

Building a Community of Leaders: Thoughts from 350 Eugene

By Kaja Rebane, January 2019

Last year I visited Patty Hine and Deb McGee, leaders of 350 Eugene, on their farm in rural Oregon. When a bunch of the group's activists showed up for dinner and a lively discussion, I was deeply impressed by their strong sense of community and shared purpose. I reached out to Deb and Patty to ask for their advice on how to build a dynamic local group. During our conversation they shared these 10 principles, and discussed how they put them into practice.

Principle 1: Be Leaderful!

Patty: “The key to 350 Eugene’s success seems to be that we’re a leaderful group. People come to us ready to get to work, and we help give them tools and support. Whether their interest is in policy, education, or nonviolent direct action, we try to plug people in.”

Deb: “We try to get out of the way so people can act on their own sense of agency. We also try new ideas and experiment. I mean, Patty and I have never done this before! There is something sacred about trusting one another to have the best intention and to do our best, whatever that is.”



350 Eugene hits the streets. Photo by Don Ewing.

Principle 2: Cultivate Social Relationships

Deb: “Any time we have an action or meet up, we build in some social time. Like after an event, we like to get together and decompress with a beverage and food at a nearby establishment. These gatherings are super informal and open to everyone, and let us sit down and get to know one another better.”

Patty: “Last year we did a group camping trip for two nights at the top of Mount Hood—we loved it! So we’re planning another trip for this year. It’s wonderful to be together with our team in ways that aren’t focused only on our climate work.”

Deb: “We did a potluck before a meeting once as an experiment, and it turned out that people really liked that too. It turns out that we like to come and socialize before meetings! So now potlucks are just part of what we do when we meet. They are vegetarian (since meat is bad for the climate) and we bring reusable utensils. We also usually teach a song, or invite other people to teach the group something.”

Principle 3: Nurture Interconnection

Deb: “We do many tiny things to help us feel connected. Like at every other meeting we’ll have all 70 or 80 people form a circle, and we’ll say ‘If you feel comfortable please take the hand of the person next to you, and look around. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the ones who can make change in our community!’ We also use humor and friendliness to help everyone relax.”

Patty: “We often light a heart-shaped red candle in the middle of the meeting area at the beginning of our leadership meetings. We start with a quick check-in at the beginning, and another one at the end. During these check-ins everyone has a chance to share and be heard. We think our biggest asset is our solid relationships. It’s very important for us to trust one another and to feel comfortable enough to be vulnerable and honest. This lets us be our best and most creative.”

Principle 4: Get Personal

Patty: “We like to meet for coffee and invite people out to our farm, especially those people we don’t see as often at campaign meetings or events—like I’ll have tea with our busy webmaster whenever I can. I like to meet with folks to see how they’re doing, make sure we’re on the same page, and see what’s new. Checking in with people like this is really important and fun.”



Deb and two of her fellow Artists meet the climate challenge with smiles and energy. Photo by Don Ewing.

Deb: “We have learned that one-on-one conversations are very important! Sometimes new, energetic people will show up at a busy event, and we may not have time to really get connected. So we’ll schedule a one-on-one to hear what they’re excited about. One-on-ones are a really valuable tool for building the movement.”

Principle 5: Honor Each Other and the Work

Deb: “We strive for a group culture based on openness, inclusivity, and kindness—a culture which is solutions oriented, but centered on people. We take joy in the work, even though it’s serious, and we prioritize human relationships. As leaders we try to model these things, and over time we think we’ve established healthy group norms.”

Patty: “We try to imbue the work with an sense of sacredness. So we’re not just trying to win, but trying to right wrongs. What we are doing in 350 Eugene is transformational, not just transactional.”

Principle 6: Build an Inclusive Culture

Patty: “We work hard to create a space that is respectful and inclusive. For example, at the start of meetings there is usually a young or gender-nonconforming person who welcomes everyone, says whose land we are on, and acknowledges that our prosperity is built on current and past exploitation. Our campaigns do this too.”

