



Why Organizations Thrive – Lesson 10: Synergize your Activities.
April 2011
By Jonathan Poisner, www.poisner.com

I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Thrive*. The article details fifteen lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),¹ buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

Collectively, I believe these lessons are a very useful set of principles that Executive Directors can use to improve their organization's capacity to fulfill their missions.

Lesson 10 is: Synergize.

The vast majority of organizations have more ideas for what they can do to achieve their mission than they can possibly do. Planning is about making choices about which of those ideas make the most sense given the lay of the land.

What's important is not to make those choices in isolation from one another.

As a growing organization, it's critical that your choices are synergistic.

What do I mean by this?

Synergism in plain English means that the elements interact in a way where the sum is greater than the sum of the individual parts.

In organizational terms, this means that a group doing Tactic A and Tactic B will accomplish more by doing them both than would be expected if you only looked at the individual benefits of each tactic and "added" them up.

Younger organizations are particularly prone to flying off in multiple directions with programs wholly unrelated to each other. In the quest to puff itself up and seem big from the start, the organization will try to spread its wings far and wide. The theory here is that by doing a lot, you'll attract more notice and more funding.

But in the quest to appear big, doing lots of different things in the short run, you may undermine your long-term quest for bigness. If your programs don't interact synergistically, you're more

¹ I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around \$200,000 to more than \$1 million.

likely to produce mediocre results, forge weak instead of strong relationships, and have staff learn many skills somewhat instead of a few very well.

So how do I know if my programs are synergistic?

Here are some questions to ask as you plan:

1. For any tactic or program, specifically identify what are the direct and ancillary benefits that will accrue to the organization. The direct impacts are the main reasons you're doing the program or tactic. The ancillary benefits could be things like information generated, new relationships, new skills, or new clout.
2. Ask yourself: do those direct or ancillary benefits have a clear impact on our ability to do some other program you're considering doing? How? Is the information generated on one program used to help another run more efficiently? Are the relationships gained on one relied upon to be more effective in another?

Be specific, not vague in identifying these benefits.

3. If the answer is no and you can't think of a direct or ancillary benefit to another program, you should reconsider whether it's the right tactic or program in the first place.
4. And if the answer is yes, then ask: how are we consciously taking advantage of the synergy?

Synergy is also particularly important when it comes to the interaction between programs and fundraising. In addition to each program being synergistic with at least one other, I'd recommend you think about how your programs are synergistic with your fundraising.

It's not enough for a growing organization to identify funders interested in a particular program. The organization should ask for any new program: what assets are we developing through this program that we'll be able to take advantage with future fundraising irrespective of the program?

The answer could be lists of people who are donor prospects, stronger relationships, future board members, or many other things.

Then ask yourself: are any of your fundraising efforts designed to take advantage of the asset? If the answer is no, you should figure out if there's a fundraising opportunity you're failing to seize.

Jonathan Poisner is an independent management consultant who helps nonprofit organizations thrive. He helps organizations with strategic planning, evaluation, coalition building, fundraising, communications, and other organizational development challenges. He can be reached at jonathan@poisner.com.