

Keys *to* Effective Network Leadership

by the editors

Effective movement
network leaders build
long-term
cross-organizational,
cross-issue
relationships,
contribute to a broader
social movement,
and embrace fluid
structure and
membership
boundaries, among
other practices.
This article presents
three network leaders
and the qualities that
distinguish their
leadership.

THE *NONPROFIT QUARTERLY* HAS PREVIOUSLY published a number of articles about the requirements of leadership in networks and movements. These requirements are described by Bill Traynor in his 2009 article “Vertigo and the Intentional Inhabitant: Leadership in a Connected World.” In it he writes that networks are always “teetering on the edge of balance,” and that within that context:

... [A] leader is not a mad scientist on the outside pulling levers and pushing buttons, but rather a mad inhabitant, an intentional inhabitant, who deploys himself as a key variable to influence the environment from the inside. This is a critical cognitive and functional shift in leadership. A leader has to genuinely participate in the environment to deploy himself appropriately. The challenges of this way of being are profound, and these challenges start with fundamental reflection on who you are as a person and how you move through the world: how you exhibit fear, react to change, deal with letting go of power and ego; how you listen and observe, and the keenness of your instincts for both conceptualizing and synthesizing; and how you hold on to or let go of strongly held





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In conflict,
be fair and generous.
In governing,
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In work,
do what you enjoy."**

convictions about what is right and what will work. All these things are rooted in the essence of who we are as people.¹

Nine years earlier, we had printed an article by Peter Hardie, "The Zen of Leadership: Understanding," in which he likens leadership in complex organizations to sailing:

If you can sync yourself with the motion of the seas and the heeling of the boat, sailing offers understanding. Sailing pits the action of the wind against the forces of the water, pulling the craft toward a destination. The sailor tunes her sails, fixes the position of the boat relative to the water, and moves. The behavior of the entire system (wind, water, boat) is fluid; the sailor knows that she rides a mercurial pattern; one that defies control. Sailing for a target is a constant process, not a one-time decision. The wind shifts, so must the

sails be shifted. The sailor feels the wind on her face and neck. She reads the words of the wind on the surface of the water. A coherent experience resolves itself from these myriad, shifting elements.

And then Hardie quotes the Tao Te Ching:

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These articles were separated by almost a decade and not informed by each other, yet they contain remarkably similar reflections. So it is perhaps no surprise that when we look over three recent case studies of leaders in some of today's effective movement networks, we see many of the same themes.

Intentional Networks

I feel like he always calls us to the higher purpose. It's very easy in networks to get into process tangles and organizational turf issues, and I think he is always guided by the North Star of freedom for our people. I feel like it unsticks us time and time again, that crystal clarity. Everything else seems like a small issue when he brings us back there.

—Interviewee describing CASA de Maryland's executive director, Gustavo Torres³

Networks are dynamic and complex. They engage many different personality types, often with diverse cultural touch points and priorities. There will be, in those groups, people who know one another very well and people and groups who are more peripherally involved. The political externalities of the movement are also likely to be in flux. What are the characteristics of an acknowledged leader in such an environment?

The Management Assistance Group (MAG) has done three case studies that we like because they meld what the leaders say about themselves with what others observe in them. In MAG's feature for this issue of *NPQ*, "Creating Culture: Promising Practices of Successful Movement Networks," MAG senior consultant Mark Leach and co-author Laurie Mazur, explain:

Initially, we hoped to offer some best practices for people and organizations in movement networks—if not "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Network Leaders," then at least some widely shared approaches. And we thought that perhaps we could offer some insight into the structures and practices that enable networks to resolve common problems. What we found was less formulaic but a lot more interesting.

Each of the three leaders is involved in a "movement network," the goal of which is to "build movements that are larger than the sum of their parts; to amass political power; and to win on a broad range of progressive issues—not only in policy and legislation, but also in the battle for hearts and minds."⁴

What characterizes these types of intentional networks is that they:

- Build long-term relationships among activists across organizational and issue divides, often with the support of a lead convening organization;
- Intentionally contribute to a broader social movement;
- Use and coordinate multiple strategies;
- Focus on long-term gains while also advancing immediate opportunities; and
- Have relatively fluid boundaries of structure and membership.

Eveline Shen

Forward Together is the new name of the organization Eveline Shen directs; it was formerly called Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice. Shen has helped launch networks that connect reproductive justice organizations and activists from across the country, and those groups link them with others working in a broad range of movements.

