Bridge-Building and Power-Building

An Ecosystem Approach to Social Change

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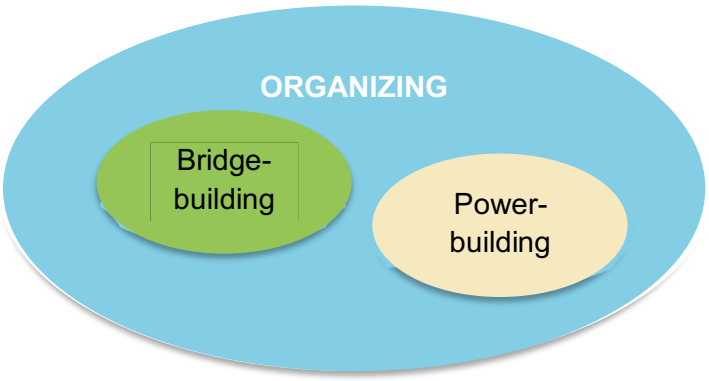
Purpose: This overview is the first in a series of short publications meant to help activists, bridge-builders, and organizers better understand how their work can reinforce one another, as well as be in constructive tension, within the ecosystem of social change. It also shares key insights and tools to help manage the constructive tensions, recognizing that different individuals and approaches to change have valid and important roles to play in our work to collectively build a just, inclusive, pluralistic democracy. (This is by no means an exhaustive list, and Horizons looks forward to continuing to improve upon this overview and adding more resources over time in collaboration with our many partners.)

CORE CONCEPTS

What is power-building?	**What is bridge-building?**
Power-building is an approach to building influence and support through fostering awareness and mobilizing people for action. This approach centers the need and raises the urgency to right power imbalances that have often led to injustice and exploitation. It focuses on the structural and systemic nature of those injustices. Power-builders see power not as a finite resource, but one that can be expanded and lead to the expansion of other resources when diverse, broad-based coalitions and movements are mobilized for a particular goal.	**Bridge-building** is an approach to building meaningful connections among people from across social, economic, political, and other demographic divides. This approach centers relationship- and trust-building and emphasizes listening and finding common ground as a first step to working towards change together. Bridge-building can be used to build coalitions among allies in the short-term, while also creating space for others not yet ready to come to the table in the long-term.
What is organizing?	
Organizing is a way of working that centers bridge-building and power-building approaches with leadership to move people and resources towards a collective goal. The Leading Change Network defines leadership as "accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve purpose in the face of uncertainty" and organizing as "leadership that enables people to turn the resources they have into the power they need to make the change they want."	



How can bridge-building and power-building reinforce one another?

Power-builders often use the principles and tactics of **strategic nonviolent action** and **organizing** to leverage resources and interests to build movements and coalitions that can achieve shared goals. **By maintaining nonviolent discipline**, power-builders can: • **Hold the moral high ground**, especially if opposing forces resort to violence, • **Build legitimacy and buy-in** for a movement and/or cause, and • **Encourage greater participation**, a critical contributor to a movement or campaign's success. **Effective power-builders are also strategic in using a diversity of nonviolent action tactics** to take advantage of key moments and spaces to mobilize people and raise the urgency for moving change in a particular issue area forward. However, building the buy-in to consolidate gains through compromise in the short-term and maintaining momentum and resilience in the long-term are common challenges among the power-building community.	**Bridge-builders** often use **dialogue**, **mediation**, **negotiation**, and other **community cohesion-building tactics** for the purpose of developing understanding, empathy, and relationships to find common ground and solutions on which communities can move forward together. **By building understanding and relationships**, bridge-builders can: • **Help break down unhelpful meta-perceptions and assumptions** that fuel dehumanization and toxic polarization, • **Develop trust among diverse actors** that can help gain **legitimacy** and **buy-in** for common ground solutions, and • **Encourage active citizen engagement** to work towards those solutions. **Effective bridge-builders are able to manage tensions while centering the common humanity** of people for long-term, **sustainable** relationship development and problem-solving. However, this longer-term emphasis often comes at the expense of the bridge-building community's ability to tackle deep-rooted issues like structural or societal power imbalances, which can lead to disillusionment and skepticism of these tactics.
Source of legitimacy and buy-in	
• **Size and diversity of participation** • **Nonviolent discipline** • **Expanding the range of tactics** to build power and encourage diverse participation • **Commitment to addressing tough issues,** even if it means raising short-term tensions	• **Emphasis on long-term relationships and trust** • **Centering empathy and understanding** • **Creating constructive spaces** to address key issues and tensions • **Ensuring space in the "Beloved Community,"** even for those who are not yet ready for it

