DIVERSITY INITIATIVE IN A
SOCIAL CHANGE ORGANIZATION: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

A consultant and lead client discuss the rationale and process for an organization-wide diversity initiative in a national political organization. Approaches and models used to address systemic organization change for racial inclusion in a social justice framework are reviewed. Discussion of initial results, including emerging cultural change and ancillary benefits of the initiative follow. The authors conclude with challenges and expectations for expanding the change into programmatic work and for sustainability.

Keywords: Diversity, Non-profit, Inclusion, Social justice, Change process, Organization development, Organizational change, Diversity Diamond, Reproductive health, Race and abortion, NARAL, NARAL Pro-Choice America.

The election of President Obama signaled a change in the US. How did that change happen? Will it last? What will it take to sustain the change? Such questions are also relevant to organizations addressing racial history. The task of change is compounded when the system under examination is a political organization that operates within a movement and the Washington political culture. This article examines an ongoing diversity change initiative in NARAL Pro-Choice America, a 40-year-old advocacy organization whose base is majority white women. The consultant and lead client discuss the rationale for the initiative, the approaches used to create change, and key developments along with challenges and expectations for the initiative.

The authors hope that by sharing this story, including missteps, successes and processes employed, the lessons learned during the change effort will be of use to other organizations and change

agents. There is a certain delicacy to the exposure represented by this article. As part of the change process, the organization approached similarly situated groups to examine their efforts to address racial inclusion. No organization would share their experience. One possible reason for their silence is the perceived vulnerability to attack that comes from admitting to the challenge of inclusion, especially for an organization with an explicitly political purpose such as NARAL Pro-Choice America. Yet, if there are negative repercussions for open discussion, then the opportunity for change is diminished and lack of courage helps to perpetuate the status quo.

Some orientation to terms is needed. In this article, *social justice* refers to rights in combination with equitable access to those rights. Laws and policies exist within a societal context of uneven resource distribution, discrimination, and more, such that rights are distributed differentially among groups, making the promise of equality before the law elusive (Bell, 2007).

Systemic change within the organization refers to the structure, management systems, policies, behaviors, programs and accountability mechanisms that both reinforce and drive the diversity initiative (Bell, 2007). That is, all parts of the organization are affected

by and reflect the intention and values of the change. For change to be sustained it must be embedded in all parts of the organization such that any element reflects the new state.

The challenge of this case is the embedded nature of the change initiative. NARAL Pro-Choice America as an organization focused on changing the US system regarding reproductive rights. NARAL Pro-Choice America's role in the larger US system change is policy, but to do that well the organization must be cognizant of the social justice context, that is, the world all women live in. Their reproductive health is informed by who they are. Developing the best policy for all depends on understanding the lives of women, and partnering effectively in the community of organizations that are focused on US change.

Background

In 2005, Nancy Keenan became the President of NARAL Pro-Choice America, a national organization that was a leader in the pro-choice movement due to its savvy political strategies, large and active membership base, effective lobbying on Capitol Hill, and pro-choice electoral victories. These elements advanced its mission to "use the political process to guarantee every woman the right to make personal decisions

regarding the full range of reproductive health choices including preventing unintended pregnancy, bearing healthy children and choosing legal abortion" (NARAL Pro-choice America, 1993).

The organization had encountered criticism of key initiatives aimed at advancing racial equity in reproductive rights. "NARAL Pro-Choice America has initiated several programs in earnest that address the needs and perspectives of diverse communities. Unfortunately, many of the programs have suffered from poor collaboration, lack of continuity, and/or cultural insensitivity." (NARAL Pro-Choice America, 2006a, p. 9). The development of a policy action kit for grassroots leaders to address reproductive health equity issues and draft legislation to improve the reproductive health care of women of color are two examples of the organization's attempts to reflect its commitment to diversity and women of color. This programmatic work produced some successes in state legislative policy change and initial collaborations. However the organization was criticized for inviting women of color to projects only after the goals had been determined, and for not acknowledging the historical discrimination of women of color reflected in reproductive abuses such as forced sterilization, eugenics, and testing of experimental reproductive technologies. These issues came to a head when

…mainstream pro-choice organizations created a steering committee to plan what they titled the 'March for Freedom of Choice.' Once the steering committee announced the March to the public, many women of color organizations expressed concern that the process used to decide whether to have a March did not include women of color. In addition, many women of color organizations felt the title of the March failed to resonate with communities of color. …after many challenging discussions between mainstream organizations and women of color organizations …the groups agreed to change the name of the March to the 'March for Women's Lives' to demonstrate that the March was not focused exclusively on abortion [and women of color leaders joined the steering committee]. Nevertheless, many women of color organizations still view the March as an example of tokenism and poor collaboration by mainstream pro-choice organizations (NPCA, 2006a, p. 6).

