Open is
an Extreme

Going to great or exaggerated lengths
for humanistic, equitable workplaces

by Laura Hilliger

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Going to great or exaggerated lengths for open, equitable workplaces

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Open is an Extreme is dedicated to my mom.

It's all her fault.
She taught me to be fierce.
She taught me to be driven.
She taught me to be independent.
She taught me to be these things even when it's hard.

Chapter 1
Open on the inside

Open tools need open people, and open people are open to change, open to thinking, open to empathy. Openness is not a binary state, rather it is a never-ending continuum for learning, reflecting and growing.

Over the years, I've learned that openness can trump the social and cultural norms embedded within us. Through openness and courage, one develops emotional intelligence. If you're honest and authentic – it doesn't matter if you are a banker with a mohawk or an environmentalist in a suit. If you're open-minded, hard-working and empathetic, it shouldn't matter if you curse or use crude phrasing (philosophically it doesn't matter anyway). If you're sincere and tactful, you should be able to interrupt. You should always question authority.

Sometimes you will make mistakes as will others. When we don't waste time judging, we can pay attention to global problems and listen to what people are actually saying. This first chapter brings together a series of reflections I wrote during the first year or so that I started engaging with Greenpeace International.

After coming from an open source community like Mozilla, I found a different set of expectations and ideals inside of Greenpeace. It felt like a culture clash, until I realized that Greenpeace is full of people who are eager to understand the nuances of openness.

In the Western world, we function inside of a quite individualist culture. We're taught a sort of protectionism about ourselves, our friends, our families, our neighbors. We're taught to protect our ideas. Protect our money. Protect our climb up the corporate ladder. We're taught to be competitive because "there is not enough".

This is inherently untrue. There is enough, plenty, enough to give away. We need to begin to work and move as a collective, and for me, it starts with finding a way to be open on the inside.

Open is an attitude

I spent three days hanging out with the activists and thinkers who attended the [Open Campaigns Camp](). Participants included loads of folks from [Greenpeace](), but also other activist organizations like [350.org](), [38 Degrees](), [Change.org](), [Witness]() and more. I could write two reflection posts – a happy-go-lucky one about how I'm eager to share [resources]() that can help people learn participatory methodologies and implement open strategies, OR a deeper reflection that openness as a trait is socially and culturally influenced and that organizational openness depends on individual openness.

Guess which I'm picking.

I was quite pleased to meet people outside of the open technology community, especially because **I tend to forget just how radical the idea of "open" is.** Open, participatory event formats are still new outside of my standard networks. Honest, direct conversation is hard for most people. Agile power structures and dynamic leadership is unimaginable. People learn that they have to hold their cards close to the chest (metaphorically, this is important when playing poker).

Many people are ready to be open in their work, but there is a kind of **emotional legacy** that influences whether or not open practices can be developed within a particular team or person, and therefore in an organization as a whole. To be open, organizations and the people within them have to overcome aspects of their identities and emotions. They have to reflect on and give tribute to the social and cultural norms that define us. And not just one person, but all the people in an organization.

I'm fascinated when I notice my ego is dealing the cards, or my fears are influencing my behavior. For me, it's terrifying to realize that someone else's distrust is just a symptom of their internal perceptions. People need proof that open can work, they need examples, and they need guides on how to implement open in their individual contexts – but the majority of open starts with navigating your own power and ego.

As a "has a problem with authority" person, I have some ideas on how we might influence and navigate tradition hierarchical structures. I've said it in the past, **it starts with leading by example.**

We start here:
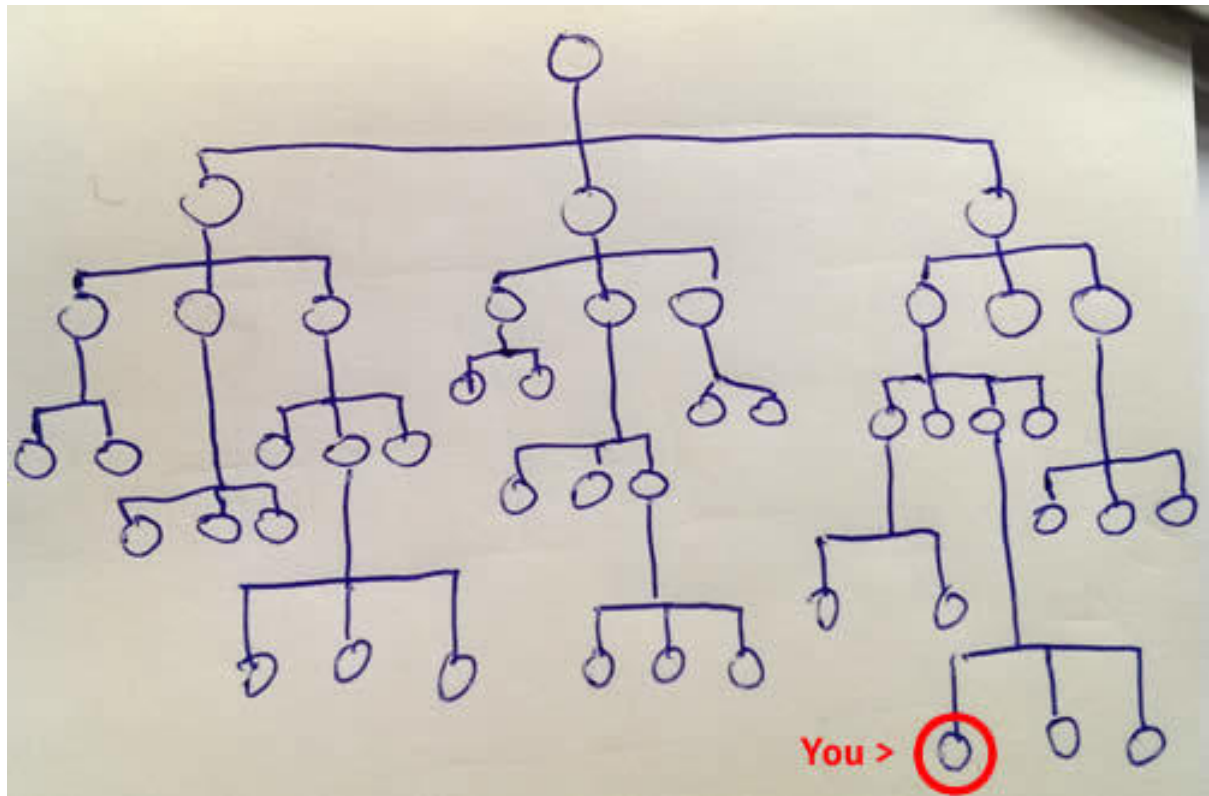
When we get to here, we've developed certain understandings of our selves ("I earned this", "I deserve this", "I'm responsible", "I have more experience", "I am better equipped"):
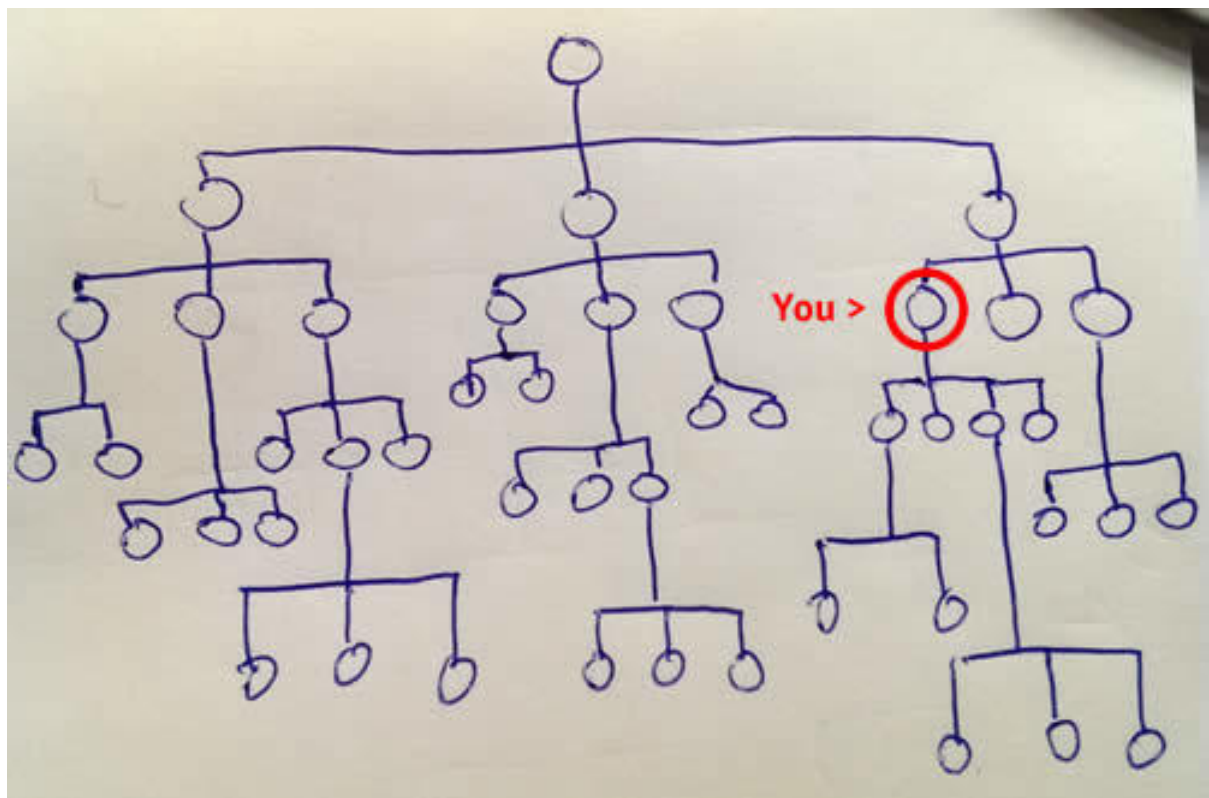
The system has taught us what is true, we DO deserve it. We ARE more experienced. We ARE better equipped. These understandings equate to ego. But what if, you implemented agile power structures from the beginning? What if you create this structure each time you are working with a different set of colleagues?
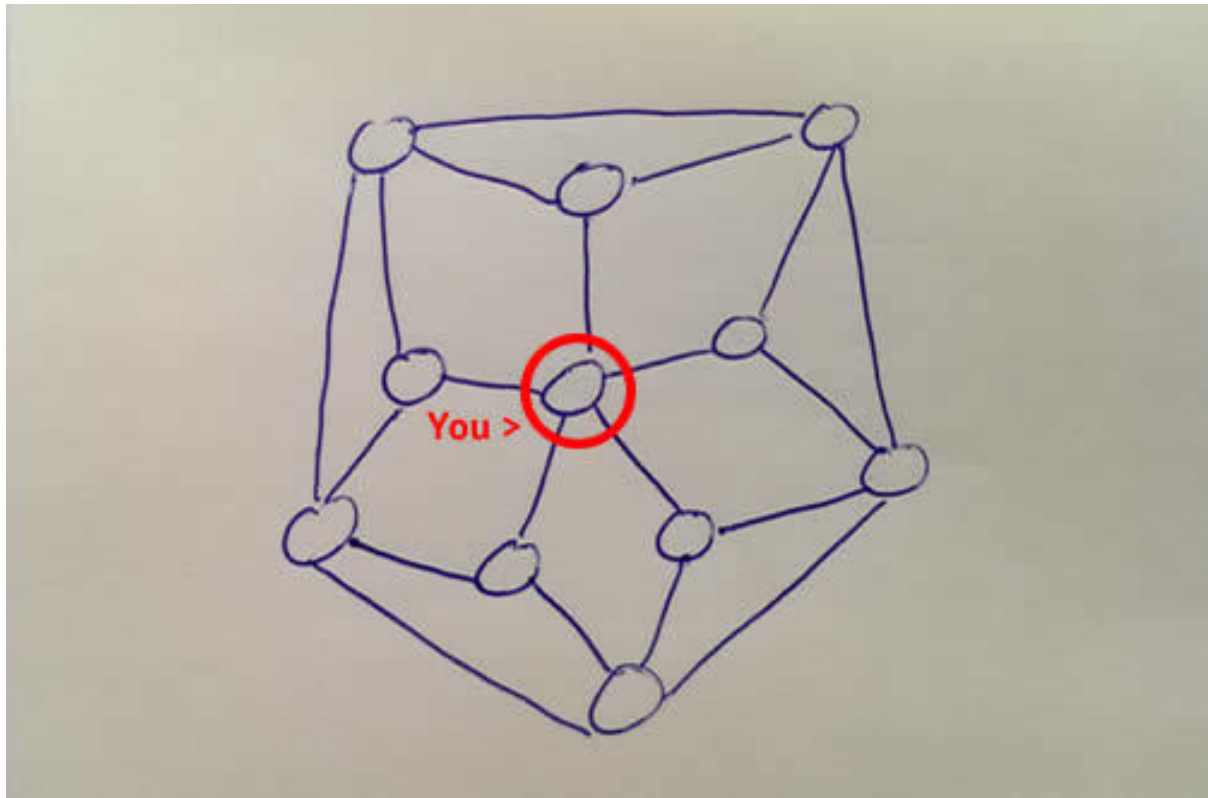
What if you weren't always at the center, and you allowed other people to take control based on skills and competencies within a specific context?
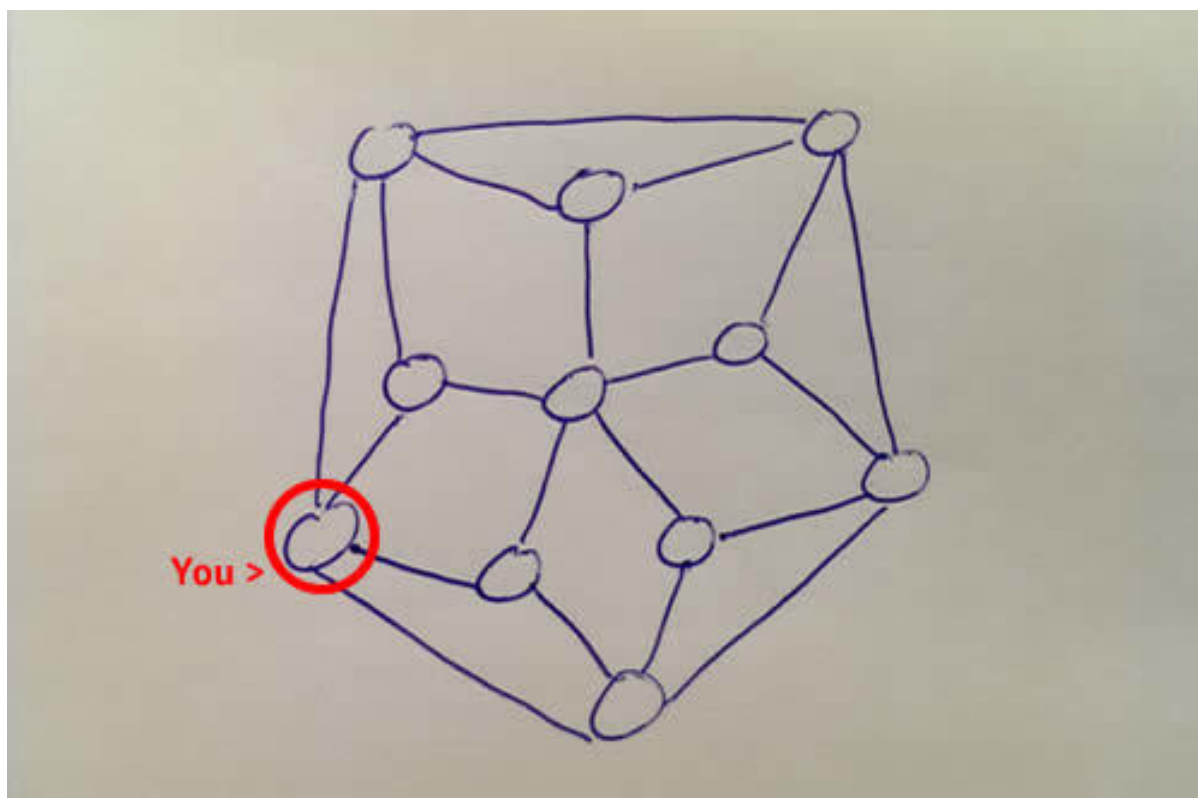
If you taught yourself to work like that, when you move up within the traditional hierarchy, theoretically you would take a bunch of people with you. This is an attitude thing, a self development thing. **If you see yourself at the bottom, you will make decisions based on your perceived station.** Fear will handicap you. You will allow yourself to be filtered through your boss, even if your boss doesn't have the specialized knowledge you do. And if you attribute your "advancement" to your own behaviors and actions, instead of the work of a collective whole, your ego will become misaligned with that which is actually true – you aren't any better than any one else. We're equals here on this planet.

