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DataCenter staff. Photo credit: Leilani Nguyen

DataCenter's Shared Leadership Model (abridged)

.....being the change we want to see in the world

By DataCenter Staff, Board and Patricia St. Onge

The DataCenter is committed to reflecting our social justice values in all of our organizational practices. In particular, we've been engaged in defining, implementing and sustaining concrete practices to dismantle systems of oppression and increase our accountability to communities on the ground. In order to tackle challenges and dysfunction endemic to social justice-minded non-profits, over the last year we have been developing long-term sustainable leadership—in particular by people of color and working class people—by sharing it across the organization. By building on transformative work in the movement, knowledge from people of color communities, and on our own thirty year organizational history of participatory decision-making, organizational culture work and anti-oppression work, we've successfully piloted and are launching the Shared Leadership organizational structure. We believe there can be a healthy balance between organizational and individual wellbeing and social change work. We believe that leadership of the organization does not belong exclusively to an executive director or the board. Leadership is the work of every person. We believe Shared Leadership works!

faqs

What is the "Shared Leadership Model"?

We define Shared Leadership (SL) as a multiracial structure of sustainable non-profit leadership and governance grounded in Movement-building, our social justice beliefs & values, historical experiences and self-empowerment. Like our "decolonizing research" methodology empowering communities to lead research projects (*see Spring/Summer 2005 newsletter*), SL proactively bridges the disparities and power dynamics nascent in the 501c3 institution to carve out the space for healthy practices. This model benefits from the roots of participatory democracy in the *Haudenosaunee*, consensus decision-making and inclusive organizational culture development. It germinates a mutual opportunity to empower a new generation of leaders while enabling co-founder Fred Goff to continue contributing to our longevity and sustainability.

Our goals for SL are to build ownership over the organization by staff and board, to dismantle racism & systems of oppression, to develop long-term, sustainable leadership by people of color and to increase accountability to our stakeholders and constituent groups.

Our Shared Leadership approach is grounded in three key concepts: integrating program and support services, leadership development and leadership rotation.

- Integrating program and support functions connects the work of all staff directly to our mission, holding each of us accountable to the communities with whom we work. When the staff person who primarily does criminal justice research shares responsibility for allocating expenses or getting out a grant proposal, that person develops a clearer, deeper understanding of what it takes to make programs happen and gains empowerment and ownership over the financial health of the organization. This work integration is essential in addressing the cycle of burnout and turnover by distributing responsibilities and relieving pressure on any one individual. Another way we are breaking down power dynamics is to value each area of work equally in the organization and reflect that in pay equity.
- Building shared leadership depends on supporting new leaders in their role through coaching and professional development. To support our new leadership in development and continuity, a team of coaches—former Interim Executive Director Patricia St. Onge, former Co-Director Carol Cantwell, Lorrie Johnson, and Belma Gonzalez—are respectively providing organizational, financial, development, and founder transition coaching. In this initial phase of implementation and learning, our coaches mentor committees, working groups and individual staff as well as doing organization-wide skills building/literacy trainings for staff and board. In addition to coaching, each staff member also has discretionary funds for individual professional development. Our next step is to engage in organizational assessment and development.
- Leadership rotation enables all staff to assume responsibility and develop skills over time in all aspects of operating and representing the organization. This builds leadership and a culture of power-sharing, while minimizing the isolation and negative impacts of concentration of power that can accrue to individuals in leadership positions over time. Staggered rotation also ensures organizational continuity and stability in the event of staff transition.

How does Shared Leadership work?

Our SL model consists of the Coordinating Council, three committees, working groups and the board. The Coordinating Council holds responsibility for keeping the organization on track with our mission, vision and strategy, and organizational legal, financial and community accountabilities. The Council is comprised of three staff members, each of whom is engaged in and represents a key area of the organization's work: Research, Capacity-Building, and Support Services Committees. Council tenures rotate on a staggered cycle among each committee's members giving everyone the opportunity to serve while maintaining structural continuity.



The three committees coordinate programmatic and support services work. Every staff member sits on one of the committees, engages in the work and ensures that program and support services function well. Committees are responsible for ensuring staff members are supported in their work and that they are meeting their responsibilities.

Working groups handle the day-to-day tasks of the organization: supporting community-based research, transferring research capacity to communities, providing research support to social justice efforts, fundraising, bookkeeping, financial management, governance, operations, communications, human rights/resources. Staff collaboration in operating the organization helps ensure that organizational knowledge is shared, not lost when staff members move out of the organization.

What role does the board of directors play in SLM?

Shared leadership impacts the entirety of the organization, board as well as staff. Our board fully supported the DataCenter's shift to a shared leadership structure and new board members are committed to helping the organization envision and implement a role for the board that honors and reflects shared leadership principles balances legal & fiduciary responsibility. To really ground our work and hold us accountable, our new board members reflect our constituency, that is they are themselves organizers and leaders from the community groups we work with. Membership on our board means involvement in legal & fiduciary responsibility, organizational development, resource development, and anti-oppression work in order to effectively steward the organization into the future. To support board leadership, the organization commits resources to develop their abilities around financial literacy and management, endowment stewardship, among others. Currently, the board is revising our bylaws to ensure they are legally compliant and reflect the new structure.

Who makes decisions?

Those who are most impacted by a decision make the decision. This means that everyone participates in major organizational decisions, while committees, working groups and individuals have the autonomy to make decisions that fall within their scope of responsibility. We practice participation and transparency, and work to balance those principles with effective decision-making.

Why Shared Leadership?

The social justice movement has experimented with reforming and internalizing the corporate model for social change purposes via the 501c3 structure for several decades. The contradiction between the hierarchical corporate model and social justice values has been the downfall of many an organization. And so the critique of the 501c3 model has been gathering momentum in movement building spaces.

Without attentiveness to and intentionality about power, we are deluding ourselves into re-creating the very systems of oppression we seek to dismantle. Our SL is but one holistic endeavor among others to be real about power and how it plays out, to empower all staff and board, to integrate and value the well-being of staff *and* organization, and create healthy ways to practice power resonant with our politics.

While we recognize no structure is without its challenges, we value the peer support and stability that shared leadership provides. Three years ago we learned the importance of undertaking a cultural

transformation to become a multiracial organization that is truly a shared and equitable space for people of color and white allies. Our shared leadership structure has grown out of our experience and needs as we build a space for sustainable multi-racial leadership that in turn will inform our work to dismantle power inequities in research and strengthen the movement for social justice and liberation.

We are indebted to former staff, directors and board members who have been teachers along the way. Financial security and support from key funders, donors, and our endowment enabled us to build and implement this structure. We are especially grateful to Patricia St. Onge who has nurtured the shared leadership structure from seedling. Her support and vision has been instrumental in helping us to take that first scary step with a leap of faith.

We are in progress, documenting the successes & challenges, and would love to hear from folks their experiences or ways that they would like to support...