In part as a response to these criticisms, the NARAL Board of Directors adopted an official diversity policy, (NARAL Pro-Choice America, 2004). However, no organizational plan was put in place to implement it. The next year, when Nancy Keenan became President a Diversity Task Force (DTF), composed of eighteen members and representing all departments and all levels of staff was convened. The DTF was headed by the COO, who had previous experience in organizational diversity work. Keenan directed the DTF to make the case for diversity at NARAL Pro-Choice America including describing challenges to date, summarizing core benefits, and articulating new staff responsibilities required to implement a diversity program. Though there had been diversity groups established and disbanded in the organization's history, this Diversity Task Force had significant momentum behind it *and* the full commitment of executive leadership. The board of directors concluded that the organization's future relevance and effectiveness depended on its ability to become more racially and ethnically diverse and to connect with younger people – to re-vision the next generation of NARAL Pro-Choice America and its work to protect and improve women's reproductive rights and access.

The final Strategic Plan for 2006-2010, approved in May 2006, included a mandate to work to "diversify our pro-choice constituency, with particular emphasis on young women and men, and women of color" (NPCA, 2006a, p.1) An organization-wide diversity initiative was launched to bring the issue of diversity to the forefront of the organization's program work, strengthen its internal operations and improve its hiring practices.

Getting Started

In 2006, through the Diversity Report and summary case statement (NPCA, 2006 a; NPCA, 2006b), the Diversity Task Force honestly and critically assessed the current state of diversity at NARAL Pro-Choice America. It defined three areas most in need of improvement: collaboration with other organizations, follow-through on projects, and general cultural sensitivity. The report also provided concrete ideas for accountability mechanisms, operational and structural changes, and key objectives and strategies.

According to the case statement (NARAL Pro-Choice America, 2006b):

> NARAL Pro-Choice America's diversity challenges…are particularly prevalent in our substantive policy and programmatic work or lack

thereof. Our public face and interactions have consistently suffered from a lack of racial and ethnic diversity, which in turn, has harmed our reputation, hampered our ability to conduct comprehensive outreach, and limited our capacity to guarantee, support, and protect every woman's freedom to make personal decisions regarding the full range of reproductive rights as our mission so mandates. (p. 1)

The document also states: "NARAL Pro-Choice America is committed to investing in diversity over the next five years because of the unparalleled benefits that diversity offers" (p.2) including added expertise that flows from multidisciplinary perspectives and also cultural, racial, and ethnic experiences that together can foster increased creativity and ingenuity. By "employing that talent to expand its reach, refine its message, and solidify member and foundation loyalty" (p.2) the organization can develop novel strategies that reach new populations.

The Case Statement (NPCA, 2006b) also argues that racial inclusion will result in a stronger movement because as a leader in the reproductive rights movement, NARAL Pro-Choice America "must deepen its understanding of the complexities of our increasingly pluralistic society. […] If our staff and programmatic work reflect the nation's diversity, our movement will be much better equipped to welcome and cultivate additional qualified leaders" (p. 2) and deserve their personal and financial investment. The Case Statement forecasts an enriched employee experience because "diversity challenges stereotypes, encourages thoughtful discussion, and helps us all learn to communicate effectively to people from a range of backgrounds – skills needed in any high-quality workplace" (NPCA, 2006b, p. 2).

Communicating the Case for Diversity was a critical beginning to the organization's diversity initiative. Now empowered with the mandate from the Board, and for the first time having a budget for a diversity initiative, the next step was to hire a consultant who would approach diversity in the context of organizational strengthening, take a multi-dimensional approach, and address internal behavioral and cultural change as well as structural change. Prior to developing a change program, the consultants articulated the theoretical frameworks used to guide the process.

Approaches and Models

Diversity work intersects the personal, historical, political, organizational, and more. The richness and far-reaching potential of diversity creates the need for clear models and frameworks that align with and complement each other. Moreover, key stakeholders are likely to have their own implicit theories about what diversity is, what is included in its scope, how to approach the organizational change process, and what the ultimate benefits should be. All of these challenges were present here.

What is Diversity? Multiple Perspectives

Achieving the promise of racial inclusion directly confronts history and the social/political/institutional distribution of resources and rewards. The process is deep, rewarding, stubborn, and touches all aspects of organizational life. It is not like other organizational change efforts, demanding though they may be. Diversity, especially in a social justice frame, reaches into collective history and requires an accounting of sometimes centuries of group identity privilege, and the behaviors and benefits that today flow to and from individuals and groups who may have no conscious awareness of, or interest in, the connection between the

present and yesterday (Bell, 2007; Miller, 1994; Smith, 2007). The social justice perspective operated at NARAL Pro-Choice America rather than the individual differences perspective (Miller, 1994) that holds diversity as the mix of differences brought to the organization by its members. While those differences exist, the ability to realize the potential of all members must necessarily recognize the historical and institutional barriers to their full participation. That is, all differences are not created equal. The *Diversity Wheel* (Loden, 1996) acknowledges the differences people bring to organizations, including marital status, education, and the like, while also emphasizing those differences that carry historical, social, and institutional freight and/or privilege, such as gender, race, and sexual orientation. The model helped explain the emphasis on race in this initiative.

