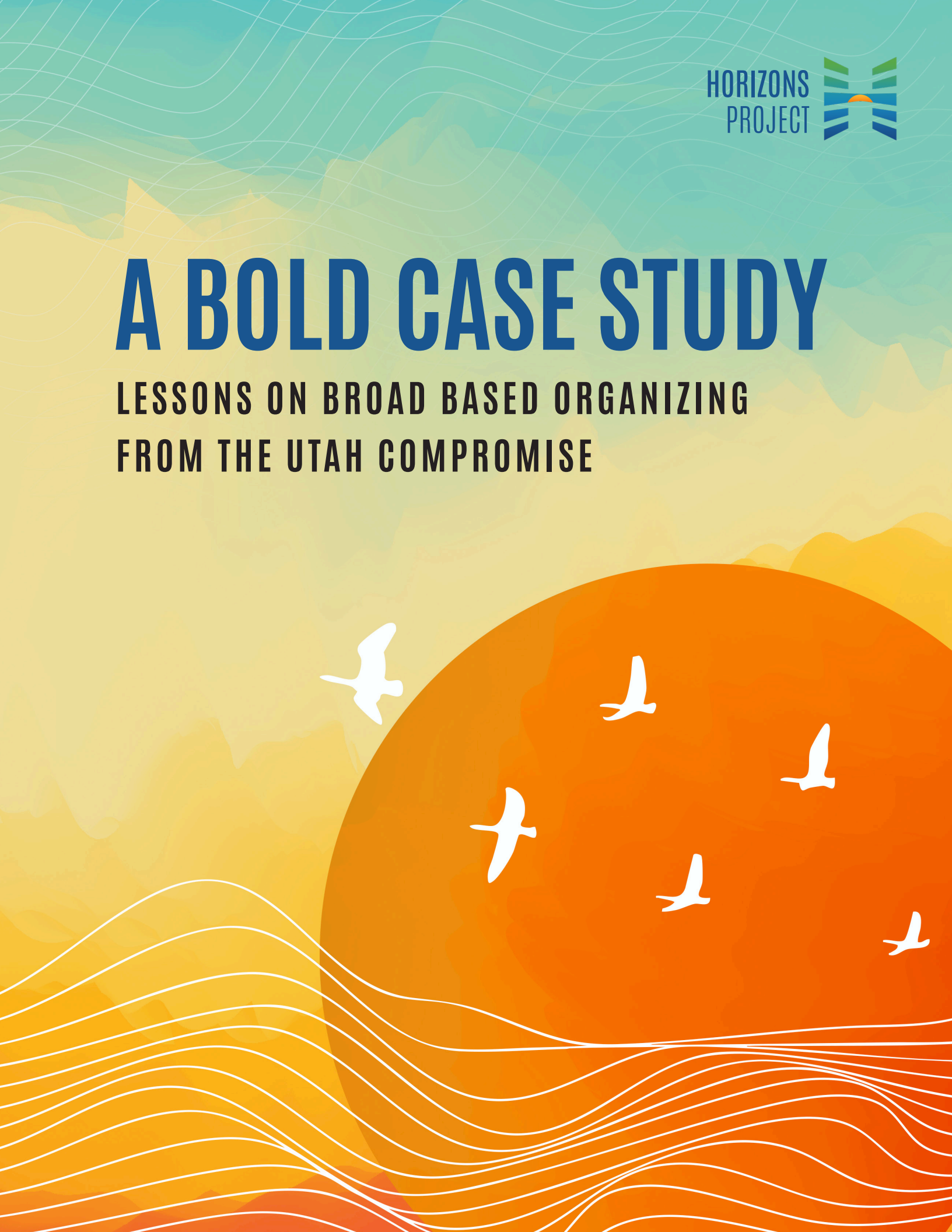
HORIZONS PROJECT

A BOLD CASE STUDY

LESSONS ON BROAD BASED ORGANIZING FROM THE UTAH COMPROMISE





OVERVIEW

In 2015, Utah Senate Bills 296 and 297 passed in a landmark win that coupled non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ+ people in employment and housing with religious liberty protections, reaching common ground across diverse communities previously unwilling to engage with one another.

The road to the passage of the bill was long and hard and started well before 2015. It took a combination of tactics and approaches from strategic nonviolent action and organizing to build power, to authentic relationship building and dialogue to build trust.

