

“THE POLITICAL PROJECT OF LEARNING”: STAFF FACILITATION OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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An Addendum to “Learning Development and Community Action: An Ethnographic Inquiry” by Lisa Weinberg

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The staff at NWFCO (Northwest Federation of Community Organizations) play an essential role in the support and development of community leadership. Four community-based organizations compose the federation: Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN), Oregon Action (OA), Montana People’s Action (MPA) and Washington Citizen Action (WCA). These multi-issue, economic justice organizations organize low and moderate-income families, on issues such as health care, education and housing. The staff of NWFCO and the statewide organizations provide policy education and leadership development tools that facilitate effective statewide and local action. NWFCO’s primary strategy is to develop community leaders and facilitate their involvement in local and statewide political processes.

The following addendum is based on five interviews Erica Foldy conducted with NWFCO staff members between March 30th and April 30th 2004: Executive Director LeeAnn Hall, Policy Analysts Dana Warn and Julie Chinitz, and Regional Organizers Mimi Ho and Jill Reese. NWFCO staff replied to questions about the organization’s role in leadership development. NWFCO’s state organizations create mechanisms through which their members can communicate directly with policymakers, enabling them to act in leadership roles that may be new and unfamiliar. Some see themselves as leaders for the first time. Policy Analyst Julie Chinitz commented that NWFCO demonstrates a “dedication to having a clear program that puts members at the center in terms of developing skills, members being the public face of the organization and of the campaigns, and also helps make sure that members are at the center in decision-making for the organization.” The NWFCO staff aids its members in this process of leadership development through planned activities, informal coaching, and the creation of an organizational culture that values and practices personal commitment, reflection and engagement with its members.

Leaders and Leadership Development

Analyst Dana Warn defined “leader” in the following way: “A leader is someone who is comfortable and able to take on a forward role in the campaigns of our affiliates.” Analyst Julie Chinitz echoed this idea in her definition: “A leader is somebody who has the courage and the confidence to take charge in situations, whether it’s issue campaigns or organizational issues, and is able to bring people along and help move other members of his or her community or other members of the organization around that issue.”

While staff members at NWFCO spoke of leaders exhibiting “courage and confidence,” they saw these characteristics in terms of process and change. Dana stated that “having the courage to say [their story], that’s ... a very transformative moment. The first time leaders tell their story they’re often very emotional afterwards. They were very nervous to do it.” Some informants saw courage as a leadership quality that can grow through experience and staff involvement. Julie noted that “there is a process of developing that courage and developing the skills, and developing the confidence. So that’s a process that we engage our members in.”

Organizer Mimi Ho echoed, “I think for me the most important principle for community organizing and leadership development is the premise that people aren't born leaders.” She then continued, “There's a variety of types of leadership. Some are very frontline and some are more in the background,” suggesting that leaders come in varying forms and that there is no single model of leadership.

Staff also emphasized the importance of experience. Mimi asserted the central role of experience: “I think one thing that's been really impressive about NWFCO is that there is... a core set of very highly developed leaders who have been with the organization over a lot of time, who have more organizing experience than a lot of the new staff that comes on.” Associated with the concept of experience is knowledge, whether the leader brings this knowledge from previous experience or gains it through specific involvement with NWFCO and its member groups. Mimi continued by articulating that “a lot of the leaders have a body of knowledge that allows them to be very much the expert on the issue.”

Leadership development begins with skill building, but goes much further. It includes giving new leaders increasing levels of responsibility, helping them to build relationships, encouraging their long-term commitment, and providing ways for them to invest in the next generation of leadership. Skill building was certainly a primary theme as staff members were asked to define leadership development. Mimi Ho stated, “At NWFCO you're really working with people to develop their skills and working from that premise that people can be trained to become leaders.” However, skill building was also explained in the context of a larger process. LeeAnn spoke of a cycle of leadership development that involves an elevated level of responsibility. “Learning skills and thinking about perspectives and then acting on them publicly and then reflecting. And then practicing their skills, getting good at a certain level of activity or action and then increasing their responsibilities within the organization.” Similarly Julie describes leadership development as “a process whereby members of the organization develop the skills, the critical consciousness, the capacity and the inclination to take charge of the organization and of specific issues, so that they can be at the table...when it comes to making decisions and policies on issues that affect their lives and the lives of community members.”

Leadership development means creating leaders who can have a real impact in their communities and beyond. LeeAnn stated that she sees leadership development as “an investment in the people within the organization in terms of building skills but also the ability to analyze the political situation to come up with positive options that are proactive and to figure out strategic ways to act to make those real. Real changes and not only in policy not only codified but in everyday life.” Organizer Jill Reese also asserted that the leadership and policy skills that are developed through NWFCO extend to life outside of the organization. Jill commented, “you recruit members and you want to develop their skills and their knowledge and abilities to participate and to understand their role not only within the organization but within this country and the movement.”