Regardless of the definitions provided by the consultants and organizational leaders, participants' responded in line with what Williams calls legacies, defined as "historical event(s) the nature of which was so powerful that its ripple effect continues to affect you today. The experiences that touched the lives of your ancestors, family members, and community of origin shape your perception of the world" (Williams, 2001, p. 8). American examples include mass

immigration and the processing of immigrants through Ellis Island, internment of Japanese citizens in World War II, and the capture and enslavement of Africans. Reaction to the mention of these and other events depends on the person's relationship to the legacy. The legacy combines with layers of individual experience and identity to create a unique pattern of self-identification, which in turn helps filter and interpret the events of the world. Thus, in any organization, diversity initiatives confront multiple perspectives about events, priorities, and even what diversity is, and whether or how racial equity should be achieved. Such lenses account for the myriad interpretations of events, even what is considered progress.

Williams (2001) articulates the process and result of social construction (Gergen & Gergen, 2004) as applied to diversity. That is, there is not a single universal truth about race, racism, diversity, and inclusion. Rather there are multiple truths created in distinct communities whose members meet in the organization, which is itself working to develop a common construction of ideas and approaches. An organization like NARAL Pro-Choice America, with a social change mission and comprised of people who are committed to a cause, faces a challenge to create a unifying vision of and approach to diversity and inclusion.

An appeal to social justice as both a *goal*—equitable distribution of rights and resources as determined by people whose needs are addressed by those rights and resources—and a *process*—mutual shaping of outcomes by people with a sense of their own agency and responsibility to each other (Bell, 2007), proved essential to an organization of mostly women, who were themselves developing their agency relative to the larger political system.

The change process focused on goals and questions rather than actions and answers. That is, the staff and leaders were encouraged by the consultants to explore their intentions, the impact of their actions, and the multiple realities through which their individual and collective action could be interpreted. Dialogue and self-reflection were more influential than providing the "right" way to view the issue of race, and allowed the group to coalesce around those issues it was capable of engaging. The dialogic process generated its own next steps on the way to the ultimate goal of racial inclusion. For example, at a staff workshop, a discussion emerged about the historical relationship of reproductive rights organizations to communities of color, especially African-American and Latina. For some, the history was well known, while for others it was news. The

organization thus developed the consensus and motivation to engage in self-education about history and its impact on current relationships, programs, and effectiveness.

Approaches to Multicultural Organization Development and Change

People, information, products, and microbes travel the globe at speeds and frequencies unimaginable a short time ago. Demographic trends create imperatives even for domestic organizations to attract, retain, and serve a new mix of employees and customers. Beyond the global community made evident in organizations, there have been domestic movements for civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, disability rights, and more. The resulting legal framework is available to challenge overt discrimination and exclusion. Organizations thus face pressure from demographic shifts, political and social changes and the impatience of previously marginalized group members for full participation, alongside the often obliviousness of those in power to any need for substantive change. That is, diversity is about the strategic imperative for cultural competence—" the capacity to: (1) value diversity, (2) conduct self-assessment, (3) manage the dynamics of difference, (4) acquire and institutionalize

cultural knowledge, and (5) adapt to the diversity and cultural contexts of individuals and communities served" (Minority Executive Directors Coalition, ND). Diversity is, therefore, also about organizational culture change.

A new organizational context changes the definition of effectiveness. Diversity work provides the opportunity to articulate a vision of the organization, its values, and the role of diversity in both. Further, the organization can determine how far down the diversity road it wants to go. Several models describe a developmental progression for organizations from exclusive to legally compliant to fully embracing and maximizing diversity, though they number and name stages differently (Jackson, 2006; Jackson & Hardiman, 1994; Loden, 1996; Thomas & Ely, 1996). NARAL Pro-Choice America is expressly aiming for the ultimate stage described variously as inclusion, incorporating diversity, valuing diversity, and multiculturalism. Rather than rely on a label, the vision states that the organization integrates "diversity in all programmatic work, throughout the organization, including board and affiliate network [and that] accept[s] responsibility for creating an environment where all people are encouraged and able to participate fully and with respect" (NPCA, 2006a, p. 14).

The assumptions articulated by Jackson (2006) are relevant here: training and awareness for individuals may be necessary but not sufficient; organizations exist on a developmental continuum; a clear vision of the ideal is needed; internal assessment is critical to ground the change process in the "real"; the organization's members must own the vision and the assessment; and there must be a consistent person monitoring and facilitating the process. Key mistakes identified by Cox (2001) such as focusing on individual awareness over organizational culture, and underestimating the time needed for sustained results were also pitfalls to avoid. Significantly, the greatest challenge in this case was building the organization staff members' ownership of the assessment and the vision. The initial phase of the consultation was aimed at broadening and deepening the understanding of the need and the implications for change, not just of the organization as an abstract "they," but of members as the subjective "we".

Much of the organizational change literature suggests that change starts at the top. However, this case suggests that change can have multiple beginnings. While it is true that sponsorship provides protection for the change, it is sometimes necessary for the top to become convinced of the need for change due to agitation from elsewhere. As described in *Background,* there was external pressure as a result of recent and continued frustration from coalition partners. There was also considerable support from the middle management and line staff. The CEO and COO were champions and there was an explicit directive from the board but the senior management was uneven in their support (it became evident later that senior management did not know how to translate their support to behavior or program). A diffusion of innovation (Loden, 1996; Rogers, 2003) approach proved useful for conducting the work. Rather than expect everyone, or even the majority of staff to embrace change, the challenge was to identify early role models who would initiate and innovate a change that others could follow. Leadership support of the trend setters would encourage others to follow suit while the objections of later adopters could be used to adjust the process as it emerged. The existing volunteers, the Diversity Task Force, were the obvious early adopters (Loden, 1996; Rogers, 2003). By working with and through them, the rest of the organization could build the readiness and ownership necessary for the change effort to succeed (Jackson, 2006).

