Governance Structures for Social Movements

A Strategy Brief for Harnessing Grassroots Capacity

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This work was commissioned by the Empathy Surplus Project, a non-profit organization dedicated to expanding freedom and responsibility for ourselves and others. Empathy Surplus does this by promoting strong, empathetic precinct leadership in county party central and executive committees. They are focused on identifying strong, empathetic and responsible public policy directions, organizing grassroots support for these policy directions and electing caring citizens as party representatives to occupy compassion and promote these policy directions.


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Introduction to Organizational Frames

Social movements throughout history have achieved lasting success by altering institutional structures and cultural norms to reflect their core values and beliefs. Their achievements can be seen in (1) the emergence of new social practices like interracial marriage or the honoring of indigenous traditions; (2) adoption and enforcement of policy frameworks like the Bill of Rights or the Endangered Species Act; and—in some circumstances—(3) as novel organizational forms that alter the institutional landscape like the new hybrid for-profit/non-profit legal charter for the benefit corporation or the crowdsourced archive of information known as Wikipedia.

In this strategy brief, we will consider the organizational frames¹ that bolster (and restrict) how an organization can be deployed to achieve goals for a social movement. An organizational frame is the structured web of rules, relationships, and values that comprise an idealized cognitive model² for understanding and acting within a particular institutional context.

Let’s make this clear with an example—the Hospital Frame:

A hospital is a place where people go to be healed when they get injured or become ill. Typical roles in a hospital include doctor, nurse, patient, and receptionist, among a diversity of more specialized roles like x-ray technician, neurosurgeon, and respiration therapist. People filling these roles have particular relationships to the standard practices of a hospital and to one another. A surgeon will operate on a patient, for example, an action that is deemed inappropriately dangerous (and may be illegal) for a nurse practitioner. There is a logical flow that moves from arriving at the hospital, to filling out forms, providing proof of insurance, seeing a doctor, and then

¹ Learn more about frames and their role in political thought online here: http://www.cognitivepolicyworks.com/archives/thinking-points/chapter-3-part-1-frames/

² An idealized cognitive model (ICM) is a set of knowledge a person has that enables her to make sense of the world. An example of a widely used ICM in modern society is the seven day week, which does not objectively exist in the world yet operates as a way of organizing time in order to plan and act on past and future events.
paying the bill. It would make little sense to charge the person prior to being admitted or to arrive after completing an operation. This collection of structured knowledge arises from the experiences of a person within the United States as a stable pattern of information and is what I refer to with the label “Hospital Frame”.

Note how this understanding of hospitals is contextually specific to the United States. In countries with universal health plans like Canada, the United Kingdom, and France, there would be no component of the patient experience that corresponds with checking insurance papers or paying a bill. Similarly, other organizational frames will have unique expressions within any particular cultural setting.

Other organizational frames that enable us to navigate our social world include the Restaurant Frame (how to order food, dine out, etc.), the Office Work Frame (sit at a desk, make photocopies, etc.), and the Church Service Frame (enter the chapel, hear a sermon, etc.). These conceptual structures enable us to comprehend social settings and behave appropriately within them. They were first studied extensively by the sociologist, Erving Goffman, whose primary interest was to make sense of social “scripts” and reveal the hidden meanings that underly commonplace societal activities.  

In the context of social movements, it is helpful to consider which organizational frames best enable informal communities of like-minded people to organize their efforts in a manner that increases their capacity to impact change. A recent example being the Occupy Movement that emerged on the global stage in late 2011 with a powerful message about fundamental injustices in the structures of our political and economic systems.

While Occupy succeeded at bringing inequality into the mainstream discourse—resonating with the sentiments of millions around the world—it was unable to harness the capacity to alter the legal structures of dysfunctional systems (and, in doing so, replace their organizational frames) in a manner that would last far into the future. We must now ask ourselves what the organizational frames are that will enable grassroots efforts to succeed where Occupy has failed and also which structural changes they will need to address in order create lasting change.

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Structures that Empower Civic Groups

There are a variety of organizational frames that can be deployed to build capacity in grassroots movements. The most central one used by Occupy was the general assembly—an open public forum for deliberation where all decisions are made by consensus and new agenda items can be introduced by any participant in the process. The organizational frame at play here is the **General Assembly Frame** which can be thought of as a container that represents the physical space where people gather to discuss matters of importance to the community.

Strengths of the General Assembly Frame include:

- **All participants have equal power.** There is no centralized decision-making body or hierarchical authority.
- **Agenda items are ranked by their overall relevance and importance to the entire group.** No “special interest” or “elite power” can bias the agenda toward their private ends.
- **All decisions represent a consensus view of the majority present.** Thus they embody the core tenant of democratic practice where everyone has equal voice and there is no tyranny of the minority.