It's not only skill building that contributes to leadership development, but relationship building as well. Jill Reese acknowledged that “there is skilled knowledge, but then there is also the other side to it, which is more of a relationship development. So building, not only the relationship of leaders and staff, and leaders and leaders, but developing their relationship to the organization as a whole.” Policy Analyst Dana Warn declared that “feeling connected with the group is an important step in leadership development.” LeeAnn stated, “I think as people mature

in their roles as staff and leaders, people realize that investing in these relationships and in development creates conditions where that work happens easier at a bigger level.” Relationship building is thus a valuable resource for the organization, as well as for the leaders themselves.

The language of commitment also arose as staff members described the leadership development process. Mimi Ho commented that “when people are willing to commit hours and hours and hours of their time or do crazy things that they wouldn't normally do, that it's because something sparks in them and shifted them. I think it's useful for the developed leaders who are trying to find new people...to be reminded this is what we're going for.”

Mimi described how the staff make room for the next generation of leaders. “Organizers have to step back for new people to come up. There needs to be an expansion of the organization to build room for new leaders. People are stepping back but also into different roles.” And the leadership development process does not end at the development of oneself to become a leader, but rather extends to an investment in the next generation of leadership through relationship building and continued commitment to others.

The Craft of Leadership Development

The process of leadership development at NWFCO and the member organizations involve both formal and informal approaches. Formal development occurs through a series of trainings that are organized into a series of stages of a continuous cycle. Informal development occurs on a more personal level to shape leaders through coaching and relationship-building.

NWFCO draws upon a six-step leadership development cycle. The cycle begins with a recruitment phase and continues to an orientation phase, local trainings, public leadership role development and senior leadership trainings. The sixth phase and final phase encourages senior leaders to recruit and mentor new leaders, thus connecting the stages of the cycle.

The first phase of the leadership development cycle is Recruitment, in which staff and leaders engage in door knocking and subsequent one-on-one home visits in order to connect with new or potential members. This stage of the cycle is called the “Listening Process.” Visits are used to build and nurture a relationship with the new member. Mimi described home visits as a way to “to orient [new members] to who the organizations are and... [to encourage] a broader vision, aside from the specific campaign that people entered into the organization with. Getting them to join on as members but then also ... recruiting them to all these different things that we're doing, trying to match the people's interest with what we have going on.”

The second step is the Orientation phase, in which new members learn the ropes. Jill stated that in this part of the cycle, “leaders are kind of participating in campaign activities, building relationships with folks in the organization.”

The third phase of the leadership development cycle is involvement in the Local Training Sessions where the staff focus on skill development, especially an understanding of basic organizing skills. Mimi noted NWFCO’s commitment to leadership development training. “I think it’s really made [training] a consistent part of the work, not sort of a periodic thing that people remember once in a while. It's part of the workplans, it's discussed, it's in calendars, so it's part of the culture of the organization.” Each of the member organizations holds Saturday

Schools, one-day workshops that develop organizing skills through sessions on such topics as active listening, public speaking, fundraising, media involvement, and campaign building. When asked about Saturday Schools, LeeAnn mentioned that “they are just one-day basic skills training where our leaders learn about the work, think about their experiences together and then set goals.” Jill commented that she thinks that the Saturday Schools are “one of the most key formal methods that we have the affiliates do... They focus on basic organizing skills, like why do we work on the issues we work on? How do you think about campaigning strategy? How do you do recruitment?” Saturday Schools engage state organizations’ members through group role-playing and skits as well as other methods. Jill commented that staff are also involved in working with leaders more informally on creating leadership development plans, asking questions such as, “What motivates you to be a leader? What are the skills or qualities that you feel are your strengths? Which ones do you feel like you'd like to improve? What are some experiences or trainings that you would like to get and if it would improve this? And, and how are you willing to give back to your state organization?”

The fourth phase of the leadership development cycle is referred to as Leaders in Public Roles, in which leaders take on more responsibility and visibility. Jill stated that “this is where you ask them to ... take on those bigger, more defined roles, and then more public roles in the campaign.” The leaders participate in local board training sessions to acquire skills relating to finance and agenda setting. NWFCO also offers a Regional Four Day Community Organizer training that allows those leaders who have taken on a public role to gain experience in door knocking, home visits, leadership meetings and issue forums. LeeAnn explained that in these trainings, “they work harder, do more field experience and then also set personal goals about what they are going to do and reflect on what experiences they’ve had and what is their next step.” Mimi provided a legislative organizing example of working informally with leaders to increase their confidence before they testify at hearings. “A lot of on-the-fly sort of speaking practice happens to develop their talking points. The organizer might sit down and document the leader's story and work with the leader depending on their comfort with speaking, but will turn it into talking points and draw the leader out.”

