



Getting Started with the ProSocial Process

A practical introduction for groups who
want to work better together



<https://prosocial.world>

hello@prosocial.world

ABOUT

ProSocial World

We're a non-profit dedicated to enabling individual and collective action for positive cultural change and widespread cooperation through our unique framework built on science and compassion.

What makes us unique?

We've been working on the theory and practice of a ProSocial framework since 2011. We decided it was time to expand our efforts and founded our non-profit in 2020.

While many organizations have a prosocial mission and vision, what makes us unique is our focus on bringing together modern evolutionary and behavioral science with Elinor Ostrom's Nobel prize-winning design principles to inform our process. Our work focuses on empowering individuals, groups, and communities at all contexts and sizes to make positive cultural change possible.

Our Belief

We believe that to catalyze rapid, positive cultural change we need to recognize our interconnectedness and continuously improve the relationships we have with ourselves, each other, and the planet.

Our Purpose

We exist to consciously evolve a world that works for all.

Our work focuses on **three key areas**

Research

Our research explores the integration of modern evolutionary science, spirituality, and community - providing an inclusive framework that can help groups to become cooperative and adaptive.

Courses

We provide a number of learning opportunities that enable and support individuals and groups to collaborate, co-create, and tackle issues together.

Community

We've created a global community so we can work together to accelerate a major, multi-level evolutionary transition and better adapt to our rapidly changing world.

A simple way to strengthen trust, shared purpose, and effective collaboration using evidence-based cooperation science.

WHAT IS THE PROSOCIAL PROCESS?

The ProSocial process is a structured way for groups to improve how they work together. It is based on decades of research from evolutionary science, behavioral psychology, and organizational practice on one central question:

What allows groups to cooperate effectively and sustainably?

Rather than focusing on personalities or conflict resolution alone, the process helps groups adjust the conditions that shape behavior: how decisions are made, how expectations are clarified, and how people respond when difficulties arise.

Groups use it to:

- Improve meetings
- Reduce tension and recurring conflict
- Increase follow-through and accountability
- Clarify shared goals
- Strengthen trust without forcing agreement

This isn't a rigid management system. Rather, it is a practical set of shared practices groups can try together.



WHO THIS IS FOR

The process can be used by many types of groups:

- nonprofit teams
- community groups
- local initiatives
- boards and committees
- classrooms or learning communities
- workplace teams
- volunteer organizations

You do **not** need a trained facilitator to begin.

This guide shows you how to try a starter version together. Many groups later decide they want additional structure or facilitation — but that comes after experience, not before.

Ideal group size: **3–10 people**

HOW TO USE THIS STARTER GUIDE

Set aside 4–5 meetings (about 60–90 minutes each).

You will work through four tools in order.

Each activity builds a shared understanding before moving to behavior change.

If groups skip ahead, they often try to fix problems without understanding what is producing them.

The sequence:

1. Learn the Core Design Principles
2. Reflect on your group together
3. Practice individual awareness
4. Practice group awareness in real time

The goal is not to do the tools perfectly, but rather to observe how your group actually functions.

STEP 1: LEARN THE CORE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

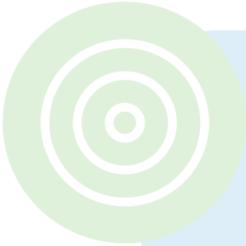
The Core Design Principles (CDPs) are conditions found in effective cooperative groups across cultures and contexts. They describe what successful groups do consistently, not what they intend or value abstractly.

During your first meeting:

- Read through the CDPs and diagram together.
- Take turns discussing:
 - Which principles feel familiar?
 - Which feel missing?
 - Which might matter most for your group right now?

Remember, you are not evaluating people — **you are observing patterns**. This conversation alone is often the first time a group shares a common language for how they function.

THE EIGHT CORE DESIGN PRINCIPLES



1 - Shared identity and purpose

A group functions best when its purpose is clearly understood and perceived as worthwhile by its members. A group also functions best when it offers a strong group identity, such that members are proud to belong and enjoy their time together. Prosocial is about creating cultures that constantly reflect on the “towards” move dynamically.

EXAMPLE METHODS:

The core method here is continual reflection on the purpose, and using it as a guide to daily action. Other ‘one-off’ approaches include the group ACTmatrix, scenario planning, strengths-based questions e.g. “What are we doing at our best”, The miracle question e.g. “Imagine it is five years in the future, everything has gone perfectly, what would you see, hear, be doing, etc?”. Outputs include mission, vision and value statements but these are less important than continual reflection on ‘towards’.

