

Field notes for transformation



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KELLE LOUAILLIER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Funding a different kind of deliverable

If you were to visit Corporate Accountability International's Campaign Headquarters in January or July and peek into our main planning room, you would probably see something like this: Dozens of campaign tactics displayed on the walls. Eight to 10 organizers animatedly discussing these ideas. A skilled facilitator from our staff leading a decision-making process that will turn brainstormed tactics into robust campaign strategies and plans.

What you would be witnessing is our planning process, which combines the organizing methods of César Chávez and the planning models of the Institute for Effective Action. We've continuously honed this model over three decades to propel our campaigns forward and achieve our mission. The successful summit on water privatization in Lagos, Nigeria last month was borne out of a process just like this in January 2015.

We create, implement, and evaluate our plans and progress rigorously because we must be bold in our impact. We are, after all, an organization committed to nothing less than transforming economic and political systems that currently allow transnational corporations to commit life-threatening, planet-endangering abuses. But our "deliverables" look very different from those of organizations that alleviate the consequences of the world's deep problems without addressing the root causes.

Social change is unpredictable

I've been following recent philanthropic discourse about social change and its development. The idea that social change rarely, if ever, follows a straight path is not a new one, but it is one that philanthropists and foundations are increasingly acknowledging. I've had the pleasure of speaking with many of you about this over the years, and I'm heartened to see it taking hold.

Foundations like Ford are acknowledging, as President Darren Walker recently wrote, that social change "is messy. It comes in fits and starts, through feats and defeats." And therefore, a philanthropic strategy based on predictable, linear results is ill-suited to solving deep-rooted and complex social problems. By focusing almost exclusively on a rigid model based on data-driven deliverables, both funders and organizations risk missing the chance to seize game-changing opportunities that invariably arise.

Therefore, the argument goes, funders should be paying attention to what have been termed "emergent strategies." These strategies develop over time as intended plans bump up against changing realities. This model recognizes the complexity of what's needed to achieve social change and supports the innovative ways organizations respond to nonlinear developments.





I'm proud to report that Corporate Accountability International has been identifying and implementing emergent strategies for many, many years, to great success. Those of you who have joined us for a strategic planning session know we explicitly bring forward "changed conditions," and our campaign development process provides opportunities to adjust strategies and tactics as we go. This allows us to seize opportunities we could not have predicted months before and overcome unexpected obstacles. When we evaluate our progress, the details—the deliverables—may look different from how we initially set them out, but we are always closer to our ultimate goal.

Our compass guides us

We can be both nimble and effective in our strategies and tactics because we are firmly rooted in several guiding principles which do not change. Among those are the organization's long-range goal, mission, two "grand strategies," and basic organizing strategy.

Our long-range goal is to ensure global survival and to create a world that affirms life. Our mission—the particular contribution we make—is to stop life-threatening abuses of transnational corporations and increase their accountability to people around the world. Our two "grand strategies" lay out how, in the largest sense, we will achieve this: 1) through massive, grassroots organizing and 2) by empowering democratic, regulatory institutions to assert their authority over transnational corporations.

As we make plans and evaluate changed conditions, we make sure our strategies:

- Are consistent with our purpose, grand strategies, and organizational values and beliefs.

- Integrate what it takes to win victories with transnational corporations in the long run.
- Take into consideration what is necessary to sustain the organization.
- Leave something with those involved that will enhance their long-term contribution to social change and build the movement.

This guidance provides us with what John Cawley of the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation calls a compass, versus a map: "A map assumes that you're going over terrain that somebody has been over before. A compass, on the other hand, keeps one oriented toward the ultimate goal regardless of the unanticipated obstacles and detours that may appear during the journey."

Almost every day we forge new paths through uncharted territories, maximizing our well-crafted plans and harnessing emergent strategies as they develop. We can't always predict the exact path we will take to get to our goals, but we always achieve what we set out to make happen. Your investment in this work is progress toward building a better world—progress that at times feels incremental ... until a huge victory demonstrates exactly how far we have come. In the end, what we deliver together are huge, systemic wins.

Thank you for taking risks with us and for your commitment to the long-term work of making transformative change possible. I am inspired by working in partnership with you.

Onward,

KELLE LOUAILLIER | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR