



INITIATING STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO SOCIAL NEEDS

Usage Note

Introduction

The nine Leadership Stories described in this usage note are part of a collection of 33 short summaries of examples of leadership successes. Each of these 5-7 page mini-cases briefly describes a leadership challenge faced by an organization, the circumstances they addressed, and the successful outcomes they achieved. These Leadership Stories are quite different in format and content than many case studies. Case studies are considerably longer, and they often offer greater depth into an organization or process. The format for case studies most often includes a narrative to engage the reader, extensive background information, and a presentation of a fundamental dilemma that leads to a decision point. Students are then asked to analyze the case with specific teaching objectives in mind—such as recommending a course of action, or considering key points in the case that lead to the dilemma. On the other hand, examining a variety of examples of leadership strategies allows a teaching approach where several points of view can be analyzed simultaneously. Issues can be framed in more flexible and innovative ways.

Since these Leadership Stories take a different approach, and are all representations of best practices (rather than organizational error or indecision), how one uses them effectively will be different. Instead of focusing on a single Leadership Story, this usage note examines a number of the stories that represent a variety of organizations all with a certain organizational or strategic similarity. By surveying a wide array of responses to various leadership challenges, students can compare and contrast decisions and outcomes. The breadth of examples that are presented in the Leadership Stories can be very useful—exemplary groups and organizations can respond to an event or challenge in a variety of ways. Exploring those various responses is a celebration of good people doing good work.

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This teaching resource is made available on the Electronic Hallway thanks to a partnership with the Research Center for Leadership in Action at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service (www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership) and funding from the Ford Foundation's Leadership for a Changing World Research and Documentation Component (www.leadershipforchange.org).

Note: These Leadership Stories and Usage Note can be used in conjunction with the Leadership Stories and Usage Note *Organizational Responses to Evolving Social Needs* as a way to compare and contrast organizations at differing stages of development.

Teaching Objectives: Organization Life Cycles and Developing Strategic Responses to Social Needs

This usage note focuses on groups that exemplify an ability to develop strategic responses to social needs. As is indicated in much of the literature surrounding organizational life cycles, the age of an organization and organizational stage of an organization do not always advance at the same rate. There can be organizations that have been in existence for many years that are still at a relatively “young” organizational stage, with few formal structures or processes in place. Likewise, there can be organizations that are relatively “new” in terms of years of existence, but which have already reached a quite developed organizational life stage. There are qualities of organizations in the developing organizational stage that can set them apart from organizations that have already established processes for how to respond to social needs.

An approach for teaching these Leadership Stories centers around examining organizations that have formulated their strategic responses; reviewing how they have responded to a pressing social need; and how their experience may contrast with approaches of organizations with more established processes. This note begins with a list of Leadership Stories that represent a cross section of groups shaping strategic responses and a summary of each. The second section offers analysis and discussion questions around five main areas:

- The defining moment or key event that causes a group to decide to act;
- The strategic approaches used to seize that moment;
- Handling pressure to reprioritize.
- Developing partnerships;
- Developing leadership.

The final section provides an at-a-glance summary of key points.

This note and the related Leadership Stories are an especially good fit with courses on leadership, nonprofit and public management, strategic planning, community organizing, and social movements. The brevity of the cases also offers instructors substantial flexibility in the use of the cases in the classroom and the placement of the cases within the overall course syllabus.

The Leadership Stories can be used in a variety of classroom settings. For instance, the faculty member could introduce a distinct issue, such as how organizations seize upon major events or crises or fail to do so. He or she could then assign each student (or sub-groups of students) a single leadership story so that they could ascertain (and explain to their colleagues) how that organization chose to “seize the day.” These separate

explications taken together would help students compare and contrast various approaches.

The individual Leadership Stories also lend themselves to being combined with other materials or readings students have been assigned. For instance, a more general reading on the special challenges of advancing non-profit goals among low-income communities with limited resources could be combined with the Leadership Story on the New Road Community Development Group, thus enhancing the initial reading assignment. Any number of Leadership Stories could be used to help to underscore readings or class discussions on the dimensions of leadership. Individual Leadership Stories could even be assigned to be read during a quick class break to provoke additional discussion once core principles on management, leadership, or program design have been established.

Twelve Organizational Profiles

A World Without Prisons: Improving Prisoners' Lives and Transforming the Justice System: Important Things to Tell Justice Now (JN)

Justice Now works to abolish the prison system in the US. In addition, they advocate for better health care and conditions for prisoners in California's two largest women's prisons.

