* (which means 'to lose the way is to find the way' – a statement about learning from failure).

# conclusion

This guide has offered ideas for a different way to look at the organisations that we create, work for and use as platforms to make positive changes in society, to defend human rights and support the full health and well-being of communities. In the guide we argue that organisations have souls – and that these souls are created, sustained and challenged by us. We explore the concept of an organisation's soul song – the song that motivates and brings everyone together in a shared vision and with authenticity. We look at elements that sustain the soul song – including seeing and presence, self-care, room for reflection, creativity, understanding how power operates, the ability to theorise work and receive feedback from the constituency, increasing well-being and security, ensuring organisational rootedness and flowing energy. We also acknowledge the role that love plays as a force that generates energy, humanity and audacity.

In the process of building an organisation with a soul there are bound to be soul challenges. These challenges may include the pressure of doing too much and resultant stress, 'undiscussable' problems and power relations, routine ways of working, failure to invest in creativity and innovation, decreasing trust between colleagues, lack of ideological consistency, 'woundology' and fear of celebration. In proposing activities and ideas for resolving these challenges we are encouraging you to be creative and unconventional – to innovate so as to build more vibrant, soulful organisations able to fully implement transformative visions.

In writing this guide we have drawn a picture of the inner lives of organisations as we have experienced them over many years of working as activists in sustaining organisations and in building women's movements in Africa and beyond. The stories draw from actual organisational experiences and demonstrate how complex the inner lives of organisations are! The principles and values underlying building organisational souls are real, important and crucial. We hope that the guide inspires you to continue to challenge yourself and to take the risks that are necessary to really develop organisations with souls.

## ANNEX: DOING AN ORGANISATIONAL 'SOUL CHECK'

An organisational soul check is a brief exercise to help gauge where an organisation is in terms of how nourished its soul is and how clear its soul song is. The questions below highlight key areas for discussion and contemplation individually and across the organisation. You can use these as a quick 'check in' – either before you start to build a process around growing the soul of your organisation, or as part of the reflection and learning process while you try different strategies. Ask each question and note key points that emerge, paying attention to whether there is a sense that things are stuck, moving positively or turning to the negative.

### Rapid Soul Check

- ☐ How well does staff know the organisation's soul song?
- ☐ How connected is the collective team to its soul song and is it singing it?
- ☐ Are there a clear set of shared values and principles?
- ☐ How strong is the sense of solidarity as well as personal and organisational security?
- ☐ Does everyone in the organisation feel that they are 'seen' by their colleagues?
- ☐ How comprehensive is the healthcare policy or health cover available?
- ☐ How supportive is the workplace to creativity, laughter and celebration?
- ☐ To what extent do individual staff prioritise their health, social and family lives as part of their activism?
- ☐ In serving the community do you periodically pause to reflect on internal well-being?
- ☐ How effectively is tension and conflict handled in the organisation?
- ☐ Are there any significant 'undiscussables' which are not being named or actively addressed in the organisation?
- ☐ Does the organisation respect diverse personal beliefs, identities and ways of being (e.g. by being secular)?

# further reading

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**“Transformation is not born out of rigid, conservative and bureaucratic ways of being. An organisation can’t create within the world what it can’t create within itself. The audacity and boldness to challenge oppressive power, embrace diversity, value respect and fairness starts with you.”**

— Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu

*Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul* is an innovative guide exploring principles and practices that can grow and nourish healthy, vibrant and resilient organisations. Drawing on decades of organisational development experience in the African region and beyond, Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu offer an approach that touches the inner core of organisations working for women’s rights, health and well-being. The authors invite us to be attentive to the subtle hidden and invisible dynamics that shape the organisations we work in, and to cultivate more inspiring and honest ways of being and doing.

The guide is designed to be interactive, encouraging you to generate your own reflections and ideas for integrating more soulful ways of thinking about and working in organisations.



**African Institute for Integrated Responses to Violence Against Women and Girls & HIV/AIDS (AIR)**

AIR strengthens and shares transformative feminist approaches to violence against women and girls, HIV/AIDS and emotional well-being and mental health in the African region. We do this by supporting documentation, critical thinking and analysis, providing technical support and facilitating exchange amongst African practitioners, and increasingly the visibility of transformative approaches.

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