

Looking Together in the Same Direction

by Margaret Leonard

"When a homeless mother with children knocks at the door of Project Hope, we should see her as a 'woman of strength,' for she has survived a profound human struggle and comes to our door with capacities, insights, and promise."

Central to organizational development oriented to social change is a core relational principle called Mutuality. When it is present it has the power to erode the dominant "I" consciousness that pervades our universe of "power-over"-type institutions, and can begin to replace it with a "We" consciousness where "power-with" engages us in the co-creation of new types of participative organizations.

Mutuality is a way of seeing, being, and acting in a world that was founded on the belief that human growth is a shared process. For those of us who see through the lens of mutuality we are human beings in relationships with one another—a community of We who share life, who believe in and call forth the artist in one another to create a work of art in ourselves, our organizations, our community, and our world.

These calls resonate with what we are seeing and hearing in our larger world. The eco-feminist movements, for example, are promoting the importance of relationships with one another, with the earth, our planet, the universe. Insights from quantum physics, molecular biology, and chaos theory, beautifully articulated by Meg Wheatley,¹ challenge us to create dynamic, ever-changing organizations that organize themselves around natural processes and risk launching into chaos as the experience from which a new order of relationships will emerge.

In this article I would like to share with you how the guiding principle of mutuality—power-with—which is espoused by those of us who make up the Project Hope community, influences who we are and what we do. I will focus on identifying this core belief and then show its influence upon the evolution of Project Hope and on a statewide advocacy organization called Homes for Families.

Project Hope

"If you come to help me, then you waste your time, but if you come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then we can both grow." This African maxim embodies both the principle and the challenge of mutuality. It calls for a transformation of consciousness among human service providers and their constituents, which affects program design and organizational development.

Project Hope, located in Boston, Massachusetts, is a human service organization that operates out of this maxim. We call it mutuality and it is embodied in everything we do. A former resident of Project Hope's Family Shelter, who is now a member of our board of directors, once shared this observation with us: "When a homeless mother with children knocks at the door of Project Hope, we should see her as a 'woman of strength,' for she has survived a profound human struggle and comes to our door with capacities, insights, and promise. She couples her journey with ours so we can learn together new ways to help families move from homelessness to permanent housing and stability in the context of community." (This expression—Women of Strength—subsequently became the title of a video on real welfare reform produced by Project Hope in collaboration with women on welfare. It chronicles real stories that help eradicate the stereotype of women on welfare.)

Traditional human service organizations are characterized by providing services to and doing for their patients, clients, or consumers (or whatever nomenclature we may use). They have been organized in hierarchical structures where there are diverse and distinct roles and responsibilities and everyone is accountable to the person above them. They are funded by public and private funding sources that bring their own sets of regulations that are fre-



**A portion of
Project Hope staff**

Photo by Maria Marrero

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quently prescriptive and controlling. Consumers are the lowest people on the totem poll, whose voices are often muffled and marginalized. Human service organizations share many of the characteristics of power-over models.

How does a human service organization like Project Hope defy these trends and transform its structures to give shape to power-with models? The response

to this question would require a book and several sequels. Ours is an unfinished but unfolding story, filled with small successes, painful failures, sometimes jubilation, and often a messy, turbulent experience in which loss of control feels like disaster and then suddenly a new pattern emerges which is life-giving. This evolutionary process has given birth to new and exciting initiatives that renew our commitment to stay with the process and not retrench to control models or noninclusive behaviors.

Guideposts

What have we learned about mutuality over these years? What are the guideposts that don't shift and change, but provide some stability in the chaos?

- Commitment to the centrality of our mission, which places the consumer voice at its center, is paramount. It carries with it the responsibility to adopt communal disciplines that engage staff, board, and consumers in a process that articulates the mission, owns it, expresses it in diverse programs, is accountable for the mission across programs, and continues to evaluate its expression individually and collectively.
- Commitment to a human development process that nurtures mutuality is primary. This commitment provokes a number of questions: What is the identity from which I act, from which we act? Do I opt for a job category as my primary identity: teacher, social worker, child care worker, house manager? Or do I name myself primarily as a person with capacities, needs, and human experiences, who is

reaching out to others? And how do I perceive others? Are they primarily clients, consumers, welfare recipients? Or am I a person in relationship with another person who is equally gifted with capacities, skills, needs, and life experiences, and with whom I share a mutual relationship of giving and receiving? Creating a relational fabric of shared growth in the one-on-one relationship provides the road-map for mutual interdependence at other levels: among programs within the organization and with other groups within the neighborhood and community.