Building a Campaign for Workers' Rights and Rekindling a Culture: Sun of Justice Rising Tonatierra Community Development Institute (TCDI)

TCDI worked to organize Mexican taco vendors in Phoenix, AZ, from being targeted in a city-wide ordinance restricting vendors. They launched an organizing effort involving vendors of other products to convince the city to try a new approach.

Changing Mandatory Drug Sentencing Laws on the Federal and State Levels: Putting a Human Face on Injustice: Reversing a Political Juggernaut Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM)

FAMM works on the federal and state levels to reverse the politically popular trend of mandatory minimums for drug sentences and to allow judges to have discretionary power again. FAMM has a staff of 21 staff members, 42 volunteer coordinators in 29 states, and 30,000 members in 30 states.

Developing Leadership and Political Capacity Among Laotian Refugees: Healing a Culture, Building a Community Laotian Organizing Project (LOP)

Richmond, CA is one of the most polluted cities in the US. In 1999, there was a major oil refinery spill. Richmond has a very large newly arrived Laotian immigrant community.

The LOP wanted the city to set up a process for Laotians to be notified in their own language when industrial accidents occur. LOP used this environmental issue to do more broad-based cultural organizing.

**Enabling Low-Income Families to Buy Their own Homes While Holding the Land in Trust for the Community: The Power of Balance
Burlington Community Land Trust (BCLT)**

BCLT has a dual mission: homeownership and community revitalization. The Trust provides subsidies to low-income people to buy their homes. The Trust then buys the land on which the homes sit and leases to the homebuyers. Homeowners get limited equity when they sell and 75% of profits go back to the Trust to keep the housing permanently affordable. BCLT has expanded its membership to include homebuyers, several thousand community members, and a broad array of community partners. It now has a staff of 31 and annual budget of \$20 million. BCLT has helped 400 families buy their own homes and has developed 300 apartments and commercial properties as well.

**Meeting the Challenges Faced by Miami's Haitian Community Through Partnership and Consistency: Magnifying the Impact; Focusing on a Common Cause: Haitian Women of Miami
Famn Ayisyen Nan Miyami-Haitian Women of Miami (FANM)**

FANM began as a political advocacy and direct service organization serving Miami's Haitian women. It has expanded to include broader community-based social services for Haitians and other immigrant groups. FANM focuses on four core programs: Family Intervention and Women Empowerment Program, Women Worker Empowerment, Immigration Advocacy and Services, and Community Economic Development.

**Organizing Communities to Protect West Virginia's Natural Environment: A Different Source of Power
Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC)**

OVEC works on a variety of environmental causes in West Virginia. The organization began in response to an oil spill in the mid-1980's that shut down municipal water supplies for 200 miles along the Ohio River.

**Preventing Drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge: The Gwich'in Tribes and Their Role in the National Policy Debate
Gwich'in Steering Committee (GSC)**

The Gwich'in Steering Committee unified 15 tribes from the United States and Canada to organize around protecting their way of life when drilling was proposed in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge. They framed the proposed arctic drilling as a global human rights issue, moving beyond just an environmental advocacy approach.

Revitalizing a Community Through Property Ownership: “A Place Worth Saving” New Road Community Development Group of Exmore, Inc (NRCDG)

The residents of the New Road neighborhood of Exmore, VA, lived in substandard housing and were neglected by the city government. The NRCDG worked to bring water and sewer service to New Road, buy out absentee landlords who were the majority owners in the neighborhood, offer home ownership to residents, and provide economic opportunities and job prospects to residents.

Analysis

The commonality among these groups is that they are groups that were originally organized around a single issue or event, often without a formally established organizational structure or entity to provide guidance, or processes for responding to social needs. An organization life cycle framework carries with it a focus on the advantages and disadvantages of being an organization that is newer in shaping its strategic response, and thus can help guide students in understanding these stories.

Some of the stories are examples of when the personal becomes political, when circumstances faced by an individual motivate them toward collective action. Others reveal when the political becomes personal. While the details of each case are quite different, there are some aspects of each case that are similar. The approaches by which these stories can be effectively compared and contrasted are subdivided into the following five areas:

1. Seizing the Day

This approach is focused on how a single organizing opportunity, such as a political or historical event, is seized upon to build a movement. Groups that organize and respond quickly to an event or crisis have an accelerated rate of decisions to make and structures to set up. More established groups have management and decision-making structures in place to evaluate opportunities. With limited time, shortcuts and temporary measures are taken that can work to the advantage or disadvantage of the new group.

