Movement Network Leader Case Study

Sarita Gupta
The Network Leadership Innovation Lab

The Network Leadership Innovation Lab is a multi-year program of dialogue, analysis, and active learning. It convenes social change leaders and taps the best thinkers and practitioners to advance our shared knowledge at the intersection of leadership development, organization and network strengthening and movement building. The Lab stimulates innovative thinking and new learning; captures how highly effective network leaders are currently working; and identifies ways to support and strengthen their work.

In the planning and design phase, the Lab brought together a diverse group of leaders to develop an agenda for learning and action. We identified a “design team” of seven executive directors who, in addition to leading their own organizations, are building and working within networks that are achieving real-world results. We then produced this and two other case studies that probe the characteristics of successful network leaders. In the next phase, we will work with this group of leaders as they deepen their learning and innovation, so that they can take existing networks to the next level—and we can learn from their efforts.

The Network Leadership Innovation Lab is in a nascent stage, but already it has produced a wealth of intriguing questions—and identified some promising practices. Some pioneering leaders are developing effective forms of leadership, organization, and capacity to connect across organizations and issue divides, constructing networks with the potential to achieve meaningful social change. The Network Leadership Innovation Lab will track the lessons learned from their triumphs and missteps—and seed new innovation more broadly.
About the Network Leadership Innovation Lab

A challenging context

Workers’ rights. Reproductive justice. Environmental protection. Immigration. Human and Civil Rights. On issue after issue, progressive social change leaders are locked in high-stakes struggles with well-funded opponents. And though we win individual battles from time to time, on a broader scale we are losing ground.

How can we catalyze meaningful, broad-scale change? It is increasingly clear that traditional approaches are not up to the task. In conversations with social change leaders, the same concerns emerge repeatedly. We spend too much time and energy on short-term, small-scale battles, rather than on systemic change. We construct tactical and transactional relationships, rather than lasting alliances. And we focus on organizational capacity and identity, often at the expense of movement building and increasing political power.

These blinkered approaches are not the result of individual or organizational failings; too often, an array of external factors and internal expectations keep us locked in. But, using these methods, we have not built the political power we need to win consistently and decisively.

The value of movement networks

Turning that around will require innovation at every level—in how we lead, connect and fund organizations working for social change. Today, many leaders—including Sarita Gupta of Jobs with Justice—are utilizing a potentially game-changing approach: “movement networks” (Katcher, 2011). These networks:

- Build long-term relationships among activists across organizational and issue divides;
- Intentionally contribute to a broader social movement;
- Use and coordinate multiple strategies;
- Focus on long-term gains while also advancing immediate opportunities; and
- Have relatively fluid boundaries of structure and membership.
The goal is to build movements that are larger than the sum of their parts; to amass political power; and to win on a broad range of progressive issues—not only in policy and legislation, but also in the battle for hearts and minds.

This approach shows great promise. This case study highlights several successful networks launched by Sarita and her colleagues. For example, the Caring Across Generations Campaign forged a diverse coalition that includes home caregivers, senior citizens, people with disabilities and immigrant advocacy organizations. Together, they fought to extend overtime and minimum-wage protections to home caregivers, prompting President Obama to announce a regulatory change that will bring coverage to 1.8 million home caregivers. More broadly, the Campaign has made visible the plight of workers in the “informal” sector, and it has united groups that have sometimes been at odds to understand and act upon their common interest.

But movement networks also present significant challenges. Like the social issues they address, movement networks are complex. And network leaders—working at the boundary between their own organization and a larger movement—must develop traits and skills that are distinct from those of traditional organizational leadership. They must balance the autonomy of individual members with the need for collective action and accountability. They must address the needs of existing and emerging members, while straddling political disagreements and differences in power, worldview and approaches to the work. And they must maintain transparency and engagement in decision-making processes while rapidly responding to changing conditions. Finally, they must thoughtfully transform aspects of how their own organization operates—often board development, strategy, and distribution of leadership—to align with larger movement and network efforts.

To realize the promise of movement networks, we must learn, together, how to address these challenges. We must embrace new models of leadership, build organizations that think and work differently, and create spaces for leaders to innovate and evolve. To those ends, the Management Assistance Group is developing the Network Leadership Innovation Lab (see inside front cover).

