grassroots Leadership

VOICES FROM THE FIELD
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VOICES FROM THE FIELD

The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation believes in the power of individuals to organize within their neighborhoods to improve their own lives and their communities. The Foundation has historically funded small, grassroots organizations, and since 1995 has provided particular support for grassroots leadership development.

In the summer of 2002, the Foundation invited practitioners—who work every day with people active at the grassroots level—to share stories and lessons learned about grassroots leadership development in the Southeastern U.S.

Four of those essays are printed here, written by the practitioners themselves. Writing independently of each other, the essayists didn’t know the topics the others would cover. But in the end, there was a common theme of communication. In some way, each writer addresses the importance of people connecting with each other as individuals, as common members of the same family.

Pat Allen and Viola Barnes Gray of Rocky Mount, North Carolina describe how “coaching” (getting together regularly to talk and plan, one-on-one) can be an effective, personal way to help people become better advocates and organizers in their community groups.

June Rostan of Maryville, Tennessee writes of the core issues of race and diversity and how the regional organization she directs has worked to remove communication barriers so that grassroots leaders, board members, staff and others can relate with each other simply as people.

Alice Johnson and Ricardo Parra-Lesso of Durham, North Carolina deal with communication issues most head-on. Their two-part essay is about improving understanding between people who (literally) speak different languages. (It’s worth noting that Ricardo’s portion of the essay is his first published work composed entirely in English. Originally from Mexico, Ricardo came to the U.S. as a laborer and student when he was 16 years old.)

And finally, Joe Szakos of Charlottesville, Virginia tells us that all leadership opportunities begin with communication, with one person asking another, “Who are you? What do you want to see changed?…”

We couldn’t have said it better ourselves. Thanks Pat, Viola, June, Alice, Ricardo and Joe.

The Foundation is committed to its support of grassroots leaders, their organizations, their power and their potential. We hope you’ll find these essays an interesting and valuable contribution for your own discussions about grassroots leadership development. We want to keep this dialogue open, so let us know.

Further resources for grassroots leaders and people who work with them are now available on our Web site, www.mrbf.org/resources.

Gayle Williams  Otis Johnson
DIRECTOR  BOARD PRESIDENT, 2002
Lena Sessoms is a retired grandmother and Acting President of the Brooklyn Community Watch in Nashville, N.C. (population 5,000) where she and her husband moved from their farm over 30 years ago to take jobs in town.

Already active in her church and a volunteer at area nursing homes, Lena had a sincere desire to see improvement in her community and joined the Brooklyn Community Watch six years ago. Her neighborhood primarily consists of industrial workers, laborers, teachers, and a small percentage of farm workers for hire. There are also areas of low-income federally subsidized housing.

In 2001, Lena became a Community Fellow with the Down East Partnership for Children, a three-year leadership development program of individual coaching, technical assistance, site visits, group training, monthly networking meetings and annual retreats.

From the start, the coordinator of the Community Fellows program, Viola Barnes Gray, noted Lena’s enthusiasm. Even though Lena had minimal experience as a leader in her community-watch group, she had great determination and desire as a community leader and had a vision of what she would like to see in her community.

In her Community Fellows application Lena wrote, “I HAVE A DREAM! I’m retired and this community is going to be my home for the rest of my life and for my granddaughter’s life as long as she lives with me. I don’t want to accept that I have to live behind locked doors and in fear of street gangs.”

Lena also recognized that she could not realize her dream without developing her ability to work for it. “To be the effective voice I want to be in my community, I need to...
be properly trained, and after I'm trained I will pass along what I've learned to others.”

As a new Fellow, Lena was required to participate in monthly one-on-one coaching with Viola, the coaching coordinator. These sessions are designed to help the coach and the Fellows get to know each other individually and develop a trusting, working relationship.

During Lena's first coaching session, she said her goal was “to know how many children and senior citizens live in the community and to bring them together.” She wanted to identify problems, develop strategies, organize mentoring opportunities, and connect with other community centers and community watch groups. (Quite a list!) She also said she needed to learn specific skills in order to become an effective leader—to facilitate group meetings, assess and identify resources, gain knowledge and training to “present myself in a more positive way,” and increase communication skills so “I can become an advocate for my community watch group.”