Focus Areas

The Diversity Diamond (Berthoud & Greene, 2001), a systems approach to diversity work in organizations, guided the focus during the change initiative. Consistent with Cox (2001), Jackson (2006), and Loden (1996), the Diversity Diamond presents individual and organizational aspects of diversity while directing participants to specific elements of each aspect. It distinguishes among the types of actions that can be taken in each arena or facet, and reinforces the need for a comprehensive approach to change and diversity work. The Diversity Diamond has been useful in charting and tracking the change, designing assessments, developing training curricula, and mapping the overall process.

The Diversity Diamond (Berthoud & Greene, 2001) is shown in Figure 1. First, attention can be focused at the level of individuals in the organization or on the organization as a whole, represented by the vertical axis. There is also an External Focus (how organizations or individuals interact "outside themselves" with others) and an Internal Focus (the "inner workings" of organizations or individuals), represented by the horizontal axis. Within these four focus areas of the Diversity Diamond are the following five dimensions

or facets:

External Relations are the organization's actions in the world—the external and organizational foci. The products and services it offers must meet the diverse needs of its various constituencies, customers, vendors, partners, and other stakeholders. *Organizational Culture* describes the ways of the organization comprised of the formal and informal structures, procedures, systems, and policies of the organization, and how these support the full incorporation of the skills, experiences and modes of interaction that diverse people bring. *Interaction* refers to the quality of relationships between individuals, or an external focus at the individual level. This facet includes ways to communicate effectively across differences, build relationships, resolve conflicts, and solve problems. *Self-awareness* describes increasing understanding of one's own cultural background, values, vision and perceptions and acknowledging one's own personal beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and behaviors. This facet involves taking responsibility for one's own contribution to the challenges and opportunities of working effectively with people different from oneself. *Continuous learning* is the ongoing reflection and improvement achieved by applying learning in one facet

to all others. For example, organizations may try to begin a diversity effort by creating new programs only to learn that they have not mastered effective interaction and that their organizational culture is itself not welcoming of diversity. In this case, the attempts at programmatic work to address racial equity created an awareness of the need to shift organizational culture and individuals' skills. As a result of the consultation, staff and leaders are readying themselves to apply their learning from self-awareness, interaction, and culture facets to new program development and coalition work.

An explicit and prominent feature of the model, *continuous learning* confronts the tendency of people who want to engage diversity work as a static body of knowledge to be mastered. Argyris (2006) describes the defensive manager who prizes competence over learning, as the latter implies incompetence and is, therefore, perceived as a threat to the manager's standing. The need to attain the diversity goals of the organization necessitates that people examine their espoused theories and their theories in action (Argyris, 2006) and be prepared to align the two for effectiveness in the envisioned organization. That is, rather than expect anyone to be effective all the time, people can develop the

resilience to adapt once they confront a gap between intention and impact.

Specific Skills Used

Throughout the project, the pace and direction of the change has been based on the actual experience of the participants. Through action learning (Vaill, 1996) and action research (Burnes, 1997; Freedman, 2006), leaders and consultants attempted changes in NARAL Pro-Choice America and determined the next action based on the actual, not just anticipated, results. As important as visible progress has been the development of participants' understanding of their individual and collective dynamics, preferences, fears, and hopes. With consultant support for their reflective work, they uncovered not just what but why, how, and who, so that they are increasingly able to see their own habits of thought and action that often unwittingly hamper the realization of their good intentions.

Learning how to learn, then, is a fundamental skill for diversity work. Demographics are ever shifting and no single person can understand all the history, perspectives, and resulting dynamics all the time. Changing demographics combined with other external pressures on the organization can leave organization staff members

feeling overwhelmed as they struggle with the whitewater of change (Vaill, 1996). Learning how to learn is even more important because diversity work itself can be emotionally taxing for some. Adult learning theory (Argyris, 2006) demonstrates that people like to *have learned* more than they enjoy the learning process. The need to be seen as competent mixed with a desire to be seen as just and fair, or at least not racist, combine to render many adults incapable of entertaining their own shortcomings. Their defensive reactions not only make them deaf and blind to new ways of being but also exacerbate the very exclusionary behavior that makes learning about inclusion essential. To proclaim loudly that "I am not a racist" is usually to advertise the opposite.

By making learning the centerpiece of the work the consultants sought to normalize common emotions that often crowd out learning. By acknowledging that everyone has something more to learn, people can be freer to acknowledge pain, guilt, shame, resentment, frustration, impatience, vengefulness and other emotions. There is a liberation that comes when people admit their feelings, not as an end, but as an important step for some on the way to taking in information or trying new behaviors.