This case study is informed by interviews with individuals involved at different intersections of the Utah Compromise.

This resource seeks to surface insights and lessons learned for organizers, bridge-builders, and activists working toward a multi-racial, pluralistic, and inclusive democracy. It offers the following key takeaways for effectively engaging across difference to build power, deepen trust, and create sustainable change:

1 Strategic planning and preparation makes campaigns and movements more effective.

A deep understanding of the conditions of power and building capacity for a range of tactics supports movements in staying adaptive and seizing key opportunities for change.

2 Investing in trust.

Relationship building, base-building, and organizing work provide the key ingredients for forging a sustainable solution: community buy-in and shared ownership.

3 Finding common ground.

Identifying the interests, values, and motivators that are shared across diverse communities can deepen connectors, minimize dividers, and create opportunities to pursue sustainable change.

4 Getting curious in tension.

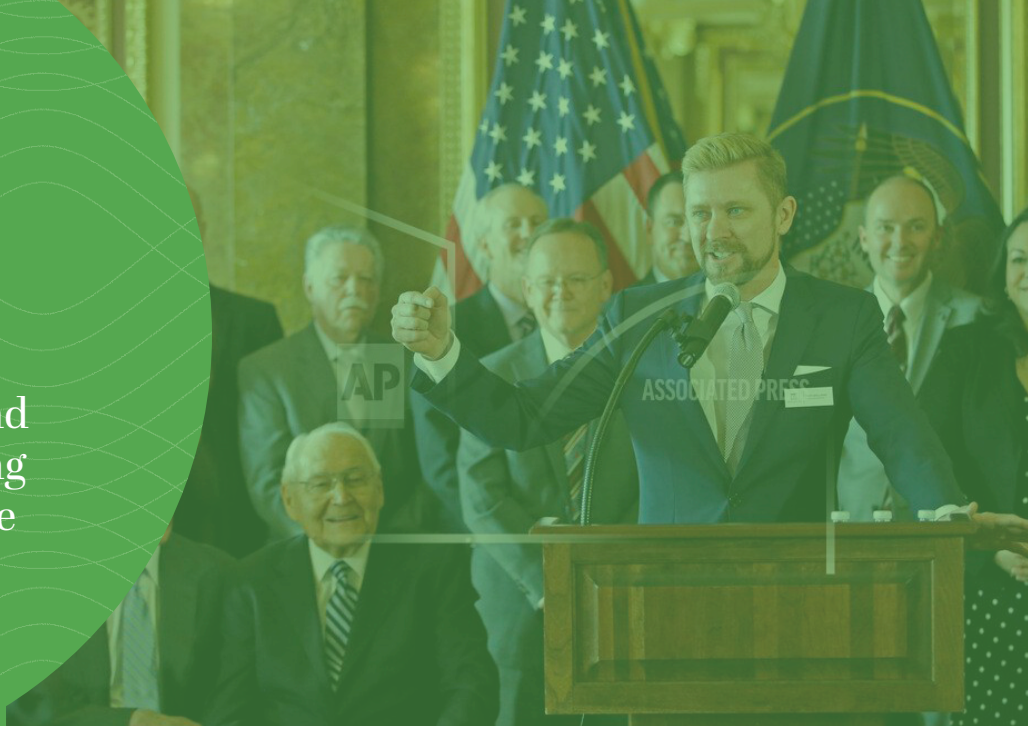
Staying turned towards the issue through moments of challenge is critical to success and requires training, coaching, patience, and discipline.

5 Modelling the leadership and community you want to see now.

The emphasis on "bringing people along", which often takes time, supports movements in fostering shared ownership of the solution, curbing backlash, and paving the way for sustainable change.

UTAH IN CONTEXT

Years of dialogue and relational organizing were essential to the Utah Compromise.



Impacted communities sharpened their analysis and understanding of their unique contexts, enabling them to seize opportunities as momentum began shifting their way. Utah is a deeply conservative State, with the Republican Party generally holding 80-90% of the legislature. In addition, Utah is unique in its very high representation of a single religious denomination, with around 60% of the general population and close to 90% of the legislature identifying as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). This power landscape in the State of Utah had made efforts to protect LGBTQ+ communities, particularly at the State level, incredibly challenging.