In just one year, Lena accomplished much of what she hoped to. She became president of her neighborhood group and collaborated with other community groups to coordinate children’s activities. She developed a rough draft of a strategic plan for the group including a vision, mission and goals. She also identified the need to expand the presence and awareness of the group within the neighborhood and wrote a letter to be sent throughout the community. In coaching sessions, Viola helped Lena edit her letter, develop a flyer, and look at other marketing strategies. Viola also helped Lena write a letter to other local groups to ask them to sponsor activities for children.

Recently, Lena was persistent in making sure that a neighbor with mental illness was admitted to a hospital. She had to make many calls and visits and ask many questions to get this done.

As a result of this experience, Lena says that she has more knowledge of the laws protecting mental patients, and a greater understanding of how to work through the system. She also has learned that “the community has power.” According to Lena, “The (Community Fellows) training paid off. I gained confidence within myself that I could and had to get some answers and help.”

Viola, as coach, has noted a great change in Lena’s ability and skill level as a result of the coaching process and other training opportunities. “Lena is more confident in speaking before others and sharing comments on issues that affect her community. [She] has a far greater depth of how to assess available resources... and connect these resources to needs. Lena has become an advocate for her community.”

Now Lena says she wants to concentrate on public speaking, advocacy, and meeting facilitation and presentation skills. She has a vision for her community. “Hopefully, as the years pass, children here will remember how the Brooklyn Community helped them grow up to become adults with character and pride,” she says. “In return they will come back and give the next generation the same love and support they were given as a child.”

Lessons Learned
While each coaching experience has been unique—as in the case with Lena—we have learned lessons that may be relevant to other grassroots leadership development programs.

General Principles:
- The coaching relationship must be based on trust and finding areas of common ground. This is especially true if there are race, gender, class or other differences between the coach and the grassroots leader.
- The coaching process must be strength-based and individualized according to the learning style of the leader.
- Grassroots leaders are often used to being told what to do or not do in relation to a problem. In a coaching process, true learning and change is best accomplished through a reflective process. Examples include helping the leaders answer their own questions and solve their own problems, see things from a different perspective, assess obvious and not so obvious results, and identify what, how and when learning has taken place.
- The coaching relationship must begin with clear, shared expectations of what the process will look like, what the goals are, what the individual wants to learn and who is accountable to whom. Otherwise, leaders may be uncomfortable sharing information that might make them “look bad.”
- Coaching sessions must be scheduled consistently and set up as a priority.
Benefits
- Coaching allows the leadership development program to meet the needs of each leader. This promotes and sustains individual growth and development.
- Coaching provides follow-up to training or other group activities.
- Coaching helps the leader identify specific training or other needs beyond what is offered to the group.
- Those who are coached are learning how to coach. Several current Fellows have been observed using the same coaching skills in their relationships with other Fellows and with their clients/community.
- Outcomes of a grassroots leadership development program are hard to measure. The coaching process, especially if it includes assessment tools, provides one way to track the growth and development of the individual leaders.

Barriers and concerns
- Grassroots leaders are “leaders” because they are already involved in their community. Regularly finding time to spend an intensive hour with a coach can be difficult.
- For those grassroots leaders who work, employer support of the leadership program is crucial, as there may be times that the leader will need to be away from work. The Fellows Program has had varying success obtaining employer support.
- Providing individual coaching to several leaders with vastly different skills is difficult and time consuming. When the Coordinator began coaching each Fellow she found differences ranging from inadequate writing skills and being unable to set goals, to having difficulty developing and adhering to an action plan.
- If a trusted relationship develops between the coach and the leader, personal and work issues may arise. The coach must be able to determine when and when not to deal with these issues. It must also be clear that the relationship is not therapeutic or personal.

Summary
Coaching can be an excellent way to help leaders develop skills at their own pace and in a way that directly relates to their goals for themselves and their communities.

However, it seems clear that it cannot stand alone. In the Community Fellows program, the group training and individual coaching go hand-in-hand. When we’ve tried coaching alone, it did not seem to enhance the skills of the emerging leaders to the point that initially seemed possible. We also have found that small, grassroots groups need help with organizational management tasks such as accounting, public relations, and development of policies and procedures.

However, coaching should be considered as one important component of a grassroots leadership program. It is the best way to meet leaders where they are in their lives, in their skills development, and in their desire to work to improve their communities.

For more information about coaching, visit the Partnership’s Web site at www.depc.org.
On my way to a meeting last spring I peeled off the lid to the Honey Nut Cheerios served on the early morning plane and there was a guessing game printed on the back. It read, “What am I? I’ll never move South. People always look up to me. People say I’m very bright. I’ve helped many people find their way. My first name is Stella.”