The definition of insanity, as Albert Einstein is thought to have said, is to do the same thing over and over again expecting a different result. For those of us working to advance progressive social change, now is the time to do something different. The Network Leadership Innovation Lab will lift up the experience of leaders at the forefront like Sarita and connect, inform and support them along the way.
About this case study

This is the first in a series of three in-depth case studies that seek to better understand effective networks, the leaders behind them, and the contexts that aid their success. To develop the case studies, MAG informally polled funders, advocates, and prominent thinkers to help identify effective leaders who are developing networks that span organizations and movements to achieve measurable results.

The leaders we spotlight in the case studies are exemplary, named by colleagues and funders as especially skilled at navigating network dynamics. But it is important to note that no one person leads a network; by definition, leadership in movement networks is widely distributed. The networks we studied have countless leaders, working at all levels—from neighborhood block captains to the CEOs of national organizations. The leaders we have profiled would be the first to note that within networks success depends on the efforts of many. Still, there is much to be learned from close examination of a few highly effective leaders who are innovating and experimenting in this area.

It is also important to note that networks, per se, are not new. Networks can be found everywhere—in the natural world and in human cultures across the globe. Successful network leadership is a feature of winning social movements throughout history. But, given the challenging political, economic and social context for social justice today, the rise of new technology that supports interaction, and the need to respond to opposition tactics, effective development of networks and navigation of their dynamics is particularly critical to success.

Our first case study focuses on Sarita Gupta, Executive Director of Jobs with Justice (JwJ), which recently merged with American Rights at Work. (See sidebar, page 4.) In addition to directing those organizations, Sarita plays a leadership role in a web of networks within and beyond the labor movement, including the Global Grassroots Justice Alliance; National Day Labor Organizing Network; National Domestic Workers Alliance; Pushback Network; Right to the City; and UNITY. (More information about those networks can be found in Appendix A.) To complete the case study, we conducted in-depth interviews with Sarita, as well as with 12 of Sarita’s colleagues, collaborators and funders. (A list of interviewees is available in Appendix B.) From these interviews, we sought to distill a set of principles for effective network leadership, and to explore how Sarita’s work embodies those principles.

Because we are at the beginning of this exploration, readers are cautioned not to assume that our findings apply beyond this one case. As we complete additional cases, we hope to identify which of these initial findings hold up across multiple cases and which are more idiosyncratic. We welcome feedback from readers on how well these preliminary findings resonate with your own experience.
Sarita Gupta: Portrait of a Network Leader

Sarita’s role

Spend any time at all with Sarita Gupta and you’re likely to hear about transformation—of people, organizations, movements and of social and political power. The 38 year-old Executive Director of Jobs with Justice (JwJ) is deeply engaged with a growing network of activists who are working for transformative social change.

Sarita’s own transformation as a leader began in the 1990s, when she became active in the U.S. Student Association (USSA), and ultimately served as that organization’s president. There, Sarita helped launch the Student Labor Action Project, a joint activity of USSA and Jobs with Justice. That led to four years heading Chicago JwJ, then to stints as JwJ Regional Field Organizer, National Field Director and finally Executive Director, a position Sarita has held for the last five years.

From these positions, Sarita has gained experience as a network leader at the local, national and movement levels. JwJ is itself a network, comprised of 46 local coalitions in 24 states. Each chapter builds a coalition that includes labor, community groups, communities of faith, youth, and workers who are not yet

Jobs With Justice

Jobs With Justice is a national network of local coalitions that brings together labor unions, faith groups, community organizations, and student activists to fight for working people. JwJ members are active in 46 cities in 24 states across the country. JwJ members “are there for one another's fights and unite to take on struggles that none of us could win alone. The only way we can win is if we stand together.”

Jobs with Justice builds long-term, formal coalitions of organizations and individuals. These lasting relationships help build the power needed to win real changes in the lives of working families and communities. As a national network of local coalitions, Jobs with Justice is ideally placed to run national campaigns that are based in the grassroots. Jobs with Justice’s national office coordinates collective action that magnifies the local coalitions’ individual impact.

