

Supporting the Next Generation of Intercultural Leaders: A Dialogue With Young Leaders

Summary by: Taj James 11/6/01

Sponsors:

Funding Partners: The California Endowment, The California Wellness Foundation, The James Irvine Foundation, The Levi Strauss Foundation, and The Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund

Project Coordination: The Leadership Learning Community

Facilitation and Dialogue Analysis: The Movement Strategy Center

The Gathering:

On August 18th, 2001, a diverse group of young leaders from northern to southern California met for an afternoon to share their experiences as leaders working to build intercultural partnerships. Picking up where a dialogue between veteran intercultural leaders left off, the participants explored the relationships between identity, culture, organization, and leadership.

The Conversation:

They began by sharing their full name and something interesting about their name. This exercise revealed many stories about family history, migration, and the tensions between assimilation and cultural affirmation. The exercise served as a metaphor for the coming conversation, as many of the stories revealed their journey toward deeper self-understanding, which was identified as a foundation for effective intercultural leadership. It also allowed the group to begin to build genuine relationships through the sharing of their personal understanding.

Major Themes:

Intercultural Leadership Requires a Complex View of Identity and Community

One of the key themes the conversation confronted was the fluid and permeable boundaries of community and identity. When talking about bridges between communities, what became immediately clear were the complexity, diversity, and contradictions “within” communities and the challenges they posed to representing and linking communities. For example, groups who are “outside” an ethnic community may see all those within it as one community, not understanding the distinctions between people of different national origins, political histories, class positions, gender, or race. This generation approaches intercultural leadership from a profoundly new and nuanced undersigning of culture, identity, and community; which makes possible new approaches to intercultural leadership.

Developing an Understanding of and Respect For Ones Own Culture Creates the Basis of Respect For Other Cultures and For Strong Intercultural Partnerships.

In an increasingly diverse society, helping young people understand their own culture has emerged as a core need in youth development, and as a tool for promoting intergroup understanding. This generation has fought, like others before it, to have their diverse cultures represented in school curriculum, in our organizations, and in the media.

This Generation of “Young” Leaders is Not Waiting to Get Older to Support Those Coming After Them. Mentoring Younger Activist and Peers Emerged as Core Practice In the Lives of the Leaders Present.

This became clear as the group described their work and how they go about it. Many run organizations devoted to developing and promoting young leaders and helping them to work interculturally. This commitment was clear before the meeting began, as many lobbied to bring young people with them to the meeting.

Framing Questions:

The questions posed by the facilitators of the group centered on:

- Models and principles of Intercultural Leadership
- Challenges and Strategies for building intercultural partnership
- Skills and experiences needed to build intercultural partnership and
- Motivations, values and world-views that provide the foundation for intercultural partnerships.

The questions posed by the group went beyond our starting point and expanded the scope of the discussion:

Balancing work “inside” and “outside” of our communities.

The question was posed as to how to balance a focus on “home” issues and the need to be part of a larger movement. Others reflected that it’s easier to come together within your own culture. Given that, how can we then use media to create a more sustained visual dialogue across communities?

On What level are connections made?

Another person reflected that they were able to connect across communities on an individual basis but were not sure how to dialogue on a community level?

Bridging cross-community work begins with the self and community.

Recognizing the importance of intergenerational bridges one participant asked how we connect first and second generation's experiences and connect cultural memory and heritage while moving forward? They then suggested that artists have a special role to play in looking for ways that the community can speak for itself in the first person. (Because art is about communication, representation, documentation, and dissemination of information about each other that recognizes our complexity, it was posed as an essential step to bridge building. Others observed that, this work is also happening at a spiritual level as this generation goes back to its cultural roots in a very upfront way.

Why Bridge?

One person reflected that people usually don't get together just because of race but because of an issue. If this is the case, how could we prevent this from happening in the context of this dialogue? He then challenged the group to identify a common focus to sustain our effort. One motivation for bridging work was revealed in the question of how to help young people come to a greater understanding about their own situation in order to understand larger systems. Another reflected on conflicts that exist in the community, such as racial profiling, and the need to create relationships so that, for example, Arab liquor store owners understand the community and vice versa. It was suggested that building this understanding requires addressing inequality in our communities. Beyond shared issues, conflicts, and understanding; identity itself was identified as a reason to work interculturally. Many people are themselves members of multiple communities that are often viewed as are monolithic. The example was given that, as a gay Latino man, it's not possible to speak for/from only one community.

Who to Bridge?

