

“FIXING THE ROOF WHILE THE SUN IS SHINING”

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- *Securing organizational health* •
in the field of human rights

ABSTRACT

Faced with an increasingly hostile environment, organizations defending and advancing rights need to maximize their strength. Assessing their internal health and understanding the ways in which weak systems and practice make them vulnerable should be a priority. In discussions among rights leaders at a project to build strength and solidarity in the human rights field, three particular areas show up as needing more attention and better approaches: board governance, executive leadership transitions and internal organizational culture. In each case, the experience shared suggests that capacity for self-reflection, learning and trust is likely to support better organizational health and ability to withstand negative conditions. While organizations are responsible for their own health, donor practice can sharply affect their experience and has an impact on the health of the field. Attention to organizational health is a critical point of departure for building resilience and strength but for a stronger human rights field, organizations and movements also need to focus outwards, on building greater solidarity.

KEYWORDS

Boards | Leadership | Transitions | Organizational culture | Organizational health

1 • Introduction

If you are a leader of a human rights organization at this moment in history, you are facing headwinds. As an already threadbare post-war consensus on rights wears into holes in many places and reservoirs of support from multilateral institutions or the non-governmental sector in Western democracies evaporate, local enemies are gaining force. You have to be ever more nimble, stretch your funds further and build better defenses, even as you are under attack.

Whether you are in a part of the world where these conditions have been the norm throughout your leadership, or you are newly embattled, you are constantly evaluating your position. Where are you vulnerable? What do you need? Where can you find solid support? These are the questions that we discuss in The Symposium on Strength and Solidarity for Human Rights.¹ And our sense is that investing in organizational health in these times is vitally important.

We are a project with a five-year life span, bringing leaders of human rights activism and advocacy together for intense exchanges on what is strengthening or weakening their organizations, and a renewed look at how we build solidarity – and therefore power – for defending and advancing rights. Our goal is to provoke some innovation in the way the human rights field responds to rising authoritarianism. Now half-way through – we will close in March 2025 – we have so far convened about 100 leaders in a series of conversations, and we aim to have brought 250 together by the end. This seems like a good moment to share some of what we are hearing and learning.

These observations are necessarily impressionistic and reflect my own sense of the dominant themes that have emerged. That said, they are all rooted in actual and recurring conversations and have also shown up in our podcast,² *Strength & Solidarity*, where human rights activists and workers talk about their organizations and movements, and the many ways they are trying to overcome obstacles.

Symposium meetings operate under rules of confidentiality so participants who have shared their thinking will not be identified here nor will their organizations. It may therefore be helpful to know a little more about them in general. They come from all over the world – 48 countries so far. Their organizations work on every aspect of human rights, ranging from formal NGOs with strong organizational hierarchies engaging formal governmental systems, to loose social movements where grassroots activism is the preferred tool and leadership is shared or deemphasized. Our youngest leader so far is 23 and our oldest in their 70s. We seek to build cohorts in which multiple identities are included and we aim for diversity of experience and education. We invite our participants to the Symposium by drawing on our own wide network and that of others, but would-be participants can self-nominate via our website.³

One caveat: it can be hard to know where an organization's health ends and the health of the wider human rights sector begins. Clearly not all the challenges an organization or

movement faces are rooted in its specific circumstances and likewise, a sector is only as strong as the organizations and movements that populate it. The borderline between the two can be hard to see. I will mostly focus on experience within organizations, but out of necessity, a wider framing is sometimes relevant and I will return to this at the end.

2 • The cost of weak governance

Although the diversity in our participants is wide, it is remarkable how frequently certain themes and experiences emerge, and it is on those commonly shared accounts and insights that I have based the observations below. When our participants talk about the health of their organizations, questions about structure, the pros and cons of hierarchy and the management of power all surface. We read case studies about funding crises or about responding to an authoritarian crackdown or arrest and many other dimensions, but time and again we return to the role of a board, the governance structure, however formal or informal, that holds the organization accountable to the mission and oversees its operations. And what many of the anecdotes suggest is that boards often do not truly understand the organizations they oversee and may not have a good grasp of their role.

While work is running predictably, this may not pose serious problems. But faced with a situation in which a board's actions are likely to be pivotal, its members may prove unprepared. Often they have not thought deeply about their role and responsibilities and it is a moment of crisis that exposes the gap. Perhaps the board has approved a budget without really understanding the organization's finances. Perhaps there is a serious dispute between staff and management, or board members are competing with the director for control. Such situations pose risks for the organization.