KEY ASSESSMENT QUESTION:

To what extent do group members feel a sense of belonging and shared purpose with the group?

KEY PLANNING QUESTION:

To what extent do group members feel a sense of belonging and shared purpose with the group?



2 - Equitable distribution of contributions & benefits

Most people have a strong sense of equity that is violated when someone receives benefits disproportionate to their contributions. Perceived fairness is essential for high group performance. Often this is about balance of effort (workload) and reward. Perceived unfairness is sometimes 'undiscussable' in groups and sometimes it is discussed endlessly but in ways that do not lead to positive change.

EXAMPLE METHODS:

Role clarity, anonymous surveys, transparency regarding allocation of rewards and benefits, communication skills training to build assertiveness and listening to multiple perspectives, open discussions of fairness, training re distinction between distributive and procedural justice and their importance for motivation.

KEY ASSESSMENT QUESTION:

To what extent are the demands and benefits of participating in this group distributed equitably between its members? What would a win-win situation look like here?

KEY PLANNING QUESTION:

How will we ensure fairness in this group? How can we create a situation where everybody benefits?



3 - Fair and inclusive decision-making

If you want good decisions and motivated people, group members need to be involved in making the decisions that affect them, particularly agreements about how the group runs. This can take the form of consensual decision making but in some circumstances consultation with a designated leader/representative, voting or even the opportunity to make objections (veto powers) can be enough and more efficient.

EXAMPLE METHODS:

Daily/weekly/quarterly meetings focusing on short to medium term goals as appropriate, consultation, participative democracy [informed voting], consent based decision making e.g. Sociocracy

KEY ASSESSMENT QUESTION:

To what extent do group members feel involved in making the decisions that affect them?

KEY PLANNING QUESTION:

How will we decide in a way that involves those who need and want to be involved?



4 - Monitoring of agreed behaviors (Transparency)

Self-serving behaviors increase when there is a lack of transparency. Monitoring does not need to be coercive. It can be as simple as having regular check-ins or meetings to discuss progress. Research shows monitoring is usually better performed by peers as part of the normal interaction of group members.

EXAMPLE METHODS:

Check-in meetings. Other processes for noticing what others are doing such as reporting, swapping roles, etc.

KEY ASSESSMENT QUESTION:

To what extent do group members know what others in the group are doing?

KEY PLANNING QUESTION:

How can we be aware of what each other are doing? How can our behaviours be transparent?



5 - Graduated responding to helpful and unhelpful behaviour (Social Reinforcement)

Effective groups have in place responses to transgressions ranging from open, compassionate conversation to find out what happened, through to sanctions or even, ultimately, exclusion from the group. Research shows trust increases in groups when sanctioning occurs for unhelpful behaviors. But sanctions alone are not enough. To create enjoyment, belonging and engagement with the group, helpful behaviors must also be appropriately encouraged. Typically this can be as simple as expressing gratitude for helpful acts or it can be built into more formal recognition systems.

EXAMPLE METHODS:

Coaching-based performance conversations [not just evaluative], buddy systems, clear and justified rules and consequences

KEY ASSESSMENT QUESTION:

If someone behaves in a way that is unhelpful or disruptive in this group, to what extent do people respond appropriately to discourage that behaviour? If someone behaves in a way that is helpful or cooperative in this group, to what extent do people respond appropriately to encourage that behaviour?

KEY PLANNING QUESTION:

How should we respond to one another to encourage cooperation and discourage unhelpful behaviors?



6 - Fast and fair conflict resolution

Any group that involves committed individuals acting authentically will inevitably encounter conflict as people have different interests and information. It is best to plan for conflicts and their resolution from the beginning by building conflict resolution skills among group members and creating helpful, flexible processes for conflict resolution.

EXAMPLE METHODS:

Developing skills in listening and assertiveness, creating a role for trusted impartial mediators, or a judicial committee with rotating membership, an escalation process: self-reflection, 1 to 1 conversation, mediated conversation, committees for assisting mediation, or arbitration.

KEY ASSESSMENT QUESTION:

To what extent does the group have fast and fair conflict resolution processes?

