

COULD THIS BE THE MOMENT WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR - AGAIN?

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Abstract

How do we ensure that non-profits can survive and thrive in an economic downturn? This article proposes that building powerful networks is the path that non-profits, especially small and medium-sized ones, should take. Based on four decades of community organizing experience at Spirit in Action and other national non-profits, we show how to successfully build multi-racial and welcoming networks. We present examples and a case study that describe step-by-step the critical elements needed for a network to function well for all participants, and how to build a force for change.

Keywords: non-profit; networks; values; partnership; change; activist; leaders; spirit; progressive; power

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There are more than 1.6 million non-profit organizations in the United States (Independent Sector, 2021). In North Carolina, the home state of Spirit in Action, a national movement-building and activist training non-profit, there is one non-profit for every 265 people. Clearly, there is great need for non-profits to step in when federal and state governments refuse to act to provide needed social services to their citizens. But we saw in the Great Recession of 2007-2009 how many non-profits in our state and across the country were forced to curtail services, cut staff, or even close during an economic downturn.

By this time, we should have learned our lesson about the financial vulnerability of non-profits in our capitalist system. This time, we can be better prepared to navigate a pandemic-induced economic crisis. Drawing on the work of Riane Eisler, we must build relationships of real partnership, not domination and hierarchy (2017). To build those relationships requires deep listening and the willingness to cross ideological barriers. We need to hang out with people who are not our crowd.

THE CHOICE TO CONNECT

In difficult times of economic, ecological, political, and social breakdown, we are faced with a fundamental choice: to contract or connect. Our individualistic, consumption-driven society dictates that we contract when we act out of a narrowly defined self-interest. We shore up and defend our limited resources in the hope of meeting our own needs. Yet, this illusion of the separate self - the notion that we are each self-sufficient islands in the great sea of creation - is largely responsible for bringing us to the brink of destruction; we never really could reject our place in the whole without harming ourselves in the process.

The opportunity in this crisis is to recognize and consciously take advantage of our inherent interconnection. Because we cannot escape from the web of life, we are called to see how we can intentionally weave new threads and strengthen old ones so that we *all* can thrive. Spirit in Action's work for the past 20 years on leadership development has shown that for non-profits and activists, building networks and real partnerships are a pathway to power that can build movements for change (Stout, 2011).

THE POWER OF NETWORKS

By "networks" we do not mean "networking," such as securing a new job at another non-profit, achieving a promotion, or receiving a foundation grant. The networks Spirit

in Action initiatives are formed to solve a problem or address an issue, and can then dissolve when the needs have been addressed. They do not need to be their own new non-profit organization. When networks are most effective, they allow us to be greater than the sum of our parts and work toward a common vision, rather than in silos with a “support group” or advisory council.

At Spirit in Action, we have pioneered a way to work collaboratively for deep and lasting change. To do this, we have had to create a different kind of space for people and groups, one that avoids the pitfalls of typical networks: inequities among groups, professional competition, intractable group conflict, and/or failure to assemble diverse stakeholders. Although some people think of networks as coalitions or alliances, we see them as a way to embrace a broader mission: people working together over and above their own issue-based work.

Networks function well for groups that are geographically dispersed, as well as in urban areas. They are key elements of collaboration and cooperation, allowing groups to share resources and increase capacity and efficiency. They can be built over common issues, experiences, geographical territory, or communities served - they can take many shapes and forms. Networks allow groups to share information and tasks like bookkeeping and fund-raising resources. The groups Spirit in Action works with, small to mid-sized organizations, especially new ones, find it difficult to survive as islands. Organizations that attempt to go it alone often find themselves alone in a time of need. Finding what they have in common can help us survive another economic downturn rather than fall apart.

Interestingly, funders now want to see organizations band together rather than stand apart (Welch, 2020). For more than two decades, increasingly professionalized foundations stoked competition among grant-seeking groups with highly competitive calls for proposals. This caused many non-profits to turn inwards, protecting their contacts and resources from each other for fear of losing funding. But foundations

began to realize that by encouraging networks, they could stretch their own dollars to make more of an impact on an issue. What they did not do is help non-profits build the infrastructure needed for successful networks, leaving small groups to search for so-called “alliances” simply to get funding.

