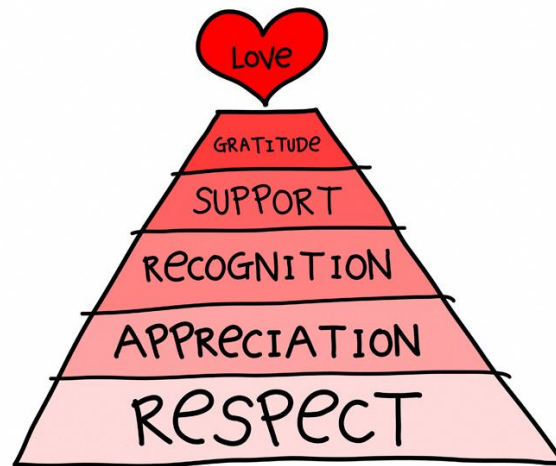


Organizer's Edge ▶

Greetings!

Mass Fair Share: Reflection on Culture and Organizing Success

**--Michael Jacoby
Brown, Mass Fair
Share, 1980 -1983**



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Culture Design Group

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Powerful social justice organizations are needed to advance justice and the cultures of these organizations affect their success. To succeed organizations often need to bring together people across differences of race, class, gender, parenthood, ethnicity and other differences.

One way groups deal with differences is to ignore them and focus only on issues that are in the common economic self-interest across difference. Mass Fair Share, where I worked for a couple years in the early 1980's, followed this pattern. It ignored differences in race, class and other differences and focused on economic issues like taxes, utility rate hikes and toxic dumping in neighborhoods.

Mass Fair Share's culture was white male, upper-income. It focused on institutional change and ignored personal, inter-personal, cultural, racial and class differences. When the organization had problems paying its staff, the director suggested that staff "ask their parents for help." This did not go over well with one staffer who was herself helping support her mother. It did not focus on issues of race. It ignored differences over issues like reproductive choice. There was a culture of overwork and sacrifice. Many sacrificed family time and women with kids especially found this harder. If staff organizers did not put in as much time as others they were often made to feel that

they were not fully committed or did not meet some unspoken standard.

The culture included a lack of fiscal transparency. This meant not paying small businesses that provided supplies and printing and the health care premiums of which employees paid half. It failed to pay the IRS.

Ignoring differences did not work out well. For social justice organizations to function well, its staff and leaders need to feel seen and heard as their complete selves so they can be highly motivated and bring themselves fully into this work. “Not seeing color” and other differences and focusing only on common economic issues may work in the short run, but it is a recipe for internal dissension and organizational weakness in the long run. The social, economic and political changes we need are a marathon and successful organizations develop a culture of dignity and respect for all.

[The Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers](#), for example, developed a culture of treating everyone with “dignity and respect,” including the Harvard management. It has succeeded with this culture over decades. If we are to “be the change” we want to see, as Gandhi said, the means must align with the ends. Culture eats everything else for breakfast and plays a big part in any organization’s success.

Feedback Welcome

We want to hear from you, your reactions, ideas, what is at the edge YOUR "envelope." Just go to...

[Visit Our Website!](#)



Who else you will hear from.....

We are just starting, but so far you can expect to hear what the following people are thinking:

Jessica Tang: Boston Teachers Union, AFT

George Luse of the Mass Teachers Assn,

Scott Reed with the PICO Network, ,

Cathy Howell, in Oregon and El Salvador, formerly with the AFL-CIO,

Caesar McDowell of MIT,

Diana Bell of Community and Labor United,

David Hernandez of the California Education Assn,

Attica Scott, State Rep Louisville, Kentucky

Walter Davis, of the Tennessee, Health Care Coalition.

Debra Askenase, of Community Organizing 2.0,

Deb Fastino, of the Coalition for Social Justice in New Bedford, MA,

Rebecca Gutman, with SEIU-1199,

Tim Dean, of SEIU-1199,

Mary Ochs, long time organizer in Los Angeles

and others, hopefully, including YOU

Other Useful Links

<http://michaeljacobybrown.com/>

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