

LEADERSHIP COURAGE

Leaning into Discomfort

Transformative change, says director of National People's Action George Goehl, is never comfortable, but, as director of the Center for Reproductive Rights Nancy Northup so perfectly describes it, we must lean into that discomfort in order to effect change. After all, as Ai-jen Poo, director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, puts it, "people are both aware of the risks but also are able to tap into the courage that they tap into every day and say, 'If it's not us, it's not going to happen. If we don't do it, no one will.'"

by the editors, in partnership with Robin Katcher, managing director of Management Assistance Group, and Jeanne Bell, CEO of CompassPoint Nonprofit Services

THIS HAS BEEN AN ODDLY INTENSE POLITICAL season in any number of ways. One unusual aspect of it has been the degree to which the electioneering has taken almost a second seat to grassroots activism; another has been the strange juxtaposition of two hot-button issues: the economy and women's reproductive rights. Both have become battlefields, and in their related movements there are any number of nonprofits doing advocacy and direct services, touching millions each day. The *Nonprofit Quarterly* interviewed Nancy Northup, of the Center for Reproductive Rights, Ai-jen Poo, of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, and George Goehl, of National People's Action—three leaders who are among those in each of their movements facing a political moment in which an enormous amount is at stake. The question: How are they thinking about the political moment, and how are they and their organizations responding in terms of taking leadership?

Two different leadership frameworks served as backdrop to the interviews. The first is from Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky's *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, in which they warn that leaders, if they are indeed leading anyone in a new direction, must be prepared to be diverted, attacked,





“Movements happen when people feel extremely marginalized. That is typically what ignites social movements, whether it’s protesting racial apartheid or protesting war or the 99 percent saying ‘Enough!’”

marginalized, or seduced.¹ This is the natural response of a system that does not wish to be disturbed. As Linsky comments, it is an attempt on the part of a community to restore the status quo by shoving the difficult issue you are trying to surface back under the table where it will not disturb anyone. The second comes from an article by Bill Traynor that was published in *NPQ* in 2009, “Vertigo and the Intentional Inhabitant: Leadership in a Connected World.”² In it, Traynor writes that he now sees that his job as a leader is to remain off-balance, adaptable, and open to other leaders taking the fore. We heard both these themes repeated in the interviews as people discussed their experiences and thoughts.

Leaning into Discomfort

Nancy Northup looks every inch the serene lady in her publicity photo, but her response to the increasingly virulent dialogue about women’s reproductive rights is to welcome the unvarnished fight. “We have been in a constant state of erosion on abortion rights issues,” she said. “But, as we’ve seen recently, it’s not just about abortion; it’s about access to contraception, and, in the end, it’s about women’s right to be sexually active.”

Northup has her work cut out for her as the United States finds itself in the midst of a presidential campaign in which, despite the fact that we seem to have bigger fish to fry—i.e., the economy—one candidate has come out opposing contraception (and, indeed, sex for any purpose other than procreation) while another has declared that he will strip Planned Parenthood of all federal dollars. At the state level, a legislator submitted a bill that would have required women to carry babies who had died in utero to full term, and in Virginia a bill was passed that requires invasive ultrasounds before abortions can be performed.

In nonprofitland, Susan G. Komen for the Cure apparently decided that the time was ripe for cutting off funding for breast exams at Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood had been a political flashpoint throughout the health care debate, and, for whatever reason, Komen had recently hired as their VP for policy a failed gubernatorial

candidate from Georgia, who had declared that she would cut all state funds to Planned Parenthood were she to be elected. The Associated Press reported on the decision on February 1, and by the next morning a backlash was predictably in full swing.