Unlike existing organizations that broaden their agenda or adapt their mission, each of these groups organized quickly without established formal processes. With limited time to determine if they could be successful at achieving their goals, the single organizing opportunities or political events are seized upon to build a movement. Organizations that have established processes in place often have the time to conduct a more complete or top-down needs assessment.

In the stories pertaining to this usage note, some groups were galvanized by an environmental catastrophe. For example, the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC) began as a response to an oil spill in the mid-1980's that shut down every municipal water supply plant along the Ohio River for 200 miles. The Laotian Organizing Project (LOP) launched its organizing work after major oil spill and environmental

incident jeopardized Laotians in Richmond, CA, because there was no civic structure to notify the Laotians in their native language.

Another subcategory of groups organized as a result of proposed legislation. The Gwich'in Steering Committee (GSC) launched a massive effort to unify tribes in the United States and Canada when they learned of a proposal for drilling in the Arctic that would destroy the tribe's way of life. Tonatierra Community Development Institute (TCDI) started organizing when a local ordinance was proposed in Phoenix that would restrict operation of mobile food stands; this galvanized Mexican rights advocates to organize taco vendors.

Some movements were started by people who were suddenly affected by a political event becoming personal, or a personal event becoming political. The founder of Fann Ayisyen Nan Miyami (FANM) is a Haitian immigrant and knew first-hand how Haitian refugees were treated. She advanced the organization quickly in response to a particularly brutal event involving a boat full of Haitians trying to land in Miami. This gave her the opportunity to organize around cultural, social, and financial difficulties faced by Haitian refugees and immigrants. In the case of Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM), the growing state and federal trend to require mandatory prison sentences for drug offenders was a political situation that became personal for the founder.

Some groups had broader and more diffuse reasons for forming, but still had to react to an event in a short time period. The Burlington Community Land Trust (BCLT) had been involved in a long planning and organizing phase and one day, an interested homebuyer showed up and the organization had to respond quickly. New Road Community Development Group (NRCDG) was galvanized by the comments of a wealthy developer who stated that he'd burn down the New Road neighborhood if he were to buy it. Residents realized that New Road was neglected by city government and people in their neighborhood were devalued. The personal became political.

2. Shaping the Strategic Response

Groups need to determine the elements of their strategic response to an event or defining moment. This response is of great consequence, especially when there are time constraints on whether or not to take action. How each organization described in the Leadership Stories decided to respond varies by case, however how they have initiated their strategic response sets them apart from how more established organizations might adapt themselves to address an emergent situation. These organizations were inventing how to respond and often could be bolder and more innovative in their response, though they certainly could be impeded by a lack of basic structure, capacity, or rules for operation.

Ongoing strength may even come from how an organization in this earlier stage understands how it will be received in the community. Some organizations were able to reframe an issue to increase public responsiveness. BCLT took a radical idea and packaged it in a way that had broad acceptance but that didn't compromise an ideal. They

approached the issue of housing availability, and sought to help the public and decision-makers see housing not as a commodity, but as a human right. Justice Now works for abolishing prisons, not prison reform. They advocate for women prisoners based on what the women want, rather from a top down approach. They are extremely bold and idealistic in their approach. Even though elimination of prisons seems like an impossible goal to work toward, the goal helps them reframe the prison reform issues they are confronting. NRCDCG had an audacious response that actually made them more likely to succeed—they transformed a request for sewer and water service in their neighborhood into an incredibly empowering community and economic development plan.

Groups approaching environmental disasters/issues had varied strategic approaches. The OVEC utilized a grassroots response and brought together people who had been affected by downwind effects of environmental incidents, but who had never organized. People in that area had been afraid to get involved and were economically and socially depressed. Their decision to organize around a proposed pulp mill rather than broader air quality issues was an important means of getting the media involved. The GSC deliberately began their organizing on a massive scale—15 tribes in the United States and Canada. They decided to frame the issue of drilling in the Arctic as a human rights challenge which could destroy a way of life, not just as an environmental issue. The LOP organized around a particular environmental catastrophe event to make the presence of Laotians more visible and to overcome cultural barriers within the community. They decided from the beginning to be inclusive in their decision-making process.

Some groups focused on a single issue and kept that one focus throughout time, and some expanded in creative ways. TCDI started out working with taco vendors and then expanded to include hot dog, flower and other vendors in Phoenix—to show the other vendors that they were all targets, and that they should band together to gain critical mass and to frame the issue as part of the anti-immigration trend in Phoenix and the United States. FAMM wanted to pass a federal “safety valve” bill that would give control of prison sentences back to federal judges. They also worked state-by-state to reverse mandatory minimums for those charged under state statutes. They had an extremely politically focused and bold agenda.

