

3 Common Myths

In Managing Social Justice Groups

Ann Caton, Potomac Group, December 2009

Most social justice practitioners take on the work of organizational management not by choice but by necessity. We make our way by luck and instinct, trial and error, and seldom pause to share what we've learned. For our collective consideration, I offer here three myths that I often find – and that I once subscribed to fully – in the management of social justice groups.

1. Conflict is unbearable.

Organizers and activists can look like an angry bunch – interrupting meetings, blocking traffic, picketing people's homes. In our efforts to win victories for our communities, we are apt to defy social convention and spark conflict on purpose, in public *con gusto*. Outside the walls of our organizations, we are warriors. Inside those walls... eh, not so much.

It's a given that every organization has its own unique culture and that each of us has a distinct personality. Frequently, however, people in social justice groups go to great lengths to avoid the risk of interpersonal conflict with peers.

This means that we short-change the kinds of actions that are actually important for the effective functioning of our organizations and alliances – like healthy disagreements and debates that lead to higher-quality solutions. Or giving and receiving feedback that might feel awkward and bruise an ego, but ultimately make us more powerful in the pursuit of our mission. Or holding each other accountable for meeting high standards and following through on commitments, which after all is what we owe ourselves, our members and our communities.

It would be nice to say I'm the exception. But I've talked myself out of saying and hearing more uncomfortable things than I can count. Looking back, it has nearly always been to the detriment of my own growth, the development of people I care about or the organization I devote my energies to.

Some of us were raised with conflict that was simply catastrophic. These are painful scripts – and they are out of date. We have the obligation to create a new reality. If we are strong enough to fight for justice against all odds, we are strong enough to lean into interpersonal conflict with colleagues we respect, like and even love.

As a recovering conflict avoider, I am consciously working to invite interpersonal conflict. Like many women, I have been socialized to live in terror of hurting someone's feelings (or looking like a thoughtless jerk). I find that overcoming these fears in the service of a higher purpose is not always pretty – but it's always worth it. Like any skill that requires practice, it gets easier every time.

2. Power is bad (and I don't want any!)

Many of us who have been on the receiving end of oppression – people with disabilities, transfolk, women of color, etc. – operate with a very precise taxonomy of power. There is the power of money (bad), the power of position (bad) and the power of the people (say what!). The power of the oppressor tends to be power over (bad), so we build power in our communities to resist injustice and liberate ourselves (the best kind!).

But what happens when our neat categories start to overlap? For instance, what about the power of position within a people-of-color organization dedicated to justice and liberation (um... bad?)

Faced with this question, many of us choose to err on the side of caution: if the power of position is abusive externally, then the power of position must be abusive internally. This logic can lead us into all sorts of organizational contortions, such as rejecting the language of hierarchy while actually operating as a hierarchy.

An organization may choose to have a program coordinator rather than a program director, for instance, or a lead organizer rather than an executive director. Too often, however, that person will carry the weight of a director or ED without the recognition or full authority of the title. Rather than truly shifting the distribution of power within an organization, this simply masks the distribution of power and creates confusion and frustration.

I raise this example not to critique a particular kind of organizational structure; the coordinator / organizer configuration is successful for many groups around the country. I simply raise it to highlight the thinking and assumptions that can get in our way.

As an organizational leader, I resisted the title of Executive Director not only because I believed in participatory management and wanted to create something other than a traditional hierarchy; I also resisted because I was afraid of the responsibility and authority. A formal and clearly defined leadership position connotes power over, and I didn't want any.

I would argue that this fear undermines us as a movement. Consider the abstinence-only approach. How will young people know to protect themselves if they are taught to simply avoid sex? How will we know to wield personal power for the greater good in responsible and effective ways if we simply avoid any semblance of it?

For organizers in particular, stepping into the spotlight and welcoming a position of power may feel counter-intuitive after years of standing beside

or behind community leaders. For women of color, seeking a position of authority may feel self-aggrandizing or overwhelming. And yet, if we are to build power with and for our communities, we should also know how to manage and model it.

