

System-Wide Governance for Community Empowerment

by Judy Freiwirth and Maria Elena Letona

Centro undertook a process to become an organization “of the community.”

WHEN IMMIGRANTS TOOK TO OUR nation’s streets this year to advocate for immigrant’s rights, the country was somewhat taken by surprise. But nonprofits and unions who have been working in these communities for decades knew the power and potential of the moment. One of the groups involved in this national showing was Centro Presente, a 25-year-old Latino rights organization that inhabits a buzzing old cavern of an office in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Founded in 1981 as an activist organization, Centro Presente became increasingly entrenched in service delivery. Although its staff reflected the constituency it served, it largely internalized a hierarchal relationship to clients: staff often viewed themselves as the experts to whom community members came to resolve their problems. More troubling was the board of directors, which had also been operating on a traditional hierarchal governance model and whose members were not of the community being served.

This situation had the predictable outcome of robbing the organization of its nerve endings. In 2001, when the board’s leadership blocked all

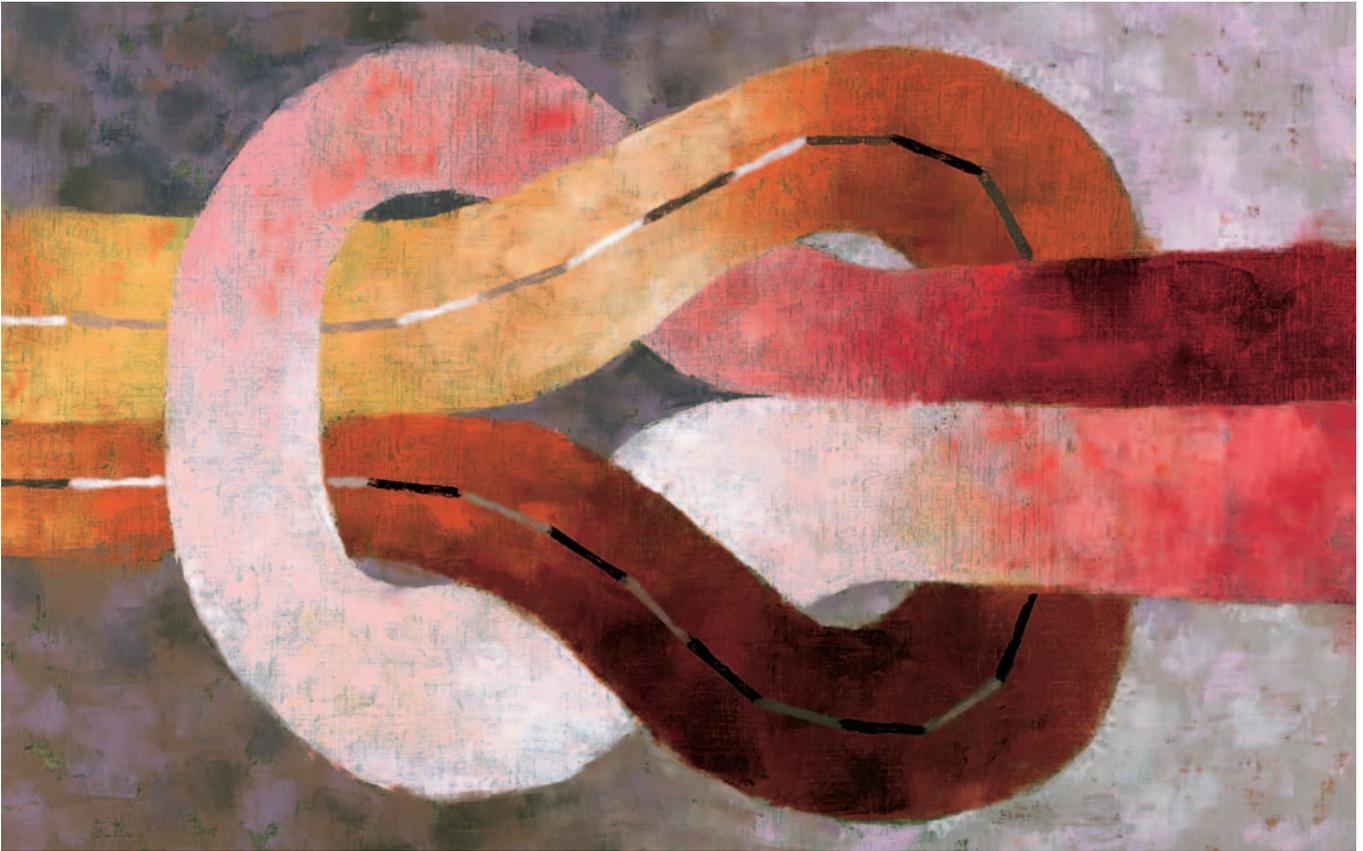
attempts to have the organization respond to urgent changes in immigration policy that would dramatically affect many of Centro’s constituents, the ED and several board members knew that something had to radically change. The organization and its board were not responding to acutely time-sensitive problems, and a significant gulf had opened between the organization and its constituency. Centro’s prestige in the community suffered, and constituents no longer felt connected beyond the practical aspects of having paperwork filed on their behalf or attending their ESL class.