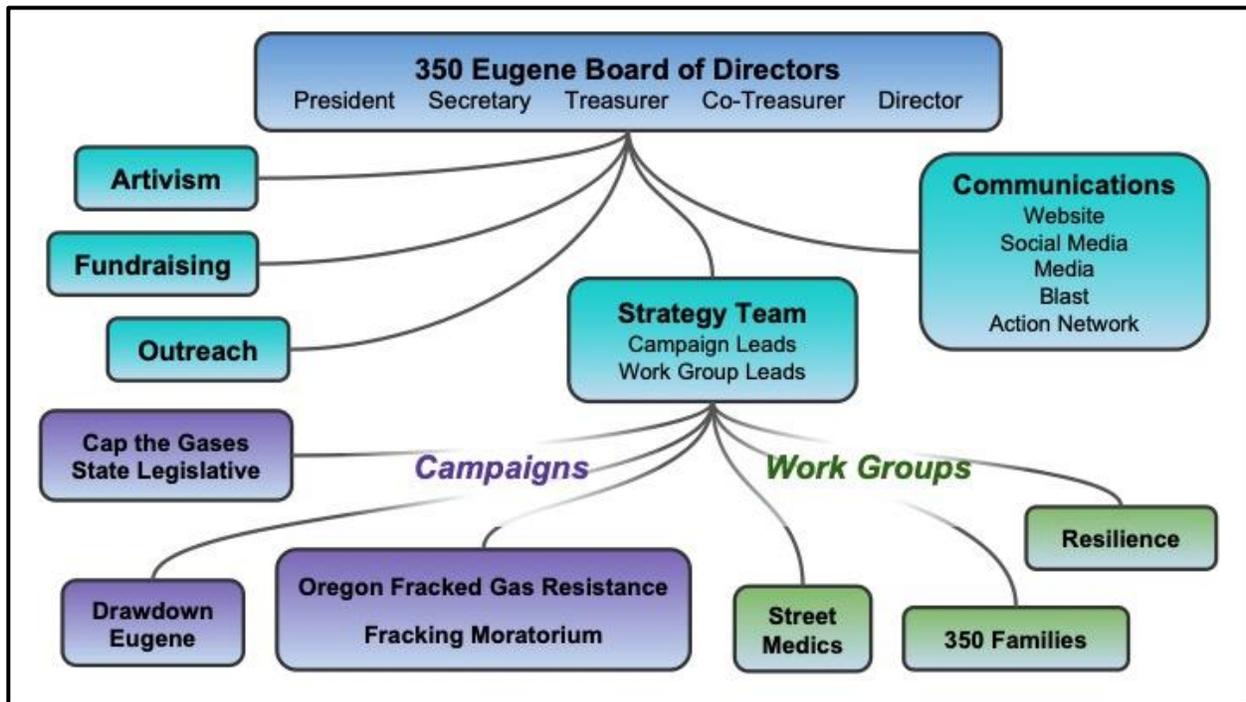
Deb: “We try to keep learning as well. We held some retreats last year on decolonizing our activism, will be doing a three-hour workshop with Idle No More on this topic later this year, and a leader of United to End Racism will provide an anti-racism training at an upcoming retreat. We also plan to put our leadership team through a structured training soon, which will draw on some of the material on white and male privilege from the training-for-trainers that 350.org held near Portland last year.”

Patty: “We also work in coalition on environmental justice issues, and do our best to act as an ally. We struggle like crazy trying to work with tribal communities. We are making every mistake possible in the process, but we will keep trying!”

Principle 7: Be Intentional About Structure

Patty: “At last year’s training-for-trainers, we learned that 25 people are too many to make some decisions. So we rethought 350 Eugene’s structure, and established a smaller Strategy Team of our campaign and work group leads, where we sort out what

direction to take the group given the big priorities, and then everyone else supports this.”



350 Eugene’s current organizational structure.

Deb: “Our campaign groups meet regularly—monthly or twice a month. And lots of work is happening at different levels of the group. For instance, we just got a local newspaper to accept our pitch to have a monthly climate article—there has been one published so far, and it got great feedback. It’s important to have a structure that supports the work you are doing, rather than constraining it.”

Principle 8: Limit Meetings but Run Them Well

Patty: “Some groups have weekly or monthly meetings of the whole group, but 350 Eugene just has quarterly meetings (preceded by a potluck). This means our capacity in between those meetings goes into actual organizing, planning actions, writing policy, meeting with public officials, going on the radio, etc.—it gives our leadership and campaign teams time to meet, and people have time to do the real work. Limiting the bigger meetings to once a quarter also helps us not get burned out. Meetings can sap a lot of energy, so we don’t let ourselves get sucked into them unless there is a good reason.”

Deb: “Patty calls meetings of the Strategy Team and Board of Directors depending on what’s going on. We meet when we need to. So it’s not like ‘Oh, we’re going to meet again already?’ but instead people are asking ‘So when are we going to meet??’ There

is lots of excitement and energy when we actually get together.”



Discussing next steps at a strategy meeting. Photo by Leonard Higgins.

Patty: “When we do meet, it’s important to use people’s time wisely. That shows respect, and helps everyone know that what we’re doing is important. So when I facilitate a meeting I have someone act as timekeeper. We also have someone in our group who is a very receptive and

empathic person. She sits next to me in meetings, and there is an understanding that she will signal me if things get off track or go in a weird direction. This helps me correct course and avoid wasting time and energy.”

Principle 9: Approach Conflict with Empathy and Firmness

Deb: “When there is an unhelpful interaction at a meeting, Patty tries to redirect the energy quickly without judgment—or schedule a later time to take it up—to ensure we stay on task. This creates a sense of safety for the rest of the group, since it reassures them that their leadership won’t allow things to become problematic.”

Patty: “There can also be more serious conflicts—in those cases, we need to bring as much grace, empathy, and understanding as possible to the parties involved. Listen to everyone, clarify who is doing what and why, and try to sort it out.”

Deb: “Occasionally there is someone whose ways of interacting create difficulties, even if their intentions are good. Sometimes the best thing to do is disentangle yourselves from that person, but we try to preserve the relationship. We need everyone in this fight—but not everyone’s role is being a grassroots organizer.”

Principle 10: Encourage People to Lead

Deb: “We are really mindful about encouraging people to step into leadership who don’t have dominant egos and a strong desire to control things. We like lively discussion, but don’t want divisiveness and egotistical displays that interfere with our collective ability to move forward. Someone who recently joined our leadership team said that one thing she appreciates is that there are no egos and no drama—and while that’s not true 100% of the time, that is really something we strive for.”

Patty: “When we bring folks onto our leadership team, we also take our time getting a sense of whether they have a sense of our group’s culture and values, and will be a good fit. It’s a process, but it’s worth it. This is our community, and we’re super glad to be working together. We owe it to the group to be thoughtful.”



Patty and Deb leading by example. Photo by Don Ewing.