

Self Organising Systems Explainer

Relevant material	 Communication Platforms and Processes Proposal
Version control	v0.1 08/09/20 (AD) v1.0 12/09/22 (AD, accepted by WC)

Contents

[Contents](#)

[Introduction](#)

[SOS Principles](#)

[SOS Key Concepts](#)

[Circles](#)

[Coordinators](#)

[Offers](#)

[Mandates](#)

[SOS in Practice](#)

[Comedy Underground](#)

[The Discord Server](#)

[Chimpanzee Fire](#)

Introduction

Only the Human's Self Organising System is both a set of principles for how we behave and an organisational and governance model.

- As a set of principles, it is a way for us to self-manage our work within OTH.
- As an organisational model, it stipulates how we get our work done.
- As a governance model, it stipulates how power is distributed.

Broadly, it means that individuals and groups cooperate to achieve a shared outcome and they do so with horizontal (rather than hierarchical) relationships. Nobody is anybody's boss. **This allows us to work towards the purpose of building a vibrant and inclusive community with a minimum of authority and bureaucracy.**

At our current scale, this is best understood as an ethic or a set of principles rather than a full governance framework per se. Certain elements of the company will still function hierarchically, such as access to key resources (e.g. the mailing list) and strategically important tasks.

Changes to core systems and processes are considered beyond the scope of this iteration of the SOS model. Our [Communication Platforms and Processes Proposal](#) and adoption of Asynchronous Communication Culture is intended to address this gap in the SOS model.

SOS Principles

- **Do the Thing** - If there's something you want to do or something that needs to be done, usually you can just go ahead and do it. As long as it fits with the values of Only the Human and our broader mission, you don't need to ask for anyone's permission. Check the [Offers](#) section below-- provided your idea doesn't raise any flags there, you have permission to fly.
- **The Yes, or the And?** - Sometimes it's your job to 'and' - add something new to the company, and other times it's your job to 'Yes' - enthusiastically support someone else's idea. Check in with the community before starting something new, but knowing that the choice as to whether or not to pursue it is ultimately yours.
- **Ask for Help, Don't Demand It** - Taking responsibility for something doesn't mean doing it all by yourself. See who is available to help. We highly recommend a buddy, even for fairly simple projects.
- **Keep Everyone Informed** - We can't be coy in improv. If you've started something, the broader community should know about it. The [Discord](#) is a great place to share what you're up to.
- **Commit!** - There's nothing worse in improv than watching someone backpedal on a big, bold choice they've made. Once you've stepped into a role and taken responsibility, it's your job to own it.
- **Be Ok Not Knowing** - You don't need a full plan before you start something. Just get started and be willing to figure it out (and ask for help) as you go along.
- **Look for 'Good Enough to Proceed,' not Consensus** - If you have an idea which is not totally formed or is a bit contentious, don't look for total consensus. Look for 'good enough' to get started.
- **Make smart use of technology** - Generally, working under an SOS model requires us to have a high degree of autonomy and to be able to work asynchronously (i.e. where people contribute at different times) over the internet.
- **Use face-to-face time for connection, community, and challenging issues** - Face-to-face meetings and Zoom meetings should only be used where an issue can't be resolved with asynchronous communication. This helps us keep face-to-face time focused on building community, connection and doing improv.

- **Be intentional and mindful with communication** - Working asynchronously means that our communication with each other needs to be intentional and mindful. Take time to read and consider information and other perspectives before making proposals and suggesting ideas.

SOS Key Concepts

These are the four main concepts needed to understand the Self Organising System model.

(1) Circles

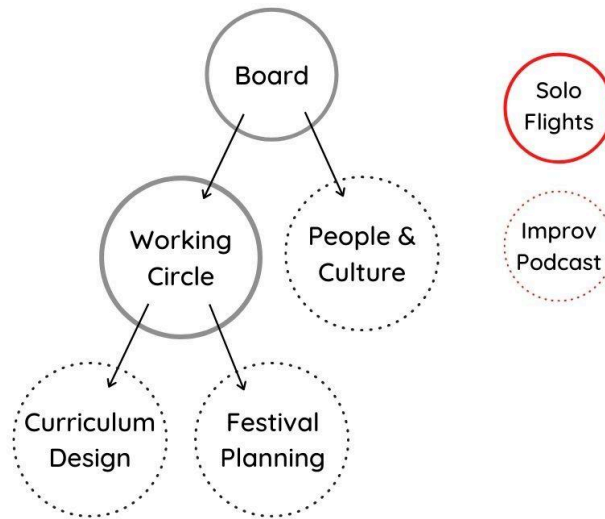
Circles are groups of people (as small as 2, usually no larger than 8-10) who are working together towards a common goal. Circles are created by mandates which must be consented to by a wider circle.

The core circle which we are required to have, by law, is the board. By mandate, it will create something like a Working Group/Circle. The Board may create other circles - for example, a "People and Culture" circle. Similarly, the Working Group may create other circles - such as a Curriculum Circle.

The board and all sub-circles from the board exist to support the core work of Only the Human.

Members can also independently form circles to undertake any task which contributes to our broader mission and is aligned with our values, so long as this does not conflict with the core mandate of the board and sub-circles. This could be a few people coming together to make a comedy podcast or form an improv team.

Occasionally, an independently formed circle may become a 'core' part of Only the Human. This process will always require the consent of the independent circle.



Example of a possible organisational structure/s under this model. The Board and Working Circle are official circles. Solo Flights is a self-organised circle. The dotted circles are potential Circles, some nested within the organisational hierarchy and an independently organised podcast.