Closely connected to action learning is the process consulting approach (Schein, 1987). Rather than insist on a particular set of outcomes or drive the client to defensive reaction, the consultants named observed dynamics and invited participants to notice their own process. Practically, this approach has required regular reflection, during individual meetings or educational sessions, post-event evaluation, and periodic long-term reviews of months and years. In this way, the client system has begun to recognize their patterns of attitude, behavior, and practice, not just in the diversity work but in the larger organizational dynamic. For example, early in the process several members of the Diversity Team were frustrated that progress was slower than they wanted. They expected the rest of the organization to take up the issue with ready commitment if not ease. By starting the project with an educational process for the Diversity Team and their exploration of their own habits, perspectives, and backgrounds, it became clear that many of the Team's members were willing volunteers but were conflict averse in addition to being lower in the hierarchy. The result was that the Diversity Team was reluctant to initiate the change they wanted to see. The project then focused

on identifying and building leadership skills of the Diversity Team.

Key Developments

The developments discussed here were identified by the Coordinating Group as pivotal moments that either advanced the organization or demonstrated progress towards the goals. In addition, the authors reviewed contemporaneous documents such as meeting minutes, event evaluations, and project reviews. For a timeline of highlighted events, see Table 1.

Establishing Structure and Leadership

In January 2007, the Diversity Task Force grappled with issues of organizational change, authority, and decision-making during an orientation session. As a result, the Task Force shifted its focus from short term task to long-term change, developed a detailed charter and created a Coordinating Group along with several Subcommittees. Articulating the charter—its authority, accountability, membership, and so forth was especially important because the bulk of the early adopters were not senior leaders. (As an ancillary benefit, it became clear that more teams within the organization could use the clarity provided by an explicit charter.) A sense of shared responsibility and accountability began to take hold during the chartering process as templates for work plans were created by new and more numerous members of the Diversity Team, and subcommittees became accountable to the group through reports at now bi-weekly meetings. The creation of the Coordinating Group was pivotal. It operationalized goals and objectives, established mechanisms for accountability, including work plans, and served as the primary coordinator with the consultants. Monthly meetings tracked relevant topics and subcommittee progress.

The Diversity Task Force became the Diversity Team of 20 people charged by the CEO to focus on: achievement of the Five Year Strategic Plan goals regarding race and ethnicity, articulation and facilitation of the process that implements the plan through buy-in and appropriate decision-making, and monitoring the process and progress of the diversity initiative. The Diversity Team was organized as a disseminator and collector of information and action. Because all departments were represented on the Diversity Team, members carried plans, discussions, questions, and progress reports to departments and gathered the same from them.

Regular visible learning and engagement efforts emerged such as a

newsletter and topical lunchtime presentations. Diversity became a regular agenda item for all regular meetings, from department to senior level. The initiative thus stayed at the forefront of planning discussions while staff were informed of efforts across the organization. Support among staff began to build. Diversity Team members reported more inquiries and positive comments from more staff and from previously skeptical staff.

Yet, even as progress began, staff members approached the Diversity Team with criticisms, questions, and cynicism. Some didn't see how diversity fit in with the organization's work and chose not to engage. Although this development was anticipated by the diffusion of innovation model (Loden1996; Rogers, 2003), Diversity Team members were nonetheless disheartened. Anecdotal evidence suggested to Diversity Team members that their efforts were held to a higher standard than those of other work teams—they didn't get these types or frequency of questions about other projects—and their colleagues appeared not to hear answers to repeated questions. For many in the client system, no amount of describing the future was enough. They wanted concrete, measureable, definitive actions and outcomes to which they would be held accountable. While this may seem

reasonable, the challenge was not only how to improve recruitment and retention rates among people of color, for example, but how would the existing staff support retention by demonstrating interest in the whole person and building productive relationships? How would they understand and address the subtle ways in which they could exclude, and had excluded, newcomers? How would they work *with* and not just *beside* colleagues? In the face of what felt like unreasonable skepticism from colleagues, many Diversity Team members began to experience anxiety, doubt, and fear.

First Test

Very little of the actual initiative followed the planned sequence or timing, nor did results always match expectations. This non-linear progression was especially true given the political nature of the organization. For example, orientation and training for staff was critical for moving forward. But in a fast-paced political organization, things don't always proceed as planned.

A first test of the organization-wide commitment to its diversity priority occurred in April 2007. Just one day prior to the planned Diversity Orientation for staff, the United States Supreme Court upheld a Federal Abortion Ban, signaling a stunning retreat from three decades of

precedent by effectively eliminating the standard that a women's health must always be paramount. NARAL Pro-Choice America had spent months anticipating and preparing response scenarios for the day of the ruling. Rather than jettison diversity as a "side issue," organizational leaders recognized that the Supreme Court's decision meant a changed environment for the mission and work. With this in mind, the planned retreat became an exploration of the implications of the Supreme Court decision for different communities and, therefore, developed even more robust program strategies in response. As a result, the staff integrated a focus on diversity into cross-department and cross organizational plans and tactics for all program areas, while reinforcing the message that diversity was core to the mission, not optional.

Training for the Diversity Team

A July 2007 session prepared the Diversity Team members for their roles as internal facilitators of the diversity initiative. By the end of the session, team members reported an increased comfort with and ability to work with diversity dynamics, understood the multiple levels (individual, group, organizational, societal) at which race and racism operate, and were able to identify the change management process and realize their roles as facilitators of change. The training provided the diversity team members with the understanding and confidence to undertake their role as internal leaders for advancing the diversity initiative.