However, things began to shift in 2008 when the LDS Church received sharp criticism from within and from outside their community for its role in organizing for the passage of Proposition 8 in California, banning same sex marriage in the State. While the LDS Church was certainly not the only faith community investing in the efforts of Proposition 8, they took on a central and highly visible leadership role given their ability to organize people and mobilize resources quickly. In Utah in particular, community members grew critical of the Church's role in advocating for an increasingly unpopular position in a faraway state. LGBTQ+ rights organizations in Utah mobilized in that moment to take stock of the key **strengths and weaknesses** of their movement, and to identify the greatest **threats and opportunities** (see callout box on page 3) for their cause, engaging in a range of organizing tactics that built momentum around the shifting public opinion.

SWOT Tool →

The Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Tool is a strategic planning exercise that can help you think through your, your organization, and/or your coalition's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats you may encounter as part of your work. This knowledge can help you identify best case scenarios, mobilization opportunities, missed opportunities, and worst case scenarios so that you can make more informed plans and use your resources effectively.



Nonviolent Action

Waging struggle for political, economic, or social objectives without the use or threat of violence. It can include protest, sit-ins, strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, and constructive interventions. This approach raises the urgency and awareness of a key issue to make it "ripe" for addressing. Explore different nonviolent action tactics with Gene Sharp's 198 methods of nonviolence action and Pg. 9 of Nonviolent tactics for the 21st Century by Michael Beer.

STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANIZING:

A deep understanding of the conditions of power and building capacity for a range of tactics supports movements in staying adaptive and seizing key opportunities for change.

The years between 2008 and 2014 saw an increase in **nonviolent actions** led by the LGBTQ+ movement. LGBTQ+ Pride events grew, advocates addressed concerns through media and performance, and activists organized protest activities such as kiss-ins in Salt Lake City. These activities were aimed at raising awareness of the challenges LGBTQ+ people faced in the State and at increasing the urgency to find solutions to these challenges. As a result of this increased pressure, momentum began to shift, and with it the balance of power. In 2009, Salt Lake City passed a local non-discrimination ordinance that, while largely symbolic, affirmed the importance of protections on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. To the great surprise of many, the LDS Church endorsed the ordinance, indicating a new willingness to engage with the issue of LGBTQ+ protections.

At the same time, organizers for LGBTQ+ rights were engaging in a concerted effort to build relationships with leaders in local and state government, faith communities, media, and business in a strategic effort to open new avenues for dialogue and negotiation. While organizers were seeing the shifts taking place as a result of the nonviolent action campaigns, they also recognized that they would need the express support of key leaders in the legislature and the community if they were going to get any meaningful legislation passed. Much of this work started as private conversations in living rooms and over coffee, often described as uncomfortable and riddled with mistrust. **Stakeholder mapping** (see callout box on page 5) was a key tool in identifying the individuals and communities most critical to bringing the issue to the larger legislative stage years later.

INVESTING IN TRUST

Relationship building, base-building, and organizing work provide the key ingredients for forging a sustainable solution: community buy-in and shared ownership.

Organizers also understood that they could not rely only on shifting allegiances at the leadership level, but that they would need to engage communities across Utah in order to secure a win. Equality Utah, the key advocacy organization for LGBTQ+ rights in the State, engaged in what

Brandie Balken, then president of Equality Utah, described as an **anchor and spread methodology.**

The strategy focused on training and empowering local individuals to garner support for LGBTQ+ protections in their communities. Equality Utah would recruit and train community members to lead local advocacy initiatives and provide resources to grassroots projects doing community education and base building work. Key to this strategy was building strong buy-in across diverse sectors of the population and shared ownership of the movement.

This ensured that the call for increased protections was coming not just coming from activists or advocacy organizations in liberal Salt Lake City, but from students, mothers, neighbors, delegates, and others, in every city and county in the State. By the 2015 State legislative session, more than half of Utah's population was already covered by local non-discrimination ordinances and legislators throughout the State were being engaged across multiple touch points to prioritize State legislation on the issue. Critical to the strategy, was learning to identify and celebrate small local wins along the **spectrum of engagement** (see callout box on page 6) in order to sustain a mobilized base.

Stakeholder Mapping →

Identify important stakeholders, the relationships between them, and the opportunities to increase support for social change. Stakeholder Mapping is a strategic planning tool that can provide insight into possible entry points for dialogue or coordination based on existing relationships, as well as new relationships that may need to be formed.