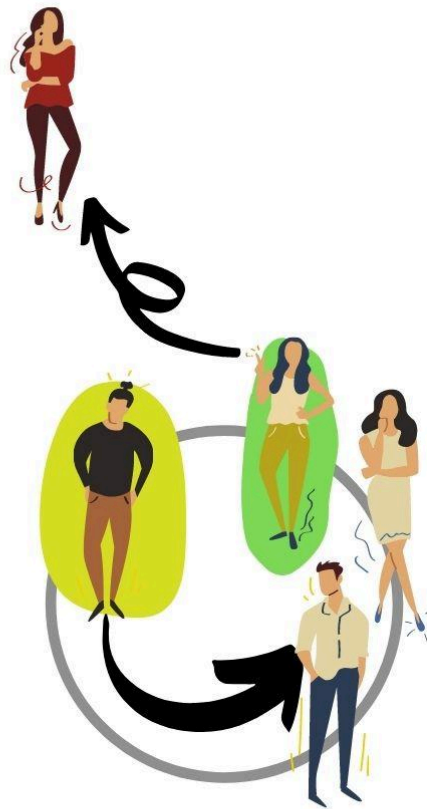
(2) Coordinators

The Coordinator role is pretty intuitive, but it's a good way to think about circles. Essentially, every circle - in addition to fulfilling its purpose - must have two other roles. It must have:

- **An internal coordinator**, responsible for helping keep people accountable to their commitments (not a boss!)
- **An external coordinator**, responsible for maintaining relationships and information flows with other circles (especially higher circles).

In most cases, this is likely to be the same person. These roles can also shift and change over time.

Making this explicit is unlikely to be necessary in the short-term, but it is a key part of the SOS model and will become more relevant as we expand.



Yellow person is responsible for keeping things flowing within the team. Green person is responsible for maintaining relationships with other circles. All people are very professional and well dressed.

(3) Offers

An offer in a project that you would like to initiate that you are willing to be **accountable to** and **responsible for**. Offers are a major part of how PITS grows organically in alignment with the energy and enthusiasm of members. If you are part of a Circle and would like to make an offer, here are a few questions to consider:

1. How will this offer interact with other systems and processes at PITS?

A conversation with the GM or EO may be useful if the idea impacts PITS' existing processes and platforms significantly.

2. Who should this offer be made to?

An offer could be directed to a member, the Working Circle, the Board, or the GM or EO, the broader membership, etc. Anything with a significant cultural or financial impact should involve the Board, and anything with a significant operational impact should involve the Working Circle.

3. Will this be an ongoing feature of PITS, or is it short-term?

If an offer is likely to result in a new process or system requiring ongoing maintenance and development, you'll need to think about how this process or system can be sustained.

4. What help do I need? Am I willing to be accountable for this Offer?

Some projects can be run independently. Often, we suggest a **buddy** or a new **circle** depending on the complexity of the offer. Offers above a certain level of complexity need a [Mandate](#).

5. What demands might this role unintentionally place on other volunteers?

Often, invisible support work needs to happen to help realise an Offer. Consider how that work may be able to be incorporated in your own accountabilities (where possible).

6. Is this an appropriate role for a volunteer?

Some roles may be better suited to contractors or employees. Check out the [Contractor Remuneration & Volunteerism Policy](#) if you're unsure. Note that paid roles can still be a part of the SOS model, but will need to go through the GM who may request a business case or commercial proposition.

(4) Mandates

The whole system doesn't function without mandates. **Mandates are designed to clearly stipulate what the purpose of a given circle (or even an individual role) is, what the anticipated duties for that circle/role is/are, and what (if any) resources that role controls.**

A **mandate** often results from an **offer**. A project is suggested as an offer, and after some refinement and co-contribution from members becomes clarified as a mandate.

The key thing is that a mandate means a person or circle is effectively accountable to themselves. **Mandates mean that people have the authority and autonomy needed to make things happen.** If people take their mandates seriously, it minimises the need for authority and top-down control.

Mandates don't need to be complex. In most cases, they are a single line on the [PITS Organisation Chart](#). More complex and ongoing roles will be expressed as a short JDF in the [PITS JDFs](#) document.

For very complex projects the [Understanding Mandates](#) document may be helpful.

Values-aligned self-organised groups, and teams, aren't expected to have mandates.

SOS in Practice

Here are some examples of how SOS has worked for PITS in practice:

1. Comedy Underground

As a core part of our business model, Comedy Underground sits within the Working Circle and the broad parameters of the show vision were established by a committee of members with the guidance of the GM (Aden Date). The GM and EO (Emma Ross) also have time allotted to ensure the back-of-house functions of the show run smoothly and efficiently (e.g. paying performers, ticketing). However, Nathan Blumenthal made an offer to be Artistic Director and now has a mandate over the month-to-month running of the show and rehearsals. Aden Date as a member (rather than as GM) acts as Nathan's buddy for showrunning purposes.

2. The Discord Server

Don Rowe made the offer of setting up the Improv WA discord. Gabriella Martini joined as a buddy to provide some redundancy. The WC and staff accepted this offer and supported the server, but Don Rowe has a mandate to run it as he chooses. As an example, he decided early on it would be a WA-focused server rather than a PITS-focused server.

3. Chimpanzee Fire

Chimpanzee Fire is an artistically and functionally independent improv team with Jessie Ross acting as internal and external coordinator. The group was set up independently of PITS but its key events, activities, and guidelines for participation/joining were made known to the wider group. Their performance style is distinct from the company and Comedy Underground, but this is welcome within a community which acknowledges artistic diversity.