

## **Skills Network: A case study in cooperative working**

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Skills Network ([www.theskillsnetwork.org](http://www.theskillsnetwork.org)) is a group of women in South London who are working together, as a collective, for social change. Their activities are diverse. Based in a converted warehouse in Brixton they share their skills with each other; design, test and make interactive, multisensory learning games for children; run family activity days; provide accredited courses for local women (in multisensory ways to support your child's learning, peer support and solidarity skills, cooperative working for yourself and your child, critical thinking skills for you and your child and more); offer a crèche; and develop ways for the experiences and insights of Lambeth women to be 'heard and counted' through peer research and topical debates.

Through all their activities, they aim to be a non-hierarchical collective of people who are all involved on an equal footing, and each supported to evolve and grow in their skills.

The approach is reminiscent of anti-hero leadership as is being discussed by Richard Wilson and the ongoing experiments of some corporates which have introduced less hierarchical management systems to better reflect our increasingly networked society. But Skills Network is pioneering something which others only discuss: a genuinely horizontal organisational model in which leadership moves between people in the group.

Responsibility is shared and there is no pay scale – because the pay rate is flat. There is a ratio in paid and unpaid time that applies to everyone. In this way, Skills Network have moved entirely away from a traditional model of service delivery, in which a group of paid professionals 'help' a group of unpaid people who give their time voluntarily. Instead, everyone's role is equally valued and this is expressed in organisational structure, process and pay packets.

Support services for women usually follow a familiar pattern – parenting, english, maths and CV or interview skills. Several women at Skills Network have been on these courses in the past and dropped out. They had felt boxed or undervalued. "There is this obsession that 'you're mothers, that's what you do'," Sandra describes, "but a lot of us have ideas to throw around and give out". Some had felt pushed into particular kinds of work, when really they wanted to be asked: "what it is you actually want? Rather than the traditional childcare catering cleaning part-time jobs that women tend to get once they know you are on a low income." Instead, the emphasis at Skills Network is on collective learning and skill-sharing.

Sandra reflected that Skills Network has given her a wider sense of what's possible – for her and her children. She is starting to question norms, and that is opening up a whole new set of possibilities.

For the woman in Skills Network, working cooperatively means acknowledging “the roles we all fall into” and helping each other to “become unstuck” from different positions of power and powerlessness. They share tasks and rotate roles to avoid any one person accumulating status and control. As a woman who recently joined Skills Network reflected, “the best thing is when we all move together. No-one is on higher position or lower position.” Whereas in the past, women have been told they are equals but have not felt equal, at Skills Network people say they feel the equality is real.

It is surprising to hear power being discussed openly, as it's not something you hear in the average organisation. But Hazel explains that as hierarchy is the norm in organisations, it is your default position – unless power is regularly discussed. In a sense, it goes against the grain: “because the system is that we always have a hierarchy, but this is a really new, radical way”. One of the challenges for Skills Network over the last two years has been finding the shared language that allows them to discuss this problem and challenge their defaults. They sought advice from Seeds for Change, which provides training for cooperatives and activists, and developed a visual ‘Power Ladder’ for discussion. Now Skills Network has its own ‘Language and Power’ training course.

In the context of equality, people gradually became comfortable enough to share “what they have and what they know” which ultimately leads to “doing better work and having better ideas”. Everyone who joins Skills Network becomes part of the ‘group meeting’ where decisions are made about the organisation – from the mundane to the strategic. Together they developed the organisation's ethos and set up processes for peer supervision that makes sure everyone is taken care of, professionally and emotionally. The organisation provides a context for enterprise – both individual and collective. Two women in the group, Jo and Sonia, set up a crèche as a small business. The crèche is based at Skills Network and allows other mothers to attend courses without having to worry about arranging childcare. They have created games which help children develop speech and language, numeracy and skills in cooperative working. They have launched several social action projects, including a peer research project on mothers' experiences of the Jobcentre in Lambeth which has involved interviewing local women and discussing the findings with academics, think tanks and local Jobcentre staff.

### **Story of Skills**

Skills Network began in 2012 with a short course on family learning and cooperative working. The initial vision for the organisation was developed by Pero and Kiran. Pero is a Special Educational Needs (SEN) teacher (a job that she still does part-time) and Kiran comes from a background in the charity sector. Through discussions in her local laundrette, Pero

realised that many mothers felt their children were struggling at school and wanted more ideas to support their children's learning at home. But neither Pero nor Kiran had faith in the conventional model where "one group of people who have resources or qualifications do things to or for another group of people who need 'help'...No one wants to be in the position of being helped all the time."

The first short course on family learning was a six-week programme, accredited by Open College Network (OCN), run on Thursday mornings and attended by eight mothers. The first session focused on play, learning styles and communication development in young children. In the second week of the course Seeds for Change provided training in cooperative working and, by the third week, everyone involved was invited to be part of group meetings through which key decisions about Skills Network are made. They began with decisions about lunch, start times and end times.

Over the next twelve months, Kiran and Pero invited women who had participated in the course to shape and lead Skills Network through the 'group meetings'. The majority of mothers remained part of the organisation. They suggested new activities and courses, and as a group applied for the charitable funding needed to run the organisations. Gradually, other women began to lead group meetings and take responsibility for the group – including Hannah, who is a mother of two, a carer for her autistic son, and has been developing their training and enterprise work; Sandra, who has taken a lead on thinking about and developing effective cooperative working processes and Louise and Sara who joined in 2013, who have started to take the lead on community skillsharing days.

Skills Network is now established as a cooperative, making collective decisions and leading together. They recently wrote a new strategy document for the organisation, based on a shared vision of social change. New courses and family activity days create opportunities for more women in Lambeth to join the cooperative. Their diverse activities reflect the diverse skills in the group, brought together by the common goal of better supporting families in the area. By drawing on asset-based approaches, taking seriously the issue of power and creating an environment of equality, Skills Network has modelled a new standard to challenge and inspire community and public services.