For a group that organized itself in opposition to elite power, this structure makes quite a lot of sense. Yet it also contains within it a major limitation that warrants special note—the consensus process is notorious for producing sub-optimal outcomes. While it does lead to decisions that reflect the majority view, many compromises tend to arise along the way that may be overly incremental and moderate. In circumstances where the emphasis is on minor improvements to an existing set of issues, this process works rather well. But in times where radical or revolutionary disruptions are necessary, it is often ineffective at promoting innovative paradigm-shifting changes to existing systems.

This tendency can be seen in risk-averse thinking across the group, a lack of creativity as “groupthink” dominates the dialogue, or a muddled “everything but the kitchen sink” set of solutions that stand little chance of producing workable solutions to the real-world problems—with all their nuanced complexity—that the group came together to address.
Furthermore, the consensus process tends to be very time consuming and slow to progress. During times when agility and rapid response are essential for success, it becomes a highly undesirable way to achieve collective outcomes.

Another important structure used by Occupy was the swarm⁴ where a leaderless movement emerged spontaneously in multiple locations all at once. The key organizational frame behind this behavior is the Activation Network Frame—where multiple nodes of a network are constantly monitoring for threats and each is able to engage in rapid response to changes in the local environment. Examples of the activation network include the hive behavior of social insects and the immune response of a complex multi-cellular organism.

Social insects (bees, wasps, termites, etc.) constantly monitor the chemical trails left by individual members of their hive and respond quickly to the release of stress markers in the proximity of a new predator or some other disruption to their normal routines. Multi-cellular organisms have special cells within their bodies—one example being the lymphocytes in the blood of mammals that attack viruses and tumors before they are able to spread—that float throughout the body and respond locally when a harmful contagion is discovered.

The key features of an activation network are decentralization and localized rapid engagement. The Occupy Movement spread quickly as local community members organized themselves into encampments and protest actions. There were no visible leaders who could be targeted across the movement and specific actions reflected the local character of each group and the concerns they rallied around.

Of course, there are many more organizational frames that are relevant to social movements. Here is a sampling that demonstrates the wide variety of possible ways to activate people and build capacity for your movement:

A **Chapter** is the part of a larger organization that “tells part of the story” within the local community it operates within—such as the “local chapter” of SEIU.

A **Division** is the reduction of a larger conglomerate to a manageable unit with its own specialized function—such as the “marketing division” of a PR firm.

A **Congress** is the gathering of citizens to establish laws and advance policies for an entire community—such as the “US Congress” that performs the legislative function in the federal government.

A **Conference** is an event that brings people together to discuss a particular topic or theme—such as the “annual conference” of the American Geophysical Union to present geologic research.

A **Convention** is an event that advances an agenda for some shared purpose—such as the UN “convention” on climate change that put forth the Kyoto Protocol.

A **Summit** is the gathering of leaders within a community to share information and make decision—such as the UN “summit” on human rights.

A **Community Group** is an informal gathering of people with shared interests—such as a gardening club or reading group.

An **Association** is a formal alliance of smaller groups that come together to establish protocols for the domains they operate in—such as a “trade association” amongst computer manufacturers.

A **Federation** is a shared legal framework for smaller units to operate under the same policies—such as the “federation of states” that makes the US a nation.

This partial list demonstrates how diverse the possibilities are for selecting organizational frames. So how will you choose which structures are best for your community? That is the topic we’ll turn to now.
Aligning Structure with Strategic Purpose

The essential question that needs to be asked is “What are the strategic objectives that you seek to achieve with your organization?” These may be cultural—shifts in social norms, community practices, or expressed values. Or they may be institutional—as increased capacity to achieve goals that come with enhancements in technology and infrastructure. They can also be material in achieving concrete outcomes that improve the quality of life for people. Regardless, it is a truism that form leads function and so the formal structure for your organization must be compatible with the functions necessary to achieve its strategic goals.

With this in mind, it is helpful to begin by introspecting about the potential relationships that may be encouraged to arise between your organization and the social movements you hope to impact. If your objectives are primarily cultural, how will your organization offer support to the cultivation and spread of ideas? Are you positioning yourself to be a connector who brings diverse communities together and weaves networks that can be activated by the movement later on? Questions like these will help rule out some organizational frames or elevate others as more likely candidates.

Similarly, if your objectives are primarily organizational, how will your organization build capacity for the movement? Do you aggregate information and package it in a usable form? Or are you a communication hub or media outlet through which others’ ideas can be propagated? These considerations will shape how you think about your position in the institutional landscape and clarify whether you are filling any unmet needs of the larger movement.

