

Reflecting on Lessons Learned

In the summer of 2007, once the search for an Executive Director had concluded and the Jefferson Center transition to dormancy was underway, JC staff and board members initiated a process of reflection. We asked ourselves where we had been as an organization, where we had come, and what we had learned in the process. One part of this reflection happened via an e-mail dialogue, which is documented below.

Letter from JC Board Member Beth Rose posing reflection questions

Hello Brinda, Kiko, Sarah, Patricia,

One way to start the reflection process is to pose a few questions for pondering. Here are a few I thought of...These are meant to be important points to ponder and reflect upon as the JC transitions and changes into something new. I will compile our responses, share them with the rest of the Board, and use them for a piece in the newsletter and maybe (in collaboration with you all) elsewhere to reflect on why the JC went through the process it did, and how other small social justice non profits might avoid similar challenges?

- What is the most sustainable governance structure for a small non profit? So many small non profits have reflective boards and aggressive directors that do the majority of the work. When the director leaves, the organization folds. What kind of structure guards against this? What might we have done differently in the transition between Beverly and Sarah, and how might we have enabled a transition between Sarah and another director?
- How does a small non profit ensure financial stability, when the director is known for/expected to give of his/her time freely for a social justice cause? Then, when it comes time to recruit someone new the pay is too low to attract a skilled candidate. How do we make social justice work financially sustainable, and provide the benefits needed so that new directors do not get burned out?
- How do you balance regional expertise--board members from a large area with an interest in the work--with local, working board members from the communities being served? Is there a role for each? Where?
- How does a reflective, hands-off board transition into one that provides day-to-day assistance and guidance to staff? Is this possible? What are some elements of the difference between these two types of boards, and the transition? (This is similar to the first question)
- How did the work of the JC change over time? Did our institutional structure keep up with the change?
- How does a small non profit sustain its reputation as a stable organization when turnover in staff can mean an entirely new staff?
- When an organization has few staff and many partners, who can and should provide the mentoring for staff to sustain them in their positions? What kind of mentoring do staff want and need?

Beth Rose

JC Board Member Brinda Sarathy's Thoughts on Reflection Questions

- What is the most sustainable governance structure for a small non-profit? So many small non-profits have reflective boards and aggressive directors that do the majority of the work. When the director leaves, the organization folds. What kind of structure guards against this? What might we have done differently in the transition between Beverly and Sarah, and how might we have enabled a transition between Sarah and another director? This is a very relevant question and one which requires deep thought. One thing that comes to mind is figuring out how to document the process of how organizational work has been conceived, carried out, and changed over time (systematization). By documenting this process, it no longer remains simply in the “head” of an overworked Director. We had very early discussions about this when Bev was stepping down and Sarah was hired on as new staff. In my opinion, the challenge for both the Board and Sarah was that we didn't really know how Bev fully conceived of the work, although it was very clear to her. And when she stepped down, it was hard for me to articulate to Sarah how she should proceed in terms of both a larger vision and more concrete, on-the-ground steps.

I know that Sarah has experience with the process of systematization given her work documenting popular education community efforts in El Salvador. I hope to learn more from this. Again, I believe that we need to clearly document how the work of the JC has changed substantially over the past three years, moving to what I would argue is more of a “community organizing” bent. Why and how has this happened over time (political and economic context, crises, energy and understanding of JC staff, community dynamics, funding streams, etc.).

If we can document this organizational history and process, then it makes it easier for someone to step into the role of Director with some continuity. Of course, other things also need to change. We need to be able to compensate all staff far better, thus being able to attract a pool of viable candidates. However, given that there may be no perfect “pop-ed” candidate out there, we may also have to channel our energies into “training”/ mentoring community members so that they eventually may be hired on as Staff. This makes the work far more “ground-up” and would also allow the constituencies with whom we work to actually take on the work from an organizational standpoint. On this last point, I would like to hear more from Patricia, Andreina, Emiliana, and Sarah, who have worked closely with community members: is this feasible? Are there community members who are interested in Staff positions? What ideas, energy, and valuable new perspectives do community members bring to the work?