When she first took on the network it was somewhat dispirited, and to help re-energize it Shen worked with Norma Wong, developer of the Applied Zen Program of the Institute of Zen Studies, to develop a mind-body practice called Forward Stance, which became a central part of the organization's culture. Forward Stance engages the body as well as the mind; it encourages attention to how one is standing, sitting, and "being" in one's body. The goal is to bring one's whole self to the work of social transformation. Forward Stance, Shen says, is "a practice that cultivates fierce individuals, effective organizations, and powerful movements for social change."⁵ A colleague describes the effect: "[Shen's] vision around transformative practices, around showing up to a room differently, and how do we get people to move from a defensive to a proactive stance—she really embraces that herself, and I think that it makes it easier for other people to follow her lead, because you feel like it's authentic."⁶ And that "authenticity" is linked to the development of trust, which is over and over again cited as a requirement of network leadership:

I think she's one of the most effective leaders I've ever come across in any setting, whether it's the nonprofit sector or the for-profit

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sector. I think that's in large part because she moves from a place of principle and really tries to be the same person in each place. . . . She's not a chameleon. She is who she is. She is very clear who she is and what she stands for, and that carries through everywhere. She is fully human, and that's what makes her leadership so compelling.⁷

Trust, of course, cannot be earned just once. Networks constantly welcome new participants, and movement networks are challenged with new and old political issues. Within all of this, the leader will likely be forever scrutinized for any betrayal of trust. This, then, requires leaders to be transparent, and not just open to feedback but welcoming of it as a necessary part of ensuring the integrity of the network's work.

Sarita Gupta

Sarita Gupta leads Jobs with Justice (JwJ), and from that vantage point has gained experience as a network leader at the local, national, and movement levels. JwJ is itself a network, comprising forty-six local coalitions, and each of these builds a coalition that includes labor, community groups, communities of faith, youth, and workers who are not yet collectively organized. Together, they work on economic and worker justice issues that impact their community. These coalitions inform JwJ's work at the national level, while JwJ's DC-based staff spearheads national campaigns that amplify the local coalitions' impact. In this complex environment it is critical that Gupta make herself fully and actively accountable. As a case-study interviewee describes it:

Some of the skills required are a willingness to get feedback and a willingness to really put yourself and your work forward for a certain kind of examination. It's a willingness to be ignorant—to not know and to really be in inquiry with others. And all of that seems tied to accountability—one of the things that often leaders who have positional authority do not get . . . The higher up you move, the less people are willing to talk to you about how they're experiencing you or the impact of your work.⁸

Without that accountability, the organization would experience blocks and paralysis. An interviewee describes Gupta's approach to leadership as one in which she "has incredible accountability and creates structures to be accountable and preserve nimbleness."⁹

Gupta acknowledges that this becomes especially important wherever people could perceive the possibility of a conflict of interest between the leader's single organization and the network. Another interviewee describes the process like this:

There's a tension between building organizations and building movement . . . that leaders sit with. Awareness of that tension is really important; the ability to be fairly transparent about that tension with one's own organization, with one's own board, with one's own members—to actually build an organizational culture that can hold that tension as opposed to the pride of empire, which we have seen in the past. . . . It's the ability to have a sense of an organization's particular contribution and to really hold that with real authority and certainty and at the same time recognize that that is a tiny piece of all that's needed, and [having] that deeply inside the organizational culture feels really critical—and really challenging.¹⁰

And the way around that? Again, transparency is important. Potential conflicts cannot remain unexplored:

One of the reasons [Gupta] has so much respect and credibility is that . . . people know that she is personally invested in trying to understand what do you need, what do you bring to the table, what do you need to be supported at the table, what are your institutional concerns, what are your individual concerns? I think this allows her to have a broad bird's-eye picture that's a more global view of how all of the pieces will work together.

The reason she is a successful bridge across really different kinds of organizations, in terms of cultures, size, scale, and resources, is because she actually really does respect and value everything that all different kinds of organizations bring. She really

believes in a social movement ecosystem, and that there are roles for lots of different kinds of organizations, and value to their contributions.¹¹

Gustavo Torres

The National Partnership for New Americans (NPNA) is a national multiethnic, multiracial partnership that “advances the integration and active citizenship of immigrants to achieve a vibrant, just, and welcoming democracy for all.” Gustavo Torres served as NPNA’s first co-chair, and remains on its board of directors. According to an NPNA partner, “His role was crucial because that was the beginning of the partnership—establishing a structure, fundraising, establishing it as an entity.”¹²

The task of establishing trust in such an endeavor required boldness—integrity without divisiveness—and this often entails exploring uncharted and sometimes tense territory.

One of the many things that I really value about Gustavo is that he is able to voice his positions and his opinion in a way that doesn’t needlessly antagonize those who disagree with him. Even if you’re at a different spectrum or just in a different place about any given decision that you don’t feel personally attacked or offended—and so often we do see that in various networks or around various tables or conferences. I think that’s a very unique skill because it allows you to be effective and it keeps the wave of communication open even after there are disagreements.