KEY PLANNING QUESTION:

How should we resolve the inevitable conflicts and differences that will arise within and between groups that are authentic?



7 - Authority to self-govern (according to principles 1-6)

Every group is embedded in a larger society that can limit its ability to govern its own affairs. These constraints can interfere with the objectives of the group and the implementation of design principles 1-6. For example, the context might impose excessive regulation on how the group behaves (e.g. when Human Resources departments constrain conflict resolution to formal procedures) or minimize the capacity of the group leader to act as a leader. Groups must be able to implement principles 1-6, without excessive interference, to function effectively.

EXAMPLE METHODS:

Structures supporting self-management, values and purpose based strategy, Agile, Sociocracy – double-link leadership

KEY ASSESSMENT QUESTION:

Does the group have authority to govern itself without excessive interference from outside the group?

KEY PLANNING QUESTION:

How can we take responsibility for managing our own affairs? How should we lead and how should we protect ourselves from undue influence from outside the group?



8 - Collaborative relations with other groups (using principles 1-7)

If we are to build systems of cooperation, a group must relate to other groups using principles 1-7. This can go wrong in two ways: a) other groups may not cooperate with you (e.g. they don't include your group in important decisions, behave in ways that can't be monitored, and so on), or b) your group may not cooperate well with other groups. In this fashion, the same design principles are relevant at all levels of a multi-tier hierarchy of social units. For example, groups cooperate well when there is shared purpose, equity, inclusiveness in decision making etc between groups as well as within groups.

EXAMPLE METHODS:

Systems for reporting out to other groups, or coordinating groups, networking events.

KEY ASSESSMENT QUESTION:

Does the group have purposeful, fair, inclusive, transparent and effective relations with other groups? Does the group primarily serve its own interests, or those of its larger context?

KEY PLANNING QUESTION:

How can we have better relations with other groups? How can we contribute to building whole systems that work?

COMPLETE THE SPOKE DIAGRAM

On the next page, work with your team to complete the spoke diagram. You'll see an example of a completed diagram on the following page.

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. This exercise is about observing how your group currently functions so you can identify areas of improvement.

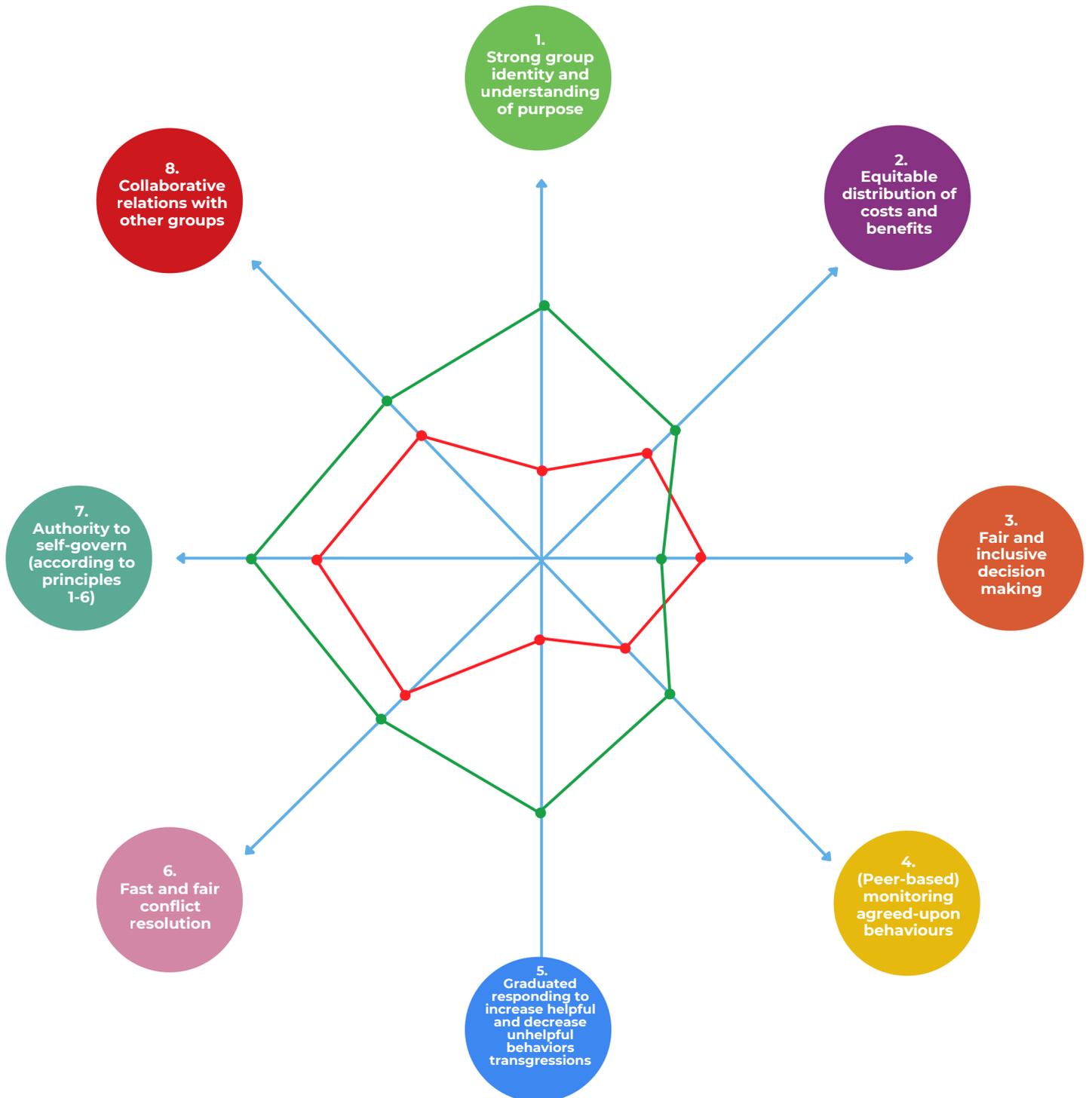
RATE YOUR GROUP ON EACH OF THESE PRINCIPLES