NUTS AND BOLTS

Spirit in Action’s own experience in this work has demonstrated that the building blocks of a successful network are:

- A safe environment where deep listening and sharing occurs, and where respect for authenticity allows for the range of leadership styles and organizational issues to become part of the group process.
- Affirming the unique role and contributions of each of the participating organizations and leaders.
- Identifying and strengthening the group’s collective goals.
- Creating a shared vision from each group’s individual mission and experiences, one that is broad enough to contain all the participants.
- Strategies for collaboration and innovation.
- Plans for collective action that will help with the realization of the groups’ shared vision.
- If the group decides to continue, developing a plan for next steps, and coaching so the participants can identify their needs for ongoing collaboration and support.
- Follow-up so that the network can grow broader and stronger.

CASE STUDY: PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATORS NETWORK

One of the early networks Spirit in Action formed was the Progressive Communicators Network in 2000. This was the first example of overcoming divisions to build a robust coalition, a grassroots media group with strong messaging capability.

Being in diverse community is essential to making broad-based change in the U.S. Starting with 25 media activists who were too politically polarized to work together, the Progressive Communicators Network grew to more than 120 members serving 1,500+ organizations (Spirit in Action, 2021b). To enjoy the privilege and responsibility of being in diverse community, we called upon activists to recognize that we share both a common humanity and particular social identities, which accord power in unbalanced ways. Bridging this power divide is at the heart of healing divisions.

It is not easy to pull together a group for the first time. In this case, there were many negative reactions from the activists we interviewed to the idea of building a coalition of media consultants, such as: “Forget it; this has been tried many times before.” “I won’t work with this other group.” “I won’t attend if [this organization] is there.” However, we persevered, asking ourselves, “Can *spirit*, which is a different way of working that is grounded in heart and vision, play a role in bringing these people together?”

Acknowledging spirit in this way is a conscious recognition of our wholeness, interdependence, and interconnection to all life on earth. Integrating this understanding of spirit into social justice work brings forward what inspires and sustains us.

In the early years, as facilitators of the process, we had to hold firm to our commitment to building trust, community, and fun, while standing strong against the usual activist culture: going right to work on the issues before building the foundation needed to

carry out the work. This led us to spend the majority of our time on pre-work, establishing agreements for our time together and doing our homework about each group that participated.

We spoke with each activist and posed this question: “For one moment, if you could pretend that none of the barriers you’ve identified existed, what would be your dream of what we could accomplish together?” We wrote down their dreams and shared them individually in another phone conversation. “Let’s try to talk about these dreams together,” we encouraged the groups.

The activists agreed - if Spirit in Action could promise they would not have to talk about networks, or collaborations, or be asked to share their ideas and models! The competition for and fear of losing philanthropic dollars permeated their thinking.

The first night’s agenda was storytelling. In storytelling we share our heart, our spirit, what inspires us to do this work. The Center for Partnership Studies recognizes the importance of storytelling as one of the Four Cornerstones of a partnership-based world structure, noting, “The proliferation of stories about relations built on mutual benefit, mutual respect, and mutual accountability signals a revolution in consciousness” (Eisler, 2020, p. 1). At Spirit in Action, we also acknowledge that telling our stories makes us vulnerable. The process of collective visioning and healing divisions that we engage in values community voices. Storytelling shows our authentic selves.

As an aid to storytelling, we asked each activist to bring one item to the first gathering that communicated something about themselves and why they did justice work. As another way to connect to each other, a caterer brought food, just partially prepared, so the group could finish preparing the meal together, an important collective task.

The next day we worked on positive visioning - what did they want to see ten years into the future? As the participants shared their visions, and realized how much they had in common, they also learned to challenge each other and say the hard things that needed to be said because media messages that would resonate with some were offensive to others. But we were able to identify three talking points that we all agreed were critical to our message. Though there were other talking points that the various groups would use on their own, these three messages took center stage.