If Centro were to truly carry out its mission—that is, to empower the Latino immigrant community—the organization needed to transform. This included shifting its focus from service provision to active community organizing and engendering a whole new level of community engagement, including a new governance model. The organization and its executive director began experimenting with the notion of system-wide governance as one of the options.

A Transformational Model

In 2002, Centro undertook a process to become an organization “of the community.” Its long-range goal was to build power within its community, and Centro’s leaders realized that if they were to be true to their mission of community empowerment, they needed to overhaul and completely transform their governance system.

JUDY FREIWIRTH, PSY.D., is an organizational consultant and founder/coordinator of the Alliance for Nonprofit Management’s national network, focused on developing new models of governance. **MARIA ELENA LETONA, PH.D.**, is the executive director of Centro Presente.



Our premise is that the nonprofit sector, above all, should be the place that fosters and advances democracy and self-determination, and that this must go deeper than just advocating for its value outside our organizations. If nonprofit organizations are to be truly accountable to their communities and constituencies, democracy has to be at its core. Yet, by and large, the nonprofit sector has tended to replicate structures and processes that do not foster democracy within organizations. We have observed that traditional governance models, based on outdated top-down “command and control” paradigms, still dominate. Such hierarchical structures not only run counter to democratic values and ideals, they often impede an organization’s achievement of its goals and, ultimately, its mission. If the voices of those who are directly impacted by our actions are not included in key decision-making processes, we too often arrive at wrong conclusions or decisions that are incongruent with constituencies’ needs, let alone with our missions. Governance *is* about power, control, authority, and influence. The key question is, do we want to perpetuate organizations that are embedded in practices of “power *over* others” or do we want to establish structures and processes that promote “power *with* others”?

These two conceptions of power are contradictory and cannot be peacefully reconciled.

There are alternative ways of thinking about governance for nonprofits—ways that build upon participatory principles and that expand beyond the board of directors as the sole locus of governance. System-Wide Governance is a model in which governance responsibility is shared across the organizational system among the key sectors of an organization—that is, its constituents or members, staff, and board. It is based upon principles of participatory democracy, self-determination, and genuine partnership and on community-level decision-making as the foundation of true democracy. The principles underlying shared or partnership governance are not new, and have been used for many years within progressive, movement-based organizations.

In this approach, critical organizational and strategic decisions are made together by active constituents/members, staff, and board. The types of decisions that are made in this way are those that determine key strategic directions or changes, long-term programmatic or organizational visions, new initiatives, political positions, and major policy and/or organizational decisions. Some more limited dialogues, explo-

Do we want to perpetuate organizations that are embedded in practices of “power *over* others” or do we want to establish structures and processes that promote “power *with* others”?

Similar principles have been used in large-scale change and planning models in which “the whole system” joins together to make significant strategic planning or organizational change decisions.

rations, and decisions are situated in individual components of the organization, depending upon the nature of the issue and its importance, while others are dealt with simultaneously by the different sectors or in different configurations. All of these decisions eventually feed back into strategy-making for the whole organization. Policy changes, for example, might be discussed first in different components and then by the whole group, or by a group made up of members from each sector.

For some decisions, the broader community and other stakeholders are brought together to participate. This larger group may be convened to make decisions regarding long-term directions that may affect the future of a specific community or a constituency.

Similar principles have been used in large-scale change and planning models in which “the whole system” joins together to make significant strategic planning or organizational change decisions. Two of the most widely used large scale models, Future Search conferences¹ and Whole Scale Change methodology,² are based on a few core principles: that you need a wide range of perspectives in order to analyze current reality and make creative, informed strategic decisions, and that you need to create peer relationships among many different kinds of stakeholders to find visionary ways forward. A System-Wide Governance model incorporates whole-scale planning sessions into the regular governance work of the organization.

In a System-Wide Governance model, the board is comprised of members of the community/constituency. It assumes that the people the organization serves possess the “lived” experience and passion to best move the organization forward. This is in contrast to the prevailing trend of professionalizing nonprofit boards despite the lack of research demonstrating that professional or wealthy board members improve board performance. System-Wide Governance creates boards that reflect and “live” the organization’s mission.

The board may continue to take on some of the legal and fiduciary responsibilities, while the other organizational components, in partnership with the board, will be accountable for the organization’s major strategic, policy, or other issues. Fiduciary and legal and other framing information, however, should be transparent within the

organization, and all sectors need to be informed and knowledgeable about them.