(very poor = towards center, very good = towards edge)

Join the ratings to create a 'wheel'.



An example of a completed spoke diagram with an effective group in green and an ineffective group in red.



STEP 2: GROUP REFLECTION

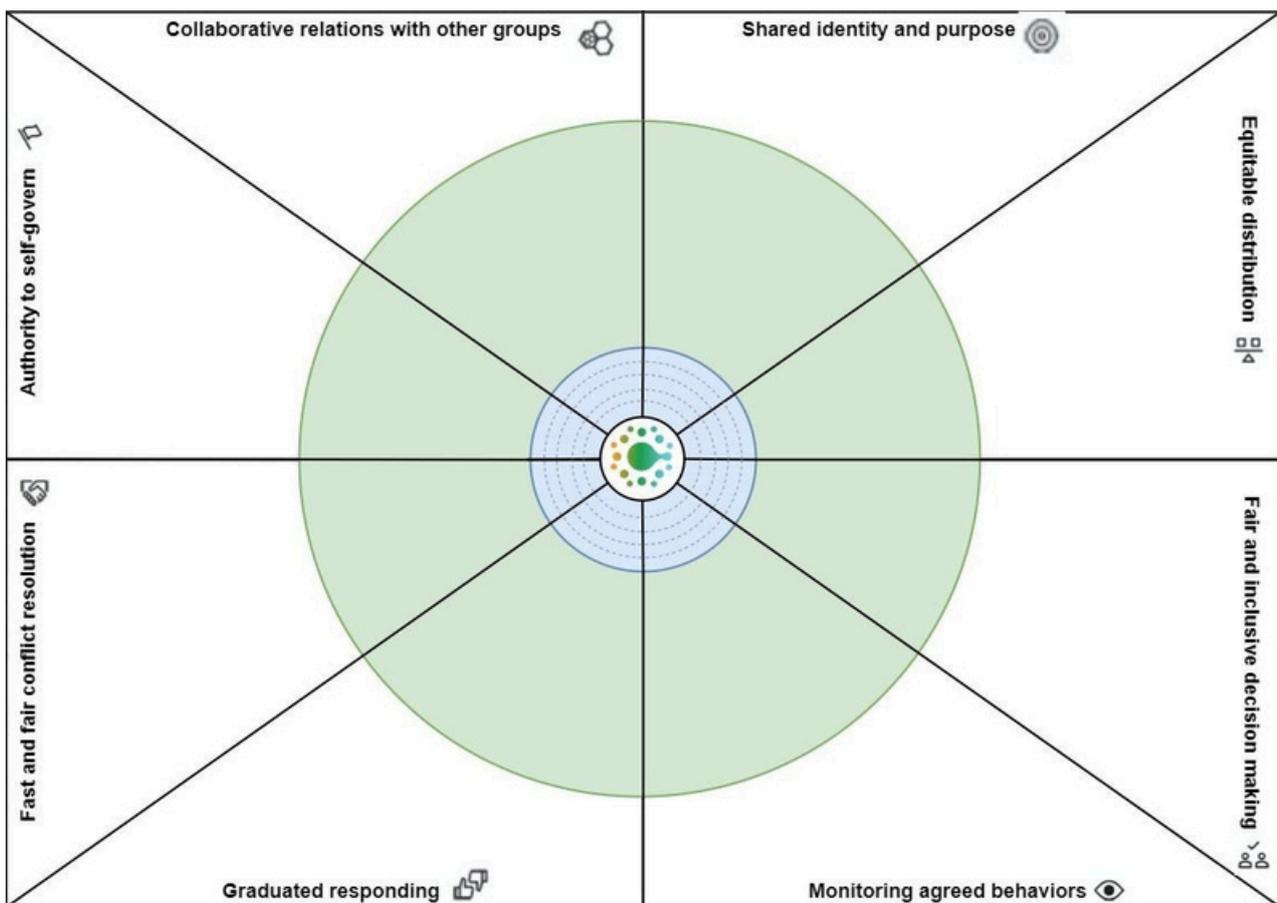
In your second meeting, complete the group reflection together.