As was reflected in the dialogue of veteran intercultural leaders, this group was also concerned about connecting people across generations. Many expressed the hope that we can find a way to reduce the gap between youth and adults, given that lot of adults cannot relate to youth. The groups then asked, how will we support ourselves, as well as the younger people coming up behind us, as leaders?" Another important issue that was raised was a need to address how issues of girls and women and gays and lesbians fold in as we think about bridging work.

How do We Promote Leadership Development and What Kind of Leaders are we Developing?

In talking about intercultural and multicultural leadership, the groups recognized and affirmed that a lot of great examples already exist so that, instead of reconstructing something that is already there, we just stay true to the existing culture. After acknowledging this, the groups named some specific challenges. One participant wondered how to move from "celebrity" leadership to "community leadership" so that we have tiers of leaders lined up to take up the call. One expressed the need to explore how to develop ghetto leaders and address the class disparities, particularly in the Bay Area. One solution posed was to develop a "young people's table" that invites older generations in.

Language and Communication.

Many of the questions framed the challenges in terms of finding language (new or rediscovered) to effectively get people to think differently? Specifically, the group wondered, how do you help people understand, and feel comfortable dialoguing about, and working through issues of race?

The Peaks and Valleys of Intercultural Leadership

In the initial part of the discussion the group posed questions. Next the group explored experiences that further illuminated the challenges, success, and strategies for promoting intercultural leadership.

Peak Experiences - Youth Lead the Way

One example focused on a community fight to defeat Proposition 209 in Richmond. Adults in the community were expected to come forward and show leadership, but it was instead young people from diverse backgrounds who came forward to lead the get-out-the-vote efforts. This recent experience was reflected in the experience of one participant in the Vietnam antiwar movement, when people from all walks of life and community came together in an insurgency of activism that gave many a sense of connectedness.

When there are conflicts between different groups, youth are often the ones with solutions to them. When racial conflict broke out between groups in Oakland in the late 90s, it was youth themselves, through Youth Together, who came in to facilitate understanding among Asians and Blacks.

In predominantly white communities that are experiencing growing population diversity, youth are again often taking the lead in fighting for stronger intergroup relations and racial justice. C-BEYOND, an organization in Concord, was created to address issues of race in a predominantly white suburb. The youth-run organization was the only organization dealing with multicultural issues in the area.

One peak experience dealt with the importance of intergenerational bonds. Homey, a group based in the Mission in San Francisco, started a project working with a local street organization to do a mural, with the expectation that everyone would get along. The mural took a lot of work and put a stop to bullying that was going on in the group, with older folks picking on younger folks. The mural allowed for the development of more positive intergenerational collaboration; but when the program ended, the bullying came back.

Some key lessons from the “peak” experiences that were shared include:

- Organizations that bring together youth from different communities have an important role to play in promoting intergroup relations and racial justice.
- Youth often lead efforts to bring communities together, when adult leaders fail to emerge.
- Conflicts that arise between youth from different communities can best be addressed by diverse groups of young people (who know themselves and about other cultures)
- Organizations that help youth understand and respect their own cultures and histories are essential to promoting positive intergroup relations.

Valleys

There were many barriers that were identified as obstacles to building intercultural partnerships and alliances. One barrier named was the sense of competition for resources, which also prevented groups from working together and from dealing with tough issues like class and race.

Another story described how foundation resources can disrupt the organic process of relationship and community building between different communities. In LA three organizations from different geographic areas and communities representing Asians,

Latino, and black young people came together to collaborate on a grant for a youth project. The agencies were working together organically and building community. Because the grant required the groups to artificially move towards taking action, they skipped the whole process of younger people actually getting to know each other. What young people valued in the process was not the “activities” conducted for the grant, but eating together and getting to know themselves and each other more deeply.

Identity – Strengths and Challenges.

Many in the group talked about the difficulty of helping to get different groups who have common interests to develop “common cause” and work together. One participant working with prop 21 and trying to connect with 22, found it hard to get each side to understand the common ground between the initiatives. With each group stuck in their own survival mode, it was hard to cross between communities to promote partnerships. This story also illustrated the particular personal challenges faced by intercultural leaders who try to bring together the multiple interests interwoven in their multiple identities.

Identity can be both a source of strength and an area of challenges for intercultural leaders. One participant described presenting their art work at a community event and being challenged by an audience member from his cultural community for giving voice, in his art, to someone, who she saw, as the source of the communities problems. This leader felt challenged when someone from his own community criticized him for including other voices in the dialogue. This story showed the risks that intercultural leaders take when working to facilitate intercommunity dialogue.

Sometimes peaks can become valleys if organizations do not have a plan in place to develop new leadership, as existing leadership transitions. One participant described how a successful youth leadership development program in LA collapsed because there was no succession plan in place.

