



Why Organizations Thrive – Lesson 14: Embrace Your Role in the Network
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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 any Executive Director can use to improve their organization's capacity to fulfill its mission.

Lesson 14 is: Embrace your role in the network

I previously devoted a separate lesson (Lesson 2) to the importance of relationships as a major factor in determining the health of a nonprofit. Nonprofits that relentlessly focus on building personal relationships tend to be more successful.

Just as individuals form personal **relationships**, organizations have **connections** to other organizations. If you were to somehow “map” out all these connections into a network, you would get a glimpse at how an individual organization interacts with its connections.

Organizations that understand and embrace their role in the network are more likely to thrive than those who view themselves as stand-alone agents of change.

Why should you embrace your role in the network? And how do you embrace it?

Let's start with the why question: what benefits flow from embracing your role in the network?

Margaret Mead was right that a small group of people can change the world.

But they've done so by generating movements and being part of them.

Every organization I've ever encountered has identified a bigger problem than it can address within its planning horizon.

This is true whether your organization has global aspirations (e.g. save the planet) or a very narrow niche (e.g. direct services to individuals who can't afford them in your local community).

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.

Indeed, we are rarely inspired to build a great, thriving organization if the problem to be addressed is an easy one. Yet, how can we then avoid being paralyzed by fear as we recognize the enormous gap between what we hope to achieve and our current capacity?

From a staff and volunteer morale perspective, you do this by identifying the unique role your organization plays as part of a larger movement of organizations and people. Just as people feel pride in being part of an organization, that sense of pride can grow if they can picture how the organization is playing a role in a broader movement.

Embracing your role in the network also leads to better strategic choices.

Just as no man is an island, no organization stands alone. In every example I've ever imagined, I can think of many other organizations (nonprofit, for profit, governmental) whose mission, purpose, and work somehow interacts with the organization in question.

Those interactions can be entirely positive in the form of alliances for a shared purpose.

Those interactions can be competitive, organizations that somehow fight for the same resources you need.

Those interactions can be negative in the form of opposition to your advocacy.

Taking these interactions into account when setting your strategic direction leads to better strategy.

An example: last week I met with an organization whose mission has very substantial overlap with another nonprofit. Their response: strategically position themselves as the "bad cop" to the other organization in pursuing policy goals.

Conversely, failing to take into account these organizations can lead an organization astray in branding. I wrote recently about how an organization I am involved with mistakenly (in my opinion) failed to account for competitors when developing its brand. (See *Why Organizations Go Off Course*, Lesson 1).

Which leads to the second question: How do you embrace the network role?

I think there are two key steps.

First, explicitly make this part of your strategic planning process, as you assess the lay of the land. Just as you want to figure out what economic, political, demographic or other trends create the landscape in which your organization plans, you should assess the organizational landscape.

You ask: who are the major organizations that serve as allies and opponents? For allies, what distinguishes our role in addressing shared problems from their roles? How can we best take advantage of the work they're doing?

How do we account for the interactions we have with these organizations when competing to secure resources (e.g. fundraising)?

Of course, identifying your role is only half the challenge. A **second** critical step is then building enduring connections to those organizations that positively interact with your organization.

Organizational connections are fueled first and foremost by personal relationships. Get to know the leaders of allied organizations by having coffee, lunch, or a drink. Ideally, find ways to let your boards know each other, not just staff.

Organizational connections are also fueled through more formal coalitions and partnerships. Be conscious in determining when a coalition of organizations would be helpful and, if a new one is warranted, launch it. Sometimes, the answer will be a partnership with a single additional organization rather than a grand coalition.

Bottom line: as you develop both formal connections with other organizations and lots of personal relationships, your organization will be far better positioned to thrive.

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