Jobs with Justice seeks strategic fights that build power for working people and address the root causes of the problems facing workers and communities. Jobs with Justice coalitions work on a range of issues from labor law reform to health care; from union organizing campaigns to immigrant rights.

For more information on Jobs with Justice please visit www.jwj.org.
collectively organized. Together they work on economic and worker justice issues that impact their community. These coalitions inform JwJ’s work at the national level, while JwJ’s DC-based staff spearhead national campaigns that amplify the local coalitions’ impact.

Under Sarita’s leadership, JwJ has also helped launch several “networks of networks” that link organizations across traditional issue divides. Sarita helped co-found the InterAlliance Dialogue (IAD)—now called UNITY—comprised of Jobs with Justice, Global Grassroots Justice, National Domestic Workers Alliance, National Day Labor Organizing Network, Right to the City, and the Pushback Network. Sarita and partners (including those in UNITY) have helped to create and spur on other campaigns and projects that utilize a networked approach, notably the Excluded Workers’ Congress, the Caring Across Generations Campaign and the 99% Spring and 99% Power.

Assessing impact

It is difficult to assess the impact of leaders within networks; the very nature of networks is that leadership is jointly held and distributed and credit for any success is also shared. But it is safe to say that the networks Sarita has nurtured have been very effective, and many observers say that Sarita played an important role in ensuring their success.

While these networks’ impacts are emergent, they have already achieved results that may have been impossible for any single organization to achieve on its own. For example:

The Excluded Worker’s Congress engaged with a sector of workers that had been largely ignored by organized labor and government, to enhance their power and leverage. The Congress brought together organizations that represent a
base of workers that, either by law or by practice, are excluded from the right to organize in the United States—including domestic workers, farm workers, taxi drivers, day laborers, workers from Southern right-to-work states, and formerly incarcerated workers. None of these groups on their own were powerful enough to negotiate with labor and government directly. But, under the banner of the Excluded Workers Congress, these groups transformed relationships with government agencies, by, for example, establishing quarterly meetings and hearings with the Department of Labor (DOL) to address the needs of marginalized workers. Those meetings, in conjunction with the work of the Caring Across Generations campaign (see below), produced a suite of proposed DOL rule changes, including a mandate to provide minimum wage and overtime protections for 1.8 million homecare/domestic workers. The Congress is also working with the AFL-CIO and individual unions to jumpstart organizing among excluded workers and to move discussions about the changing nature of work and how that impacts organizing and policy solutions in the future.

The Caring Across Generations Campaign was born of three interconnected crises: a shortage of home caregivers to support the growing numbers of elderly and disabled Americans; a lack of basic job protections—such as minimum wage and overtime laws—for those caregivers; and the lack of affordable long-term care services for individuals and families. To address these concerns, the Caring Across Generations (CAG) Campaign was launched. CAG forged a coalition of groups that had not previously worked together: home caregivers, senior citizens, people with disabilities and immigrant advocacy organizations. The Campaign seeks to create two million good quality jobs in the home care sector; provide a pathway to citizenship for the existing immigrant care workforce; and to make sure that long-term care services are accessible and affordable to all families. CAG’s efforts, along with those of the Excluded Worker’s Congress, have already borne fruit. In December 2011, with CAG members at his side, President Obama announced a proposed rule change to extend overtime and minimum-wage protections to tens of thousands of home caregivers. And CAG’s accomplishments extend beyond the policy realm. The Campaign has made visible the plight of workers in the ever-growing “informal” sector, and it has united groups that have sometimes been at odds—caregivers and those that employ them—to understand and act upon their common interest.
The “99% Spring” and “99% Power.” The last year has seen a burst of organizing on economic issues, as Occupy Wall Street helped raise awareness about the growing gulf between the nation’s richest 1% and the remaining 99%. At the same time, UNITY organizers, led by JwJ and the National Domestic Workers Alliance, realized that many different kinds of groups—labor, housing, climate justice, banking reform—were launching campaigns to promote corporate accountability. UNITY and its partners at National People’s Action saw an opportunity to build these campaigns together, rather than in silos. More broadly, they saw a chance to parlay these efforts into a larger conversation about how to make the economy work for the 99%. UNITY partnered with National People’s Action, Move On, and the United Auto Workers to develop a training curriculum on economic justice. Some 100,000 people nationwide participated in the trainings, which examined the roots of the current economic crisis, envisioned alternatives and offered opportunities to get involved in activism. Following the trainings, UNITY groups partnered with several other organizations* to launch a series of shareholder actions throughout the Spring. Collectively, they mobilized over 25,000 people to participate in one or more of the actions, and generated proxy resolutions on issues such as executive pay. This effort generated substantial news coverage, and—among other victories—helped force numerous companies to drop their membership in the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council.

*New Bottom Line, National People’s Action, Rainforest Action Network, Communications Workers of America, Service Employees International Union, United Steelworkers, National Guestworkers Alliance, United Food and Commercial Workers, MoveOn, Enlace, Common Cause, Restaurant Opportunity Center, Public Citizen, 350.org, and Alliance for a Just Society.
As the examples above make clear, networks expand our notions of what change is possible and grow our collective capacity to realize that change. At the same time, networks are dynamic and complex, requiring leadership that differs from traditional notions of nonprofit management. Here, we explore the capabilities of one leader in order to illuminate broader principles of effective network leadership. Our conversations with Sarita and her colleagues provide some tantalizing initial answers to two essential questions:

- What do networks require of leaders generally; and
- What specific attributes and behaviors does Sarita exhibit that make her effective in a network space?

Interviewees identified seven keys to effective network leadership, and offered examples of how Sarita applies those skills and qualities:

1. **Build authentic relationships.**

   Respondents universally cited the ability to form authentic, long-term relationships—based on mutual trust and respect—as a crucial ingredient of network leadership. Effective network leaders are able to build deep connections across a variety of boundaries. These are not merely temporary, tactical alliances that dissolve when the immediate goal is reached; instead, they embody a lasting commitment to shared values. Authentic relationships are the glue that binds leaders, organizations, constituency groups, issues, and sectors; they form the basis of movement networks.

   “The first thing that comes to mind, especially in the network context and the movement-building context, is a capacity for sustained, respectful, authentic relationships as a building block for sustained collaboration, for deep collaboration, strategic partnership and alliance as opposed to tactical alliances.” *

   **How Sarita does it**

   **By embracing mutuality and reciprocity:**

   “She inherently builds a bedrock level of trust…on long-term sustained relations that are reciprocal and not one-sided. Fair exchange is not a hobby for her…It’s very genuine and not just about getting what she needs. It’s about her being in relationship with others. She reciprocates; she’ll be there for you.”

*Throughout this document, quotations are italicized, and those from Sarita Gupta are identified as such. To preserve the anonymity of interviewees, all other quotations remain unattributed.*
“[W]e had to start from a place of trust, that we’re actually all wanting the same thing, but we have to have a multifaceted way in which we’re getting there and we have to trust that we’re going to be there together through every aspect of this to make sure it doesn’t become the either/or or that the campaign is done when the workers get what they want.”

—Sarita Gupta, on the development of the Caring Across Generations Campaign

Think long term; act now.

Successful networks articulate and embrace an inspiring long-term vision, while responding to what Martin Luther King called “the fierce urgency of now.” Together, network members must understand, integrate, and contribute to a shared analysis of the movement and its context as well as a compelling vision of success in the face of that reality. At the same time, success on social justice issues is often elusive, and repeated losses can be demoralizing. Accordingly, respondents say that effective network leaders balance big-picture thinking with specific concrete actions. They help articulate a bold vision while pursuing achievable “wins” that keep network members motivated.

This balancing act is challenging for leaders of all organizations, but it is exponentially more difficult in networks, which require buy-in from a much larger and more diverse set of actors. Nor is this a one-time effort: a movement network’s analysis, vision and action are constantly shifting and evolving in response to changing circumstances.

“[A network leader] envisions what’s possible to do together that we can’t do on our own and articulates that vision…capturing the imagination of funders and leveraging these relationships, articulating it to the staff and the networks…so we see how time spent with [others in the networks] fits into our work in the long run and in the short run.”

“There needs to also be some very concrete common program. Just coming together on ideas or on a conceptual basis or a frame isn’t that helpful alone; because people need to be in motion together, to get the relationships, context and ground.”

