The Power of Relational Influence

The subject of power has catapulted to the forefront of systems change conversations. There is widespread recognition that unless power dynamics change, the structural reforms we achieve will neither be sustainable nor lead to genuine equity. And yet, why do we still feel like we are miles away from understanding it? One thing is clear, our reckoning with racial oppression and the vast inequities highlighted by the pandemic have only reinforced the need to understand the nature of power and how it can be rebalanced.

Hypothesis: Power transforms through increasing relational influence between diverse actors that, in turn, change the underlying values of the system.

Although transforming a system requires fundamental changes in mental models, relationships and power dynamics, history shows us that intentions often flounder when it comes to dominant actors “sharing” power. Understanding how this change can occur, what are the conditions that allow it to take place - and stay in place - in an equitable way is at the heart of justice filled systems change. We believe that for power dynamics to really change in ways that shift systems towards equity and justice, the most important question isn’t who has power and who doesn’t, but how power is exercised (relational influence[1]), and what informs it (values). Power is not only a “what” and a “who” how but more importantly a “how” and a “why”.

Examples from the field and our own experience lead us to believe that power transforms when the underlying values of a system change. And what makes the values change? The experience of being in a sustained, authentic, deep relationship with others. What transforms power is not (only) who is in control or not, but when “all” of us (authentically) are interacting together, and learn from and about each other in ways that open up new realities. This creates the opportunity for shifts in relational influence and values.

Exploration

In this exploration we hope to bring concrete examples and suggestions about how power dynamics can radically change, with an emphasis on the education field. Recent reform efforts in the U.S. education field have focused on transforming power dynamics between the institutional power and those for which the system exists in the first place: students. All around the country, educators and administrators are willingly challenging their traditional ways of exercising power to engage with parents and students in decision-making (for instance, crafting school discipline policies, curriculum content, and even whole school redesign). In the instances where we have seen these changes in power dynamics occur in an authentic and impactful way, mental models from system actors have radically shifted due to relational practices such as empathy interviews, student shadowing, and healing circles. These practices have exposed institutional power holders to “feeling” the pain and the hope of those experiencing the inequities, a radically different experience from “seeing” the inequities of the system in disaggregated data during technical meetings with other administrators.
Although we are committed to co-designing this exploration, we initially envision engaging in an Action Research effort to bring concrete examples and suggestions about how power dynamics can radically change through increasing and strengthening the relational influence of diverse actors, particularly for traditionally marginalized youth and communities. We are currently exploring co-creation and partnership opportunities with two collective systems change networks.

We believe that a solid guiding frame for this exploration is the work of movement building and community organizing. Community organizers have great wisdom about how to nurture relationships and facilitate interactions that build the power of people and communities to transform power. Dr. Hahrie Han’s distinctions between transactional mobilizing and transformational organizing highlight the importance of relationships to transform the motivations and reach of power[2]. Professor Manuel Pastor at the University of Southern California has made similar observations.[3]

**Action Research Parameters**

**Objective:** Explore collective systems change networks that have transformed power dynamics between those in authoritative positions of power who traditionally have all the decision making, control and influence (e.g. public institutions and philanthropic funders) and those most impacted by the system (e.g. youth and community stakeholders),

**Methodology:** Identify specific collective efforts interested in exploring the subject of relational influence and how their efforts have effectively and authentically transformed power dynamics in their systems.

- Build a collective understanding with backbone leaders of what power dynamics currently enable or hinder equitable system outcomes.
- Interview and co-create containers and processes with current systems, youth and community leaders to better understand how they perceive power dynamics shifting in their efforts.

**Outcome:** Develop concrete examples, principles, frameworks and processes that can assist and guide OYS collaborative and other collective impact efforts increasing the relational influence of diverse actors, particularly for traditionally marginalized youth and communities.

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[1] We define relational influence as the depth and breadth of relationships one has that exhibit reciprocity.