Guidelines:

- Answer honestly rather than politely
- Focus on patterns, not individuals
- Avoid problem-solving yet

You may notice disagreement. That is useful information, not a failure. Often at the heart of disagreements are shared needs and values. Clarifying these consolidates shared purpose.

You may also discover that your group does not have one shared experience – it has several. Cooperation improves when those differences become visible.



The blue ring can be used to rate effectiveness on the principles (1-5 with 5 being high performance). We recommend you use the green ring to answer “How is the group already implementing this principle?” and the white section to answer “How could the group improve on this principle?” Alternatively, for a “matrix-like” experience, the green ring could be used to record behaviors moving the group TOWARD better performance on the principle while the outer ring can be used to record behaviors AWAY from the principle.

STEP 3: INDIVIDUAL AWARENESS

Before your third meeting, each person completes the Personal Noticing exercise individually.

This step is crucial. Groups often try to change group dynamics without noticing their own behavior inside the group, such as reactions, assumptions, withdrawal, urgency, or defensiveness.

You do not need to share everything you write. This exercise allows you to build awareness of how you participate in group processes.

Pay special attention to the value you are striving for and what you need to express that.

At the meeting: Discuss what you noticed about your own behavior, not others'.



STEP 4: PRACTICING IN REAL TIME

Step 4 is when you bring awareness into an actual group interaction.