How Sarita does it

With visionary leadership:

“She provides the ‘visionary glue’ and sees what is happening nationally and sees where the holes are and has relationships within the network and sees where folks fit into that picture. In this particular moment where the opposition has such strength it is
important to see where there is growth, where there is a need for resistance and how to build from there.”

“[It’s] not just about convening and facilitating others’ agreement but about providing and leading with your own political analysis.”

—Sarita Gupta

### Remain open and accountable.

The complexity of movement networks and the environments in which they operate require continual reflection and learning. Indeed, without the ability to learn, adapt, and change, networks wither and become irrelevant; they lose their ability to authentically respond to the needs of their members or to threats and opportunities in the larger world. Accordingly, effective network leaders are distinguished by a willingness to seek feedback from others, to listen deeply, and to act on the feedback they receive. In short, they are committed to remaining open and accountable.

“You need awareness and vigilance about what people are concerned about and what changes are taking place in the country…you need openness and willingness to always ask these questions without being proprietary about what answers you receive.”

“Some of the skills required are a willingness to get feedback and a willingness to really put yourself and your work forward for a certain kind of examination. It’s a willingness to be ignorant – to not know and to really be in inquiry with others. And all of that seems tied to accountability—one of the things that often leaders who have positional authority do not get…The higher up you move the less people are willing to talk to you about how they’re experiencing you or the impact of your work.”

### How Sarita does it

**Through deep listening one-on-one:**

“In part because JwJ is so broad [Sarita] can really listen to everyone and not come in with one agenda and push it forward. She listens for commonality and finds a place where forward motion can happen.”

**By remaining accountable to her base:**

“Sarita has incredible accountability and creates structures to be accountable and preserve nimbleness.”

“You need a real base on the ground willing to challenge the network leaders. It’s not enough to just have the leaders together… Transformative networks really require a base to test ‘Is it enough? Too much? The accountability keeps you grounded.”

—Sarita Gupta
Manage power dynamics.

The very nature of networks—their diversity of actors and approaches; their fluid boundaries of structure and membership; differentials in resources and capacity; and dynamics of race, ethnicity, gender and class—make certain tensions and power imbalances inevitable. Tensions may surface as management dilemmas, for example: in aligning different organizational self-interests and political positions; balancing structure with nimbleness; addressing concerns about credit and legitimacy; and ensuring the success of the movement as well as its component organizations. Network leadership requires an ability to understand these dynamics; to hold an entire, complex picture of the network and to track and respond to flows of power, resources and levels of agreement and disagreement.

Effective leaders manage power dynamics through both visible and invisible tasks. They spend time attending to the non-glamorous, behind-the-scenes work of maintaining relationships and communications. They genuinely value the contributions each actor brings to the table and parlay their different contributions into greater impact. At the same time, they make the workings of the network as transparent as possible by, for example, being explicit about operating agreements that guide the network’s functioning. They foster constructive discussion of power imbalances, management dilemmas and other tensions that simmer below the surface. And they are open about how decisions and trade-offs are made.

Finally, effective network leaders are mindful of the inherent conflict between maintaining the fiscal health of the network as a whole and that of its component organizations—a conflict exacerbated by the exigencies of fundraising (a concern we will explore in future publications). Working to ensure adequate resources for the network and its component parts requires a commitment to fairness and equity and, often, skillful navigation of funder-grantee relationships.

“At a table with 20 groups, some with lots more power and resources, imbalances show up as disagreements about priorities; there’s the potential for either losing the power players or having the others feel like tokens... It’s a long road to handling power imbalances.”

“The ‘isms’ of race, gender and class can determine who is seen as credible. “Isms” don’t show up so much at [the organizational level], but do show up in other spaces like Beltway posturing on national campaigns where the white male network gets more play.”

“You have to be able to distinguish between what’s a problem that can get solved versus what is a dilemma which just has to be managed versus what is a nuisance which needs to be ignored.”
“If there are one or a handful of people who are seen as the leaders of the network…that can create tensions for those who are not. Yet someone needs to be responsible for the good functioning of the network without being seen as taking over.”

“I think what’s really hard is every individual organization is struggling to raise resources. You don’t want the interest of the network to be pitted against the interest of its individual members in terms of resources or otherwise.”

