

No.1

Learning from
Practice Series
**Organizational
Perspectives**

Creating an organizational culture for social justice activism

Overview

Since 1999, Raising Voices has worked for the prevention of violence against women and children by catalyzing change in the nature of relationships between women and men, girls and boys, children and adults. At Raising Voices, we understand violence as an abuse of power, not only at an individual level but at a broader level where norms, systems and structures tacitly accept and perpetuate violence. This analysis permeates all of our work at Raising Voices, which is fundamentally based on a commitment to social justice.

Our organizational culture embraces the idea that the social change we seek to inspire in others must begin with ourselves — with committing to personal reflection and change, ethically using power at work and at home, recognizing that activism does not start when we walk through the office doors, and supporting each other as we strive to do all of this with compassion and vigilance.

Social justice is the belief in the fundamental dignity, rights and equality of every person; and a vision that freedom, safety, opportunity and fairness are accessible to and enjoyed by all.



I thought activism was moving around with a placard and shouting. Now I know I can do activism in many small ways—in how I treat others, in how I treat my house helper or children. Activism doesn't have to be something big. Small things mean a lot. ~ Raising Voices Staff

Violence prevention is our commitment to a shared humanity. Thus, it has always felt essential to bring our full selves to the work—our values, our self-identities, a respect for the wisdom in everyone, and the courage to grow in each other's presence. Building an organizational culture that fosters this vision has been challenging—it has taken many years and the collective effort of all of us at Raising Voices. It has also required continually deepening our social justice analysis and pushing ourselves to stay connected as we grow. Our culture has been one of the most critical investments we have made at Raising Voices. Without this culture, the politicized spirit of our work—the core of its effectiveness in fostering social change—would not exist.

“ Raising Voices is a place that treats community members with the same respect and inclusivity it does its staff. These porous boundaries between staff and community, the consistent respect for people and their ever-changing ideas, and the trust in people’s ability to use their own logic and experiences to come to the right conclusions, is transformative. ~ Raising Voices Staff

Experience

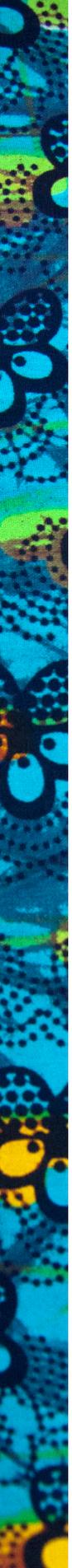
From the outset, social justice was the bedrock of Raising Voices. Yet for many staff, this framing was a departure from the development agencies where they had gained experience. A values-driven organizational culture based on principles of social justice—one that can lead us to decline partnerships or funding that is misaligned with our values—was, for some, unfamiliar and at times unsettling. For many staff, it felt uncomfortable to experience equity in the workplace—for example, seeing the office assistant or driver not only be present and have a voice at staff meetings but also take responsibility for facilitating those meetings. For others, it felt strange and too personal to be asked to reflect on and to question one’s own experiences of oppression and power rather than focus on the individuals and communities with whom we worked.

Raising Voices and the Center for Domestic Violence Prevention (CEDOVIP) share a unique relationship and closely aligned organizational cultures. In 2003, CEDOVIP became an independent organization, apart from Raising Voices where it was first established. Due to the shared history and continued close ties between us, much of Raising Voices’ work around organizational culture is a collective effort with CEDOVIP staff and leadership.

“ I love that at Raising Voices we push back against donors, or are unafraid to say no when the spirit of an engagement doesn’t feel right. In my experience, that is rare and valuable. ~ Raising Voices Staff

With a small team, Raising Voices began what would become a gradual, collaborative process, in which organizational interactions guided by the values of social justice would, day by day, reveal and demonstrate how things could be different. While not all staff stayed, many were taken in by this new way of working and helped lead the way forward.

With more years and voices, what began as an instinctive culture gained more structure and form. As staff, we came together to articulate our organizational values—equality, respect, integrity, non-discrimination, activism, unity, teamwork, accountability, creativity, and quality—and made a commitment to values-driven decision-making and practice. We established processes rooted in mutual respect and learning, such as regular retreats, Friday staff development sessions, Monday all-staff check-ins with rotating facilitation, and Wednesday tutorials where everyone is encouraged to explore critical, controversial issues and share ideas of any kind.