One participant explained that despite giving their board a full year's notice of their intention to leave, the board was so used to relying on staff, that they failed to take responsibility for the transition, assigning the recruitment of a successor to a recruitment agency with little supervision. The candidates on the final shortlist did not fit the organization's values and proved unappointable, leaving a glaring and lengthy hole in management while the board initiated a new hiring campaign.

In another case, board members were originally recruited because they were close and valued colleagues of the director, so their confidence in him was personal. When, to their surprise, the director had to resign under a cloud, they realized as they picked up the pieces that their loyalties were divided. In a third case, the board received credible information about a case of abusive treatment in the organization but decided to turn a blind eye, rather than pressing the director to address it. Their avoidance caused donors to lose confidence and fundraising was affected. And in a fourth case, the board was suddenly faced with a hole in the organization's finances. They had approved the budget, had seen the expenditure reports, but had not noticed that restricted donor

funds were being used to cover a shortfall in the operational budget, with serious consequences when the donor became aware.

Many such stories pointed to a sense that certain boards had not been giving due attention to formal obligations and that: expectations had not been appropriately set at the start of members' terms; some board chairs were too busy to give their role the necessary attention; and governance structures – such as a budget committee – were not created or did not regularly report back to the full board. In short, members either did not have the necessary skills or had joined for prestige or out of friendship, without considering the likely workload or the responsibilities of the role.

So how are such problems to be addressed? One key point here is that where there is no crisis, there may be little reason to doubt an organization's health. The weakness only becomes obvious once an acute problem has emerged. That is why we in the Symposium would argue for “fixing the roof while the sun is shining.” Every situation will pose distinctive challenges but it seems safe to say that to be able to carry its responsibilities well, a board needs to invest in its own capacity over time, ensuring the necessary range of skills – accounting and legal knowledge but also strong experience navigating contemporary culture and social issues. They need to meet for longer than routine business requires so that members can build a shared sense of connection and responsibility, proactively gaining insight into their organization through meeting and learning from staff and making a frank self-assessment of their ability to respond decisively, should an intervention be needed. A board chair and a director working together can guide this effort but there is no short cut – it happens in real time.

This is not to say that a group of well-intentioned board members, jolted out of complacency, cannot rescue a situation and steer their organization into calmer waters, but such an outcome is far from guaranteed. Governance does not have to be burdensome but it requires sustained attention. None of this, however, should be used to justify a board usurping management responsibility. The principle should be, “nose in, hands out” – follow closely, but respect boundaries.

3 • Leadership change as risk

One moment when an organization's health is always of critical importance is when there is the prospect of a leadership transition. Time and again, Symposium participants have chosen to discuss transitions. Their stories start when they begin to think of moving on and realize their organization and its board may be ill-prepared for the strains their departure would produce. They may end up staying too long despite being burned out and no longer having much passion for the work, always on the hunt for the ideal successor who remains elusive. I have mentioned that boards may not respond effectively to a director's exit. But our participants also speak of a loss of confidence and resilience among staff who may worry about change

or be fearful about their future under a new boss. A departing director may encounter donor ambivalence about committing to their successor, making them fear they will be the cause of a collapse in the organization's income. And sometimes – especially if they are founders - they discover their own fear that their organization will change after they leave, and try to reduce that risk by revising strategy and fundraising in advance and filling vacancies before they go, even though these steps may preempt their successor and tie their hands.

These and many other scenarios have been shared by our participants who have seen how a transition can go off the rails. Their core goal is to make sure their organization survives and the oft-posed question is, “what is the best way to achieve this?” A related question has often been, “when is the right time to start preparing for your exit? A year in advance? Three years?” Often what emerges from the answers is less a focus on a timetable, and more a focus on the organization's readiness.

In Symposium Principal Moderator Chris Stone's view, from your first day as an organizational leader, you should be working to assure your organization's ability to replace you at very little notice. Preparation includes hiring and keeping a team of skilled people who can be trusted to work effectively without micromanagement; a board that understands the organization and knows what it would need to do in the short and then the long run if you suddenly disappear and establishing practices and documentation that make the organization and its workings visible and understandable to those outside it. That way, donors can place their confidence in the organization, rather than relying primarily on their relationship with the director.