This model also employs a team structure, using members or constituents, board, and staff to carry out some of the governance functions. Rather than having one person lead the team, a board member and constituent or staff member form a partnership. To be effective, they need to operate within an “open-system”—that is, there is a continual communication, transparency, and coordination among the teams, the board, and the larger constituency and community.

Transformation in Context

When Centro chose the System-Wide Governance approach, it knew that reconstituting the board would not be enough—the staff needed to change the way it perceived the community. Whenever an organization delivers services, power relationships are built in between the service delivery staff and “clients” and between the board and the community. Centro learned that it needed to have ongoing conversations about what power-sharing meant, what having more knowledge does in terms of power, and that experience is just as valuable as expert knowledge. The challenge was also to have everyone in the organization, without exception, think and act as an organizer. Job descriptions were rewritten to include concrete organizing responsibilities and staff learned to adopt new ways of engaging with constituents. Not all staff agreed with the changes, and some who were not comfortable with the transformational process chose to leave. Newly hired staff incorporated themselves into a new culture and were able to more quickly think and act as organizers.

Centro Presente was now ready to launch its membership program. The membership model is premised on the belief that there should be a relationship of equals between Centro Presente and the community to whom it owes its existence, that both could be partners in the strengthening of the organization and in the process of improving life conditions in the community. The membership program provided former “clients,” “students,” and “constituents” the space to take active, direct, and ample participation in the organization’s work as “members”—Latino immigrants who were willing to be active shapers of Centro’s future.

Experimenting with Alternatives

In 2004, after working steadily on these issues for about a year and a half, members elected a new board comprised of active Centro Presente members. Once this happened, Centro began to experiment with alternative governance models. Although the membership has final authority through member assemblies and member community meetings, key decisions regarding mission, strategic direction, policy, political decisions, and new programmatic initiatives have been made by a partnership model—large retreats twice a year that include active members, the full board, and staff.

If the whole organization is responsible for the major strategic, planning, and policy decisions, what type of decisions does the board make within this model? The Centro board now functions as an “executive committee” akin to one you might find in a traditional board structure. The board is accountable to the membership and the larger community. It continues to meet monthly and has decision-making authority over some issues, such as financial oversight, personnel issues related to the executive director, legal issues, and other issues that can’t wait until the membership is convened. Similar to some executive committees, it also provides support to the executive director as issues arise and it must bring major decisions back to the membership. The board model is still evolving and will need to maintain its flexibility as the organization continues to learn from experience.

Inclusive, Flexible, Working Teams

Centro’s board committee structure also underwent major restructuring. Rather than adapting the traditional committee model for the board, they designed a unique, flexible team structure comprised of members, board, and staff. In order to be responsive to a fast-changing environment and shifting organizational priorities, the teams were designed to be flexible both in terms of focus and composition and to serve as an important platform for leadership development in all sectors of the organization, particularly for the membership and board. For example, most recently Centro has had three such teams—one designs and implements immigrant rights organizing strategy, the second designs and organizes popular education initiatives, and a third proposes and organizes grass-

roots fundraising strategies and events. Member leadership has dramatically increased as a result of the teamwork.

Fundraising has also been transformed and become truly integrated into the other work of the organization. By placing the task of active fundraising within a member/board/staff team structure, the membership not only takes the lead in organizing fundraising events, but uses them to help mobilize the membership for its organizing campaigns and other work of the organization.

Four years into the transformational process, Centro Presente is an entirely different organization than it was when it embarked on this journey. As of December 2006, Centro has over 1,200 active members.³ Using this new model of governance, Centro has become a vibrant leader in the immigrant rights movement, both nationally and locally, while providing legal assistance and adult education to over 3,500 people. As one member described the difference this model has made for the board:

This is the most engaged and consistent board we’ve ever had! Since they’ve come through the membership at Centro, they know about the organization . . . they know the staff and the work . . . they know the issues, and since they’ve personally benefited from the organization, they have a passionate interest in Centro and its future.

The experience of Centro Presente demonstrates that organizations can not only challenge their current assumptions about their constituencies and power dynamics, but can successfully transform their boards and organizations to truly be more democratic, passionate, inclusive and, ultimately, more responsive to the community they serve.

Endnotes

1. Weisbord, M. & Janoff, S. *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations & Communities*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1995.
2. Dannemiller Tyson Associates
3. Centro has a staff of 12 and a budget of \$820,000.

Reprints of this article may be ordered from store.nonprofitquarterly.org, using code 130404.

Centro’s board committee structure also underwent major restructuring. Rather than adapting the traditional committee model for the board, they designed a unique, flexible team structure comprised of members, board, and staff.