Northup talked about the incident as a catalytic moment: “So many American women have access to services at Planned Parenthood, and the reality is that one in three women in the United States has had an abortion,” she said. “And, so, I think it was a final wake-up call to say, ‘Hey, enough. We’re not going to let you tarnish every single interaction with a really good provider of reproductive healthcare services.’ It has been a loud alarm that exposed the fact that the debate about abortion is also a debate about women’s ability to use contraception, which in the end is really a debate about women’s ability to be sexually active and to plan the number and spacing of their children. Pretty basic. When Rush Limbaugh labeled a thirty-year-old law student a slut for defending affordable contraception, I think all of a sudden the American public realized that this is the same old fight about whether or not women can be sexually active, and to hear that kind of misogynistic attack on a mature adult woman advocating affordable contraception I think was a real stunner.”

Northup went on to say that she welcomed the fight that must happen now, saying, “Movements happen when people feel extremely marginalized. That is typically what ignites social movements, whether it’s protesting racial apartheid or protesting war or the 99 percent saying ‘Enough!’”

“We have not been—as a field, as a movement—assertive enough in our response to the very aggressive and extreme policies of the anti-choice movement. So it was interesting to think about the topic of this article when it was first presented to me: what it means to take unpopular positions. I think about it on all these different levels. What we do every day at the Center for Reproductive Rights is so contested that just coming to work is a salvo—a challenge—yet it’s hard to say that we’re in a marginalized position, because there’s broad support in the United States for access to abortion. But at the same

time the issue is so volatile that you don't know when you run into someone what their response is going to be. But we have to take on that discomfort boldly.

"In fact, leaning into discomfort, I think, is critical, to make sure that what we are doing—both externally, as we work to establish reproductive rights around the world, and internally, at the organization level—is bold enough. The organization had better be feeling discomfort if it's leaning into new strategies and ways of working.

"You have always to ask, Am I pushing for the change that's really needed? On all of those levels, you have to continually refresh and check and make sure that you're getting the most power for the mission by being as uncomfortable as possible. Because change is hard, and the reason why you have to look at all those different levels—yourself, your organization, and then the world—is that if you're not willing to hold the tension of change as an organization, how can you begin to understand what you have to risk and what others have to risk to make change happen in the world?"

Taking Your Place at the Table—and Building the Table if It Isn't There

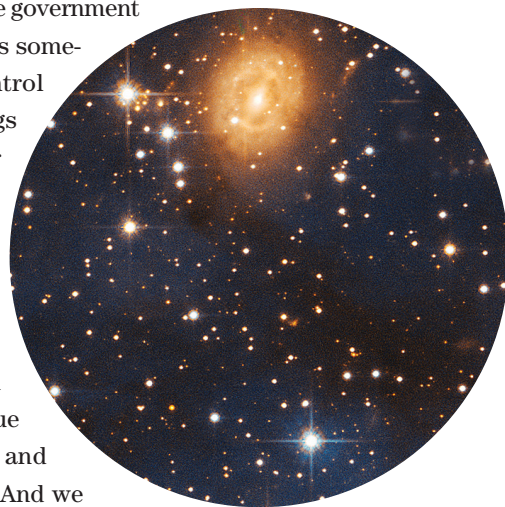
Ai-jen Poo knows about the depth of the risks that ordinary people can and do take to pursue social change. She is director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), and she sees what it takes for that organization's constituents to take leadership. As Poo observed, "Domestic workers work in isolated workplaces. They don't have any job security whatsoever, and there are no labor standards or protections, except—for now—in New York, because of us. But really, there's nothing mediating the relationship between a worker and an employer—your workplace is somebody else's so-called castle. It already takes a lot of courage to assert your rights and dignity, and to make sure that you get paid on time, and to make sure that you can get home on time to your own children. And all of these challenges that are just day-to-day challenges of living in that environment already demonstrate a tremendous amount of day-to-day courage." So, when it comes to their standing up in public for the economic

rights of low-wage workers, "people are both aware of the risks but also are able to tap into the courage that they tap into every day and say, 'If it's not us, it's not going to happen. If we don't do it, no one will.'"