But the ability to ensure operational consistency is only one version of a healthy transition. A different concern raised by participants is that a leadership transition is often seen too narrowly as merely a change of personnel. Yet it could be so much more. A transition can be an opportunity to take stock, to celebrate what has been achieved, and open up to a conversation about new directions. A board and a staff leadership team who know and trust each other can provide the consistency and stability needed for a change of director that invites and makes use of creativity and imagination. Conversely, if the departing leader has not invested authority and bonds of mutual trust in those left behind, the transition may stall, leading to recriminations on all sides. What we hear from our participants is that in human rights fields around the world, leadership transitions are a work in progress and we believe this is an area where organizations and movements could be significantly stronger. These and other points are amplified by Ignacio Saiz in a valuable blog post on our website, *Transition take-aways – five tips on how to leave well.*⁴

4 • Restoring a faltering internal culture

A third, regularly surfacing topic from our conversations is organizational culture. It is no secret that the non-profit sector has, over the past five years, seen an upsurge in internal strife, with recriminations between staff and management, identity-based tensions and/

or intergenerational distrust. There is new confidence about challenging poor, or heavy-handed management or behavior that is at odds with an organization’s stated values.

For human rights organizations, these divisions cause pain on all sides. Internally, accusations that a leadership has fallen short in this sphere is taken as a sign that they have feet of clay, that they are not committed to the justice and rights they purport to defend. Externally, reputational risk for the organization is high, given a very public commitment to defending rights. Hostile governments are quick to seize on such criticisms as evidence that their critics are no better than they are. Painstaking efforts to understand contested events and competing explanations exhaust and distress all parties, yet may not achieve the hoped-for restitution, or rebuild trust. It is terrain that is easy to enter while distracted and inattentive to warning signs, but very hard to leave.

It is sometimes observed that these are problems more frequently found in US and European organizations and this may be true, or it may rather be that they get more attention than such tensions in other parts of the world, particularly given the intense and inflammatory nature of identity-based fissures in the metropole or the Global North (whatever your nomenclature of choice). Listening to our participants, my sense is that wherever they are in the world, they are experiencing sharper tensions in their organizations and that, as the world shrinks thanks to ever closer digital integration, the issues arising in New York are also arising in Bangkok, in Buenos Aires, in Lagos – perhaps not in exactly the same way, but close enough to be mutually recognizable.

Our participants are all organizational or movement leaders, so one aspect we frequently discuss is their experience of responsibility for trying to resolve deep division and polarization in their organizations. Their comments show that carrying responsibility for restoring a healthy culture is hard enough, doing so as members of minorities or as victims of exclusion themselves, in the face of expectations that are not informed by their experience, is even harder. Whether they are leading-while-women, while queer, while young, while members of a minority, they experience harsher critique and judgement when their organizations are divided. One young woman in an Asian country spoke about succeeding an older man as director. The age and gender prejudice and common assumption that she would do a poor job became a chronic thorn in the side of her internal management and colored assumptions by partners, donors and government.

5 • So what have we heard about solutions?

To judge from what our participants say, drivers of tension and sources of division are frequently more varied than often assumed, and may operate simultaneously, making it necessary to tease out distinctive causes and address them. While there are no quick fixes and no guaranteed formulas for building a resilient culture of respect in an organization, a couple of reflections seem regularly to emerge.

One is that while expressions of anger around identity and difference may be the leading edge of staff unhappiness, these may be rooted in, or aggravated by, poor management and weak support for overstretched team members. A leader who takes the trouble to observe the practice of the managers below them, to ensure they are adequately trained and to give honest feedback is investing in an organization that will be better able to handle conflict in the workplace. Many tensions begin with thoughtless, unfair or high-handed treatment by someone with management authority and these behaviors are common in people who have been given power over staff but do not have the skills or experience to manage well or whose fear of challengers make them too brittle to cope with feedback, or worse, causes them to probe for divisions to exploit.

Furthermore, even well-managed staff in human rights organizations will at times struggle and they need managers to show curiosity about their working experience and to do what is in their power to help. We have heard from participants about the difference it made to team health when they proactively took steps to acknowledge secondary trauma and burn-out and arranged access to regular counseling.

A second broad theme that has repeatedly surfaced is that organizational leaders need to be self-aware and to overcome the desire to avoid conflict and distress. Building a culture of respect in organizations requires a leader to be fully present for their teams. They may be busy, worried about funding shortfalls, fearful themselves or traumatized by the work or simply frustrated at what they see as navel-gazing by their staff, but it is they who set the tone. If they want a team that can work through disappointment and disagreement and come out the other side, as leaders they need to lean in and model that.

