

Eight things I learned as we created the Pride Statewide! Network

Statewide Organizing with Pride

by Laura Pierce

In 1996, the Pride Foundation began an exciting statewide outreach and organizing project. The Pride Foundation is a community foundation dedicated to strengthening the Northwest's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community. The idea behind the Pride Statewide! program was to encourage the type of community building, fundraising and granting that the Pride Foundation has excelled at by forming partnerships with community members across Washington State. The model we developed was to convene a local committee, and provide that committee with support in the form of technical assistance and matching funds. The local group would raise money for a local granting fund, and grant the funds to nonprofit organizations working to strengthen the GLBT community locally. In the first three years, the program has been very successful, with active committees in Spokane, Yakima, Pierce, Clark, Thurston and Kitsap Counties and over \$80,000 granted to local organizations. Rather than telling a history of the project, this article emphasizes successful strategies for statewide organizing.

1. Reach Out

Our outreach efforts were critical to building a statewide network. Outreach of many different kinds was used, but the most effective was one-on-one conversations and meetings. People appreciate being contacted directly, and whether or not they get involved directly in your effort, they will be informed and may become supporters behind the scenes. You will also learn by talking with many people what elements of your project are most exciting to people, what potential landmines exist in the community you are entering, and who is who.

By seizing every opportunity to talk with people and share your goals, you build awareness and a widening network of supporters. As you do outreach, ask people you meet with for additional contacts. While your outreach will be most intensive at the beginning of your organizing effort, plan for ongoing outreach to continue growing the network.

2. Communicate & Listen

Communication is among the biggest challenges facing any regional network. Recognizing this, we set up diverse ways to keep in touch, including mailings, email, phoning and a monthly conference call with participation from all communities. As lead organizer, I made an effort to talk regularly with three or four different contacts in each community. This alerted me to potential problems or misunderstandings within a group early. It also communicated to a larger group of volunteers the value of their opinions and contributions.

Accommodating diverse communication styles is crucial. "How do you like to keep in touch?" should be among the first questions you ask individual volunteers. The volunteers I worked with had many different preferences, including email, phoning (some preferred to be called at work, while others could only talk in the evening at home), faxes, or mailings. Often, the same person who took a week to return a phone call answered my email within hours. In every case, I found that I could keep in touch with people easily and quickly once I figured out their preferred method of communication.

3. Repeat Key Messages and Values

One key to our success has been developing several key messages, and emphasizing our vision for the project and our values. In addition to reminding participants of Pride's goals, vision and mission, we find ways to remind the groups we work with of goals they have set together. We ask them to refer back to goals frequently and evaluate all new ideas in light of those goals. In addition, we emphasize the values underlying our work, such as: diversity is essential to building a strong organization, and every individual deserves to be treated with respect.

4. Learn the Lay of the Land

No group operates in a vacuum. Especially at the beginning, we needed to learn about the communities we are working with. What are the critical issues, major industries, demographic and economic trends? Because GLBT people are a part of their larger community,

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issues as diverse as farm worker organizing, changes in the healthcare and welfare systems, plant closures, INS raids and political elections affect our volunteers and our organizing efforts. An effective organizer needs to understand these contextual issues.

5. Build Relationships

Since we are in this for the long haul, we focused on relationship building from the start. You can't please everybody all the time, but you can treat people with respect, follow up on promises made, and communicate as much as possible. These actions build a foundation for a continuing relationship.

6. Develop Volunteer Leadership

Expect to build a corps of volunteers slowly. Don't be afraid to ask for help, but do ask supporters for specific contributions. Most people have an easier time committing to something if the time commitment, type of work, or level of involvement is clear. Consider the person's individual talents when you ask them to volunteer. If a person feels uniquely qualified to get the job done, he or she will be more likely to take it on.

Encourage people to take leadership roles within the group, and reflect back to them the leadership qualities you see in them (we rarely get this type of feedback). Try to offer meaningful leadership development activities and informal coaching such as assistance in developing a meeting agenda and debriefing afterward.

7. Work Through Conflicts

Wherever people are working across differences, conflict will arise. In forming these partnerships, we are working across geographic difference. In addition, we are asking GLBT and allied people to unite across gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and gender identity lines. As an organizer, it is important to keep conflicts in perspective and recognize natural stages of group formation.



8. Exchange ideas

Because of the distance separating Pride Statewide! volunteers, it is a challenge to create opportunities for volunteers to talk and share what they have learned with each other. We promote dialogue and exchange of strategies through an annual day-long Pride Statewide! Summit. While this provides face-to-face exchange, we also make an effort to share strategies and accomplishments of each group with the others throughout the year. Sharing stories serves to inspire and energize, and sends a strong message that the central office is learning from and valuing the work being done at the community level.

Conclusion

Pride Statewide! has faced many challenges during its short history. The principles described here have helped us overcome some of the most difficult challenges, and move forward with our work. Throughout the program's history, the learning and organizational change prompted by the inclusion of new voices has been powerful and rewarding. We hope these strategies will be useful to others in building a powerful movement for social change. 🐾

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