And then, as proof of at last feeling safe and able to trust, the participants actually asked to share their ideas and models. Out of this came a plan to build the Progressive Communicators Network. “Even though we have an agreement not to talk about it, I think we should become a network,” suggested one activist, and with consensus in the group, the network was born.

Why did it work? Spirit in Action staff recognized diversity and built around it. We brought together the most diverse group of activists we could because organizers often work with people of different cultures, political persuasions, or life experiences. Our facilitators created a safe space for the group, which allowed for trust-building and communication. If things went wrong and people were offended or discouraged, we did not expect them to work it out on their own. We said, “This isn’t easy. We’ll help you. Let’s deepen our conversation and listen to each other for real understanding.” We told our stories.

Our gatherings were designed to enable participants to explore not only their “heads” (the facts and knowledge of a situation), but also their “hearts” (what drives them to seek change, their vision for the future, and their personal interest in the core issues). Gathering spaces were beautiful and designed to nurture creativity through music, play, heart-centered dialogue and exploration, and concrete action planning. In order to maximize their potential, movement-building spaces must be intentionally created to ensure maximum diversity of participation and clarity of purpose.

PURPOSEFUL INCLUSIVITY

Spirit in Action removed obstacles to participation by providing transportation, childcare, meals, and lodging. This is critical in enabling underrepresented groups - including low-income participants, parents, and other marginalized stakeholders - to participate fully.

Multi-racial teams facilitated gatherings and trainings. It matters who is in the room; there is greater impact and opportunity for creative innovation when different players - such as representatives of diverse political and organizing strategies - have the opportunity to learn to work together effectively.

For example, a group we worked with in Seattle brought together a very diverse group by putting white folks on the waitlist until half the slots were filled by people of color. It worked out that everyone who wanted to come was able to attend, and many said it was the most diverse experience they had experienced in Seattle. This did not just happen by inviting people. It required sitting down with key leaders and helping them become invested from the beginning. As we saw in our work with Piedmont Peace Project in the 1990s, an organization which built leadership from within a poor and working-class community to promote peace, better jobs, health care, and basic social services, trust and community building are preconditions before the gathering can even begin (Stout, 1996).

Healing divisions based on race, class, gender, and other barriers is key to forming a network that represents a variety of diverse interests, perspectives, and people. At the core of our work is a deep respect for the community and for religious and cultural practices that different groups bring to ground their vision of the change they want to see.

We learned from our initial experience with the Progressive Communicators Network that by taking the time to build a strong foundation first, our crucial work together got done much more quickly and effectively. Groups saw that shared strategic communications are not only more successful at winning on the issues, but, as we later witnessed working on prison justice, are more likely to define the public debate and set the agenda. As one of the participants concluded, “I feel like we’ve accomplished more here in the past 24 hours than in the past 17 years I’ve been doing this work.”

One participant, Gopal Dayaneni, is a national leader among community organizers as well as an early childhood educator, lecturer, and philanthropist. Reflecting on the start of the Progressive Communicators Network (PCN), he described the network’s evolution. “The growth has been based on relationships and affinities, so everyone still maintains a closeness of relationship.” Moreover, “In the early days of communications work, we inherited the ‘proprietary’ attitudes of the Public Relations world. We would hold onto our media lists or not share our curriculum. PCN really broke that down” (Sangita, 2012).

This is where the power for change lies: with community voices that are valued. We need to be ready to be in real partnership with the people who are on the ground.

PRACTICAL, EMPOWERING, AND ACTION-ORIENTED

Networks, whether formal or organically developed, must be grounded in the day-to-day reality every organizer faces. This was especially clear in 2020, when we trained a new cohort of volunteers and groups in our TAKE 10 model of civic engagement (Spirit in Action, 2021a). TAKE 10 relies on teaching disenfranchised and marginalized people how to be leaders, recruit volunteers, educate voters, and develop the deep listening skills and personal contacts that keep them motivated and energized, regardless of who is in office.