- How does a small non profit ensure financial stability, when the director is known for/expected to give of his/her time freely for a social justice cause? Then, when it comes time to recruit someone new the pay is too low to attract a skilled candidate. How do we make social justice work financially sustainable, and provide the benefits needed so that new directors do not get burned out? I partly touched on this issue above. While commitment and passion are certainly required for social justice work, I don't think martyrdom is appropriate or healthy. Indeed, it seems that the tendency to self-exploit, so common among small non-profit staff, is antithetical to the goals of social justice itself (fully valuing people, etc.). It also fosters major burn-out!

One of the things to consider is higher compensation and benefits. And here, I think we need to develop a funding base that extends beyond foundations. Many corporations now have philanthropic arms and some may be supportive of popular education work. However, this is an area where we have to develop contacts, and do more research. I am not inclined to think of all corporations as evil; some are trying to use their prosperity to bring about progressive work. So,

it is a matter of figuring out who these actors are, and how to get them to listen. I also think that larger community foundations (better-endowed) would be an option for additional funding. But again, we need to make personal contacts and foster relationships. This is a long-term process, but one that may bear fruit down the road. Finally, we should also continue to increase our individual donor base as well as perhaps having the constituencies with whom we work support the JC in some way (financial if possible, or in kind).

- How do you balance regional expertise--board members from a large area with an interest in the work--with local, working board members from the communities being served? Is there a role for each? Where? I think that regional expertise would be useful to the Jefferson Center, but perhaps in the form of an Advisory Committee of some sort. A more active Acting Board would ideally consist of people more familiar with communities and on-the-ground projects, as well as folks situated more locally. This would facilitate more active involvement and interaction with JC Staff while also making the logistics of meeting in person more easy.
- How does a reflective, hands-off board transition into one that provides day-to-day assistance and guidance to staff? Is this possible? What are some elements of the difference between these two types of boards, and the transition? (This is similar to the first question) See above. I think there is room for a more reflective Advisory Committee, but it seems to me that the Staff also need a more active Acting Board. There may also be annual, in-person meetings among Staff, the Acting Board, and the Advisory Committee.
- How did the work of the JC change over time? Did our institutional structure keep up with the change? This question is part of what needs to be considered if we choose to engage in a process of systematization. Perhaps we can talk more about this on our call? I would like to hear more from Staff on how they have seen the strategies of working with communities change over time.
- How does a small non profit sustain its reputation as a stable organization when turnover in staff can mean an entirely new staff? Clear communication with our donors, funders, and allies. I think the JC has been particularly good in terms of its excellent newsletters and bulletins. However, we should also be prepared to face any "loss of reputation" that may come with a complete turnover in Staff. I think this may affect our relationship with some funders more than others.
- When an organization has few staff and many partners, who can and should provide the mentoring for staff to sustain them in their positions? What kind of mentoring do staff want and need? I think outgoing Staff members can provide a crucial mentoring role for new staff and is crucial to the transition process. An Acting Board would at this point also be more involved in helping with Staff mentoring and organizational vision. We should hear from JC Staff about the types of mentoring they have wanted/ needed and when.

More Questions from Jefferson Center Executive Director, Sarah K. Loose

Hi Beth Rose,

Thanks for sending out this e-mail and posing these questions. Here are some additional questions to add to the mix:

1. What challenges has the JC confronted as a social justice organization working in rural communities? What have been the challenges for staff of working in a rural environment?
2. What are the opportunities and challenges of being a regional organization working at the local level in multiple communities at the same time?
3. Isolation (of many forms) has come up repeatedly as a difficulty for JC staff. What is the nature of this isolation and what could have been done to address it?
4. The JC has occupied a unique space in social justice change work. We are not exactly a “grassroots community group” and yet we have been doing direct organizing/popular education work in communities where there are no existing grassroots community groups. At times, our work has been the catalyst for the formation of new grassroots groups. Yet several social justice funders have been reluctant to fund our work since we aren’t a traditional grassroots group. How can we better explain and convince funders of the importance of a group like the JC? (i.e., if it weren’t for the JC, there wouldn’t be groups like *Inmigrantes Unidos de Shelton* for them to fund in Shelton!)
5. The JC has supported low-income workers and immigrants in their efforts to make change in their own communities. This work can be quite time consuming for emerging local leaders, many of whom have long and inflexible work schedules. At the same time, we have wanted more accountability within the JC as an organization, and have asked some local leaders to also serve in the capacity of a JC board member. Was this a wise decision? Is it realistic for new grassroots leaders to serve in both capacities? Why or why not?
6. How has the JC’s board and organizational cultures facilitated or hindered grassroots participation?

