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Change from the Inside Out

Miriam Messinger

Some dream of large-scale action, influencing larger and larger numbers of people as a means to create change. On the one hand, it is hopeful to believe that one has the capacity to transform social structures that reinforce inequality. On the other hand, a focus on size and growth in the nonprofit or NGO sector may be a distinctly Western phenomenon, fueled by a profit paradigm that requires growth and profit.

In this article, I proffer that one way to build social change is to create organizations, lead, and build relationships that model and reflect the change being sought on a grander scale. Sometimes this necessitates burrowing deeper and focusing inward as a means to building sustainable change. I was engaged in this work for eight years at The City School of Boston. While The City School is a functioning, vibrant organization, I no longer work there and so will talk about the work I was a part of in the past tense.

The City School is a youth leadership social justice organization for high school students. It brings together young people (and adults) in the greater Boston area across their wide range of identities, to learn about social change together, to acquire leadership skills, to build a supportive community, and to create change. The students study, act, and reflect. The studies may happen in classrooms, prisons, homeless shelters, or on the streets. Like the Hyde Square Task Force, The City School sees youth as assets and uses a youth-development model to create a community capable of action and social change. The City School is unusual in its ability to unite young people across class, race, geography, religion, and sexual orientation, to learn about and address oppression, and to discover new ways of being and creating together that

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do not replicate regular channels of power and control.

Borrowing from architecture and yoga, I offer a metaphor for organizational development work: At The City School we sought to build a strong foundation, strengthen and maintain our core, and breathe deeply in order to create an inner structure that parallels and models our external vision. A spirit of love and hope, authenticity, strong justice values, flexibility, and reflection were critical to this effort.

There are numerous examples of how The City School created change through building our foundation and core. I will first offer elements from our content work — the space that we created and the educational offerings intended to build a youth-adult movement for social change:

- *Program content: learning the history of social change.*
The City School introduces young people (and adults) to social change history by sharing examples of youth and adult leaders from movements over time. This exposure is not available in most schools but it allows people to be inspired and connected to history. The education about the historical and under-told story of social change provides hope and access to models; it is coupled with instruction to build concrete skills that will help these teens in their own work, from public speaking, to fund raising, to group facilitation.
- *Opportunities to practice increasing leadership within the organization.*
Teens put their historical and skill learning to work leading activities or a group of peers, and move on to leading organizing campaigns, teaching, and then serving as staff and Board leaders. Leadership is also about decision making. In 2004, a group of youth leaders met to propose a new mission statement, believing that current policies were stifling their political activity.
- *Creating a transformative space.*
At TCS, we built environments that foster social norms not always supported in the “real” world. In each program, teens and adults together created guidelines about how to work and be together. The organization has overall expectations to treat people with respect and as equals. To do this counters the norm that most of us live with. If you want people to treat each other with love, respect, and equality, you have to tell people what it looks like, model it, repeat it and expect people to make mistakes. Some of the core elements are:
 - hold people responsible for their actions/impose consequences
 - expect people to challenge each other about real issues; conflict and disagreement are okay
 - expect people to be open to others and loving.
- *Working across difference*
The world we live in is divided by lines of race/ethnicity, religion, class,

sexual orientation, geography (urban/suburban), age, and other parameters. Young people and adults live, work, and go to school in virtually segregated environments. When people do come together, their interactions and communication are often stilted and fail to create deep relationships that can nurture empathy and love. At The City School we not only intentionally bring people together across these lines but we discuss the barriers and issues that can keep us apart, talk about histories of oppression, and model working together across differences in a meaningful way. This is something that needs to be practiced and can lead to transformation, leaving all involved unable to return to a life filled mostly with assumptions, preconceptions, and barriers to building solidarity with other groups.

In addition to cultivating programs and environments that support creating positive change, the next most important contribution is organizational policies that support and promote the changes. The City School believed in building a healthy and just organization, fit to carry out its mission of building youth leaders who take on social change. Examples of policies and processes to create this kind of just organization include the following:

- *Hiring policy:* Young people were involved in hiring all staff in order to build their skills and ensure that their needs were acknowledged. Having this kind of engaged hiring process also led to conversations about priorities, the balance between the “who” and the “skills,” how staff not engaged in direct youth work needed to relate to our teens, how people learn, and who has the power to make decisions. Adult staff and youth involvement were both important in these processes.
- *Circle of Elders:* Part of The City School work involves helping teens understand the criminal justice system, doing leadership work with people in prison, and bringing teens into contact with people who are incarcerated in order to expand learning and understanding for both. Given that work, it was even more critical to introduce alternative justice practices in dealing with breaches of community guidelines. Youth and adult staff developed these practices including a “Circle of Elders,” a group of three people with strong ties to the community designed to mediate disputes and suggest remediation as well as to meet each year to address general areas of tension in the community.
- *Salary guidelines:* We developed baseline values and a policy to be used in setting salaries. One principle was to value direct work with young people so that one should not have to move into management to increase one’s salary. We sought to balance market prices with the skills we were valuing as an organization. Another guideline was that the salary of the highest paid person should not exceed three times the salary of the lowest paid full-time person.