“ I remember working with a coworker who is quite brilliant and innovative. She made a mistake and laughed and said ‘oops.’ I laughed too. Suddenly my defenses were down. Those defenses had been built up in other organizational contexts where one constantly had to pretend to know and defend their knowledge to others. In a place where it’s okay to say ‘oops,’ it is much more likely to find a brilliant idea. ~ Raising Voices Staff

Amid this culture, we watched each other grow, and saw many of us transformed personally and professionally. We experienced the collective strength that came from getting to know each other as whole people—through deeply supportive moments as well as through simple acts, such as morning greetings, checking in personally, celebrating life events and mourning our losses together. Often, we celebrated the culture we had created. Other times, it gave rise to challenges and debate. For example, we struggled with how to provide critical feedback and manage dissent, while maintaining the positive and safe environment we enjoyed. It was only with practice that we developed—and still continue to refine—the skills and structures that make such openness between colleagues a positive process that reinforces our respect for and belief in each other.

“ At first, it was about getting well versed with my job description, doing the things I thought I was hired to do and ticking these off. After about six months, I realized that lots of people around me were talking more about other people’s stories: a woman experiencing this, a child faced with that. People were openly challenging themselves on how they dealt with certain situations and the actions they took to support someone—not just at the office and in the community, but also within their own families and neighborhoods.~ Raising Voices Staff

Today, our culture is still evolving. It is imperfect and time consuming—demanding intensive participation and innovative processes. It is also passionate, motivating, empowering and transformative—and responsible, in large part, for our programmatic achievements. Working for social change is far more than a job; it is a life of deep purpose and restless nights. Our organizational culture gives us strength. It surrounds us with our shared values, and reminds us that opportunities for social change live in each moment.

“ You feel like you are in a family, and even when you think about leaving [for other opportunities] you hesitate, because you know this kind of environment is unique, as it affirms who you are and nurtures your power within. ~ Raising Voices Staff

Learning

As an organization, we often engage reflectively and constructively in understanding our culture, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it can continue to fuel our spirits and our work. Through this process, we have begun to articulate organizational culture as an essential component of social justice work. The following learnings have been the most inspiring and provocative.

1. Social justice work is personal.

The work we do in communities is intensely personal—we implore women and men, girls and boys to question the status quo; to reflect on their lives, on their relationships, and on their choices; and to envision a different way of being. This can't be achieved within communities if we don't first (and continually) undergo similar processes ourselves. Doing so requires an investment of time and resources at an organizational level as well as courage and vulnerability on a personal level. These efforts strengthen our work. We have learned that by exploring power and justice in our own lives, we become more attuned to the complexities of injustice, more skilled in helping others through processes, and more committed to seeing change.

“Raising Voices teaches you to talk to people without putting them down. You become very conscious of your language. One thing I've learned over time is the impact that your words can have. There is now a language that's not allowed at my house, because it puts people down. ~ Raising Voices Staff

Over the years, we have seen staff leave abusive partners, develop healthier relationships with their children, start believing in their own ideas, and go back to school to get degrees—all following paths that led them to fuller versions of themselves. For some of us, this culture means that the workplace is the most personally supportive place in our lives. We have learned that social justice activism depends on team members feeling intensely for an issue and caring deeply about what they are doing. It is when staff feel emotionally inspired by their jobs that their work shows the ownership, rigor and creativity that social change requires.

“I can see a significant number of staff who have become virtually different individuals as a result of being in this culture. ~ Raising Voices Staff

That said, when our work is so deeply intertwined with our personal lives, it can at times feel overwhelming. We have learned that our organizational culture depends not only on personal reflection and political analysis but also on creating space for just having fun—an important aspect of self-care and strengthening unity. For example, at Raising Voices, the organization sponsors a staff hip hop class twice a month, hosts social events at the beach with family, and every day we try to remind ourselves to do the little things that bring lightness and humor to the workplace.