In October 2007, staff were required to attend an all-day diversity training session in which they explored diversity issues, language, communication, and applications, and developed commitments in the form of department plans. The session allowed staff to focus on diversity together and they gained significant insights into their co-workers' histories and experiences with aspects of diversity. They began to accept that the initiative wasn't going away.

A department survey intended to cement the gains of the training, yielded several positive responses, such as:

> 1. *How does/can our department move diversity forward?* "create and continue relationships with diverse vendors", "interview from a diverse candidate pool", "commit to reading more diverse publications", and "build partnerships with key organizations and congressional caucuses that represent women of color".

2. *How do/can we pay attention to diversity in how we work together as a department team?* "create small lunch mixes of people from various departments to learn about each other", "conduct separate monthly department diversity meetings", "make certain that our department has a representative on the Diversity Team and the representative reports back from Diversity Team", and

3. *How do/will we hold each other accountable?* "speaking up and addressing the issue of diversity", "share responsibility for maintaining an atmosphere conducive to discussing difficult issues", "model good examples to share with other departments", and "ask questions instead of assuming or just going along with the group consensus"(NARAL Pro-Choice America, 2007).

Discussion then extended to the broader state Affiliate Network. In February 2008, the Affiliate & National Diversity Colloquium was held in Washington, D. C. to share programs, methods, actions, and lessons of three strong affiliates that had existing programs and long-term commitment to racial

inclusion. The intention was to develop a mechanism to share best practices, considerations, and recommendations with the remaining affiliate network.

The Colloquium resulted in a Leadership Group, comprised of members of this initial meeting, to focus on the issue of diversity. Initial objectives included: advocate for transparency to encourage peer support of diversity work; act as a catalyst for the network to begin or increase their own diversity initiatives; use diversity work to strengthen the relationship between NARAL Pro-Choice America's national staff and the affiliate network. The Leadership group conducted an affiliate diversity needs assessment, shared the results with the affiliate network and launched a monthly conference call program to share best practices, considerations, and recommendations among the affiliate network.

Internalizing the Initiative Across the Organization

The Diversity Team was learning to adapt to setbacks, deal with internal challenges, and was getting acclimated to its evolving role. Diversity Team representatives reported that departments were also integrating diversity conversations and strategizing into their work without being nudged by the

Diversity Team. Staff members were now initiating and participating in conversations about race and diversity. Management practices began to strengthen as leaders shifted the focus of meetings from tactical decisions to strategy and overall operations, shared lessons about their own management practices, and discussed how to work together more effectively as a team. Deeper, more challenging and self-critiquing conversations about race and the organization's political work took place.

By 2008, the Diversity Initiative efforts were solidifying. The Diversity Team, the Coordinating Group, and Subcommittees set work plans, and their minutes and calendars showed regular meetings were happening. The Mosaic newsletter was distributed every two months and was the focus of department discussions as shown by meeting agendas and notes, and department reports to Diversity Team. Diversity was now also incorporated into the organization's volunteer program with elements such as topical films, training, and discussions on the differential impact of policies on women of color. Although baseline statistics are not available, coordinators agree that the volunteer pool has grown and has a larger proportion of younger and more racially diverse volunteers. (Statistics are being kept

now.) Brown Bag forums were scheduled every two to three months rather than sporadically, and participation in these forums was increasing.

Obama Endorsement Decision and Fallout

In the spring of 2008, the Democratic Primary for US President was running neck and neck with two pro-choice candidates – Senator Barack Obama, and Senator Hillary Clinton. As expected, many mainstream women's organizations were supporting Senator Clinton. After a thorough, deliberate and measured endorsement process, NARAL Pro-Choice America's Political Action Committee (PAC), endorsed Senator Obama – based on his viability, delegate count, and resources. The decision was purely politics. The timing of this decision, intended as an early general election endorsement, was perceived by many in the mainstream women's movement as abandoning Senator Clinton, abandoning women, and ultimately abandoning the women's movement. This made NARAL Pro-Choice America the target of considerable and even vitriolic attacks.

While the PAC's decision to endorse the candidate who would become the first African American president of the United States was not influenced by the Diversity Initiative, the staff's ability to

withstand and respond with dignity and professionalism to the expressions of racism that were directed toward the organization was supported by the foundation established by two years of organizational diversity work. When staff received racist messages by email or phone, there was no question as to how to respond. Organizational leadership had established a clear procedure and a set response.

Economic Downturn

NARAL Pro-Choice America was not immune to the economic crisis that began in 2008. Donations from foundations, individual donors and members declined as the markets fell and unemployment rose. The organization responded by restructuring and down-sizing once in March, 2008, and again in January 2009, as the crisis worsened.