Many of the “peak” experiences that were shared related to the inspiring role of young people taking leadership on community issues, and some of the valleys reflected the disappointment felt when older leaders, who were supposed to be allies, didn’t support younger leaders. A member of a group that is working to organize other young workers in the hi-tech Silicon Valley, where it’s predominantly non-union, came to a meeting in San Francisco to discuss the future of progressive labor. The veteran organizers at the meeting could not understand why the young workers were there, failing to see that their efforts represented the future of the labor movement.

Some of the key lessons and successful strategies from the “valleys” that were described include:

- Competition for resources is a barrier to relationship building.
- Failure to “pass the baton” and develop new leadership in organizations.
- Foundation funding can disrupt organic community building.
- Reaching out beyond your “own” community can open you to criticism from “within” your community.
- Older leaders sometimes fail to recognize the importance of supporting the innovative work of younger leaders.

Successful Strategies:

- Genuine cross community relationships and bridges are built during informal time through sharing food and time.
- Intercultural leaders can use their multiple identities as an asset in bridge building between communities that are often perceived as more monolithic.

BROADER LESSONS

The group then stepped back to examine the broader lessons they could draw from the sharing of stories of high and low points with intercultural leadership.

The groups then posed the question: Why do some things work and others don't? Do issues bring people together more than race? What draws people across the lines? Many agreed that promoting knowledge and understanding of each group's own culture helped to facilitate cross-cultural exchange.

In response to the failure of established leadership to support emerging intercultural leaders, some felt that existing groups that don't understand the changing context will become irrelevant and obsolete. They encourage a willingness to shut things down when something new is emerging.

The challenge was characterized by one participant as the need to find a "frame" through which to understand the issues, that is broad enough to include diverse communities, but not so big that it dilutes the issues folks are working to address. The example was given of campaigns around Propositions 21 and 22 in which people were operating from different frames (youth or gay) and there was not a big enough frame to encompass both. It was suggested that the frame that works must be big enough to create a place for multiple-identities.

Members of the group also affirmed the ability of communities to solve their own problems. When left alone, things can get worked out and new solutions emerge as opposed to the external hand that comes in to fix things.

One key to effective intercultural leadership was a need for folks to be accepting of people and groups with different beliefs. The language of 'leadership' can marginalize folks who don't share the same political perspective of the leadership.

Intercultural Leadership and Aftermath of 9/11/01

This larger conversation began in Los Angeles against the backdrop of community leaders still coming to terms with the social unrest following the Rodney King Verdict. This group came together at a time when the world faced a crisis of terrorism and war.

One person reflected that we have a whole generation that does not know what it is like to go into a war, and because of that the communication gap between this generation and others is even more problematic. Others reflected that there are many in our communities that have experienced collective trauma as immigrants from countries who have experienced war, or as many young people who experience trauma every day. People are seeking trust, relationship, and connection. We often dismiss relationships that are developed in the context of our working together on things. Art was offered as a way to reach into those areas where kids are and help them to tell their stories.

In the current political crisis of terrorism, one participant reflected on the terror that many young people have felt their whole lives. Young people have been the brunt of the war on drugs, militarization of communities, etc. We have children raised in fluctuating oppression who have experienced the prison system as a result of crack. We have to bring the pain of our communities into the room. Many of the communities in this country have been devastated. The young generation is brilliant and resilient. Our job is to make sure these young people can create their own realities and to help bring them to a place where they can lead.

Why Intercultural Leadership? How does it Relate to Your Theory of Change?

In answer to the question of why, many in the group identified intercultural leadership as an essential strategy for community survival. “We do it because otherwise we will die.”

Another reflected that, “I have been shut up, me and my culture. Why do I think I can’t reach you? How can I touch you and everyone in this world? Is dreaming the way into change? We need to pay attention to how people are dehumanized. For liberation we need eyes to see the road ahead and the feet to walk it. A lot of this work is about the real world experiences of oppressed people - people of color, youth, and gays who all need to be at the table. It’s really important to understand where people are coming from and to have a sense of mutual respect and a place that is safe to express yourself. This can be validating.”

The challenges of understanding intercultural work were revealed in a story about a community that often is perceived as “monolithic” by those on the “outside.” The leader of a group that works with Asian American and Pacific Islander youth, described how intercultural partnerships are built by helping the young people to understand their own cultures of national origin, be they Mein, Chinese and Vietnamese. They then build bridges to Asian youth from other Asian communities. In doing so the students have an experience in building bridges across boundaries of national origin, making it easier for them to build bridges to other communities “outside” of the Asian community.

