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Diversity Initiative in a Social Change Organization: A Case Study

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DIVERSITY INITIATIVE IN A SOCIAL CHANGE ORGANIZATION: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

A consultant and lead client discuss the rationale and process for an organization-wide diversity initiative in a national political organization. Approaches and models used to address systemic organization change for racial inclusion in a social justice framework are reviewed. Discussion of initial results, including emerging cultural change and ancillary benefits of the initiative follow. The authors conclude with challenges and expectations for expanding the change into programmatic work and for sustainability.

Keywords: Diversity, Non-profit, Inclusion, Social justice, Change process, Organization development, Organizational change, Diversity Diamond, Reproductive health, Race and abortion, NARAL, NARAL Pro-Choice America.

The election of President Obama signaled a change in the US. How did that change happen? Will it last? What will it take to sustain the change? Such questions are also relevant to organizations addressing racial history. The task of change is compounded when the system under examination is a political organization that operates within a movement and the Washington political culture. This article examines an ongoing diversity change initiative in NARAL Pro-Choice America, a

40-year-old advocacy organization whose base is majority white women. The consultant and lead client discuss the rationale for the initiative, the approaches used to create change, and key developments along with challenges and expectations for the initiative.

The authors hope that by sharing this story, including missteps, successes and processes employed, the lessons learned during the change effort will be of use to other organizations and change

agents. There is a certain delicacy to the exposure represented by this article. As part of the change process, the organization approached similarly situated groups to examine their efforts to address racial inclusion. No organization would share their experience. One possible reason for their silence is the perceived vulnerability to attack that comes from admitting to the challenge of inclusion, especially for an organization with an explicitly political purpose such as NARAL Pro-Choice America. Yet, if there are negative repercussions for open discussion, then the opportunity for change is diminished and lack of courage helps to perpetuate the status quo.

Some orientation to terms is needed. In this article, *social justice* refers to rights in combination with equitable access to those rights. Laws and policies exist within a societal context of uneven resource distribution, discrimination, and more, such that rights are distributed differentially among groups, making the promise of equality before the law elusive (Bell, 2007).

Systemic change within the organization refers to the structure, management systems, policies, behaviors, programs and accountability mechanisms that both reinforce and drive the diversity initiative (Bell, 2007). That is, all parts of the organization are affected

by and reflect the intention and values of the change. For change to be sustained it must be embedded in all parts of the organization such that any element reflects the new state.

The challenge of this case is the embedded nature of the change initiative. NARAL Pro-Choice America as an organization focused on changing the US system regarding reproductive rights. NARAL Pro-Choice America's role in the larger US system change is policy, but to do that well the organization must be cognizant of the social justice context, that is, the world all women live in. Their reproductive health is informed by who they are. Developing the best policy for all depends on understanding the lives of women, and partnering effectively in the community of organizations that are focused on US change.

Background

In 2005, Nancy Keenan became the President of NARAL Pro-Choice America, a national organization that was a leader in the pro-choice movement due to its savvy political strategies, large and active membership base, effective lobbying on Capitol Hill, and pro-choice electoral victories. These elements advanced its mission to "use the political process to guarantee every woman the right to make personal decisions

regarding the full range of reproductive health choices including preventing unintended pregnancy, bearing healthy children and choosing legal abortion” (NARAL Pro-choice America, 1993).

The organization had encountered criticism of key initiatives aimed at advancing racial equity in reproductive rights. “NARAL Pro-Choice America has initiated several programs in earnest that address the needs and perspectives of diverse communities. Unfortunately, many of the programs have suffered from poor collaboration, lack of continuity, and/or cultural insensitivity.” (NARAL Pro-Choice America, 2006a, p. 9). The development of a policy action kit for grassroots leaders to address reproductive health equity issues and draft legislation to improve the reproductive health care of women of color are two examples of the organization’s attempts to reflect its commitment to diversity and women of color. This programmatic work produced some successes in state legislative policy change and initial collaborations. However the organization was criticized for inviting women of color to projects only after the goals had been determined, and for not acknowledging the historical discrimination of women of color reflected in reproductive abuses such as forced sterilization, eugenics, and testing of

experimental reproductive technologies. These issues came to a head when

...mainstream pro-choice organizations created a steering committee to plan what they titled the ‘March for Freedom of Choice.’ Once the steering committee announced the March to the public, many women of color organizations expressed concern that the process used to decide whether to have a March did not include women of color. In addition, many women of color organizations felt the title of the March failed to resonate with communities of color. ...after many challenging discussions between mainstream organizations and women of color organizations ...the groups agreed to change the name of the March to the ‘March for Women’s Lives’ to demonstrate that the March was not focused exclusively on abortion [and women of color leaders joined the steering committee]. Nevertheless, many women of color organizations still view the March as an example of tokenism and poor collaboration by mainstream pro-choice organizations (NPCA, 2006a, p. 6).

In part as a response to these criticisms, the NARAL Board of Directors adopted an official diversity policy, (NARAL Pro-Choice America, 2004). However, no organizational plan was put in place to implement it. The next year, when Nancy Keenan became President a Diversity Task Force (DTF), composed of eighteen members and representing all departments and all levels of staff was convened. The DTF was headed by the COO, who had previous experience in organizational diversity work. Keenan directed the DTF to make the case for diversity at NARAL Pro-Choice America including describing challenges to date, summarizing core benefits, and articulating new staff responsibilities required to implement a diversity program. Though there had been diversity groups established and disbanded in the organization's history, this Diversity Task Force had significant momentum behind it *and* the full commitment of executive leadership. The board of directors concluded that the organization's future relevance and effectiveness depended on its ability to become more racially and ethnically diverse and to connect with younger people – to re-vision the next generation of NARAL Pro-Choice America and its work to protect and improve women's reproductive rights and access.

The final Strategic Plan for 2006-2010, approved in May 2006, included a mandate to work to “diversify our pro-choice constituency, with particular emphasis on young women and men, and women of color” (NPCA, 2006a, p.1) An organization-wide diversity initiative was launched to bring the issue of diversity to the forefront of the organization's program work, strengthen its internal operations and improve its hiring practices.

Getting Started

In 2006, through the Diversity Report and summary case statement (NPCA, 2006 a; NPCA, 2006b), the Diversity Task Force honestly and critically assessed the current state of diversity at NARAL Pro-Choice America. It defined three areas most in need of improvement: collaboration with other organizations, follow-through on projects, and general cultural sensitivity. The report also provided concrete ideas for accountability mechanisms, operational and structural changes, and key objectives and strategies.

According to the case statement (NARAL Pro-Choice America, 2006b):

NARAL Pro-Choice America's diversity challenges...are particularly prevalent in our substantive policy and programmatic work or lack