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Making Revolution Irresistible
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MAKING REVOLUTION IRRESISTIBLE

We designed the (Re)Generative Leadership Framework to be accountable to movements and future generations by creating the conditions to bring our best and full selves to achieve our vision.

BY LORENZO HERRERA Y LOZANO

As we in philanthropy work for a just transition, it is essential that we reflect on our relationship with power and how we use it within our organizations and how our practices advance or obstruct the transformative changes we seek in the world. In this article, I will share lessons grounded in 20 years of experience with a variety of different organizations, which also apply to philanthropic institutions. These are not simply curious challenges faced by grantee organizations, but destructive and pervasive phenomena that are critical for funders to confront as well. This is an invitation to sit with the contradictions and misalignment between the world our hearts envision and the world our behaviors create.

Late in the summer of 2020, after more than a decade operating as a fiscally sponsored project, Justice Funders (JF), a Just Transition-aligned organization whose mission is to be “a partner and guide for philanthropy in reimagining practices that advance a thriving and just world,” incorporated as an independent nonprofit. Two years prior, JF had experienced rapid growth and was confronting its growing pains while also learning from them. As an organization working to partner with and guide philanthropy to redistribute wealth, democratize power, and shift economic control to communities, JF saw that the moment presented an opportunity to pursue its mission. But we also realized that to organize philanthropy for the purpose of practicing deep democracy, we also had to develop this practice ourselves. JF would be structured as a worker self-directed nonprofit.

I was three months into my tenure at JF when these decisions about its organizational structure were taking place. Twenty years before joining JF, I began my organizational leadership journey working alongside other queer and trans artists, educators, and organizers in Texas. As a young person new to racial and social justice, I learned about radical institutions birthed from resistance movements that were later professionalized and co-opted, other groups that had risen and fallen according to the capricious whims of philanthropic partners, and those that imploded under the weight of staff and community heartbreak, burnout, or death. I spent the first 17 years working at two racial justice organizations where the staff and board were composed entirely of (often queer) people of color. It was in these organizations that I both experienced and caused

the most heartache. For years, I grappled with the contradictions of working at social change organizations whose visions inspire a more just world for all of us, yet cannibalize our own through the practices and behaviors with which we think we are carrying out our missions.

I became convinced that if we were to continue relying on the nonprofit industrial complex (and its precarious, dependent relationship with philanthropy) as a mechanism for facilitating social justice, we were guaranteed to fail if we continued sacrificing ourselves and each other in the process. Hope and desperation fueled a two-decade quest to make sense of these contradictions. After two stints as associate director and two Icarus-like experiences as executive director, the first at age 24, as well as coleading organizational startups, restructures, and dissolutions; serving on a dozen boards of directors; studying organizational leadership, ethics, and movement-sourced frameworks; diving into psychology, neuroscience, behavioral economics, and interpersonal neurobiology; and years of coaching, consulting, and training, I have learned a few lessons.

As carbon copies of for-profit corporations, virtually every nonprofit organization I encountered, most of which were social-justice-oriented, functioned according to the 18th-century premise that workers must be managed, and that management is responsible for ensuring worker production and compliance. Despite our desire to honor our shared humanity, our policies, values statements, and supervision practices suggested expectations that workers conduct themselves as cognitive machines: thinking beings lacking feelings and unmoved by their own nervous systems.

The assumption underlying the policies, team agreements, and values at these organizations is that everyone is working with positive or neutral psychological states. Rather than proactively building our individual and collective capacity to follow through on our mission when challenges inevitably emerge, our policies, team agreements, and values are often weaponized to police behavior and enforce compliance.

In hierarchical organizations, information and power are concentrated and guarded among higher tiers or perceived as such. Individuals at the top feel isolated, misunderstood, and unappreciated. Near the bottom of the hierarchy, people feel mistrusted, patronized, and undervalued. Folks in the middle receive barely enough information to assuage the frustrations of those at the bottom tiers and are given just enough power to enforce compliance with expectations, real or perceived, from above.

Yet less hierarchical and nonhierarchical organizations are not inherently immune to these problems. Having participated in restructuring a community-based organization from a hierarchy to a collective, I learned how access to information, identity or experiential privileges, and cultural capital can contribute to inequitable decision-making and imbalanced power dynamics, even in the absence of structural power differences.

We have created an industry so dedicated to the humans to whom we pledge our mission statements that we exclude the humans inside our organizations. Our heartbreak and burnout are by design.

CULTURES TO FORGE AND SUSTAIN CHANGE

Several years into my search for answers, I realized that learning how to do the work without sacrificing ourselves and each other ensured only survival. The internal resources and radical interdependence it will take to pursue our vision requires us to push beyond just surviving, and instead move toward flourishing and thriving. Just as our vision

depends on transformative changes in the world, pursuing our vision requires transformative changes in our organizations. We need a shift from a culture of compliance and constraint to “one based on caring and sacredness of relationships to each other and the world upon which we depend.”