The answer? Stella Polaris, the North Star.

Since this was obviously a message from on high (or from General Mills), I started to think about its possible meaning and soon realized that stars could serve as a good analogy for grassroots leadership development. “I’ve helped many people find their way”...good leaders do that, don’t they?

After all, the North Star was used by African slaves as a guide in their escape to freedom. Those who were escaping learned how to use the star from other slaves, their peers. And young slave children were taught to find the North Star. The secret of the North Star was coded into songs and stories, sewn into quilts, and made a part of the culture of the slaves.

At the Southern Empowerment Project, the secrets of leadership that overcome prejudice against people of color, women, poor people, gays and lesbians are often hidden in the life stories of our members. We intentionally weave these stories into the culture of our organization.

These secrets (now shared!) were in the stories told about ancestors who built an AME Church on land they bought—while still slaves—from selling pound cakes baked in the ashes of a fire. They were in the conversations over breakfast when a Board member came “out” to other Board members. They were in a female member’s story of abuse by a husband she had married as a teenager. They were in the pain of a Black woman’s memory of being considered almost invisible by the white family whose children she cared for. They were in a person’s memory of how hard a mother worked emptying bedpans in a hospital and how the family just scraped by. They were in the songs and prayers and solidarity expressed when someone was sick or a family member died. They were woven together with tears and smiles and hope for each other and our ability to build organizations that could be free from racism and all those other isms that bind us up.

The Southern Empowerment Project encourages these grassroots leaders, who are already involved in their own groups, to take their leadership to another level. This effort starts with our Board—a mix of beginning and experienced
leaders drawn from our member groups—who take new leadership skills back home to their own organizations.

so how do we do it?

1. Build on the strength of the group. We make sure that our member groups are diverse (African-American, white, Latino, urban, rural, Appalachian, Southern, gay and lesbian, poor and working class). We encourage groups to send us leaders ready for a challenge and ready for a different experience—those leaders who are respected, admired and able to motivate.

2. Encourage peer learning and decision-making. Every Board meeting includes a discussion, film or video on a topic to challenge people’s thinking or give them a chance to talk about their own experiences. Leaders are given true responsibility and power to guide the organization and lead the committees. We have wonderful chairs who teach each other how to run a good meeting. And we make sure that participatory training of some form is part of most Board meetings.

3. Make overcoming racism, classism, sexism and hetero-sexism part of the culture of the organization. We give people time to get to know each other across the barriers of race, gender, and sexual orientation. We make sure that good food, fellowship and laughter are important parts of meetings. We learn about each other’s families and communities, visiting them if possible. We work and play together. And we could do an even better job of using songs, poetry and art as a way of learning.

Like the journey to freedom, the path to leadership can be risky and uncertain. But through this valuable work, we help ensure that the path will always be lit by stars.

SEP conducts an organizing and fundraising school every summer and is publishing a hands-on book on fundraising for volunteers (English and Spanish versions). For details, call SEP or visit www.southernempowerment.org.

Southern Empowerment Project
(865)984-6500
www.southerempowerment.org

PURPOSE: To stand with the oppressed, challenging racism and social injustice.
Recruits and trains community leaders to become organizers to assist organizations in the South and Appalachia to solve community problems.

PARTICIPANTS: Eight member organizations in Kentucky, Tennessee and South Carolina. All do direct-action organizing and together involve more than 3,000 grassroots members and leaders.

PLACE: Home office in Maryville, Tennessee
YEAR FOUNDED: 1986

LEADERSHIP PROGRAM OR PRACTICE THAT’S WORKED: Give people the opportunity to get to know each other across race, gender and sexual orientation differences through fellowship, food, laughter, storytelling and poetry.

By Alice Johnson and Ricardo Parra-Lesso, Staff of the Highlander Center, consultants and former staff of El Centro Hispano

At El Centro Hispano, our work is to develop Latino grassroots leaders who can build a strong Latino community with collective social and economic power. Even though we operate primarily in Spanish, a strong Latino community must have strategic alliances with other groups, and in Durham, N.C. most of the ally groups operate in English. Over the years, when the Latino community and
the ally communities came together for any purpose, the first thing we had to handle was how to communicate between English and Spanish, and do so in a way that included everyone’s culture, created the interpersonal bonds that turns a “stranger” into a “colleague” and then into an “ally.”