3. Facing Pressure to Reprioritize

Many organizations are faced with having to readjust some of their goals or even portions of their mission. Some organizations that are shaping all new strategic responses to social needs don't have a history that guides these choices. More established organizations have more experience with these types of paradoxical challenges and may have more finesse in attracting other organizations to their side. Organizations that are developing strategic responses to social needs, in face of a defining moment, have varying skills for choosing to how to proceed or not, which a discussion of Leadership Stories will illuminate.

BCLT refused to lose connection with its community as it got larger and larger, and kept in the forefront the idea that housing is a basic right, not a commodity. FAMM had to make a heartbreaking compromise with no organizational history for how to handle such

a choice. They helped to pass a bill on mandatory minimum sentencing with the provision that it would not be retroactive, so no one who was working for the bill would have their loved ones released early. It was a terrible decision to have to make. They managed to use that setback to aid them in their work on the state level in Michigan, which was ultimately successful.

NRCDG experienced setbacks at the beginning of their community development work when the city failed to commit to paying a portion of a loan. Once they secured funding they refused to compromise and accept money that would limit their autonomy and power (they rejected a half million dollars from the state because it was going to be low-income tax credit money). TCDI compromised by working with the city to develop an alternate plan to regulate vendors. They had to suppress some internal disagreements for the sake of unity and some form of success. JN do not compromise. They often split on decisions with other prison reform groups. For instance, they actively worked against prison hospice programs because such programs would jeopardize their efforts to secure compassionate release of prisoners.

4. Building Unusual Partnerships

As noted above, organizations which are formed around a single event or crisis may have the interest and ability to be bolder or more controversial than more established organizations. These circumstances also impact the process through which the new group seeks out partners and partnerships to carry out its new work. These groups make varying choices about recruiting unusual partners, but in many cases the partnerships can be fresher, because there is no past history shaping the next steps.

BCLT appealed to left and right wing partnerships. FAMM created partnerships with families of those incarcerated, and then worked with judges and legislators who agreed that the mandatory minimums weren't working and were a huge expense and burden to the prison system. They also worked with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the American Federation of Government Employees, a group that represents federal prison guards. GSC involved tribes, religious leaders, and environmental groups. LOP unified different Lao tribes that weren't accustomed to working together and had different languages and cultures. They attempted to overcome cultural barriers and to include Laotian women in organizing. LOP started out as political advocates, then shifted into providing services for Laotians, such as counseling resources in schools. TCDI brought together a group of people whose sole commonality was that they were vendors selling from mobile carts. The various vendors, who previously felt no connection to each other, became a united group.

5. Developing Leadership

Organizations that are developing strategic responses may have more innovative ideas around leadership development and citizen empowerment than do organizations with well-established processes and more formalized structures in place. The Leadership Stories reveal how these groups address what it means to make someone an informed and

active participant. This includes ways to intensify commitment and means to break down cultural barriers that can impede active participation.

Leadership development, technical assistance, and citizen empowerment are all key aspects of organizational success. How an organization deliberately takes a moment-seizing victory to gain more ground is essential. How an organization cultivates leadership is crucial to its sustainability over time. Some of the groups in this discussion have been more successful than others at effectively creating leaders. Systems to create dependable leadership often are developed as an organization matures, although the life cycle can ultimately turn against fresh leadership by establishing impenetrable leadership circles. Organizations with looser or smaller structures are faced with the task of figuring out how to continue: to wait for a new event, to monitor existing activities, to move organizers to other organizations, to increase community activism, and to strengthen cultural identity. Each of these tasks can determine how an organization strategically develops new leadership.

BCLT decided to institutionalize democracy and use visionary pragmatism for their decisions; they actively encouraged discussion and debate among their leaders. Leadership is more formally cultivated through participation in the NeighborWorks program and through the creation of BCLT's Homeownership Center. The organization recruited as many community members as they could to get involved in the issue of housing and this led to leadership development across a very broad community, not just among homebuyers. FANM's leadership development has evolved from informal education to more formal activities and programs. FANM engages in sustained political activism, advocacy training, and support for families.

NRCDG began by creating leaders among its neighborhood residents, then turned their initial success toward leading the entire town of Exmore through a successful community revitalization process. GSC conducted a large-scale unifying process for tribes spread out over a huge area. The Steering Committee created opportunities for education around alternative energy sources, cultural traditions, and land stewardship. Their form of leadership development centered upon cultural empowerment. LOP also used leadership development to focus on rebuilding cultural connections among the different Lao tribes. Laotian women, a traditionally disempowered subgroup, were actively sought out to get involved. TCDI focused on cultural training and education and subsequently decided to use its leadership capacity to focus on a new population, day laborers. Justice Now had a very activist form of leadership development. Their goal was to train and empower those who were incarcerated as well as interns and law students.