Embracing the opportunity to act, ensuring a place at the table for her constituents, and building greater power for themselves and the broader movement, is what this organization is prepared for. Poo pointed to a recent victory snatched from the jaws of defeat: "In 2010, we were hoping for a vote in the [New York State] Senate on the Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights. It was totally outside of our control, and it was right at the end of the legislative session, when bill decisions were getting made, and if they didn't go back to work then none of these bills would get decided on. And we had already been in this fight for five years, and we were all working so hard for so many years, and we were so close.

And then, all of a sudden, [the government shutdown] happens, and it is something that we have no control over whatsoever, and things come to a halt. I remember that we felt an incredible amount of frustration at that moment but also realized that we always have choices, and that we could choose to take action, and we could choose to continue to have our voices heard, and there was always a way in. And we ended up organizing a twenty-four-hour vigil at the governor's office. And then we were joined by people like Gloria Steinem and Stuart Appelbaum, who is a labor leader here, president of the Retail Workers Union. We were joined by all kinds of people who really lifted the spirits of everyone involved in the campaign, and we really counted on each other to keep one another inspired, despite how challenging and how uncertain the future was. And I think there was just the recognition that there will always be things that are outside of our control, and there will always be choices that we can make to continue and to build as a campaign and as a movement, and that

"[I]f you're not willing to hold the tension of change as an organization, how can you begin to understand what you have to risk and what others have to risk to make change happen in the world?"



no matter what happens the choice to build is always there.”

Similarly, when the Occupy movement emerged, in early fall of 2011, it created an extraordinary opportunity in its broad framing. Occupy by no means took the domestic workers movement by surprise. They knew that the discontent was there, waiting to be voiced, but the degree to which the frame for the action would include the very poor or immigrants or other mar-

ginalized groups as priorities is always the question. “Of course, domestic workers have to be understood as part of the 99 percent,” said Poo, “but now we are connected to so many other different people of other walks of life who are also suffering economically. Occupy has provided the opportunity for connection and for movement building and for large-scale change, which is what we need.”

NDWA’s members have been involved in supporting Occupy and have been a part of general assemblies and involved in workers’ rights working groups. Now NDWA has taken a leadership position in 99% Spring, an effort to train 100,000 people nationwide in the issues of Occupy and the practices of nonviolent action, to prepare and encourage them to go out in their communities and take action this spring.

Taking to the Margins with Purpose

National People’s Action (NPA) is now a primary organizational sponsor of 99% Spring and is leading efforts to reexamine the role financial institutions play in our democracy and economy. But when George Goehl became NPA’s executive director in 2007, the organization was struggling to lead, despite its rich history. Thirty years earlier, NPA had spearheaded the passage of the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act of 1975, which forced banks to disclose where they were and were not making loans, and for whom they were approving and denying loans, by race and gender

and geography. That, then, led to the passage of the Community Reinvestment Act, in 1977. But for a time, said Goehl, the organization became “relatively insular and unconnected to peer organizations and potential allies.” In fact, added Goehl, a former funder warned him that the organization was on the verge of becoming irrelevant.

Said Goehl, “I loved the DNA of the place, so in some ways I might have been the exact right person for the job, because it wasn’t like I was going to come in and get rid of the good stuff. But, that being said, knowing that the financial crisis was based in foreclosures, and that housing and banking had been NPA’s strong suit for thirty-five years, it was tough for NPA not be a well-oiled machine. That was hard.”

Nevertheless, Goehl and his organization knew that they were facing an unprecedented situation, and that now, maybe more than ever before, was the time to take strong action. “Really, it would be hard to make up a story as crazy as that,” he commented. “The same banks that created subprime lending drove the economy to the brink of collapse; were then bailed out but kept handing out big bonuses; then spent \$1.4 million a day lobbying against financial reform—and the banks that were ‘too big to fail’ actually got bigger. In almost every case—Wells Fargo, J.P. Morgan Chase, and Bank of America—they acquired other banks in the process.”

