Jonathan Poisner
STRATEGIC CONSULTING

Why Organizations Thrive – Lesson 2
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By Jonathan Poisner, www.poisner.com

I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Thrive*. The article details fifteen lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),[1] buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

No one of these lessons is all that interesting by itself. Collectively, I believe they are a very useful set of principles that any Executive Director can use to improve their organization's capacity to fulfill its mission.

This article is Lesson 2.

Lesson 2 is to relentlessly focus on relationships.

What do I mean by that?

I mean that successful organizations are constantly expanding their pool of relationships and strengthening existing relationships. The organization's programs (the reason the organization exists) must first and foremost meet organizational goals. But organizations that thrive have programs that are also designed and run with relationships in mind.

To understand why, it's helpful to take a giant step back and talk about network theory and social change. A wide variety of books have come out in recent years detailing the various ways in which social change happens via networks of people connected by relationships.

While people receive information outside of relationships, relationships have a powerful role in how people react to information.

People listen more to people with whom they have relationships.

People are more likely to be persuaded by people with whom they have a relationship.

People take action more when requested from people with whom they have a relationship.

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[1] I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around $200,000 to more than $1 million.

I may give a more persuasive ask to John Doe than my friend Jim, but if Jim and John are friends, Jim's request for a donation is much more likely to succeed. That's why it's so critical that board members of any organization raise money from their friends rather than just passing on lists to organizational staff.

All of this is basic Human Behavior 101, yet too often organizations don't think hard about what this means for how they conduct their business.

What should it mean as a practical reality for an organization?

Here are two ideas:

First, the organization should systematically seek to expand the number of relationships its key leaders have with others in the community.

As OLCV Executive Director, I did that in a variety of ways for myself: attending fundraisers for peer-organizations, instigating lunch or coffee with potential allies who I didn't already know at other organizations, and asking board members to invite me to any non-fundraising parties they were throwing so I could meet more of their friends.

Organizationally, when we conducted programs, our bias was to put our program staff into positions where they could meet peers from other organizations or potential volunteers in situations where they weren't asking people to do anything in that initial meeting – so the emphasis could be on relationship building. So we hosted brown bag lunches to compare notes with staff from similar organizations, we hosted volunteer appreciation parties, and we put on trainings for members of the community.

Many of these activities never would have penciled out as making sense if you looked solely at the outputs of the particular event or activity given their cost in time and money. The real payoff would come later – when at some undetermined time in the future our program staff turns around and takes advantage of the relationships gained to make some "ask" of the person they've met. That means staff should be explicitly told at events like this to focus on meeting and getting to know people better rather than hanging out with existing friends.

Second, organization should design programs that convert those with whom they have direct relationships into communicators to their own set of relationships

Donors should be turned into fundraisers. Volunteers should be turned into volunteer recruiters.

I have 182 people in my Linked In network (an online network for professionals). Those 182 people have 21,800 direct connections – eg. 21,800 people are friends of friends. There are 1.7 <u>million</u> people who are connections of those 21,800 – people who are friends of friends of friends.

My power to get things done for any organization is to a significant degree impacted by how effectively I can tap into those 182 to reach the broader network.

So how do you get your relationships to take action? In the online world it's seemingly easy – facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and dozens of other sites are specifically geared to allow people to spread information and "asks" throughout their social network. But while easy to spread information and asks, response rates are abysmal.

The real payoff comes when you get people to spread information or make requests in situations where two-way communication is happening in real-time – which usually means on the telephone or in-person.

How do you get your first-order relationships to turn around and ask their friends for money, to volunteer, to attend an event, to write their Congressman, or just to talk up your organization when at a cocktail party?

At the simplest level it's by having a compelling message that motivates them.

But beyond message, you need a structure for their involvement that's designed to motivate them.   At OLCV, we did this first and foremost by organizing teams of volunteers at the local level who took ownership of certain organizational decisions, thus motivating them to act. With their help, we grew from an organization with a few dozen volunteers in 1996 to more than 1000 by 2004. (A lot more about this in Lesson 3 – coming in August).   We also did this aggressively through our Annual Dinner, by investing time in communicating with our table sponsors, the majority of whom were selling tickets not buying tables.

Lastly, organizations should think consciously about securing involvement of special people who have a larger than normal impact. In his book, *The Tipping Point,* Malcolm Gladwell writes about three types of people who play a particular role in social change:

Connectors have an unusually large number of relationships.

Mavens have a strong need and ability to help solve other people's problems.

Persuaders are particularly likeable and charismatic.

In hiring, in recruiting board members, and in recruiting volunteers, organizations should keep an eye out for people who fit these descriptions and put an extra emphasis into bringing them into movement. When you find them, place a particular emphasis on giving them roles and responsibilities where they can take advantage of their unique status.

Of course, you can have all the relationships in the world, and your organization won't thrive without many other elements. But organizations that thrive almost universally demonstrate a recognition that relationships lie at the heart of their work.

Jonathan Poisner is an independent management consultant who helps nonprofit organizations thrive, by assisting them with strategic planning, coalition building, fundraising, communications, and other organizational development challenges.   He can be reached at jonathan@poisner.com.