This means not only stepping up our own game but actively supporting our colleagues when they do the same. It's too easy to cut each other down out of jealousy or a misguided attempt at equality: how come she got selected for that? Who does he think he is? This sideswiping is a waste of our time and talents.

Let's not leave power to the usual suspects. Let's get serious about developing ourselves and each other by modeling the handling of authority in open, healthy, creative, effective and inspiring ways.

3. Alternative structure = THE solution

Most of us in the movement have seen hierarchy go terribly wrong – at work, at home, at school and within society at large. We have seen uninformed and unethical decision-making one too many times, and routinely bear witness to a complete disregard of those most impacted by those in charge.

Burned and wary of these abuses, we have tossed the master's tools in the river. With a sense of hope and imagination (and often a dose of righteousness), we set out to topple hierarchy and create bold new structures. Surely here is THE answer: the collective, the co-directorship, the flat structure, the director's circle!!

At first it is glorious, and then we feel the struggle. Some people are doing all the work, and others appear to be coasting. Roles and responsibilities are unclear, and important work is falling through the cracks. People lack the skills to do their jobs and hold each other accountable. Meetings start to feel not only pointless but e-n-d-l-e-s-s.

It is time to consider a new concept. Maybe directive management isn't THE problem. Maybe participatory management isn't THE solution. Both

have their dangers and both have their gifts. Maybe we need the best of both.

Patrick Masterson writes about these as two interdependent polarities – a concept as ancient and intuitive as yin and yang. The framework of polarities suggests that if you focus on *either* directive management *or* participatory management *to the exclusion of the other*, you will experience the downside of that approach.

I have had my days as a rigid adherent of the alternative structure. Any suggestion of directive management struck me as a betrayal of core principles and an opening to the abuse of power. Today I believe that social justice organizations need the best of participatory management *and* the best of directive management: clarity, accountability and stability.

Alternative structures have deep potential. They can inspire the best of our thinking and commitment. They are vital training grounds for those who have traditionally been blocked from the halls of power. And they can ensure alignment with and accountability to our communities. People all

across the country are doing brilliant and courageous work in reimagining and reinventing social justice organizations. They are also, all too often, unprepared for the blind spots and downsides of alternative structures.

The next time you see a downside coming, don't ask what THE perfect structure or solution is, but rather what the correct balance might be. What is the element that is missing, and how can we integrate it while staying true to our values and vision?

In closing I would encourage social justice practitioners to try on new behaviors. If you wince at interpersonal conflict, start some. If personal power makes you nervous, take some. If you're in an alternative structure, change what's not working. Build on what is and then write about it. Share your knowledge with the rest of us – not just the struggles you wage outside your organization, but the ones you wage within.

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Writings that Informed this Article

“Brave Leadership in Organizational Conflict,” by Kenneth Bailey. The Nonprofit Quarterly, Vol. 10, Issue 4, 2004.

“The Tyranny of Structurelessness,” by Jo Freeman. Women's Liberation Movement, 1970.

“Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvably Problems,” by Barry Johnson. HRD Press, 1996.

“Claiming Your Leadership and Power as an OD Consultant,” by Robert Marshak. OD Practitioner, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2001.

“Participatory Management and Directive Management in Community Based Organizations,” by Patrick Masterson. Potomac Group, September 2009.

“What Did You Say? The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback,” by Charles Seashore, Edith Seashore & Gerald Weinberg. Bingham House Books, 2004.

About the Author

Ann Caton has led the growth and development of mission-driven organizations for over a decade. She is a partner at the Potomac Group, an organization development practice that works in partnership with individuals, groups and organizations to increase their effectiveness and capacity to manage change.

Your suggestions and reactions will inform further writings on this topic – drop me a line!

www.potomacgroupllc.com / ann@potomacgroupllc.com