NARAL Pro-Choice America's leadership team identified the core of the organization, reduced staffing, and restructured to advance a focused program. The team's ability to weather the storm methodically and effectively was the result in large part of the Diversity Initiative having served as a catalyst for the organization and the leadership team to address the organizational culture, management practices, structure and systems, ways of interacting, and even

self awareness. As part of the Diversity Initiative, and prompted by it, senior leaders had engaged in several workshops to support their own team work and management practices. The organizational culture had significantly shifted from department silos to more cross-department teaming and this too meant that staff was eventually able to recover from the layoffs with even greater determination. As importantly, NARAL Pro-Choice America did not compromise core priorities – the Diversity Initiative remained a valued and integral component of the organization, even with reduced staff and funding. With limited funding for consultants to conduct periodic training or facilitation, staff has had to become more self-reliant. This has not defeated the Diversity Team, rather it has inspired more energy and commitment of the team members, resulted in more staff volunteers from the broader organization to serve on the subcommittees, and an increased level of engagement of the leadership staff.

Ready for External Work

After three years of focused diversity work on its internal operations, NARAL Pro-Choice America is eager and confident to engage external efforts. Staff responses to surveys show broader knowledge of the purpose of the initiative,

higher ratings for the Diversity Team's effectiveness, and greater overall engagement by the staff. Recently, the Spanish Lunch subcommittee renamed itself Latino Advocacy Committee and intends to promote work surrounding reproductive health issues that affect Latinas in the U.S. The subcommittee is translating content on the organization's website into Spanish, while subcommittee members sharpen their Spanish language skills in the context of reproductive health so they may be able to respond to communication anticipated as a result of the Spanish web pages.

NARAL Pro-Choice America in partnership with our affiliates in Arizona and New Mexico launched a collaborative project with pro-choice Latina/Hispanic leaders in the southwest region of the US. Community leaders assessed current research on Latina/Hispanic attitudes towards reproductive rights and justice issues and oversaw new public opinion research conducted among Latinas/Hispanics in the southwest region. In contrast to past criticisms, anecdotal evidence suggests that partners are pleased with the effort to solicit feedback throughout the process.

Recently, the organization's Policy Caucus convened with the state-based affiliate network to strategize sex education policies and campaigns to address so-called "Crisis Pregnancy Centers (CPCs)." (Posing as legitimate public health clinics, CPCs use deceptive and intimidating practices to block women's access to complete reproductive health services.) In a departure from past such discussions, the agenda included a focus on diversity and race related to these policy issues. In particular, how do national and state organizations, with a history of missteps around racial issues, address the opposition's strategy of opening their fake clinics in communities of color? The group addressed the connection between the current issue and historical mistrust that affects pro-choice work in communities of color (e.g. eugenics). As a result of the conversation, the group anticipated different experiences and perspectives and planned the approach to allies and volunteers accordingly.

The Cycle Begins Again—Level 2

Three years after launching its Diversity Initiative, the Diversity Team has an expanded sense of confidence and purpose, boldness, and empowerment. In preparing plans for 2010, and continuing to connect departments to the organization as a whole, the Diversity Team has engaged each department in a Diversity Vision Process. For each core area of work, the organization is

developing a vision for diversity in alignment with its 5-Year Strategic Plan. Staff is then identifying specific, meaningful, and doable actions for the coming year. These action steps will become the basis for integrated department plans.

Challenges

With progress, new questions emerge. After three years of work, NARAL is still not the racially and ethnically diverse organization that the leaders envisioned. When will it happen? How and where to push forward? Progress is slow and frustrating, but leaders and staff no longer shrink from the questions for they are signs of progress and commitment – and hopefully, a demonstration of the internal will of the organization to drive forward until it achieves the change it seeks.

Key among the challenges for the diversity initiative is securing the time and leadership necessary to sustain the effort. Support from the bottom notwithstanding, an empowered driver is essential to success. As the tenure of the current President, COO and other leaders extends, the organization will need to engage in succession planning for the diversity work. While there is momentum and a sense of stability to the effort, there is no guarantee of sustainability without the current leadership. Even though the organization has made a compelling strategic case for the diversity effort, the historical and habitual behaviors of individuals and groups require conscious and conscientious counterbalancing for some time to come, even beyond the 5-year plan.

The work is slow-going because of organizational, movement, and national history and the reasonable skepticism by women of color individuals and organizations. Yet the authors believe there will be a tipping point, when the consistent effort and even glacial progress will be recognized as not another fad but as a commitment to justice and effectiveness in the new era. The evidence so far is that the work builds on itself. The diffusion of innovation approach (Loden, 1996; Rogers, 2003) is proving its utility as the effort becomes more deeply embedded in the organization. Rather than think of the work as a single process, it is more accurate to envision waves of adaptations as new ideas, practices, and accountability take hold one after the other. The first wave could be seen as the individual level work of self-awareness and interaction and the internal work of organizational culture. While this work is not complete, it has set the foundation for a focus on external relations including program, new partners, communication

strategies, and more (Berthoud & Greene, 2001). As the organization learns from its work in external relations, it will likely need to cycle back to internal work to make necessary adjustments. The challenge, then, is to recognize that the work is never done but that learning and adapting must be continuous so that the organization can reach its vision by successive approximations. Tests will come, not when things are going well, but when the organization is confronted by situations where decisions are neither clear-cut nor easy.