Participants have told us of the discomfort but ultimately the great value of sitting with staff who are disappointed with an aspect of their leadership and of hearing tough feedback. It is difficult for a leader to succeed without undertaking self-reflection on their role, their power and – importantly – what makes them afraid. One who seeks to advance rights and justice needs, as Audre Lorde puts it, to “reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears.”⁵ The ability to shepherd a team towards greater health and a culture of respect and trust requires a leader to model courage, honesty and openness. Doing the necessary introspection and gaining insight into what is driving your practice is key, not simply making a pro forma “acknowledgement” of your privilege and moving on.

6 • Donor impact on organizational health

In my caveat at the start, I acknowledged that it is not always clear where an organization’s health ends and the sector’s health begins. Nowhere is the boundary more fuzzy than where the relationship with donors is concerned.

Organizations do not and cannot control what donors do. Clearly, donors are a key part of the ecosystem in which an organization must operate, but grantees are responsible for their own health. Our participants would doubtless agree, but they are frank that navigating their relationship with donors is tough and that this affects the internal lives of their organizations. They routinely comment that donor preferences and strategy have undue impact, on both practical obligations like planning, staff assignment and other managerial choices, as well as on morale, anxiety about whether funding will continue, high stress when replacement funds have to be found, and so on.

While leaders are grateful to have financial support, they express anguish – the word is not too strong – about the challenge of managing donors’ mercurial reversals on past commitments, self-referential behaviors, their frequent lack of humility or worse, a lack of sufficient curiosity.

Inside the moderators’ team, we have argued about how to weigh the impact of donor practice as a factor in organizational culture. Clearly the health of organizations is impacted and even harmed when donors behave badly. But grantees so far, unsurprisingly, have not been keen to call out bad behavior, given the risk of alienating the source of their funding and while this remains the case, little is likely to change.

There is no space here to elaborate on arguments about how donors might better support healthy organizational culture through their policies and actions, but good published research and guidance exists⁶ about what works. Rather than framing the question around practice, it might be more useful to think in terms of power – how donors use theirs and what kinds of power grantees can gather and deploy to negotiate a less fraught relationship.

7 • In conclusion

The reflections captured throughout this article are a snapshot of contemporary conversations – a selection of issues that the human rights leaders we convene are sharing with each other. They point to places where there are opportunities for repair, where organizations can be made stronger and more stable in a tough environment and I have shared some of the approaches and strategies we have discussed.

Some from whom I sought feedback told me the account above is a pessimistic assessment of the current state of organizational health. I take a different view. You cannot solve a problem if it is not acknowledged. Hearing colleagues in the Symposium discuss these problems proactively and openly gives me confidence rather than concern. The courage to face internal dissent and to try and understand what is not working well and why, can only be positive. The more conservative voices in our field may complain that investing time and resources in organizational health is a self-indulgent diversion, a distraction from the important business of defending rights. It seems clear, however, amid the distressing organizational upheavals of

recent years, that this view is rooted in wishful thinking. There is no reasonable alternative to embracing opportunities to strengthen organizations and movements that defend and advance rights. Our conversations in the Symposium suggest leaders are ready and even keen to do the work required to achieve healthier – and therefore more effective – organizations.

Looking beyond a focus on organizational health, as I noted at the very start of this article, the headwinds currently buffeting the human rights field are worsening, and fortifying your organization, while vital, is far from sufficient. Our field is fragmented. It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on the critical need for an invigorated and more muscular solidarity in the human rights field, but in our view, the power that can be built through solidarity not only improves outcomes against oppressors and rights abusers but also strengthens organizations and improves their resilience. We believe that working to build *both* strength and solidarity is vital for surviving the storm.

NOTES

1 • “About,” Strength & Solidarity, 2022, accessed December 20, 2022, <http://strengthandsolidarity.org/about>.

2 • The Strength&Solidarity podcast, 2022, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://linktr.ee/strengthandsolidarity>.

3 • “Invitational Events,” Strength & Solidarity, 2022, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://strengthandsolidarity.org/engage/invitational-events/>.

4 • Ignacio Saiz, “Transition Take-aways: Five tips on how to leave well.” Strength & Solidarity, May 26, 2022, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://strengthandsolidarity.org/blog/transition-take->

[always-five-tips-on-how-to-leave-well/](#).

5 • Audre Lorde’s lecture, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, has proven one of the most popular readings we use in the Symposium, partly because it locates discussions about how and whether people collaborate well firmly around power - who has it, who depends on the power of others and in whose interest a real change in social relations might be.

6 • See, for example, “Leadership,” Trust Based Philanthropy Project, 2022, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/leadership>.



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