While these approaches can be in tension with one another—in general, power-building often seeks to escalate an issue so that it cannot be ignored, while bridge-building endeavors to de-escalate tensions to find harmony—the truth is, we need them both. We cannot address deeply rooted issues if they are not brought to the surface, and very few people do their best problem solving while in a state of anger or being put on the defensive. **Luckily, the challenges that each of these approaches face can be mitigated and addressed by key strengths of the other approach if sequenced and built upon strategically:**

Sources: Nadine Bloch, Adam Curle, Veronique Dudouet, Marshall Ganz, Lisa Schirch, Maria J. Stephan, Tabatha Pilgrim Thompson, Leading Change Network

Opportunities for reinforcement	
Key bridge-building strengths • **Builds consensus and facilitates compromise** among key constituencies, decreasing the likelihood for spoilers and resolving or de-escalating intra-group conflicts • **Strengthens possibility of bringing new people** into a campaign or movement • **Consolidates gains in formal and informal institutions and norms**, increasing sustainability	**Key power-building challenges and weaknesses** ⇒ **Expanding beyond the base and meaningfully engaging** with those who may disagree. ⇒ **Building consensus and compromise among diverse groups** for short-term wins that can build towards long-term goals ⇒ Maintaining **momentum and resilience**
Key power-building strengths • **Raises the urgency and awareness** of a key issue to make it "ripe" for addressing • **Lessens the power imbalance** to make it harder for those in power to stall progress • **Builds a sense of belonging, solidarity and purpose** through collective action.	**Key bridge-building challenges and weaknesses** ⇒ **Recognizing, respecting, and managing constructive tensions** as normal ⇒ **Seeing conflict and polarization as constructive** and necessary for positive change ⇒ **Getting stuck or shying away from difficult issues** for the sake of preserving a sense of stability

What does organizing that integrates these approaches look like in practice?

People doing power-building and bridge-building work do so through organizing people and resources to build core infrastructure to reach their goals. If we think about the ecosystem of social change as an evergreen tree (see below), **organizing** is the *pith*—it carries the essential nutrients up the trunk to the rest of the tree. The **core infrastructure**, which can include organizations, movements, coalitions, networks, and community groups, is the *heartwood* with connecting fibers bound together for a strong foundation. The **power- and bridge-building tactics and approaches** are the *growth rings*, where changemaking happens by creating space for addressing key issues and injustices while centering relationships. The **short- and mid-term gains** are the *leaves*. As we move our ecosystem towards **a just, inclusive, and peaceful democracy**, our democracy itself becomes the *tree.*

Sources: Nadine Bloch, Adam Curle, Veronique Dudouet, Marshall Ganz, Lisa Schirch, Maria J. Stephan, Tabatha Pilgrim Thompson, Leading Change Network

We can also think about **power- and bridge- or relationship-building approaches** along a Y- and X-axis respectively, where, in the end, we reach a collective goal of **a just, inclusive, and peaceful democracy** (see left). As we work our way along each axis, we are working to balance power, while building more sustainable relationships. Along the way, we may encounter **inflection points for change or achieve a key win** using a combination of tactics from both fields to move us along. Too much emphasis on one approach over the other may not move us as quickly along the axes as we would like and could even send us backwards from our goal. However, with strategic planning and coordination, and an appreciation and understanding for who is best placed to do the work needed, we could ensure that these setbacks are less likely to occur.

Sources: Nadine Bloch, Adam Curle, Veronique Dudouet, Marshall Ganz, Lisa Schirch, Maria J. Stephan, Tabatha Pilgrim Thompson, Leading Change Network

**Note: This diagram has been adapted from Veronique Dudouet's Powering to Peace Special Report for the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2017 (Figure 2) and the U.S. Institute of Peace's Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding Guide, 2018 (Figure 2).*

Practical tips and tools for everyone:

- Transforming the Colour of US Peacebuilding: Types of Dialogue to Protect and Advance Multi-Racial Democracy
- Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding Guide and Online Course
- Leading Change Network Organizers Handbook

For more information and/or to provide feedback:

- Email us at info@horizonsproject.us and follow us on Twitter and LinkedIn!

Sources: Nadine Bloch, Adam Curle, Veronique Dudouet, Marshall Ganz, Lisa Schirch, Maria J. Stephan, Tabatha Pilgrim Thompson, Leading Change Network