ANCHOR & SPREAD METHODOLOGY

1 LOCAL ORDINANCES

Recruiting and training university students, parents, and other community members to lead advocacy efforts at the city and county level for the passage of local non-discrimination ordinances.

2 SIT WITH ME SUNDAYS

Grassroots effort led by Mormon mothers of LGBTQ+ children who hosted neighbors to share their story and do community education around LGBTQ+ rights.

3 MORMONS BUILDING BRIDGES

Grassroots effort that brought Mormon delegations to Pride Parades and other LGBTQ+ events to show solidarity in high visibility ways.

4 DELEGATES

Recruiting volunteers to flood districts with pro-LGBTQ+ delegates to put pressure on legislators seeking election wins to prioritize LGBTQ+ protections.



Spectrum of Engagement →

The spectrum of engagement is a strategic planning tool that can help us identify active supporters of our cause, as well as potential allies to engage. Successful engagement comes by moving individuals and groups along the spectrum to be in support of your cause.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

Identify and mobilize the interests, values, and motivators that are shared across diverse communities to deepen connectors and minimize dividers.

Building off the continued momentum of the relationship building, dialogue, and base building work, organizers set out to bring the issue to the state-wide legislature where key negotiations would take place. Equality Utah secured a Republican sponsor for the bill – a critical shift in strategy after multiple unsuccessful attempts to bring forth legislation through the Democrats in a heavily Republican dominated legislature. They also engaged key legislators as well as the Utah State Governor to garner support. In doing so, LGBTQ+ advocates centered stories and narratives around freedom, faith, and family they learned were most successful in the anchor and spread methodology. Organizers leading the dialogue, relationship building, and eventual negotiations focused on the work of identifying areas where there was **common ground, strengthening connectors and minimizing dividers** (see callout box on page 7). In most cases, common ground only emerged where relationships had already been built, and defenses came down.

One key point of agreement provided the foundation of the landmark bill: no person, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or religious affiliation, should be discriminated against in employment or housing. To get a high visibility, state-wide win for the movement, advocates chose to focus on this somewhat narrow point of agreement in seeking statewide legislation. This limited focus, circumvented other contentious issues where common ground was harder to find. Parties on both sides of the negotiation table recognized this narrowness as key to the success of the legislation.

Organizers identified the key institutions or **pillars of support** (see callout box on page 7) maintaining oppositional positions to LGBTQ+ protections. Understanding that these pillars were made up of real people who could be engaged and called to action, organizers developed strategies and messages that addressed their individual interests in order to garner support. Organizers did outreach to local media to shift the narrative around LGBTQ+ people and their causes. They sought out business leaders, emphasizing the message that non-discrimination protections in employment strengthen business practices, challenging traditional narratives that they would burden employers. One by one, organizers struck down the reasons oppositional figures and institutions maintained to stand against protections, strengthening the case for State-wide legislation down the line.

Connectors and Dividers Activity →

Identify the connectors that link people across difference and the dividers that create fault lines separating groups and interrupting individual needs. Identify actions that decrease dividers and increase connectors.

GETTING CURIOUS IN TENSION

Staying turned towards the issue through moments of challenge is critical to success and requires training, coaching, patience, and discipline.

Despite having built common ground, tension and conflict remained high as the spirit of compromise proved to lie on a delicate and even vulnerable balance. Advocates were dealt a difficult blow when in 2014, prepared to bring the bill to the legislative session, the Utah Governor placed a moratorium on all LGBTQ+ legislation after the Federal Respect for Marriage Act recognized same-sex marriage at the federal level. In response, LGBTQ+ activist Troy Williams led a march on the Capitol where thirteen activists, later labeled the Capitol Thirteen, were arrested in a highly visible public outcry of discontent. The employment of this confrontational nonviolent action tactic where organizers had otherwise prioritized trust-building and constructive organizing, proved critical in this moment. While several key leaders in Utah would point to the Capitol Thirteen as a breach of trust and a barrier to building compromise, the event was critical for galvanizing support from the organizing base and raising the urgency around the issue. This moment highlights the strategic value of taking risks and speaking truth to power, especially at critical inflection points. Without the participation of those willing to engage in disruptive tactics, those negotiating would not have had the leverage they needed to push for change.