Summary

The stage in the life cycle of an organization has a direct impact on how it approaches various leadership challenges. The organizations included in this usage note are examples of successful groups who chose to act as a result of a defining moment or event. They developed and employed a range of strategic responses to seize that moment and to address the social need; were confronted with and handled paradoxes; developed

partnerships; and set up systems for leadership growth. In all these ways, they were able to overcome the limitations of the developmental nature of their strategic responses and achieve results of more mature and fully developed organizations.

Attachment 1 - Organizations At-A-Glance

	Defining Moment/Key Event	Strategic Response	Facing Pressure to Reprioritize	Bolder/Political Partners	Leadership Development
BCLT	Home buyer shows up	Radical idea packaged in mainstream way	Not willing to alter mission or goals, focus on total social change	Left and right wing	Huge community involvement, institutionalized democracy, formal training and technical assistance
FANM	Founder is Haitian immigrant, single refugee event mobilizes organization	Educate Haitians and involve other immigrant groups	Information not available from Leadership Story	Wide coalition of immigrant groups in Miami who had not previously worked together	Informal and formal education programs
FAMM	Brother of founder incarcerated. Political trend for mandatory drug sentences	BOLD — federal and state-by-state action	Made a huge, heart breaking compromise— passed a bill that would not help current members. Seen as better than no bill at all	Unusual— judges, legislators, ACLU, prison guards, families of those incarcerated	Training for sustained activism, information
OVEC	Major oil spill in the Ohio River	Organize communities that had never had the courage be politically active	Information not available from Leadership Story	Economically and socially depressed communities, media	Education
NRCDG	Speculative Development after decades of city neglecting their neighborhood	BOLD — water and sewer service, getting rid of absentee landlords, and home ownership	No compromise— didn't accept \$ that would limit their autonomy and power	Residents, other community development groups	Civic participation, community education, broader town revitalization

Attachment 1 - Organizations At-A-Glance (cont.)

GSC	Proposed drilling in the Artic	Framed environmental issues as a human rights issue, and cultural empowerment	Information not available from Leadership Story	Environmental groups, other US and Canadian Tribes, religious groups	Stewardship, cultural traditions, learning about alternative energy sources
LOP	Oil spill, no one notified Laotian population in town	Used single issue as a way to do more broad community and cultural development	Needed unity, but had cultural barriers to overcome	City officials, various Lao tribes	Service delivery, cultural rejuvenation
TCDI	City ordinance that would put taco vendors out of business	United all vendors in city to work on opposition	Realized unity was most important in working with the city, suppressed some internal disagreements	Wide spectrum of vendors	Community organizing training, cultural training, taking new skills and applying them to a new issue—day laborers
JN	Issue of great importance to founding members	Abolish prisons—extremely bold and political approach	Won't compromise even if it harms other prison reform efforts	Incarcerated women, students, interns	Activism training

Initiating Strategic Responses to Social Needs: Usage Note

About the Research Center for Leadership in Action

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Founded in 2003 at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, a top-ranked school for public service, the Center's unique approach integrates research with practice, bridges individual pursuits and collective endeavors, and connects local efforts with global trends. RCLA scholars use innovative social science methodologies to address ambitious questions that advance big ideas in leadership.

Public service leaders rely on RCLA to create customized leadership development and capacity-building programs that facilitate critical reflection, peer-to-peer learning and transformation at the individual, organizational and systems levels.

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About the Leadership for a Changing World Program

Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) is a signature program of the Ford Foundation designed to recognize, strengthen and support social change leaders and to highlight the importance of community leadership in improving people's lives.

The LCW Research and Documentation Component is housed at the Research Center for Leadership in Action at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. LCW uses three parallel lines of inquiry ethnography, cooperative inquiry and narrative inquiry – to explore questions related to the work of leadership. RCLA is committed to developing participatory approaches to research and uses dialogue with LCW participants as a core of the research process. While the award portion of the program has concluded, RCLA continues to partner with nonprofit organizations to develop together new understandings of how social change leadership emerges and is sustained.

Learn more about Leadership for a Changing World at <http://www.leadershipforchange.org>, and learn more about the RCLA Social Change Leadership Network at http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/our_work/social_change_network.php.

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