For decades, researchers in neuroscience and psychology have noted the vast differences between positive psychological states and neutral or negative ones. When we experience positive psychological states, dopamine is released, creating a sense of happiness and well-being; adult neurogenesis (the growth of new neurons) is stimulated; our brain’s learning centers are activated, enabling cognitive flexibility and adaptability; and we enjoy increased creativity and energy levels, better immune system functioning, and emotional and perceptual openness. Building our capacity to bring about lasting, transformative change means being deliberate and proactive in cultivating the conditions for us to show up with the capacity to experience not only positive but also thriving psychological states. *We need to come alive.* To call on the wisdom of Toni Cade Bambara, “[our] work: to make revolution irresistible.”

We must be deliberate and proactive in cocreating organizational cultures that build on what our brains are best at. We have to anticipate our brain’s hardwired negativity bias and threat surveillance, and gradually rewire our brains toward cognitive frames that imagine, build, and sustain a just world. We need to recognize that organizational culture—our ways of being with and making sense of ourselves and one another—permeates, animates, and shapes our organizational structures, systems, and strategies. Culture cannot be relegated to the periphery of our efforts, as if it were separate from “the work.” In the shadow of our movements’ achievements are a growing number of broken hearts and disbanded organizations—evidence that culture can break us when left unattended. Culture does not happen to us, it happens *through us*.

The further we travel toward a just transition, the more resistance we should expect from the systems and structures we seek to transform. Stopping the bad, changing the rules, and creating the new in the face of mounting resistance will require the continuous expansion, reinforcement, and regeneration of imagination, courage, persistence, and resilience. None of this is possible without each other. So in anticipating increased resistance, we must invest in one another as if we intend to win, as if we expect our vision to come to fruition, as if our love of humanity and the planet includes the people in our own organizations.

(RE)GENERATIVE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

As the newly incorporated JF emerged as a worker self-directed organization, we knew it was vital to invest in strong structures, systems, and practices to govern and steward personnel, finance, programs, and operations together. Equally important, we understood that the health of the organization and impact of its mission would depend on our ability to cocreate a culture where every one of us could come alive—flourishing and thriving in the full expression of our humanity—and bringing our whole and full selves to this work. We also recognized that as an organization partnering directly with philanthropic institutions, JF had an opportunity to model for movement organizations and funders themselves, the possibility of organizational cultures that honor shared humanity because it is both *just* and *strategic*. A framework began to coalesce as we set out to steward the creation of such an organizational culture: the *(Re)Generative Leadership Framework*.

STOPPING THE BAD

Organizations still rely on practices that pursue similar ends to those sought by the inventors of “management” in the 18th century: control and compliance to maximize labor output. Since the Industrial Revolution, “management,” as most of us understand, practice, and experience it, has relied on threats and incentives to motivate people to work.

Research on self-determination and motivation has demonstrated that carrot-and-stick approaches to external motivation are ineffective and even counterproductive. A punishment-and-reward approach serves as a mechanism for control and contributes to what the Just Transition Framework describes as a culture of militarism that is deeply embedded in an extractive economy. When these extractive external motivation strategies are present in grantmaking institutions, they can be replicated in relationship dynamics with grantees.

BUILDING THE NEW

Inspired by the principles of Just Transition, the (Re)Generative Leadership Framework draws on the botanical theory of heliotropism (the directional growth of a plant in response to sunlight), neuroscience and positive psychology research, self-determination theory (which holds that individuals are more motivated when they believe they can determine their own outcomes), and appreciative inquiry, which is a model of organizational and social change that seeks to engage stakeholders collectively in imagining and designing better possibilities for themselves. This framework is a strategic move from *management* to *co-stewardship* and an explicit shift from *control and compliance* to *intrinsic motivation and engagement*. It is a self-sustaining engine of interwoven practices that build on and fuel one another, enabling us to come alive in our work with the capacity to create lasting change.

As fields of wildflowers tilt toward the sun throughout the day, we turn to life-giving forces for energy, inspiration, and direction. At JF, our vision of “a world that honors the sacredness of our natural resources and recognizes the inalienable rights of all” is the heliotropic force that compels us to move forward. We apply the asset-based model of appreciative inquiry to cultivate the conditions that enable us to begin embodying our vision in the present while moving in the direction of the world we seek and expanding our vision for that world by pushing against the boundaries of our current imagination.

By operationalizing our values of psychological safety, centering well-being, radical interdependence, generative leadership, and untethered imagination, we name the behaviors and practices we need from one another to self-govern and co-steward the organization’s resources. These behaviors and practices become the conditions that seed the nutrients for *intrinsic motivation* and *flourishing*.

