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Photo courtesy of NPA.



Beyond Collaboration: Bringing Strategic Thinking to Long-Term Alliance Building

By George Goehl

For more than 40 years, National People's Action has been rallying everyday people in cities, towns and rural communities to participate in civic life through community organizing, campaigns and direct action to advance economic and racial justice. But, until six years ago, NPA did not have deep relationships with other community or worker orga-

nizing networks. This was the product of a longstanding pervasive orthodoxy – no permanent enemies, no permanent allies – that defined our tradition of professional community organizing.

Certain that this orientation was a barrier to structural change, we began to experiment by building deep alliances with a set of national organizations that do community and worker organizing. It was clear that to amass the power necessary to create the change that our members needed, we would all have to give up some control to have more impact.

Among the lessons we learned from this experimentation was that successful collaboration and long-term alli-

ance building starts with a clear understanding of what you are trying to accomplish. If the goal is to increase power to win a specific policy victory, you might survive without deep, long-term alliances. Making structural transformations to the political economy, however, requires a strategic division of labor that builds coordinated power for the long haul. Ultimately, clarity of purpose is what motivates us to push through short-term barriers to long-term organizational alignment.

Today, we work in varying levels of alignment with PICO National Network, National Domestic Workers Alliance, Jobs (continued on page 13)



challenging grantmakers
to strengthen communities

Bringing Strategic Thinking to Long-term Alliance Building

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with Justice, the Communication Workers of America, Alliance for a Just Society, National Guest Workers Alliance and Right to the City, among others. These alliances have resulted in a more strategic division of labor that extends to campaigns, civic engagement, long-term strategy development and shaping worldview.

Some concrete results from this work include:

- Training tens of thousands of people in an analysis of our political economy and the practice of nonviolent direct action.
- Moving policy solutions, such as reducing principals on underwater mortgages, from the margins to the mainstream of the financial reform debate.
- Securing billions of dollars in mortgage relief for underwater homeowners.
- Protecting hundreds of millions of dollars in family assets annually by ending big-bank issuance of payday lending products.

Although we are proud of these outcomes, our goal is to build a permanent progressive infrastructure with the power to transform our economy and our democracy. We think the best is yet to come.

Six years into this experiment, here are a few of the lessons we've learned.

COALITIONS AND LONG-TERM ALIGNMENT ARE NOT THE SAME.

Organizers view coalitions as temporary. Coalitions tend to develop around a specific opportunity or challenge. While relationships are built within coalitions, the coalitions themselves often have set beginnings and endings. At NPA, we define permanent alignment as uniting organizations around a longer-term agenda and strategy. This approach yields organizational relationships that are designed to outlast any one effort or set of personalities.

Alignment goes beyond coordinated work on specific initiatives like campaigns, infrastructure building or strategic communications. It means aligning analysis and strategy to better coordinate planning, growth trajectories and movement interventions with our partners. It's not just working together now, but making plans to work together over the long term.

What does this mean for philanthropy?

Campaigns designed with the dual goals of winning specific victories and building long-term relationships are particularly good investments. They deliver immediate results and they also have the potential to leverage even larger impact down the road.

TO GO LONG, WE MUST GO DEEP.

Because organizational leaders come and go, alliances will remain fragile unless relationships are formed at multiple levels between the engaged organizations. Alignment limited to top leaders restricts the agility needed for multiple organizations to seize critical movement openings or challenges. Turning on a dime requires that a broad set of actors from each organization operates from a similar analysis, solid relationships and coordinated strategy.

NPA and the PICO National Network began working together in 2009. From the beginning, we involved people at every level of both our organizations. We made investments in the relationships among the directors of our affiliate organizations, our local grassroots leaders and our national staff. During the first year, we organized meetings that brought people from across our networks together to share personal stories of transformation, learn about each others' approach to the work and develop shared vision and strategy.