- *Firing policy:* We attempted to have the Circle of Elders or more than one supervisor involved in the disciplinary and firing process. We put in place disciplinary steps to deal with non-emergency but problematic work situations. This policy emerged following the dismissal of a popular staff person; young people felt that they wanted more of a voice as the main constituency of the organization.

These are some of the ways we used content and organizational policies to build a social justice organization from the inside out. Another crucial element was being able to be clear about power structures and power in the organization and to intentionally build ways to share that power. The impetus for this work came both from my beliefs about leadership and demands from staff and young people that we be accountable to our mission, from the inside out. At times, that movement to sharing power was smooth, and at other times it was contentious and solutions emerged from struggle.

As a youth development organization, it was an important value to offer growth and challenge for young adult staff as well. These staff structures and skills also support collaborative leadership: peer feedback and support, explicit mentoring, coaching for those interested in taking on director roles in the future, shared responsibility for decision making and rotating roles from taking out the trash to facilitating staff meetings.

The move toward increasing power and voice for young people was emergent throughout the history of the organization. Teens, for example, have always served on the Board of Directors. That involvement resulted in changing the number of youth representatives who serve on the twenty-person board from two (from the founding in 1995 and for several years), to doubling their numbers (~2000), to crafting the “youth power” statement mandating 30 percent representation on the board and that a youth and an adult serve as board cochairs (2004). Shifting decision-making power in this way was more than changing numbers on paper. It required reflection on how our board model would change given the different representation, and examination of what training and expectations you have of all — youth and adults alike. We were clear that we were not simply training young people how to exist on a traditional board but rather challenging the efficacy of such a board structure and training everyone how to be effective leading youth-adult community-based work. In many ways, our board functioned as one of our programs; it was a place of great learning and transformation, particularly for adult members less accustomed to youth work.

The work to address power and create more equitable power structures began, for me, with a need to cast an inward gaze. I always felt privileged to be in a leadership role at The City School. As an organization with a mission to bring young people together across divides of race, class, and geography, I could see that I had a place at the table but knew that it required awareness and vigilance to serve in the role of executive director. It was important to see the ways in which I could be a bridge

builder, translating the magic of The City School to potential donors and facilitating a powerful emerging conversation between youth and board members, for example. Bridge building has always been a piece of my life. And yet, that was not sufficient. Another aspect was to think about what privilege was afforded to me as a white woman with advanced educational degrees in an organization predominantly serving youth of color, staffed primarily by people of color.

At root, I believe that individual accountability and reflective leadership are essential to creating a just organization. Steps I see as important in this journey are transparent decision making; never acting as if you are “helping” someone; devoting time to mentoring staff; acknowledging how privilege and institutional racism and oppression impact our roles, our work, and our lives; and determining how this awareness translates into action in your workplace.

In order to think about collaborative decision making and power sharing, one must acknowledge one’s positional and societal power, be aware of strengths and weaknesses, and be able to honestly say what one does not know. North American society does not honor not knowing or the wisdom of working in concert to create better solutions. Some of the steps I took felt in direct contradiction to all my schooling, which had propelled me to think of myself as smart, highly qualified, and able to take on increasing responsibility . . . on my own. In order to support this work at The City School, I found I needed support from colleagues both internally and externally. Another step was to know when I did not have the answers and when to step out of the way, a lesson I am still mastering. These are issues and reflections that can be implemented in any work setting.

As a leader, I am caring, grounded, concerned that others achieve their goals, practical, and loving. I believe deeply in the capacity of every human being, even when they are not living to their full capacity, and I care fiercely about building workplaces and organizations that reflect those values. For me, this is about equality and about the belief that we can create a more just world. These values grow out of Jewish teachings and are bolstered by my desire to build on the work of those who came before me to create something better for my two children. I found in my time at The City School that, like a vibrant family, the work takes tenacity, love, clear guidelines, flexibility, and humor. You do not always know that you are doing the right thing in the midst of the tumult but with clear purpose and good people, you know that you have a deep foundation and a strong and flexible core that will allow you to experiment and grow.

Self-awareness and a willingness to learn, coupled with thoughtful programs, policies, and organizations can help to build change from the inside out.