That year would also see a change in the leadership of the movement, as Brandie Balken stepped down from Equality Utah and Troy Williams took her place as president of the organization. Troy would carry forward the strategy that Brandie had established in the years prior, centering authentic relationship building and good faith dialogue. However, staying turned towards the issue remained challenging, especially as tensions rose in negotiations that often turned confrontational. Key negotiators leaned on training, continuous coaching, and the elements of joint problem solving in order to stay committed to what Troy Williams described as the space of constructive tension where authentic compromise takes place. Critical to the approach was the ability to separate the people from the problem and stay consistent in leaning on established trust and relationship, while maintaining unwavering in the purpose of securing vital protections for the LGBTQ+ base.

By the time the 2015 session came around, there was an increasing sense of urgency around finding a solution. Stakeholders wrestled with a range of questions including where protections would start and stop, how to assess and balance tradeoffs, and how to know when compromise has gone too far.

Pillars of Support

are the groups and institutions that maintain a social or political system. Identifying the institutions and resources that provide support to the system you are trying to change helps us understand how power operates in that system to be better equipped to change it. Work through the Pillars of Support Tool and explore different tactics to engage different pillars of support through Horizons Projects' Pillars of Support Project.

As a movement, they made decisions around what they were willing to move on and what they would hold steadfast. For example, while negotiators for LGBTQ+ protections let go of including public accommodations in the legislation and agreed to specific carve outs from the bill for institutions such as religious universities, they maintained unmoving on the inclusion of gender identity, in addition to sexual orientation, in the legislation, refusing to leave out transgender communities from the protections.

Remaining in the space of constructive tension, allowed diverse stakeholders to hold each other accountable to an authentic commitment to compromise. The eventual success of the negotiations underscores the importance of uncovering power dynamics in order to ensure that both sides have something to gain, and lose, at the table. Stakeholders strategically focused on **addressing the interests and needs** (see Onion Analysis tool on page 8) undergirding oppositional positions and found ways to write a bill that met the needs of both LGBTQ+ and religious communities. The balancing of power opened space for the creative opportunities of compromise that avoided one sided, double-down solutions and forged a path for more long-lasting change.

> "There always needs to be some tension in the relationship... you are going to challenge [others] to see something differently, you are going to spark some kind of doubt that hopefully brings them towards you. That tension has to exist. The question is when have I gone too far? When have I crossed the line where I am not being loyal to my community and not seeking their best interest? When you are in those spaces and feel no tension you really need to ask yourself that. That tension is where the creative thing happens. – INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

> "As I went through the process, the question is how do I respond in conflict if I believe the other side truly believes they are motivated by love. How does that shift how I engage in a conflict. Even when they make me really mad, how can we stop and give your opponent the benefit of the doubt and really begin to listen. – INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

MODEL THE LEADERSHIP YOU WANT TO SEE NOW

The emphasis on "bringing people along", which often takes time, supports movements in fostering shared ownership of the solution, curbing backlash, and paving the way for sustainable change.

Shifting allegiances on LGBTQ+ protections in large numbers among both key power holders and local community members was often challenging, slow, and riddled with setbacks and failures. It was essential for **leaders in the movement** (see callout box on page 9). to ensure that their base understood the strategy they were engaging in. Leadership reinforced that centering relationship building and local power would eventually produce tangible wins to the cause. Central to this strategy, was getting very precise and realistic in the hearts and minds of partners and constituets about what is possible and truly believing in the ability to achieve it.

The Onion Analysis →

Dig beneath the positions of your allies and counterparts to uncover underlying interests and needs. By peeling back the onion, discover potential allies and reveal power-holder's hidden conflicts of interest.



Democratic Leadership Tool →

Leaders can enable others to achieve their purpose in the face of uncertainty by creating new leadership capacities, sharing power, creating sustainable institutions, and reducing dependency on any single individual.