This deep partnership led to three critical outcomes. First, it allowed us to be nimble and to seize opportunities

that required strategic shifts. Enough people within our organizations had the shared theory of change and strong relationships needed to move on something big with limited notice.

The depth of the partnership also allowed us to move through periods when our organizations had disagreements and come out stronger on the other end. This was possible because so many people had invested time in building something that would outlast any one campaign.

Finally, by engaging affiliate organizations in the process, we paved the way for deeper collaboration among local organizations. For example, the Missouri-based groups Grass Roots Organizing (an NPA affiliate) and Communities Creating Opportunity (a PICO affiliate) have since developed a strong relationship that had not existed previously. Their relationship, along with Missouri Jobs with Justice, helped form the core of the Missouri Organizing Collaborative, founded in 2012.

What does this mean for philanthropy?

Foundations should take the long view with investments that bring members together across organizational lines. In Minnesota, members of the faith-based organization ISAIAH and Service Employees International Union locals spent years holding meetings to build relationships and deepen analysis together. The payoff from this investment may not have been immediately clear, but now there is agreement that this and related work laid the foundation for the incredible level of collaboration and policy impact taking place in Minnesota today. The return on these investments might mature at a slower pace, but the ultimate dividends can be much greater.

Collaboration in and of itself is not the objective. We must strategically tap into the collective capacity that already exists. Philanthropy can help by asking

grantees which alliances they are investing in and why. This includes engaging in productive discussions about how we are building cross-organizational alliances and infrastructure that will outlast individual personalities, how we are reaching scale through aggregation, and how we are producing the relationships needed to implement our long-term strategy together. We should be able to demonstrate the ways our work can deliver both in the short run and as part of a longer-term strategy.

GOING INTO BATTLE BUILDS STRONG TIES.

Unsurprisingly, the same activities that build relationships, trust and shared experience within an organization work across organizations. NPA's deepest experiences on this front grow out of our partnership with the PICO National Network and the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA).

NPA and NDWA held our second joint convention in April of this year. Planning for this meant our staffs

worked together for months – helping us build relationships, understand more about each other's culture and learn from one another. Just as important, our members have co-led actions on the Wall Street tax, mortgage relief and immigration reform. Planning and pulling off multiple 1,200-person events over three years developed the shared experience that allows for seizing new strategic opportunities. NPA is now teaming up with NDWA and Caring Across Generations at the state level, enabling us to broaden our engagement and draw upon our diverse strengths.

Similarly, NPA and PICO members have gone into battle together many times – ranging from negotiating meetings with former Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke to actions at big-bank offices and corporate shareholder meetings. The intensity of preparing for, engaging in and evaluating these actions created strong ties between people at multiple levels of our organizations. NPA and PICO are now exploring opportunities to do more long-

term thinking and planning together. This is possible because of the ties built through moving into action and taking risks together.

What does this mean for philanthropy?

Creating the arena for people to go into battle together and to build alignment is time-consuming and often require individual organizations to sacrifice short-term opportunities to invest in long-term impact. It requires answering tough questions about delegation of authority, lines of communication and efficient trust-building. In short, it is easy to drop. The day-to-day running and growing of an individual organization is challenging enough. Investments that reward the hard work of building alignment, while providing continued support to the individual organizations, are key to sustaining the engagement of leaders and organizations in the face of other ongoing demands.

We believe the biggest barriers to aggregating the collective power of economic and racial justice organizations come down to tensions around credit, control and money. These issues are real and won't go away. The good news is that when these tensions arise in the alliances described above, we can now navigate them in direct and productive ways. When we build relationships that are broad and deep, we are able withstand these tensions and be stronger for them.

None of this is to say that any collaboration is perfect – or that we don't have more to learn about building effective long-term alliances. We do. Yet, in this challenging economic and political moment, it is clear that building a more thoughtful and strategic social justice infrastructure is as critical as ever. There's too much at stake not to. ■

George Goehl is executive director of National People's Action.



Photo courtesy of NPA.