For many of the groups we work with in TAKE 10, the Covid-19 pandemic has been extremely challenging. The door-to-door personal contact for get-out-the-vote and voter registration activities could not be done the same way as with previous elections. Most of our volunteer leaders were doing this work in addition to providing critical relief for food banks, helping workers get unemployment compensation, and/or getting people help in paying for their utilities. There was grief and mourning, for beloved people, for our lives, for our communities. In this situation, an informal peer-to-peer training network developed.

We knew we needed to create a space, albeit online, for people to share their success stories as well as their disappointments. Our get-out-the-vote activists helped provide everything from diapers to support for the elderly to reminding people to fill out the census. We wanted them to know and learn from each other about what they would keep doing post-November 2020, what they will do differently, and what they still need to learn.

One lesson was about letting go and empowering others. “You reminded me that I needed to take the time to start building other leaders and empowering them,” one participant told us. “You get so caught up in accomplishing the mission that you don’t realize you haven’t brought anyone along with you.”

Groups such as Spirit in Action’s TAKE 10 leaders learned to create an atmosphere of openness, allowing respectful dialogue about controversial issues and supporting each other as human beings even when they did not always share each other’s analysis and strategies.

There may be differences among the groups - they may have disagreements over strategy and tactics - but identifying shared values is among the most important things we can do to create a successful network. Groups often realize that they have a shared

vision despite their differences in strategies. They also see and experience that the difficult work of healing divisions across the power divides of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, language, issues, and perspectives is possible.

A POWERFUL MODEL FOR CHANGE

Transformational change can happen when we take the time to build a force for healing and power that is multi-issue, broad-based, and diverse, a force that begins from a place of deep knowledge and positive vision. Spirit in Action's experience has shown us the power of networks when they are thoughtfully and patiently built.

Forming a network must break down the barriers that keep groups from collaborating, reflect the diversity in the communities they serve, engender trust and allow for reflection, value community voices, and speak from the spirit of the work as well as its day-to-day reality. Networks can be simultaneously action-oriented and a resource for action.

With networks like these, we can enable the non-profit sector to survive and thrive. We can work together and practice understanding of our differences. We shift from what we have learned to think is best to what we dream is possible. We can hang out with new people.

The most exciting thing for Spirit in Action has been witnessing the evolution of networks like PCN, the Education Circle of Change, and others, and the cultural shift that took place among the members who participated. We need leaders who are trained to understand the components and power of transformation, who will not be pushed by the group to jump ahead and react, or panic in the face of attack and economic dislocation.

We believe there is no alternative for the non-profits we know to building power for change, except through networks. As described by Eisler (2017), we envision networks that are based on “mutual respect, accountability, and benefit” (p. 5) as natural and essential. Guiding individuals and groups to see themselves clearly and *then* to see beyond themselves and their individual organizations to the larger progressive movement is our goal. As people try out new ways to work together, a vast, yet powerfully aligned, collective vision of the future is co-created.

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That awareness of her own roots and of the people she wanted to reach led her to build the Piedmont Peace Project (PPP). In a conservative region of North Carolina, PPP worked successfully to forge extraordinary alliances across race and class lines and won major public policy changes. In order to work at the national level, Linda moved to the Peace Development Fund (PDF) as Executive Director. Under Linda's leadership, PDF tripled its grant-making capacity and initiated several groundbreaking projects, including the Community Media Organizing Project, the Southeast Training for Trainers Program, and the National Listening Project. Linda now directs Spirit in Action, an organization that supports and trains ordinary people producing real change in communities across the country.

Linda's awards include a Public Policy Fellowship from Harvard University, Honorary Doctorate from Allegheny College, and the Freedom Fighter Award of the Equal Rights Congress. Her story was featured in Studs Terkel's book, *Hope Dies Last*, and she is the author of *Bridging the Class Divide* and *Collective Visioning*. She has held leadership roles and been active in several volunteer organizations including Class Action, United for a Fair Economy, the Radcliffe Public Policy Institute Economic Justice Task Force, Solidago Foundation, and Blueprint NC.

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