NPA knew that the time called for a bigger, bolder vision, even if it made some uncomfortable. As Goehl explained, “NPA can’t really see a road toward a dramatically more just economy that doesn’t include really restructuring big corporations and how we relate to them. We can make some things a little better over here, make this a little better over there. But if the imbalance of power is so significant that it feels like we have to address not just corporate money and politics but also the dominance that a set of really big, often very unaccountable corporations have in our economy, well . . . I do think that as a nation we feel that we have a right to expect more from government and to hold government accountable, but I think sometimes we question whether we have a right to expect more from corporations and to hold corporations accountable. But

“[D]omestic workers have to be understood as part of the 99 percent, but now we are connected to so many other different people of other walks of life who are also suffering economically.”



corporations are a legal creation of our government, which theoretically is ours. However, I have been in rooms with people that I would think would be with us on this, and laid it out, and definitely gotten a bit of a stink eye.



“that’s what makes this a fun place to work right now, because I think we’ve brought in those kinds of thinkers into our orbit, and so there’s just a lot of testing, experimentation—a kind of inquisitiveness and curiosity.”

* * *

“But I think we forget that the profound change we want is not supposed to be comfortable. We look back at the stories of the women’s suffrage movement or the civil rights movement and the farm workers movement, and we look back at the leaders and the members of those movements with admiration, almost as if they were winning popularity contests in their own time. And, obviously, that wasn’t the case. People were risking ridicule, embarrassment, and being ostracized, and I think that sometimes we think we can create change—and we can, marginal change—without taking those risks. But if we want to create *transformative* change we’re all going to have to risk those things. There’s increasing rhetoric around the notion of transformative change and a new economy and a dramatically more just and sustainable economy . . . but to really live up to that, our actions are going to have to be as powerful as we say our convictions are.

“I don’t feel like we’re doing anything radical. I think what’s radical is banks financing payday lenders who charge 455 percent interest rates, or people fraudulently foreclosing on people—that’s radical. Corporations hiring tons of lawyers to figure out how they don’t have to pay any taxes—that’s radical. Saying that’s unfair is what we do, and that seems like really normal and pretty mainstream to me. I do think that as a social justice movement we’re going to need to toughen up, and I do think we and our funders will need to have thick skins if we really want to create transformative change.”

Goehl is a leader who believes that the organization needs to remain open and a bit unstable in some ways. “We need to constantly ask ourselves what it takes to advance significant social change and break with orthodoxy, but,” he confided,

Social-sector leadership is not and should not be a completely comfortable role. In a world full of current and future ambiguities, leaders have to stay nimble and ready to rebalance their organizations to fit most powerfully into a whole field/movement strategy. The skills of consultation and engagement with other leaders inside and outside of an organization are never entirely straightforward but have to be kept moving in the right direction whenever a door seems to crack open—or needs to be cracked open.

We conclude with a passage from “Vertigo and the Intentional Inhabitant”: “In connected environments, leaders know that networks are always teetering on the edge of balance, requiring many small adjustments to achieve a measure of dynamic stasis. I have found that a network leader has to be in constant motion, paying attention to the habits and the small stimuli needed to incessantly reconstitute balance and motion. One must learn to feel the current of change, look for and recognize resonance, and deploy oneself not as prod, but as a *pivot* for the many moments of change that are called for every day.”³

NOTES

1. Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business Press Books, 2002): 31.
2. Bill Traynor, “Vertigo and the Intentional Inhabitant: Leadership in a Connected World,” *The Nonprofit Quarterly* (Summer 2009): 83–86.
3. Ibid., 86.

To comment on this article, write to us at feedback@npqmag.org. Order reprints from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 190104.

“I think we forget that the profound change we want is not supposed to be comfortable. We look back at the stories of the women’s suffrage movement or the civil rights movement and the farm workers movement, and we look back at the leaders and the members of those movements with admiration, almost as if they were winning popularity contests in their own time. And, obviously, that wasn’t the case.”

THE Nonprofit QUARTERLY

The latest news and analysis about the nonprofit sector from the *Nonprofit Newswire*

Regular feature articles

Subscription information for the print magazine

For more information from the *Nonprofit Quarterly* go to www.nonprofitquarterly.org