Maybe there will be more questions later... I look forward to our conversation.

Sarah

JC Board Member Kiko Denzer's Reply

Dear Folks,

Well, since I replied to the meetingwizard email, my schedule has changed and I have a full day of work on Thursday, so I'm going to have to limit my participation to some late night thoughts:

After an initial review of your comments, some fermentation time, and an urge to make a detailed in-depth response, question by question, it occurs to me that I should perhaps try a shot from the hip, first.

I get the feeling, not only from the comments, but also from the very nature of this process, that there is a desire to identify our errors to prevent them happening again. It seems to me that this kind of sentiment is prevalent in "organizational development" discussions, along the lines of "don't reinvent the wheel." I would like to propose the argument that, perhaps:

- reinvention of the wheel is critically important to both individual and organizational growth. In addition, I'd also like to propose that, perhaps:
- people are more important than organizations, and that the success of an organization should not be measured by the number of years it survives its founder, or the number of dollars it raises.

First, reinventing the wheel:

Every child has to learn to crawl before it can walk. We don't suggest to kids that they skip crawling and, indeed, we now have evidence that crawling is a physical catalyst for essential brain development. OK, an organization is not a baby, but it occurs to me, in thinking about Brenda's comment about reflective boards and aggressive directors, that the JC's organizational structure was, effectively, Bev's way of organizing her own "mentors" and "advisors," if you will, so that she could do the work she wanted and needed to do.

I would not want to "guard against this." One person who can do extraordinary work should have the support and encouragement to do that. Yes, it's a challenge when that person dies or leaves, but maybe we need to see organizations as ways for various communities to support various individuals? Otherwise, don't we run the risk that organizations become more important than people? And isn't that the very paradigm we're trying to change?

I'm not sure such thinking would have resulted in any different ways of dealing with the transition from Bev to Sarah – but I'd be interested to hear Sarah's response, if any.

As for organizations and their sustainability, I wonder if Miles Horton would have been Miles Horton had he gone to work for the Highlander Center, rather than setting off to answer his own questions about his own people? (Same question applies to any one of your favorite pop ed or social justice heroes.)

This raises another very important matter for me, which is all the many layers of significance and value that get packed around the quantity of dollars available to pay "professional" directors and staff. It seems to me that many of those layers hide what is a fundamental conflict between professionalism and justice.

I don't believe that justice is an administrative function. I think it's a fundamental principle by which people recognize their true relatedness, or not. Some see relation in terms of a divine author of all life; others see it in terms of shared genetics. Either way, it seems to me that justice is just not adjustable according to pay scale. If we could pay every non-profit staffer a full professional salary according to their qualifications, and provide benefits, would we have justice?

So what else is there? Hannah read me a quote this morning from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote: "whoever loves community, destroys community. Whoever loves his brother, builds community."

Then she read me a paraphrase of Jean Vanier's definition of community: "when people start truly caring for each other and each other's growth."

OK, money makes the world go 'round and people have to pay the bills, but the best and most "successful" communities I've had the privilege to know have been ones in which salaries and benefits weren't required in order to participate.

So I'm wary of "professionalism." Just because someone "professes" a belief, a plan of action, a set of principles, doesn't mean they can make their vision manifest. In fact, and in practice, I think the profession of belief is often a distraction from the much more difficult task of practicing one's principles.

It seems to me true communities will provide salaries and benefits (or better) to all; but somehow I don't think salaries and benefits for all will provide true community.

Finally, folks, I'd like to suggest that this inventory include a full and celebratory list of (recent) accomplishments. My own (brief, late-night) list includes:

- Inmigrantes Unidos de Shelton
- Grupo de Mujeres de Astoria
- The Forks group
- The JC legacy (in (at least) two parts: Bev's and Sarah's; but also, of course, Patricia's, Nikki's, board members, friends and allies, funders, supporters, and others – all of which can be, I'm sure, greatly expanded upon.

And then there's a special part of the JC legacy, which is seed stock: every experience, every lesson learned by every individual who participated is, I believe, a seed. You never know where and how it might bloom, and what kind of fruit it might bear.

I know there's much more to talk about. I'm sorry I can't be with you, but I'll look forward to reading/hearing about it, and to our meeting on the 22d.

-- Kiko