How Sarita does it

By attending to invisible leadership tasks:
“She’s not only able to lead in terms of…what she says in meetings…but she does the invisible work, which is the real connective tissue, the stuff that people don’t even recognize because things are moving smoothly. It’s usually when things start breaking down that you start to realize an absence of leadership or a failure of leadership. But powerful leadership is the invisible leadership that actually makes things go and makes things go smoothly… She follows up. She has the pre-conversations. She has the post-conversations. She puts together plans. She is really good at both leading and implementing, and I think that helps instill a lot of trust and confidence.”

By respecting organizational autonomy and different contributions to the whole:
“One of the reasons she has so much respect and credibility is that…people know that she is personally invested in trying to understand what do you need, what do you bring to the table, what do you need to be supported at the table, what are your institutional concerns, what are your individual concerns? I think this allows her to have a broad bird’s eye picture that’s a more global view of how all of the pieces will work together.”

“The reason she is a successful bridge across really different kinds of organizations, in terms of cultures, size, scale and resources, is because she actually really does respect and value everything that all different kinds of organizations bring. She really believes in a social movement ecosystem and that there are roles for lots of different kinds of organizations and value to their contributions.”

Through intentional learning and dialogue with others:
“The ability to work collectively, consult with lots of different people—I guess a lot of patience. A lot of network building is about really honoring people’s independence and their autonomy while also continuing to remind people of why it’s important to come together. That takes a lot of work.”

By negotiating with funders to reduce competition for funds:
“[We] made it very clear to funders that money for UNITY should be from the larger foundations who have more resources to give, and not from [the smaller foundations that were already funding the individual networks and organizations that constitute}
UNITY. We said to [smaller funder] ‘We know you’re excited about UNITY, but you should fund a piece of the work and you should fund the networks to engage in UNITY and the member organizations versus [funding] UNITY itself.’”

—Sarita Gupta

**5** Share and develop leadership.

Again, leadership in networks is—by definition—widely distributed. If networks are to succeed, there is little room for big egos or for holding on to power. Accordingly, humility is a signal trait of effective network leaders. They are able to step up and take responsibility, yet they are comfortable sharing power and credit. They are scrupulous about consulting with constituents and stakeholders before making decisions. And effective network leaders are committed to leadership development; they honor and nurture the leadership capacities of others.

“It is especially important for…leaders to see themselves as servants rather than ego being a major part of it, because again, [the network] has to be completely committed to leadership development.”

“Ultimately, those of us who really believe in networks also recognize that part of transforming society is leadership development, and that is best done through networks—to spread those skills, to spread those strategies, to have it grow.”

**How Sarita does it**

**By humbly stepping into leadership voids with a bold vision:**

“She is very proactive in every space – she’s not the executive director of every space, but it’s as if she is responsible for that level of leadership in every space.”

**By sharing decision-making:**

“She’s always assessing who needs to be involved; has the pulse of the longer vision of the network… Always asks ‘who do we need to run this by'? Considering different stakeholders in networks she asks about every one of these folks and their level of engagement.”
Find your organization’s place within the larger movement.

Leading an effective organization presents one set of challenges; leading an organization that is part of a larger movement adds another layer of complexity. Successful network leaders inhabit the boundary between organization and movement; they must simultaneously lead (and transform) their own organizations so that they can advance organizational, network- and movement-level objectives. This requires clarity about the organization’s mission and goals, and an understanding of how those fit within the broader aims of the network and movement.

“There’s a tension between building organizations and building movement…that leaders sit with. Awareness of that tension is really important; the ability to be fairly transparent about that tension with one’s own organization, with one’s own board, with one’s own members – to actually build an organizational culture that can hold that tension, as opposed to the pride of empire which we have seen in the past….It’s the ability to have a sense of an organization’s particular contribution and to really hold that with real authority and certainty and at the same time recognize that that is a tiny piece of all that’s needed, and [having] that deeply inside the organizational culture feels really critical – and really challenging.”

How Sarita does it

By striving for clarity about her organization’s role:
“I think when you don’t have clarity on [your organization’s] role, and outcomes and goals on that level, it makes it harder for you to operate in a networked space or a broader movement space. That’s when it feels very abstract.”