Open is an attitude, not a set of processes and procedures. Holding on to it despite potential repercussions is an act of courage because most people hold on to the cultural and social norms they're used to.

About the Author

Laura Hilliger is a writer, educator and technologist. She's a conceptual architect, multimedia designer and developer, a product owner, technical liaison, project manager, and more. In addition, as both a specialist and a generalist, Laura is an activist who is happiest in collaborative environments.

Because she's an advocate for systemic change, Laura believes that the Internet has more power than any other medium to create a better future for all of us. She is a co-founder of [We Are Open Co-op](#), a cooperative that works to spread the culture, benefits and processes of open wherever it can. She's also an [Ambassador for Opensource.com](#), and has spent the last four years working to help [Greenpeace](#) become a more open organization.

Previously, Laura taught at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism and was the lead mentor at the Bay Area Video Coalitions Producer's Institute. She developed curriculum for the Adobe T3 project, has mentored at film labs in various countries and spent 5.5 years at Mozilla.

Laura has orchestrated multinational collaborations between the non-profit and tech worlds, invented concepts and platforms for global communities and spoken and run workshops all over the world. She studied multimedia design and has a Masters in Media and Education. Laura sits on several non-profit boards and is an active participant in open communities at a global scale.

She can be found writing both fiction and non-fiction, as well as working in the space between technology and everything else.