And ultimately, there is consideration of how you measure success. Will your objectives be met by winning elections? Passing key legislation? Or perhaps a shift in culture that elevates different ideals to the default position in public discourse? In each case, it is vital that care be given to the construction of metrics that resonate both with your organizational form and the larger mission for which you have begun to mobilize resources.
As a case study, consider again the example of the Occupy Movement. Which strategic objectives were met by its organizational frames and which remain unresolved that could be advanced with new organizational frames?

As mentioned above, Occupy chose the **General Assembly** and **Activation Network** frames to advance its objectives. These forms were well suited to (a) elevate the norms and values associated with a functioning democracy; and (b) help their message about a rigged financial system to spread far and wide. With respect to these goals, we can assert with confidence that Occupy was successful.

And yet few structural changes, if any, have been advanced to alter the political and economic systems that perpetuate inequality in the United States and around the world. Measured with respect to this observation, Occupy has been an unqualified failure. This can be explained with respect to the organizational frames that were absent from Occupy which would have been needed to achieve material outcomes in the policy arena.

Specifically, there was no way to direct the swarm of protestors toward a ballot box or to elevate representatives for candidacy to high office. The general assembly proved susceptible to hijackings by anarchist individuals that were able to disrupt an otherwise productive dialogue about systemic change. And the network of Occupy outposts in cities around the world were disconnected from levers of power capable of producing structural reforms.

Imagine instead if the Occupy Movement deployed the **Convention Frame** or set up a **People’s Congress**⁵ to establish policy frameworks that could then be enacted. Existing structures could then be utilized by representatives of the movement to convene a Constitutional Convention to introduce and seek popular vote on constitutional amendments, for example. Structures such as these could then be used to deploy the experience of democracy cultivated within general assemblies to advance amendments for public financing of elections or revocation of corporate personhood from the legal structures of the US government.

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⁵ [http://www.peoplescongress.org](http://www.peoplescongress.org)
One reason why the Occupy Movement did not take such a structuralist approach is that there is an absence of *citizen sovereignty* in US culture. By this I mean that “being a citizen” in the United States is often narrowly confined to the voting booth. People do not feel in their bones the idea that our government is “of the People, by the People, and for the People.” Our founding documents—the US Constitution and the Declaration of Independence—grant sovereignty to the citizens as the root source of authority in our country. And yet we do not experience it as real and so do not think to act upon it in order to alter the structure of our government.

Cultivating a cultural appreciation for citizen sovereignty will require effective civics education, something that is lacking in our public education system and marginalized by the prominence of consumer culture. Grassroots groups need to nurture the experiences of citizen sovereignty through their selection of organizational frames as a key part of adult civics education. In this way, the *cultural capacity to enact institutional reform* can be increased and movement objectives become more tractable.

**In Closing**

The materials presented throughout this strategy brief build on the vital insight that **organizational structure is as much cultural as it is institutional**. Key design considerations pertaining to strategic objectives, community processes, and social values are all contingent on the selection of organizational frames—thus constituting *modes of thought and types of interaction* that naturally resonate with a particular institutional form.

The goal of this short strategy brief is simply to make you aware of these considerations in the hope that this will help you build more effective organizations that help the social movements you most want to impact with your efforts. It should be clear by now that constraints arise for what is possible, likely, or excluded by any particular organizational form. And so care must be taken to consider the strategic implications of one organizational frame versus another.

Please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss these issues. As a researcher who works with semantic frames that promote social change, it is my earnest desire to spread this knowledge far and wide.

Sincerely,

Joe Brewer
Founder & Director of Cognitive Policy Works
About Cognitive Policy Works

Cognitive Policy Works is both an educational center that provides professional training to people in politics and a research/consulting firm that analyzes the workings of the political mind for non-profits and social businesses. We’re a team of experts in political behavior and social change with a powerful combination of skills ranging from psychology and linguistics to media studies and strategic planning.

At the heart of our work is an understanding of human thought and behavior. We analyze cognitive frames, conceptual metaphors, moral worldviews, cultural narratives, and other aspects of political thought to demonstrate the significance of understanding how the mind works in social and political contexts. Unlike other organizations that work in this area, we seek to share our knowledge in the form of practical steps taken by practitioners to incorporate these insights into their daily work. In other words, we focus on the process (how to change what you’re doing) instead of merely providing products (in the form of reports and articles). This sets us apart from the standard think tank or consulting firm.

We seek to empower non-profit leaders and grassroots activists alike, through innovative marketing models inspired by the open source software movement. Our goal is to develop new "best practices" and make them widely available to advocates of progressive social change as they face the major challenges of the 21st Century.

Find us online at http://www.cognitivepolicyworks.com.