It was posed by another participant that, to promote intercultural requires we need to address the lack of self esteem in their own community. This motivates people to deepen their understanding of their own cultural identity so that they can project their own identity rather than have it imposed externally. Through interethnic dialogue we need to redefine what American means and we need build strong positive cultural identity and self esteem to create that conversation.

Why intercultural leadership?

- It’s the only way to make change.
- To address silencing and dehumanization of different communities.
- Intercultural leadership requires that the real experiences of oppressed people be represented at the table. Oppressed communities need to “connect their oppressions” to create a powerful force for change.
- A way to address the lack of self-esteem for marginalized communities is to deepen ones own cultural identity.

- Understanding your history helps you to understanding your interests. This creates the possibility to identify alliances based on shared cultural experiences that reflect and reveal shared interests.
- Special attention needs to be given to class difference in intercultural work.
- Effective work is based on genuine love and respect for people. Relationships sustain the work.

Strategies for Building Intercultural Partnerships

Root it in culture – one participant described using the directions of the medicine wheel as a cultural tool to help youth understand that people can be distinct, but all be one. She then described using the cultural practice of alter making, that tend to be indigenous or Latino, but can be inclusive of other traditions and built in community space. Someone else mentioned the Native American expression “all my relations’ as an important “frame” that can be used to help groups see how they are related and interconnected. The leader of one organization shared her organization’s experience hiring a shaman to bring them back to a place of cultural pride as a basis for moving cross culturally. This process helped them face the questions of who are we really and how can we exchange as people when we are stripping heritage from young people? Having cultural and ethnic pride is critical and without it social justice work can operate from a melting pot model.

Get outside the box - Creating partnerships is itself a creative process. This may be why so many of the participants talked about the role of art in helping people to imagine new identities and new relationships. One person asserted that dreaming is key to change.

It’s About Relationships – Many talked about people and how it has to be about love and the people in the work and that those are the connections that sustain involvement. Another shared simply that “I want to know who I am, who you are and then I want to educate people.”

Its About Building Power – One small group discussed the need to build intercultural partnerships, stemming from a lack of power that marginalized communities face and a need to combine forces in order to create positive change. This involves helping groups to connect oppression of different communities.

Going Deeper - Where does it happen?

The questions were posed to the group, “Where is intercultural leadership happening? In schools? Organizations? Coalitions? Houses of worship? The Street? The first response was everywhere.

One story was shared about a multiracial organization that was challenged with creating a supportive space for both the African-American and Latino members. The group struggled with the issues of language and translation. The translation was difficult but they worked through it by purchasing headsets. This issue caused some people to leave the group, but because of the struggle they went through, the African Americans in the group became strong advocates of translation and full participation.

Others questioned why we make distinctions between personal and professional. “Things start in the home. When clocking out, the job does not end, because the work resides everywhere

The community has to break bread and talk about how life is going. Coalitions don’t reach into every home. Students need to educate their parents, e.g. the son has to educate his father about domestic abuse...its not going to come from a national something.”

Another participant asserted that, “It’s happening where it is exploding.” It’s happening in juvenile halls and in work places where people are barely surviving. Look at where people are coming to the table. Schools can work well. You need to understand power relations and where you can effect change. You also have to be aware of cultural barriers and how to come to common ground. You have to have faith in partners to help you. You need some sustainability. It means you have to know how to get money for your organizations. Many groups are facing problems with this.”

One member of the group felt it was important that we remain humble as we take some share of the responsibility. It is important to recognize that we are only a fraction of what is happening. We need to have faith in others and the importance of relationships.

One participant reflected on how young people learn and grow. “We need to help young people learn to talk, feel, and be affirmed. Kids need to see themselves in the most positive and complex ways to break the stereotypes of monolithic communities. The things we learn are the things we see and experience. Trainings are not as effective as genuine relationships.” A story was related about how a young person described overcoming their homophobia, not through the training she had received, but through building a relationship with a staff person at her organization who was lesbian.

Conclusion

Participants reported that they were able to build new relationships with other leaders and were excited to continue the dialogue and relationship building. Some commented that there were few spaces to engage in that depth of honest dialogue about the challenges we face in our work and they look forward to continuing the dialogue. Others suggested the next dialogue be more intergenerational to make needed connections. The experience created connections between ideas and people that will impact our work in different ways. The questions posed at the end of the dialogue pointed to the commitment of this group to promoting intercultural leadership. “How can we create a network right here to do something through racial coalition building? How can we create forums where we can help this work to happen? How can we bring the inspiration from this work back to the organizations where we are working? How do we make it real?”