Sustainability of this diversity effort depends on integrating diversity awareness and action into all elements of the organization—from cross-departmental planning to project teams, from program design, to meeting management. That is, it requires a systems approach to change, including regular communication about purpose, roles, expectations, successes, challenges, and accountability. It requires ongoing record keeping and evaluation, along with consistent communication that the strategic imperative demands that staff is responsible for doing things differently. For those people in leadership roles, this need to communicate and stay conscious about the very ideas and actions that seem to them to be an obvious need, means that they can forget

the importance of sharing what they are doing, thinking, planning, and why. Just when the early adopters think change has taken hold, the later adopters may still be wondering what all the fuss is about and whether this too shall pass (Loden, 1996; Rogers, 2003).

The authors see staff members becoming more comfortable with discomfort and expect their skills will be tested with a more diverse staff, different coalition partners, and an approach to the work itself that may shift in response to the demographic changes. The diversity work has so far initiated an examination of the implications of the mission and diversity vision for how the organization approaches the issue. That is, how does the social justice approach, inherent in the organization's mission and diversity work, manifest in the programmatic and procedural work of the organization? The answers can be expected to generate discomfort for some in the organization who are quite comfortable with the status quo positioning of the issue and the organization. Some may see the shift to new ways of thinking and approaching the issue as a loss to be avoided. The skills of the existing leadership to promote dialogue through the discomfort will likely be tested further.

We expect the work will demand a balance of agitation and patience and the

discernment to know when to stress one over the other. Of course, people interpret agitation and patience differently depending on where they are in the organization and in the change process (King, 1964; Williams, 2001). That too will be cause for dialogue and leadership.

The challenges are real but surmountable and we are encouraged by the progress made to date, including tangential benefits such as the more comprehensive and intersected planning. Projects and departments are less siloed than they were before the initiative. People understand how their various responsibilities affect each other and must be accounted for. The Diversity Team charter demonstrated a process that supports all project teams, namely the value of clearly articulating roles, authority boundaries, decision-making and accountability. Within departments, middle and lower level staff are speaking up more—and they are being listened to. Inclusion is indeed about "us" as much as it is about "them".

Conclusion

Organizations are facing a changed context. Success demands effectively working with and for people of different backgrounds. Racial history in the US makes working together across racial differences especially challenging,

yet essential given the demographic trends of the country. Recognizing the need for success as an organization that can attract and represent racially diverse constituents, NARAL Pro-Choice America began a process of conscious change. The focus on systemic change and social justice directed the consultants and organization leaders to work to embed awareness of, and skill in, working across racial differences.

Though the effort began as a response to criticisms about working with women of color and dealing effectively with racial and cultural differences, the Diversity Initiative has strengthened the organization in general. This was partially due to the fact that discussion of race became a venue for airing other grievances that needed to be addressed, but also because the practices of listening, dialogue, developing clarity of vision, holding each other to account, interdepartmental planning, and more, are management practices that serve the organization well.

Means and ends reflect each other. In this case, what is accomplished, whether the diversity initiative or NARAL Pro-Choice America's general mission for reproductive rights, is signified by how it is accomplished. People and their organizations consistently fall short of their aspirations and espoused values.

Rather than bemoan this fact, the organization and its members can be as attentive and intentional about their behavior and the culture of the organization as to shrewd political tactics. It is virtually impossible to seek change in an external system without understanding the organization itself as a system and seeking to reflect the desired change within.

Ultimately, success will be when diversity no longer is a NARAL Pro-Choice America initiative, but an organizational norm. Until then, inclusion will need to be conscious, planned, monitored, and supported. Though the change cannot be called fully sustainable yet, we remain confident the work done to date has set the ground and nurtured a hardy change seedling that with proper attention will result in deeply rooted change. Critical to sustainability is not the speed of change, though fast is desired, but its durability. The fact that NARAL Pro-Choice America's Diversity Initiative is carried in all parts of the organization means that it has many keepers, many people who raise and address challenges and opportunities. The sense of coordination and interdependence increases the likelihood that issues, solutions, mistakes, etc. will be shared throughout the organization. Such networked learning and change is the root

of a culture shift that can last beyond current leaders or other individuals. While sustainability is never a foregone conclusion, conditions for success have taken root.

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Authors Note

Table 1: Timeline

Year	Month	Event
2004	April	March for Women's Lives
	December	Board adopts Diversity Policy
2005	December	Nancy Keenan becomes President
2006	March	Diversity Task Force convened
	May	5-Year Strategic Plan includes diversity goal
	July	Diversity Report
	December	Case Statement
2007	January	Diversity Task Force becomes Diversity Team
	March	Diversity Team charter completed
	April	Planned staff orientation becomes Supreme Court decision planning session
	July	Diversity Team training on diversity and change leadership
	October	All-staff training (April orientation rescheduled) and department survey
2008	February	Affiliate and National Diversity Colloquium
	March	Downsizing
	June	Endorse Sen. Obama
2009	January	Downsizing
	May	Planning for 2010
	Ongoing	Begin designing new programs and partnerships

Figure 1: Diversity Diamond

Organizational Focus

Organizational Culture

Examining and designing
the internal workings of the
organization.

External Relations

***Working effectively with
the community***

Internal Focus

Continuous
Learning

*Learning from new
interactions and new
programs.*

External Focus

Self-awareness

Awareness of differences
and of our own biases and
preferences.

Interaction

Engaging and working
productively with people
from different backgrounds.

Individual Focus