



JUNE 2019

TRANSFORMING ORGANIZING

A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF BOLD'S ORGANIZERS PART 1

Written by: Zuri Murphy, LMSW
Social Insights Research

02

INTRODUCTION

Movements for and against government policies, such as immigration or movements against state-controlled policing, such as Black Lives Matter seem ubiquitous. It is easy to take for granted how these issues become a part of the national dialogue. Yet social movements do not appear out of thin air, they are rooted in local actions to challenge and change the status quo and are often led by people facing these issues in their communities. Social movements rely on activism, advocacy, and protest, but they cannot survive without organizers. The contribution of community organizing to social movements is the development, articulation, and execution of a set of complex processes in which micro and macro social problems are examined and resolved through strategic planning and action by groups of impacted individuals.

Despite the rich history of community organizing for civil rights, labor, women's rights, immigration, and LGBTQ rights over the past 80 years, little research has been conducted on the processes and models utilized to make these critical social shifts. Even less research has been conducted with the individuals who lead these actions and who have dedicated their lives to community organizing. There are over 27,000 books and articles that appear in an academic search for "social movements" and only 3,000 for "community organizing."

03

Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity (BOLD) began training organizers in 2012. Over 100 Black leaders from all over the United States have completed the year-long training, and after concluding six years of programming, director Denise Perry and her team decided to develop a multi-year interview project to understand the long-term impact of BOLD training in partnership with Zuri Murphy, of Social Insights Research, who has been evaluating their programs since the first cohort. The first wave of interviews was conducted in 2018. Two more waves will be completed over the next eighteen months. This is the first long-term study following the lives of Black organizers to understand the personal and professional roles they manage as leaders, directors, and strategists of organizations that are committed to building formidable power for Black people.

BOLD'S APPROACH

“Reinvigorating Black Social Justice Movements”

BOLD's primary work is strengthening Black social justice infrastructure in the U.S. They do this by transforming the practice of Black organizers to increase their alignment, impact and sustainability. The importance of relationships among community organizers to social change cannot be minimized. In the 50's and 60's, the wins of Black movements depended on large networks of Black leaders. These networks were developed through churches, the NAACP and SCLC branches and through training at freedom schools, citizenship schools and leadership development programs at Highlander. These organizations served hundreds of Black leaders and their allies, including Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, John Lewis, Ella Baker and the young activists of SNCC. Over time, the focus on Black leadership waned as conservative forces pushed back against revolutionary struggles and issue-based, non-ideological community and labor organizing emerged as a seemingly more viable approach for change. Yet, by the end of the 20th century, the limitations of this approach became strikingly apparent; neo-liberalism has washed over every area of American life from trash pickup to campaign funding and the number of incarcerated Blacks has quintupled since the 70's^[1] while poverty rates remained twice as high as whites'^[2]. BOLD's commitment and investment in Black leaders has emerged at a critical time for communities and for the practice of community organizing in the United States.



05

Transactional versus Transformational Organizing

Most community organizers are taught a transactional model based on principles developed by Saul Alinsky. Alinsky grew up and organized poor and working-class communities in Chicago beginning in the late '30s and later started an institute to train organizers. The crux of his philosophy was that to win fights against unjust state and corporate actors; trained leaders were needed to organize people to take radical political action to upset the balance of power. He developed and taught his tenets all over the world and had a profound impact on activism and social justice work.

Despite the wins that Alinsky and neo-Alinsky style organizing has secured for communities, critiques of these methods have emerged over the years. Organizers questioned the all-or-nothing approach that emphasized conflict and unconventional intimidation tactics and marginalization of women's leadership. Alinsky-esque, transactional organizing often erased individuals' experiential knowledge and beliefs, visions and the desire for ideological struggle against the oppressive structures of the United States. The model emphasized a focus on tangible wins and tactics that generated norms such as the expectations for organizers to work through exhaustion; placing a strong emphasis on turnout and numbers; and using the community's negative emotions as a motivator. These norms continue to permeate the field and persist in most organizer training curriculums to this day. The consequences of this approach have been organizer burn out and withdrawal from community work, deterioration of relationships, and poor mental and physical health.

06

Transformative organizing has emerged as a new approach to leadership development and social justice work. Similar to transactional organizing, transformative organizing teaches political education, mobilization, and strategic power building as methods to address injustice. However, the model differs from transactional organizing in its emphasis on long-term vision, self-awareness, naming and addressing oppression that impacts communities, and the healing of personal suffering. It is an outgrowth of community organizers' dissatisfaction with the short term wins, political setbacks, and the struggles of organizers to maintain balance and fruitful relationships within their personal and professional lives. The model brings together "impactful grassroots organizing, ideological development, and personal transformation... to create deep change on multiple levels" (Maina, 2010) BOLD's approach is built upon five core principles^[3]. Transformative organizing:

- uses specific campaigns to change power relations and bring about radical social change;
- requires the leadership of society's most exploited oppressed and strategically placed classes and races;
- is produced by transformative organizations;
- becomes truly transformative in the course of battle;
- transforms the consciousness of people who participate in the process of building organizations, struggles and movements.