— Sarita Gupta

By embodying a genuine commitment to the broader network and movement:
“People really respect her. They see her as somebody who’s very fair, who has the greater goals and missions of the network in mind, rather than somebody who’s just concerned about her own or JwJ’s interests.”
Embrace uncertainty; stay grounded.

Network leadership is difficult. Both networks and the issues they address are fluid and tumultuous, requiring leaders to remain flexible and calm in the face of change and conflict. Successful network leaders make it look easy, but their equilibrium often rests on a foundation of internal work, discipline and self-care. To remain grounded, it is helpful to have clarity about one’s own role, and that of one’s organization and movement. But it is also necessary to embrace uncertainty, and to accept the possibility of failure.

“I guess comfort with uncertainty means accepting all the discomfort of it and acknowledging that it’s real and then just being with the response to it. [We’re] in a time of such enormous transition and change…. [it requires] being flexible. So that’s part of it—really figuring out how you can shape an organizational culture around that.”

How Sarita does it

By upping her game in times of crisis:
“When emotions are really high, when people are really amped up…that’s precisely when she gets her smartest. She is totally unwavered by that level of emotion. Emotional registers and pitches don’t faze her. She is able to be equally as effective and strategic even when things get really crazy. She is consistently strategic and can use those moments to create forward motion.”

By looking within:
“I actually have spent a lot of time thinking about my inner work in relationship to my outer work….in terms of being a leader and finding practices on a regular basis that ground me so that I can actually come to each of these roles with both a desire to keep learning, a desire to learn from mistakes – like to accept the fact that I’ll make mistakes along the way – and an ability to be disciplined about what role I’m playing when and how I’m advancing the needs of which entity and when. This allows me to be clear coming in, and not be threatened by roles that others want to play. It’s easy to go to the coalition/movement spaces and be competitive. There is a moment I realized how counter this is to movement building.”

—Sarita Gupta

By caring for herself:
“[Regular reflective writing, coaching, exercise and yoga, and meditation] has been a really important part of what’s allowed me to manage these different settings.”

—Sarita Gupta
Leadership in movement networks requires traits and skills that are distinct from those of traditional organizational leadership. For example, traditional models call for a laserlike focus on the interests and goals of the organization, while network leaders must balance a more diverse, and often conflicting, set of concerns. Traditional leadership models elevate high-profile, charismatic executives, while network leaders are noted for their humility and willingness to let others shine.

Sarita Gupta is by all accounts an extraordinary leader; a pioneer who has learned to navigate and thrive in the fluid context of network-building. The traits of successful network leadership, which Sarita embodies, can be understood and, to some degree, cultivated. That is the purpose of this series of case studies, and of the Network Leadership Innovation Lab more generally.

Finally, while the focus of these case studies is on individual leaders, our work to date makes clear that effective networks are not all about the individual. Equally important is the “enabling environment” that supports the work of network leaders. The enabling environment, and the ways in which successful leaders shape and navigate that environment, will be a focus of future NLIL inquiry and publications.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Organizations and networks in which Sarita participates

**99% Spring** offers training on economic justice, including the roots of the current economic crisis and opportunities to get involved in activism.
http://the99spring.com

**99% Power** is a coalition of “workers and retirees, families fighting foreclosure and the unemployed, students, immigrants and environmentalists, who have united together to build an economy and a democracy that works for all us, not just for the 1%.”
http://www.the99power.org

**American Rights at Work** “informs the American public about the struggle to win workplace democracy for nurses, cooks, computer programmers, retail cashiers, and a variety of workers who we all depend on every day. Our vision is a nation where the freedom of workers to organize unions and bargain collectively with employers is guaranteed and promoted.”
http://www.americanrightsatwork.org/about-us.html

**Caring Across Generations Campaign** “is bringing together the stories of seniors, people with disabilities, working families, and direct care workers into one campaign to ensure freedom and dignity for the workers who provide care and those they support.”
http://www.caringacrossgenerations.org

**Excluded Workers’ Congress** “believes that all people who work, regardless of the temporary nature of their work, their lack of a fixed workplace, their immigration status, any previous criminal convictions, whether they currently have a job or not, how they are classified or misclassified, or their lack of a traditional collective bargaining structure have the human right to organize and deserve working conditions of respect and dignity.”
www.excludedworkerscongress.org