2. A values-based culture requires everyone in the organization.

Raising Voices prioritizes values and recognizes that living our values requires everyone to play their part. Treating everyone on staff with dignity and respect, inviting everyone to learn and contribute ideas, and expecting everyone to share in upholding our organizational values are all fundamentals.

“When I came for my first interview, the guard was the one to decide who went into the interview room. Some interviewees bypassed her without greeting—only to be sent back to her. ~ Raising Voices Staff

Truly walking the talk of organizational values is a new experience for many who join our staff. The adjustment for some is filled with confusion, self-consciousness and even shame for past or current beliefs and behaviors. However, those who ultimately feel supported and inspired by this kind of environment stay and begin to make these values their own.

“ The high points, for me, are that I genuinely feel proud belonging to this organization—knowing that what it stands for and how it engages in the work is very much aligned with my personal values. It also pushes me to scrutinize my own behavior—the tone of voice I use with colleagues, how I express frustration when it arises. I am more self-aware of these nuances than I have been working in other settings. ~ Raising Voices Staff

None of us live the organizational values in every moment. However, when everyone is investing their whole selves in trying their best, it can feel personal when someone among us explicitly breaks from the shared values—such as by stealing, lying or using power over others. Similarly, within a culture rich with compassion and camaraderie, it can be difficult to raise areas of weakness, conflict or displeasure when something like this occurs. As a result, some instances of inappropriate behavior or underlying tensions can go unacknowledged for too long. During these moments, we have needed to draw on our values even more heavily—recognizing that if we avoid conflict or challenges we are damaging our organizational integrity. Our culture is our strength and brings unity to our work, but that doesn't mean it will always be smooth or easy. However, when living our values includes initiating difficult conversations and actions, we mitigate other challenges along the way.

3. Shared leadership is a gift and a challenge.

When leadership is no longer about wielding power over others, everyone has the opportunity to lead. When there is an underlying freedom to make mistakes, everyone can explore their own potential. When no one must justify their place in a hierarchy, everyone can take risks and propose emergent ideas. These aspects of our culture usually make our organization come alive with creativity and possibilities.

“ Because of such an environment . . . motivation sets in naturally and levels of ownership are high. ~ Raising Voices Staff

With shared leadership at Raising Voices, no one simply performs assigned tasks. We are all called upon to seize opportunities that can lead change—at work and beyond. However, taking initiative in these ways requires courage, energy and willingness to take personal responsibility, which can be challenging and unfamiliar. Being accountable to each other and ourselves is far more demanding than being accountable to an external authority. For all staff, such leadership comes with an emotional weight and potential for burnout, from feeling greater responsibility for outcomes and how these shape the lives of community members. For senior coordinators, there is an added challenge of nurturing creativity and initiative among staff while still appreciating that decisions made in the best interest of the organization may, at times, be disappointing to individual staff members.

“ I think the main challenge is that this [shared leadership] all takes time and can be complicated. How do you balance the emphasis on equality and positive use of power with the reality that decisions need to be made, and at times, quickly? ~ Raising Voices Staff

It is an empowering yet challenging way to work. Feeling the trust and belief others have vested in you comes with moments when some of us doubt our capacity, yet with collective accountability we then turn toward each other to be reminded of what's possible.

4. Innovation is required to sustain our culture throughout organizational growth and transition.

When Raising Voices was younger and less known, we had more time to nurture organizational culture. We could hold five-day retreats and spend hours in one-on-one mentorship. The relationships that resulted were invaluable and gave us the momentum and strength to do bold work. As our organization grows, it becomes more difficult to find the time for deepening relationships, for pausing and connecting, for keeping the spirit of our work alive.