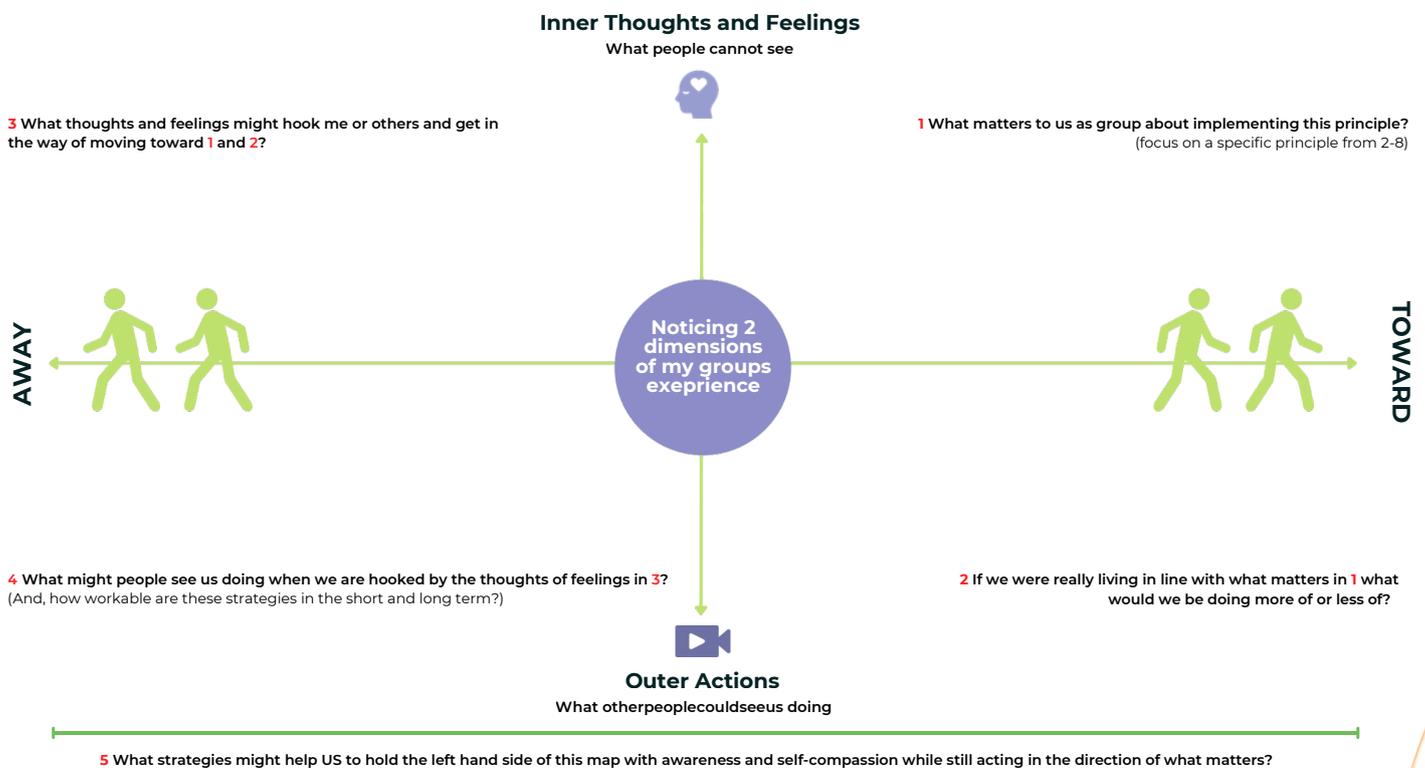
During a normal meeting, periodically pause and ask:

- What is happening in our interaction right now?
- Are we hearing all voices?
- Are we drifting from our purpose?
- Are expectations clear?

Remember, this is a shared observation practice and not a critique. Most groups discover that problems were not caused by one person but instead they were produced by interaction patterns.

This is usually the point where groups begin to experience meaningful change. It will be particularly transformation if you overtly acknowledge what you admire about the others in your group.

Use the group noticing tool below together.



WHAT USUALLY HAPPENS NEXT

These starter practices are intentionally lightweight. They are designed to help your group see how it functions in practice and not to fully restructure it.

After working through the tools, most groups notice both improvements and clearer limits to what they can do on their own. At that point, groups typically choose one of three paths.

1. Continue practicing independently

Some groups decide the tools are enough for now. You can keep using:

- The Core Design Principles as a regular check-in
- Personal Noticing before important meetings
- Collective Noticing during discussions and decisions

This works best for smaller groups with relatively low conflict and clear shared purpose.

2. Take the *Becoming ProSocial* course

The [Becoming ProSocial course](#) helps individuals and groups move from awareness to reliable coordination.

The course introduces:

- authentic conversations
- structured group agreements
- decision-making protocols
- accountability practices
- skills for working with disagreement and strong emotion

People and groups often choose this when they want consistency – not just good meetings occasionally, but dependable collaboration over time.



3. Work with us on a custom program

Some groups are dealing with challenges that are specific to their context, such as leadership transitions, organizational change, cross-department coordination, community conflict, or multi-stakeholder projects.

In those cases, a tailored process is often more useful than a standard course.

This option is especially helpful for organizations, partnerships, or community initiatives where many roles and responsibilities must align.

If you're unsure which path fits, you're welcome to contact us for a conversation.

Contact us: hello@prosocial.world

Follow us on socials to stay up to date on practical tips, events, and impact stories :



FURTHER READING

If you want to go deeper, check out our book:

“Prosocial: Using Evolutionary Science to Build Productive, Equitable, and Collaborative Groups” by Paul Atkins, David Sloan Wilson, and Steven C. Hayes.

It provides a detailed look at strengthen trust, shared purpose, and effective collaboration using evidence-based cooperation science.