The fifth phase is Senior Leadership training, which develops advanced skills and focuses on NWFCO’s core principles and values. These are done regionally. The Regional Leadership Trainer’s Training is focused on developing the role of senior leaders, enabling them to work on public speaking skills and to learn the Saturday School curriculum in order to train leaders in their own states. Jill explained that leaders are “bringing NWFCO's expertise and resources into the states to help them do outreach, really get new people to go to training and really focus the trainings and the skill building on what the states are needing.” NWFCO also holds Local Action Education sessions to explore specific issues of interest and concern. In the past, Action Education sessions have focused on such issues as welfare-to-work, minimum wage, and campaign finance reform. According to LeeAnn, “Action education is sort of getting people to understand sort of a worldview, a sense of what are their values. What do they care about?”

Continuing the focus on education, NWFCO bring policy staff in to lead Issue Education Forums to aid leaders in their exploration of policy issues. Dana stated, “when there is an issue, a new policy development, for example, and leaders want to understand it, the policy staff will go visit an affiliate and do a training, so they understand the issue in more detail and ask a lot of questions and get background.” Staff policy analysts also assist with the examination of complex policy issues. According to Julie, the policy analysts support leadership development in

two ways: “one is doing research and producing materials that enable leaders to go to speak with policymakers and legislators [with] research to support the arguments that they're making and the demands that they are making. So it's really providing an additional tool for leaders when they go and push their agenda forward. And then the second part of that is translating the more wonky or technical information or material into a language that becomes useful for members and leaders...”

Another training at the 5th level is the Advanced Skill Training. For this, trainers choose a specific skill to focus on. Topics for the training have ranged from computer-based tactical research to media interview training. Conflict resolution and active listening are skills practiced across various trainings. As with many skill-sets developed through the NWFCO trainings, these skills are developed and explored through group role-plays. LeeAnn stated, “we talk about what is active listening and we practice that in various trainings at different times, and we talk about... [and] role-play hostile conflict in a political situation. How do you respond?”

NWFCO has recently put particular emphasis on racial justice trainings. The racial justice trainings were used as an internal examination of how NWFCO could strengthen its racial justice work and expand it to broader audiences. These trainings provide exposure and education in issues of individual and institutional racism, beginning a dialogue about issues that are uncomfortable for many individuals to discuss. Jill commented, “the really explicit focus that NWFCO has put on racial justice in this past year... has brought a lot of stuff to the surface and has really opened up communication... It's created a safe place where people feel like they can explore a little bit and I think people are growing.” She continued, “it's really made them ... think about what are some of the race cuts on the campaigns they're working on.” A “race cut” is a way of looking at an issue that surfaces racial inequities or disparities. For example, according to Jill, Washington Citizen Action was working on a campaign to reinstate food stamp benefits to people who had former drug felonies. “If you look at the numbers, that law disproportionately impacts people of color because they are disproportionately convicted with a felony.” The racial justice trainings enable participants to examine the racial connections in their work.

Leaders pass through each of the phases of the leadership development cycle: recruitment, orientation, local trainings, public roles and advanced trainings. The sixth phase is the Senior Leaders on Assignment phase where senior leaders travel to other states to engage in recruitment activities, hold training sessions and mentor new leaders. Lee Ann explained, “We send many of our senior leaders to another state to take over staffing responsibilities for a period of time and come back and debrief and reflect on those experiences.” LeeAnn commented at this point, “we have leaders that in some instances have more experience than staff, [which means] a blurring of lines between staff and leadership roles.”

Through NWFCO's formal and informal leadership development methods, state organizations' members build relationships, gain organizing and public speaking skills, engage in reflection, become knowledgeable about an array of policy issues and then pass this knowledge to others. By recruiting, supporting and training new state organizations' members, senior leaders have the opportunity to bring their knowledge, experience, courage and confidence to the same leadership development cycle through which they passed.

A Climate of Reflection

NWFCO includes four statewide member organizations that have their own processes and practices. But they share a climate of reflection. Staff and leaders at NWFCO produce an environment of mutual engagement and learning, according to LeeAnn. “States are different, because their politics are different. And what’s important becomes different. But that the process of engagement and learning for staff and leaders is the same, and that we can commonly come together and take up that political project of learning.”

The ultimate goal is to connect individual development with the organization’s mission and vision. But it all begins with reflection. “I think a lot of what we want to invest in is really that reflection,” said LeeAnn. “Where are you at in this organization? How do you see yourself in relationship to the organization? How have you developed and grown? What kind of development and growth do you want to have? How does that fit in to what you see as the mission and goal of the organization?” Leadership development is the link between personal strength and organizational power.

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