I feel like Gustavo is really unafraid to go into tough territory, meaning if there’s a disagreement he’s willing to name it and stay in there through conflict as necessary, and struggle through things.¹³

Ironically, Torres acknowledged that dealing with conflict can be a problem for him in a smaller arena; he handles it with a “forward stance” in the larger realm of the network. A colleague describes Torres’s approach to conflict:

And when there has been conflict, we come to the table and we work it out. That

is a sign of a good leader—that he doesn’t allow you to fall apart. When he has to step back, he steps back. But when he has to tell you how it is, trust me, he does not think twice about it. People respect that.

He’s gone out of his way to try to figure out, particularly in Prince George’s County, how to work with and cultivate the African-American political establishment . . . [H]e has formed the coalition between a hefty chunk of the black community and the Latino community. Very, very important and not a given. That didn’t have to happen. It easily could’ve turned into a major conflict between two groups who were both striving to climb up the ladder.¹⁴

As a point of integrity, Torres sees the primacy of voice and leadership among those being represented as critical.

In terms of the leadership development, Gustavo has been one of the consistent voices in the national movement demanding representation and presence of impacted immigrants. He’s like one of those guys who is always in the room saying the thing that makes everyone else uncomfortable on this issue—and very seriously and directly, as he should.¹⁵

And as far as those providing funding for that development, Torres has said:

I believe that when I come to the funders with our vision and mission, they already know where we’re coming from . . . so I don’t give them a lot of room to give additional ideas, honestly. In part, that is the reason we have such a great relationship with the funders. They know what we stand for. They know that we’re coming with a clear agenda—an agenda to be empowering our community with our community.¹⁶

Going back to Bill Traynor’s article, we find these points of network management:

- **F** (*form follows function*): We want to build only the level of structure and formality that we need to do the job—no more and

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no less. If we overbuild, it will require more resources to support and be that much harder to deconstruct.

- **O** (*open architecture is best*): We try to build forms (i.e., committees, teams, and processes) that are flexible, informal, provisional, have provisional leadership, and are always open to new people. These forms are more in sync with a network environment.
- **L** (*let it go*): If it isn't working or if there is no demand, you have to let it go and let it go quickly. That goes for an idea you might have and for which you can't get interest or for a program you have run for five years that no longer sells.
- **K** (*keep it simple*): We need to keep simple things simple so that we have the time and energy for the complicated stuff. Anything that can be routine should be. A five-minute problem shouldn't take fifteen minutes.
- **S** (*solve the problem*): In a flexible environment, we need to move through stuck places a hundred times a day. Everyone needs to make "solving the problem" the most important rule of engagement with one another.¹⁷

And, if we put all of this together, we begin to understand what working within an intentional network requires of its leaders. As Traynor writes, "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."¹⁸

NOTES

1. Bill Traynor, "Vertigo and the Intentional Inhabitant: Leadership in a Connected World," *The Nonprofit Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (summer 2009): 86, www.nonprofitquarterly.org/management/1454-vertigo-and-the-intentional-inhabitant-leadership-in-a-connected-world.html.

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2. Peter Hardie, "The Zen of Leadership: Understanding," *The Nonprofit Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (summer 2000): 56, www.nonprofitquarterly.org/management/142-the-zen-of-leadership-understanding.html.
3. The Network Innovation Leadership Lab, *Movement Network Leader Case Study: Gustavo Torres* (Washington, DC: Management Assistance Group, 2013), 13, managementassistance.org/ht/display/ContentDetails/i/23019.
4. The Network Innovation Leadership Lab, *Movement Network Leader Case Study: Sarita Gupta*; *Movement Network Leader Case Study: Eveline Shen*; and *Movement Network Leader Case Study: Gustavo Torres* (Washington, DC: Management Assistance Group, 2012 and 2013), 2, networkleadership.org/lab-publications/.
5. The Network Innovation Leadership Lab, *Movement Network Leader Case Study: Eveline Shen* (Washington, DC: Management Assistance Group, 2012), 5, managementassistance.org/ht/display/ContentDetails/i/21394.
6. Interviewee describing Forward Together's executive director, Eveline Shen. Ibid., 24.
7. Ibid.
8. Interviewee describing Jobs with Justice's executive director, Sarita Gupta. The Network Innovation Leadership Lab, *Movement Network Leader Case Study: Sarita Gupta* (Washington, DC: Management Assistance Group, 2012), 10, managementassistance.org/ht/display/ContentDetails/i/21398.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 14.
11. Ibid., 12.
12. The Network Innovation Leadership Lab, *Gustavo Torres*, 7.
13. Interviewee describing CASA de Maryland's executive director, Gustavo Torres. Ibid., 17–18.
14. Ibid., 18, 13.
15. Ibid., 14.
16. Ibid., 17.
17. Traynor, "Vertigo and the Intentional Inhabitant."
18. Ibid.

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