After 45 days of negotiations, Equality Utah and other advocacy organizations, faith leaders, as well as both Republican and Democratic legislators came together to celebrate the Governor's signing of Utah Senate Bills 296 and 297. Both sides were committed to showing support for the solution, despite fielding arrows from each of their flanks that would seek to criticize the bill from within and outside of the State. The relationships that had been established helped build buy in for the solution across difference, curbing backlash from both the far left and the far right who, in many cases, felt their side had given up too much. Utah voices maintained that the power and trust building work that had taken place in the years leading up to 2015 and that culminated in the successful passage of the bills into law, was indeed successful not only in institutionalizing important protections for Utah residents, but also in creating a significant culture shift across the State. Consistently since 2015, Utah has ranked in the top 5 states nationally in approval ratings for LGBTQ+ nondiscrimination protections, the only red state to be among the top ranked. Impacted communities engaged media and other trusted messengers within and outside of Utah to reinforce this message through articles, press conferences, and public events. These efforts combined with the increasingly high approval ratings for the legislation in Utah, supported the movement in garnering support for the solution and preventing backsliding on the legislative end.

The success of the Utah Compromise served to create lasting infrastructure for continued dialogue and collaboration in Utah. With relationships and trust already built, LGBTQ+ advocates have secured additional legislative wins since 2015 including hate crimes protections legislation in 2019 and a comprehensive ban on conversion therapy in 2020. However, common-ground work has become increasingly difficult in Utah, like in much of the rest of the country, with more recent increases in polarization that have eroded commitments to dialogue and compromise. These shifts highlight the lesson that organizers and movements must continue to engage in context assessment as well as in trust and power building strategies, even beyond the consolidation of short-term wins, in order to maintain momentum for sustainable change and remain adaptable to shifting contexts.

The strategies and tactics organizers mobilized to seize opportunities for change in Utah are specific to the contexts of place and time and will look differently when working across diverse communities and issue areas. In Utah, like in other contexts, it took a broad coalition of diverse individuals working across the ecosystem of social change. Readers are encouraged to work through the following Discussion Guide for Further Thinking to practice key tactics and approaches by either working through the Utah Case, or applying them to a movement effort taking place in your community now.



DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR FURTHER THINKING

1

GETTING STARTED:

Strategic planning is an essential part of kicking off any successful campaign or action. Use strategic planning tools to assess where power lies across and between diverse groups and to identify the ripest opportunities to move forward your cause. Explore a broad range of tactics that support effective and adaptable approaches in order to seize key opportunities for change.

Consider, when do you need to emphasize trust and relationships with unlikely allies? When do you need to lean into escalation to raise awareness and increase urgency?

PRACTICE:

- Stakeholder mapping - Identify important stakeholders, the relationships between them, and the opportunities to increase support for social change.
- Spectrum of Engagement – What tactics will appeal to various interests, needs and cultural inclinations so the groups will shift one step towards us?
- Pillars of Support - Identify the institutions and resources that provide support to the system you are trying to change to understand how power operates in that system and be better equipped to change it.

2

SEQUENCING ACTIONS:

Once you have a good understanding of the conditions you are working in, explore a broad range of tactics and approaches including strategic nonviolent action and organizing to build power, and authentic relationship building and dialogue to build trust. Review the overview on Connecting Bridge-Building and Power-Building on how the strategic sequencing of a diversity of approaches can help us unstick difficult issues and build towards more sustainable outcomes.

Consider, what are some common spaces, events, or connection points in your community that attract diverse stakeholders as you organize around your issue to increase the likelihood of working with more people?

Practice:

- **SWOT Tool** - Think through your strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats you may encounter to make informed plans and use your resources effectively.
- **Onion Analysis** – Dig beneath the positions of your allies and counterparts to uncover underlying interests and needs. By peeling back the onion, discover potential allies and reveal power-holder's hidden conflicts of interest.

3

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE OUTCOMES:

Lasting change requires a commitment to continuous learning, strategic thinking, and leadership. As your work shifts, pay attention to the stories and narratives you are telling about yourself and others, as well as the ways your assessment and strategy may need to shift to promote sustainability and make backsliding less likely to occur.

Consider, who is in your corner? Who are the advisors, peers, and supporters that help you stay turned towards your work, especially as it becomes increasingly challenging? What are some ways you can check in with yourself to ensure you are still aligned in your strategy?

Practice:

- **The Power of Story** – Storytelling allows us to articulate our shared values. Develop your story of self, story of us, and story of now as a source of inspiration, a means to engage and connect with other, and, most importantly, a way to motivate others to join you.
- **Movement Support Team** – Explore examples and lessons learned from building communities of practice for peer-to-peer support that help leaders navigate challenging terrain while remaining values and vision driven.