To create more Spanish-friendly spaces, we almost immediately saw that we needed “interpreters” and we started with the all-too-common practice of sitting all the Spanish speakers together in a corner and having an interpreter whisper in Spanish to them what was being discussed. It was fairly obvious that this only marginalized those same leaders we sought to build. Sometimes we tried consecutive interpreting, which is when an interpreter repeats “out loud” everything that everyone says, and does so with the speaker and the interpreter alternating turns to speak in small chunks. This does a better job of including everyone engaged and the discussion flowing naturally.

Finally we discovered what many folks doing cross-cultural work are discovering these days: interpreting equipment. Interpreters can interpret a discussion, speaking into the microphone at the same time the discussion is happening, and the folks listening can hear the interpretation in their headphones in “real time.” (It’s basically the same kind of audio system that is used in meetings of the United Nations.)

Using trained interpreters and interpreting equipment was a breakthrough. Soon our leaders were able to participate in a wide range of activities, both in the larger Durham community (such as city council meetings, neighborhood forums, homebuyer and small business workshops, etc.) as well as in events for social justice and leadership development.

But the interpreting equipment was only being used in a kind of passive sense: workshops and meetings were facilitated exclusively in either English or Spanish, and the participants who did not speak the “main” language of a given event were the only ones who listened through interpreting and headphones. If those who didn’t speak the “main language” wanted to say anything, the interpreters went back to consecutive interpreting, repeating “out loud” after them in little spoken chunks.

Then we tried something new. To make sure that all could communicate, but that English would not dominate over Spanish, our own Board decided to give everyone who is not bilingual a set of interpreting headphones, and interpret the discussion about the budget, debating back and forth, each wearing headphones and hearing the other’s response via simultaneous, bi-directional interpreting, happening in real time. The meetings then could be facilitated and led in either language, or in both, switching from moment to moment.

This kind of radical “multilingual space” is essentially the power tool referred to in the title of this essay, although it took us some time to get the courage to try it out with multilingual groups outside El Centro’s Board.

On one creative occasion, we were interpreting for a group of 100 residents meeting about an urban revitalization project happening in their neighborhood. We had only 50 headsets. The residents happened to be exactly half English-speaking and half Spanish-speaking. Determined to stick to the model of facilitating meetings from both English and Spanish, the agenda contained sections that were led in English and sections that were led in Spanish. Everyone in the room would need at some point to listen via interpreter headsets, but we didn’t have enough sets.

When we switched languages in the facilitation, we asked the participants to find a neighbor who didn’t speak their language, and give them their headphones for the next section of the agenda. The room had been tense up until that point, because the revitalization project being proposed was quite controversial for the residents, and its discussion was bringing out racial tensions that already existed among them. However, asking the participants to take a moment, look each other in the eye and share a language tool between them helped ease the tension in the room, and helped create a subtle group cohesion that project planners had not previously been able to achieve. This is an example of how the politics of language and culture can be wielded to unite rather than divide.
Using the tools: a personal view

By Ricardo Parra-Leaso

I speak Spanish and didn’t know English when I came to this country as a teenager in 1994. I had to rely on interpretation during the different workshops I participated in through El Centro Hispano. In fact, it’s only in the last two years that I have begun to speak English with any confidence. I know how it feels when someone is interpreting for you in a space that does not try to be inclusive for all its participants. It is not fun, especially when you have people next to you who may not seem comfortable with your language or maybe your culture. They can make you feel uncomfortable or mad, and sometimes can even make you feel like your language is unsophisticated, or make you feel sorry for who you are, how you speak, or where you come from.

Interpretation is not only the interpreter’s responsibility; it takes each and every person in the room to make the space open and welcoming for all. And it is not just about language. It is about culture, knowing and honoring each person, being open to learning new things, and most importantly, not letting one language or culture dominate the space. It is important to let language be what it is: a tool to communicate our feelings and to build strong allies for the justice and peace that we all want.

Nowadays I no longer depend on interpretation. But I still feel strongly about making every group inclusive for other languages and cultures. There are times when what I have to say is so close to my heart, and my heart still feels in Spanish. It’s very important to still feel like I can speak up in whatever language my feelings are in at that moment, and to know that the people around me will be open to hear me in whatever way it comes out. That also helps me trust the allies around me, no matter what language they speak or where they come from.

