

Power dynamics and harm statement

Introduction

Note: this statement is always in progress. What's below is where we are on 7/1/2021.

Our commitment to risk, unpredictability, and experimentation creates dynamic work of which we are very proud. This document is an attempt to balance our values that can create instability with our concerns about safety, inclusion, and egalitarianism.

Because we operate outside of the regional theatre model we are making extremely ambitious large scale projects with fixed deadlines and very little money. This framework frequently creates conditions where harm thrives (stress, panic, and pressure).

Since its inception The Acme Corporation has been dedicated to artist-driven work. A tenet of our process is that humans aren't replaceable. The work only exists because of the people. We value the work itself over the institution that we've created to support that work. The institution requires the humans, the humans don't require the institution.

We are aware that power dynamics exist. We do not believe that power imbalances are innately harmful. We do, however, recognize that any situation in which one entity has power over another has an increased potential for harm. This statement is an attempt to both mitigate that potential and outline ameliorative actions if that potential is realized. This statement is not meant to serve as an exhaustive examination of power, but rather as a guideline for company members and artists and anyone who works with Acme.

Discussion of power dynamics

Here are some commonly understood examples of historic power relations:

- Men have historically had more power than women.
- White people have historically had more power than people of color.
- Cisgender people have historically had more power than transgender people.
- People without disabilities have historically had more power than people with disabilities.
- Natural-born citizens have historically had more power than immigrants.

These power relations (and others not specifically named above) have laid the groundwork for and continue to be propagated by systemic and traditional inequalities. Power relations are expressed and reinforced in infinite undefinable ways. We recognize the influence of the observable but undefinable--we are theatre artists, after all.

Here are some power relations that commonly exist in the rehearsal and performance process:

- The director is in a position of power.

- In a company process the artistic director(s) have more power than other company members.
- In a company process company members generally have more power than other artists.
- Often actors are treated as though they have less power than other artists in the room.

Our expectation is not that unequal power relations will stop existing. Our process relies on a centralized power structure, where the director/creator (almost always Lola) has the most authority. We also do not expect that we will all always carry an appropriate awareness of our influence and dominance at all moments. We do expect that company members, artists, technicians, administrators, and anyone else who works with Acme works to the best of their ability to respect every human in the process, and to learn from mistakes when we make them.

Expectations of behavior

Because the expression of power dynamics is subtle and often invisible we aren't able to compile an exhaustive list of prohibited behaviors. Below we've listed some general guidelines that won't apply to every situation, but may be helpful as a starting point.

Here are some general guidelines for expectations of behavior:

- Do not abuse, assault, or harass anyone.
- Listen to and respect the boundaries of the people involved in the process.
- Physical touch has different meanings to different people. It's a good idea to ask before you touch someone.
- Hateful speech or language that generalizes an individual based on what groups they may belong to is disrespectful and doesn't contribute to an environment where the best work can be produced. Consider how your language might be interpreted in ways other than what you intended.
- If you aren't sure how someone would like to be identified then ask them and adhere to that identification.
- Take responsibility for your own needs whenever possible.
- Make space for other people's expressed needs whenever possible
- Have compassion for yourself and others
- Be willing to admit when you've made a mistake or harmed someone.
- Be willing to learn and heal when a mistake is made

Procedures for stopping or reporting harm

We encourage anyone involved in the process, but particularly company members, to create and protect a respectful and compassionate process.

Here is a list of guidelines for what to do if you have been the object of or witness to harmful behavior:

- Whenever possible (we fully understand it often isn't) address the situation as it's happening. If you are able to attend to the situation in a way that makes you (or the person you are trying to protect) safer and more comfortable then do so, even if that involves removing yourself from the immediate situation.
- Report the incident. There are a number of authority figures in the Acme process. Our hope is that you will feel comfortable reporting to at least one of them.
 - The Artistic Director: Lola B. Pierson
 - A member of our advisory board who has volunteered to help with abuse and harassment reports: Jessica Murphy-Garrett <jmurphygarrett@gmail.com>
 - An actor who gets elected in the early stages of rehearsal
- If appropriate, request a restorative justice process. The Acme Corporation does not have an official relationship with any mediation centers, but admires the work of Restorative Response Baltimore and DC Peace Team (amongst others). We believe in transformative justice practices that champion accountability without replicating the damaging processes and outcomes of the criminal justice system. If you feel that you need to go fully outside of the organization to have your concerns addressed we would recommend doing so. Acme will do its best to support a process where all parties are respected and heard, including funding the process to the best of our ability.
- We do not believe in shunning. We do not believe in prison. We believe in abolishing all prisons, including the ones inside of us.

Outcomes of harmful behavior

We do not think we will never fail, but we do expect that when we do fail we will approach the situation openly, thoughtfully, compassionately, and with the best interest of all parties in mind. We do not believe in shunning. We do not believe in punishment. We believe in accountability, transformation, and growth. We can only heal together.

This statement was written by Lola B. Pierson, artistic director, but contributed to by other company members.