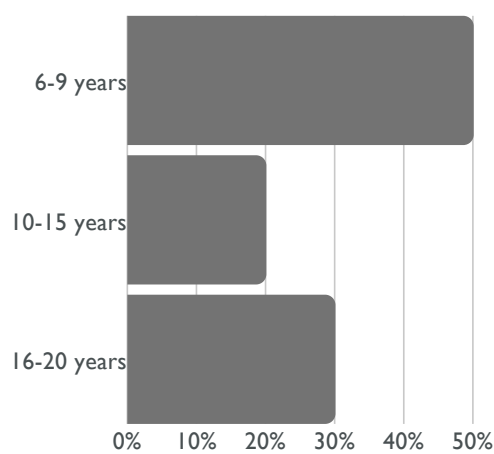
BOLD's pedagogy not only builds a new theory of movement building, but it has developed a praxis implemented to transform individuals who have been trained in transactional models. BOLD is committed to developing a new generation of Black leaders and has created a unique space, a maroon space^[4], for black-identifying community organizers to develop, connect, and heal in service of their community. This study provides deep insight into the impact of BOLD's transformative organizing program.

07

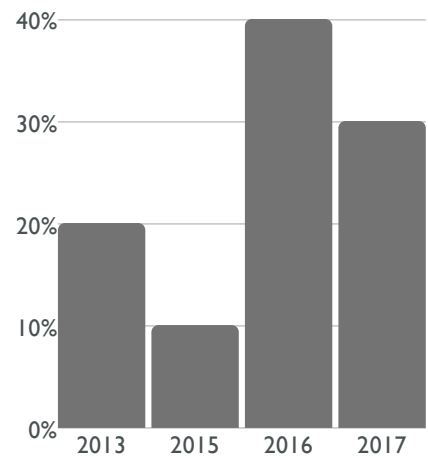
THE BOLDERS

Twelve BOLD leadership track alumni were recruited and agreed to participate, and ten completed their interviews with Zuri Murphy, BOLD’s evaluator. These leaders were located across seven states and represented a broad scope of life and leadership experiences. The age and background varied widely across the participants however, most were women and most were in their 30s. They had 6 to 20 years experience in movement work and consequently, 80% hold upper-level positions such as executive director or organizing director. Two have national positions. The interviewees included recent graduates and those who graduated two to four years before the time of their interview. Names and identifying information has been excluded for confidentiality.

YEARS ORGANIZING



COHORT YEAR



08

KEY FINDINGS

TRAINING IMPACTS LEADERS' RELATIONSHIPS

“It takes all of us to convince the white majority that our lived experience is valid.” Many interviewees explained that they don’t have a supportive community in their home organizations. They also lacked relationships with other Black colleagues who spoke their language and understood movement work. Additionally, they explained that as leaders they often didn’t know how to relate to their staff in a way that promotes interdependence. BOLD models the values of support and love and designs an environment where people have time to bond through participation in cultural activities that promote a feeling of connection such as singing, learning martial arts sequences together, doing small group activities, and asking and answering the hard questions. These relationships become quite enduring. Participants become travel companions, co-workers, supporters, and accountability partners. Most importantly, these relationships lead to positive organizational and movement outcomes.

Several participants describe how they have brought their new skills to their organizations “It’s fun to see the practices work on them. One staff member is a self identified curmudgeon. ‘Fight’ is his knee jerk tendency and I can see him consciously choosing his responses”. Another reflects that after BOLD they had “stronger interactions with those they collaborate with, increased clarity in business, and better preparation for interacting with people.” Another participant explains “[I am] understanding the need for accountability in organizing work and able to engage others (BOLD and non-BOLD) in organization and spaces in more authentic way.”

09

Personal level outcomes from BOLD participation are no less meaningful than the organizational ones. Shifts in the lives of the organizers are a delicate and often unforeseen consequence of internalizing the principles. One BOLDer shared her thoughts as the training concluded. "...by the last day I was like, "I'm going to get divorced... y'all don't know what you helped me see... What I could've repressed for another 10 years!" Gaining and losing partners didn't happen to everyone, but the impact of transformative practices led participants to be more honest with what they wanted from their work and their relationships.