Closing

When we create an environment that does not allow folks to participate fully using the language and words of their choice, then we are cutting off the fullness of what people have to share. This is as true for immigrant grassroots leaders as it is for any marginalized and oppressed group. Finding ways to include multiple languages and cultures in grassroots leadership development is one step in the path towards social justice, for everyone.

For more information about creating multi-lingual spaces, contact El Centro Hispano.

You can’t develop leaders in a vacuum

By Joe Szakos, Executive Director, Virginia Organizing Project

For people involved in community groups, it’s easy to be busy. What’s much harder is to be thoughtful and strategic.

Groups claiming to help individuals develop leadership skills offer all kinds of programs. Unfortunately, they are often carried out in windowless rooms with hired consultants who are far removed from the day-to-day activities of any organization.
This article focuses on some of the things we have learned about leadership development at the Virginia Organizing Project, a statewide citizens group founded in 1995. We have found that to be effective, grassroots leadership development—building the confidence of individuals to act publicly and more effectively—has to be an intentional, deliberate process that is fully integrated into the work of the organization.

For example, we use the "Rule of Three" when doing a media conference. Person one, an experienced public speaker, is very articulate and can handle the most difficult of reporters’ questions. Person two (whose heart still races when the camera comes in her direction) knows a lot, but is wary of unexpected questions. Person three may not yet consider himself a leader (heart is racing, knees are knocking and hands are shaking), and has never been part of a media conference before. His role is to introduce the other speakers, get a feel for how the media works, and thereby takes a big, big leadership step.

The equivalent to the “Rule of Three” can be used for presentations to groups, public hearings or other gatherings. If an organization receives an invitation to send a representative to address a group, why not send an additional person who simply introduces the speaker? It’s a great experience for the person and not really that complicated!

Organizations need to always have an entry-level role for someone who has not been active before. And they need to create entry-level events, too. The effectiveness of a grassroots organization—and its leaders and staff—can be measured in the specific ways people are learning from each other and in the number of people moving up the leadership ladder.

There are many examples of deliberate leadership development. When the Virginia Organizing Project holds a weekend Dismantling Racism workshop, “home-grown” facilitators are used. Instead of using just experienced facilitators, others who are learning how to do the workshop are included in the facilitation team. They may only do one or two sections of the workshop, but they participate fully in the planning stage, are active in the de-briefings throughout the weekend and are part of the evaluation process when the workshop is finished. Besides giving other people a chance to learn the craft of facilitating, using “home grown” facilitators also gives a clear signal to participants that they, too, can move into leadership positions.

**Encouraging Leadership**

What other signals does an organization give to encourage individuals to take on greater leadership roles?

There is a sense that the chairperson is “taking her turn” and will help others assume the role when their turn comes. Being chairperson is not seen as a launching pad for a personal career in politics, or as a position-for-life.

Strategy teams on issue campaigns always include individuals who have not been active before. Besides learning a lot, their insights are invaluable in trying to get new people involved.

Participatory methods are used at board meetings and retreats so people feel welcome and can contribute. A variety of faces and voices in newsletters and annual reports provide a clear signal to new people that they can become leaders, too. Organizations need to take great care that the language that they use in campaigns, projects and program descriptions is inclusive. Leadership development is not learning a new language but it is about drawing out a common language.

If an organization is truly committed to helping people who have never been active before join with those who have already tackled community problems, regardless of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, occupation, geographic location or ability, then they have to develop sound training programs, especially those dealing with dismantling racism, sexual orientation and oppression, economics education, building public relationships and other leadership development skills. The training programs—held locally, regionally or statewide—must be integrated into the actual day-to-day work of the group and take time to add new information, insights and theory. Workshops draw out the collective wisdom and knowledge of the participants and don’t rely on people consuming an expert’s lecture.

Our organizing strategies have to include many different avenues—workshops,
telephone conversations, on-site visits, reading materials, conversations, videos—the whole package. And it starts with the original one-to-one conversations that ask, “Who are you? What do you want to see changed? What do you want to learn? Why are you active?”

These conversations reveal for us the direction in which people want to go, and will go if you ask them.

After all, the test of effective leadership training lies in the ability of individuals to act as a result of the training. It’s like making bread. The dough can rise and rise (members can attend training after training), but you have to put it in the oven (take action) before it makes bread (change)!

See www.virginia-organizing.org for further leadership materials. To request the VOP quarterly news magazine, write Virginia Organizing Project, 703 Concord Avenue, Charlottesville, VA 22903-5208.