Building bridges from the margins:
The work of leadership in social change organizations

Sonia Ospina, Erica Foldy

In a shared-power world, each of the individuals, groups and organizations affected by complex, intractable public problems have only partial authority to act on them and lack the power to resolve them alone. Collective action is, therefore, essential, but it cannot happen without first connecting across differences. Leadership scholars argue that a functional requirement of organizing in contemporary society is fostering and strengthening relational bonds among stakeholders with differing perspectives, that is "the ability to work from a multi-group perspective—one that not only fully understands each group's needs, but also successfully bridges these needs and moves toward the goal of producing a greater good for everyone".

"How do social change leaders secure the connectedness needed for collaborative work to advance their organization's mission?"

We identified **five leadership practices** which create conditions that bring diverse actors together and facilitate their ongoing ability for collaborative work:

Naming and shaping identity:
Leaders in business, education and other contexts prompt others to identify with them or their organization. Our research suggests that identity can also be used as a way to bridge differences and create more powerful alliances.

Engaging dialogue about difference:
Surfacing conflicting needs, interests, goals and activities is, paradoxically, essential to the long-term goal of a common vision and a shared agenda. Recognizing dissimilarity among individuals can then allow them to more fully engage in a joint project.

Prompting cognitive shifts:
A cognitive shift is "a change in how an organizational audience views or understands an important element of the organization's work". Prompting cognitive shifts to create a sense of shared interests is crucial to the process of building bridges and alliances because organizations must frame their issue in such a way that it resonates with the needs of other individuals, constituencies or organizations.

Creating equitable governance mechanisms:
Without counter-balancing forces that enhance unity, ensuring that diverse perspectives inform decision-making can create division and confusion. Equitable governance mechanisms can be a unifying force because they maximize the likelihood of full ownership of the outcomes.

Weaving multiple worlds together through interpersonal relationships:
Cultivating and nurturing one-on-one, interpersonal relationships represents an important leadership practice to ensure collaborative work among diverse individuals and organizations. These relationships help to weave together the diverse, often fragmented and complex set of expectations, needs and goals of individuals and organizations, enabling them to engage in collective action.

Underlying assumptions of cross-boundary work:
1. The importance of minimizing power inequities
2. Recognizing the strategic value of "difference"

Poster by Daniëlle Ramp

Ospina, S., & Foldy, E. (2010). Building bridges from the margins: The work of leadership in social change organizations. The Leadership Quarterly, 21(2), 292–307. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.LEAQUA.2010.01.008

TU/e