**Global Grassroots Justice Alliance** is “a national alliance of grassroots organizations building a popular movement for peace, democracy and a sustainable world. We support each other’s local struggles and collaborate with international allies who share our vision and commitment to building a transformative social justice movement beyond borders.”
http://ggjalliance.org
Jobs With Justice is “a national network of local coalitions that bring together labor unions, faith groups, community organizations, and student activists to fight for working people.”
http://www.jwj.org

National Day Labor Organizing Network “improves the lives of day laborers in the United States. To this end, NDLON works to unify and strengthen its member organizations to be more strategic and effective in their efforts to develop leadership, mobilize, and organize day laborers in order to protect and expand their civil, labor and human rights. NDLON fosters safer more humane environments for day laborers, both men and women, to earn a living, contribute to society, and integrate into the community.”
http://ndlon.com

National Domestic Workers Alliance “is the nation’s leading voice for the millions of domestic workers in the United States, most of whom are women. NDWA is powered by 35 local, membership-based affiliate organizations of over 10,000 nannies, housekeepers and caregivers for the elderly located in 19 cities and 11 states around the country.
www.domesticworkers.org

Pushback Network “connects the infrastructures of well-established, high-performance community organizing groups from across the country to achieve a breakthrough in civic participation. Each state in the Network is lead by anchor organizations which guide strategic planning and coordinate the development of broad-based alliances of on-the-ground, grassroots workers, activists and ordinary residents committed to change.”
pushbacknetwork.org

Right to the City “emerged in 2007 as a unified response to gentrification and a call to halt the displacement of low-income people, people of color, marginalized LGBTQ communities, and youths of color from their historic urban neighborhoods. We are a national alliance of racial, economic and environmental justice organizations.”
www.righttothecity.org

UNITY was formed to: “respond to the current economic and environmental crises by developing a bold agenda for change founded on a vision of just, equitable and democratic recovery; ensure that our base constituencies – historically marginalized communities, especially communities of color – are at the forefront of efforts for transformative social change; achieve a level of scale and power that we are unable to reach through our individual national networks/ alliances; and develop our local, regional and national capacity to win.”
http://theunityalliance.org/
## Appendix B

**People interviewed for this case study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mackenzie Baris</td>
<td>Director, DC Jobs With Justice (JwJ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Booth</td>
<td>Assistant to the President, American Federation of State, County &amp; Municipal Employees (AFSCME)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret Butler</td>
<td>Director Portland JwJ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treston Davis-Faulkner</td>
<td>Field Director, JwJ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lara Granich</td>
<td>Director, MO JwJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marielena Hincapié</td>
<td>Executive Director, National Immigration Law Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverend Calvin Morris</td>
<td>Executive Director, Community Renewal Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>Huy Ong</td>
<td>Field Organizer, JwJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ai-jen Poo</td>
<td>Director, National Domestic Workers Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Erica Smiley</td>
<td>Senior Field Organizer, JwJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saket Soni</td>
<td>Director, National Guestworkers Alliance and New Orleans Workers Center for Racial Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alta Starr</td>
<td>Program Officer, Ford Foundation</td>
</tr>
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About the Management Assistance Group

The Management Assistance Group (MAG) strengthens visionary social justice organizations, leaders and networks to create a more just world. To those ends, we develop innovative approaches to capacity building; conduct research on critical organizational issues faced by our clients; and share our insights with the social justice sector and the nonprofit organizational development field.

Over three decades, we have worked in partnership with more than 1,000 local, state, national, and international organizations, leaders, networks, and funders of varying size and focus. We help our clients develop powerful strategies for change, and build the clarity of purpose and effectiveness they need to achieve their goals.

Our work supports individual leaders and organizations, as well as larger multi-organization efforts and movements. This multi-level perspective informs our ability to help clients with strategic planning, fundraising, adjusting to growth and change, managing people, organizational restructuring, board development, coalition building and more. Our diverse team of consultants combines knowledge of organizational development with a deep understanding of the strategies organizations use to advance social justice.

For a list of MAG’s clients, client testimonies, and case studies, please go to our website at www.ManagementAssistance.org.