“ We can't sustain culture on old passions; it's a fire that needs to be regularly stoked. Whenever we decide to just get on with the work, we quickly see that if we don't invest in aligning our culture, then people don't really 'get' the organization, things start feeling 'off', and the work ultimately suffers. ~ Raising Voices Staff

As a result, we are now looking to bring innovation not only to our programs but also to how we evolve our culture—developing ways to sustain organizational culture throughout growth, while still enjoying the momentum that comes with size and experience. At Raising Voices, while diverse staff had played a meaningful role in developing our organizational culture, it was for long the role of the directors to oversee its evolution. This is no longer helpful or feasible, which means new team members are now not only maintaining culture but also creating it. The next challenge is in how to embrace the shifts that will come from such diversified leadership, while ensuring core elements of our culture remain.

“ What I like is the way we are all connected . . . At Raising Voices we have a shared objective, and all of us become leaders. ~ Raising Voices Staff

We are learning that one aspect of maintaining culture through growth is recognizing how it shapes not only behavior but also identity. It defines *how* we do our work as much as *who* we become as an organization. Standing together to uphold the integrity of our identity can foster shared power and organizational stewardship, while creating more flexibility in how we embody that identity over time.

Action

Over the years, we have learned that our organizational culture is an essential aspect of our work at Raising Voices. In this way, it is evolving into a distinct practice of its own. Our experiences and discoveries have led to the following thoughts on what we can do as a nonprofit community:

- **Be Vocal on Values:** As development becomes more of an industry, it is paramount that as social justice organizations we live the values we strive for in our programming, and become vocal in that regard. In doing so, we all have an important role to play in keeping development grounded in its social justice roots.

- **Engage the Whole Person:** Through our recruitment and our cultures, we can model a balance of head and heart, skills and spirit—knowing that such a balance will bring our practice to new levels. Part of achieving this balance is making time in the workplace for the individual—for their personal reflection and personal growth—because, in the end, the work is only as good as the people leading the effort.
- **Accept Failure and Conflict:** Our individual and collective strength is magnified when we learn to fail without shame and confront conflict with grace. While failure and conflict can bring challenges, neither diminishes the integrity of the individual or the organization. Creating space for error in the workplace—without fear—will enable us all to innovate, to find our strength and to embrace shortcomings as the beginning of growth.
- **Lead with Our Actions:** The most influential form of leadership is leading with our own actions and making choices that set an example. It is the little things that matter and that people notice—small gestures that show respect and kindness, sharing responsibility for everyday tasks, not monopolizing the spotlight, encouraging others to take the lead. By being authentic and values-driven ourselves, we inspire the same in others.
- **Advocate for Organizational Culture as Essential Practice:** As more organizations create a culture for living the values of their work, and more organizations experience how this culture improves the quality of their work, we can together elevate it as a promising practice and give it the attention and dialogue it deserves. We can work to empirically demonstrate how organizational culture deepens social justice outcomes and also increases job satisfaction, staff retention, quality of work and more.



Being part of a vibrant, self-reflective and striving organization has given me strength and has sustained my own belief that good work should not be 'just work' but a manifestation of one's vision of how life ought to be.

~ Raising Voices Staff

Want to get started?

Invest in your own organizational culture. If it is ad hoc, begin the journey of making it deliberate, personally transformative, and supported by time, processes and resources, by doing some or all of the following:

- Reflect on your organization's culture. Then have a collective discussion session with all staff to see how they understand it.
- Reach out to groups who have a strong organizational culture. Talk to them about their successes and struggles. Learn from each other.
- Ask your funders to support internal processes that foster a deeper connection to social justice.
- Ask organizations you fund about their cultures—encouraging and supporting internal processes for strengthening them.

- Commit to processes that deepen your organizational culture. Consider one of the following:

Get Moving! Facilitator's Guide and Participant's Workbook (2012)

GBV Prevention Network / Raising Voices

<http://preventgbvafrica.org/get-moving/>

Strategies for Building an Organization with a Soul (forthcoming, 2015)

Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu

<http://airforafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Building-Organisations-with-Souls>

We Rise: Movement Building Reimagined (forthcoming, 2015)

JASS/Just Associates

<https://www.justassociates.org/en/we-rise-resource>

If we want our work to catalyze social change then we must open ourselves to being changed by the work.



The *Learning From Practice* series is a collection of articles that synthesize perspectives and activism emerging from Raising Voices' experience in preventing violence against women and children.

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