As the name implies, we are able to experience intrinsic motivation when our basic psychological needs for autonomy (our ability to shape our own lives), competence (feeling skillful and confident in what we do), mastery (learning, mastering skills,

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noticing our progress), purpose (feeling connected and contributing to something greater than ourselves), and relatedness (connection and belonging) are met. A transformative vision cannot be realized when we feel miserable, disengaged, disconnected from others, and intellectually stuck. Engagement becomes possible when our psychological needs for intrinsic motivation are met. These needs, when satisfied, also contribute to the elements of well-being (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment) that enable us to flourish.

FROM COMPLIANCE TO ENGAGEMENT

Across organizations, supervision practices continue to rely on dated, inefficient, and empirically flawed ideas and models that are antithetical to our professed values. These ideas and models serve as deterrents to our ability to bring our best, fullest selves to move our mission forward. These antiquated practices include performance evaluations (a relic of the Industrial Revolution that perpetuates an extractive workplace culture), the US military's World War I-era merit rating system, the "rank and yank" system popularized by General Electric in the 1980s, and hierarchy-reinforcing practices, popularized in the 1940s, that tie raises to merit and evaluation. Efforts to incentivize employee performance can have the opposite of their intended effect. And while tools such as performance improvement plans can improve worker performance, basic expectations are unlikely to be surpassed. We often celebrate compliance and improvement at the expense of opportunities for engagement.

When we move away from control and compliance and toward intrinsic motivation and engagement, supervision shifts to coaching others to notice when and how the nutrients for intrinsic motivation and flourishing are present, and identifying what contributing factors can be cultivated. By investing in the conditions that allow us to come alive (thriving psychological states), we unbind performance potential. Accountability becomes a valuable byproduct of employees' (re)generative relationship to their work, instead of a limiting tool for control and compliance.

STOPPING THE BAD

Despite their widespread use, performance evaluations continue to prove inefficient, inaccurate, and counterproductive. While employees are supposed to receive feedback based on an objective assessment of their performance, studies in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 2000 and *Personnel Psychology* in 1998 and 2010 have demonstrated that feedback is overwhelmingly about the person offering it, rather than the recipient. Involving more than 500,000 manager evaluations (across the three studies) from managers' supervisors, peers, and supervisees, researchers found that around 55 to 71 percent of the evaluations' variance was attributable to the peculiarities of individual raters (known as the "idiosyncratic rater effect"). The studies found that no more than 20 percent of variance was attributable to actual performance.

The use of inherently subjective feedback, coupled with differences in hierarchical power, have produced compliance and enforcement practices that purportedly support learning and identify growth opportunities. At best, performance evaluations can lead to adequate performance and create a growth ceiling, which is set by the supervisor's imagination and skills. All too often, however, performance reviews turn into demoralizing conversations that risk activating our sympathetic nervous system and

interrupting our ability to receive feedback, learn, and adapt. We have come to realize that our focus on people's shortcomings impairs, rather than enables, learning.

A similar dynamic characterizes philanthropy as metrics and evaluation protocols are used to hold grantees accountable. These onerous requirements offer little, if any, benefit to grantees and their missions but go a long way in reinforcing funders' power over them. Instead of nurturing partnerships of care and trust, these practices create a sense of overwhelm for grantees and imply that they cannot be trusted to carry out and evaluate their own work without funder rubrics and oversight.

BUILDING THE NEW

Moving from theory to practice, we replaced performance evaluations with a (Re)Generative Leadership model for coaching and supervision. Designed in accordance with the 4-D model (discovery, dream, design, delivery) of appreciative inquiry, our model facilitates introspection, reflection, and collaborative conversations with the goal of naming, affirming, and inquiring into peak moments in our work. By naming what is working and delving into our strengths, we are able to identify—and cultivate—the nutrients for flourishing and intrinsic motivation, while also optimizing our cognitive capacity by increasing creativity, perceptual openness, and energy levels. We maximize learning opportunities, allowing us to recognize, reinforce, and refine our skills and practices.

As the Just Transition Framework urges, we must "resist, rethink, restructure." To build a regenerative economy guided by caring and sacredness, where resources are regenerated and work is carried out through cooperation and guided by deep democracy, we need to *resist* supporting the organizational cultures, structures, and strategies that reinforce dominance and control. By *rethinking* how we care for and show up for one another, we can lean into radical interdependence—where gratitude, kindness, and solidarity strengthen our bonds—so that when we struggle, when times are hard, and when we break each other's hearts, we remain in shared humanity. If organizations continue to be how we organize our work toward a just transition, we must *restructure* them to facilitate the individual and collective resilience to bounce back

when we fall and find our way to each other when we "other" and mistake one another for a threat.

The (Re)Generative Leadership Framework is an invitation to stop the bad of traditional organizational development and management practices that engender compliance enforcement, distrust, ineffectiveness, and heartbreak. We can build the new by meeting our core needs for flourishing and intrinsic motivation. We can invite the possibility of building organizations where we no longer incentivize, coerce, or punish, as the work itself becomes the reward, and "revolution is irresistible" because—not in spite—of one another. □

To build a regenerative economy, we need to *resist* supporting the organizational cultures, structures, and strategies that reinforce dominance and control.

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