- Commitment to understanding the systemic causes of poverty at every level of the organization is critical. Comprehending the larger forces that create hunger, homelessness, inadequate education, and impoverishment, transforms our perceptions and helps us to move our focus from *who* needs to be changed to *what* needs to be changed in our society. Creative use of popular-education learning processes releases consumers from behaviors of self-blame and converts their energies to behaviors that result in social change for themselves and others.
- Commitment to ongoing reflection, evaluation, and education is a core discipline that enhances the culture of mutuality. We recognize the need for ongoing evaluation, celebrating our victories, acknowledging our failures, and owning our need to become a learning community when it comes to the important mission of social transformation.

A significant outcome of our unfolding story is that many of the women once sheltered at Project Hope are now in permanent housing, off welfare, working in jobs with benefits, and continuing their education in community and four-year colleges. Several of them are involved in their communities and are participants in activities, committees, and boards of directors that enhance family strengthening. Others have been spokespersons at local, state, and national conferences where their articulate and compelling voices are clearly heard.

Homes for Families

Project Hope, in collaboration with provider and advocacy organizations in the state, has long been committed to ending family homelessness. However, our agenda to identify solu-

tions often excluded the collective voice of the homeless families themselves. In 1994, several like-minded groups addressing the issues of family homelessness and frustrated by the lack of consumer presence, raised these questions: What would a statewide advocacy organization that coupled the energies of the provider and consumer community look like? What would its mission and action agenda be?

We invited a number of current and formerly homeless women to join providers and advocates in a process of reflection to address these questions—should we formulate a mission statement and create such an organization? The answer was a resounding Yes! Homes for Families was born. The Homes for Families' mission was largely shaped by current and formerly homeless women, who took a holistic perspective to the problem by pointing out the comprehensive needs of homeless families. So rather than focusing on a single issue, we recognized that homelessness can involve a variety of issues—lack of housing, food, access to financial resources, income, and safety and health resources; therefore we work in all these public policy areas in building emergency response systems and permanent community-based solutions.

The group's organizational structure certainly reflects its commitment to partnership. Fifty percent of the board, staff, and membership have experienced homelessness. Furthermore, Homes for Families can point to many gains it has made in mutual interdependence with other advocacy organizations, such as access to family shelters, increased housing options, and access to jobs that pay a living wage, to mention a few. And, like Project Hope's, our journey has been one marked by chaos. On occasion we have failed to follow the process to which we are committed simply to achieve rapid response to public policy agendas, resulting in muffling the consumer voice and giving in to the provider voice. But we are

learning from our mistakes to be faithful to our process and grow in mutual understanding with our diverse partners.

Conclusion

The African world view is expressed in the words: I am because We are. Our efforts to embody the relational principal of mutuality in who we are and what we do brings us closer to understanding the wisdom of this view. We have only just begun. We are a work in progress. We invite you to join us in our efforts to become a community of "We" creating anew.

Endnote

Margaret Wheatley 1999. *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, second edition.

About the Author

Sister Margaret Leonard's life focus is to serve low-income families in crisis. Acting collaboratively with many partners as executive director of Project Hope, she creates enriched services and programs and models that empower families to live healthy, meaningful lives. She is a founding member of Homes for Families, an advocacy organization composed equally of shelter providers and currently/formerly homeless residents, and she is an active board member of neighborhood organizations whose mission is to rebuild the infrastructure of Boston's inner city. Sister Margaret's most recent writings include, *We Need to Stand Together: The Impact of Welfare Reform on the Dudley Street Neighborhood and the Community's Response to the Challenge* and she is a contributing author to Donna Haig Friedman's forthcoming study, "Parenting in Public." In recognition of her multiple contributions to society, she is the Year 2000 recipient of the national Isaac Hecker Award for Social Justice.

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