LEADERS ARE MAKING CONSCIOUS CHOICES

The methodology of BOLD's body-based practice rooted in somatics goes beyond trust falls and icebreakers. So when the facilitators begin discussing processing emotions, awareness, and healing many participants are skeptical. In the fishbowl exercise, for example, BOLDers are in the middle of the room, discussing their life histories or feelings during an exercise surrounded by people they may have met only a few days ago. The facilitators model everything however, transformative practices are often alien to organizers. One interviewee admits walking out in anger, resistant to a call for vulnerability "I broke down crying after the training. I left but I came back." Most participants join the program because someone they trust told them to apply. One interviewee explained, "I asked the folks who had already gone 'What is it?' They said, 'We can't explain but it's great and you have to go!'" What we can learn from these stories is that choosing BOLD happens after the applications are accepted and the interviews are complete. Once participants realize that this is much more than agitation tactics and power maps, everyone must make a decision, to trust or shun the process; to accept or reject the risk of sharing parts of themselves that they prefer to remain hidden.

10

Everyone does not make this choice, but most do. A consistent theme of choice emerged in three ways:

- Deciding to engage, disengage with the BOLD process, others, or certain situations;
- An enhanced ability to be aware of one's patterns of behavior and then do something different;
- Becoming more honest about their needs with themselves and in their personal and professional relationships.

BOLD creates an environment where leaders are challenged to practice radical trust, radical love, and radical commitment to the shared vision of Black liberation. It cannot be underemphasized that engaging fully in transformative leadership development is not a given. Participants choose to accept what BOLD had to offer.

To put it into context, most organizers come into BOLD with lived experience and training in transactional methods and have had minimal exposure to the value of resilience or taking actions aligned with their values. Organizing work can be all consuming due to the expectations and desires to accomplish big goals, fulfill long awaited visions and urgency to dismantle the oppressive systems from which Black people are trying to gain their freedom. As one participant stated,

“We come from a movement that values martyrdom.”

This perspective is particularly harmful to Black people who have a different relationship to oppression than their white counterparts.

100% of the organizers expressed that they came into the training with some history of exhaustion, pain, disappointment or personal trauma. One leader described his work as being overshadowed by the need to protect himself from the mental strain of doing his job and physical dangers in the distressed community in which he lived.

11

Another explained how BOLD's praxis stuck with him over time: "I rose through the ranks after BOLD and became a director and then I left and ended up in a stressful organization; I let a lot of the BOLD practices go, but I eventually got back to my commitment; without BOLD I wouldn't have been consistently asking myself 'What do I care about?' That question not only led to me starting my own organization but thinking this way allows me to make choices that stay in line with my vision instead of falling into my tendency to appease the people. Now that I'm a leader of my own org the stakes are higher."

What this study has found is that when the organizers make choices with their minds and hearts they are willing to take the steps to become aware of how their conditioned tendencies^[5] have influenced their organizing, leadership, and relationships. Their "shape"^[6], to use a somatics term, becomes apparent and they choose to examine what behaviors they practice that contribute or detract from their aliveness, and as a result their leadership makes a quantum leap. A BOLDer explains her experience:

"Mama Lisa came over to me and whispered to me. 'You haven't tapped into the fishbowl' and I was like, 'I know' because I don't want to be embarrassed. And she's said 'trust yourself'. And she probably doesn't remember that she said that to me but I remember feeling like I would have just stood there and watched because I was afraid and not feeling like enough. I realized, 'Oh! I'll disengage as a choice and I do that when I don't want to be embarrassed and I'm scared' and that has consequences for people who I say I love. I have a unique contribution and to withhold that from spaces where there are people who I say I'm going to be in relationship with is actually a way that I irresponsibly yield my own power."

"BOLD was there where there was no other space in my life where that level of self-awareness would have happened."

12

RIGOROUS PRACTICE IS VITAL

A striking tattoo on a BOLDers' arm reads "Love and Rigor". Rigor, in the BOLD context, is living with a commitment and being willing to work toward embodying the commitment through consistent practice. One leader explained it thus:

“Transformed leaders practice rigorously and that leads to transformational leadership on the ground. When things become scary or hard we revert back to what comes naturally for all of us. The only way to establish a new default response is through commitment and practice.”

The interviewees were asked about what resiliency practices they utilized and how often. Everyone was not practicing regularly, but those who were engaged in at least one practice that they had learned or committed to at BOLD, and several exclusively practiced what they were taught in their training. People were often at either end of the spectrum- practicing often or not practicing and wishing they were. When asked how not practicing impacted their life they shared, “When I’m out of practice my boundaries become unclear. I’m either overextending or under-committing.” “When I’m out of practice I feel overwhelmed.” “I feel guilty that I’m not doing jo^[7].” In contrast, when they are in practice, they are “...taking up space and creating a body of work that is rooted in black love,” and “...able to better manage my struggle with depression.” “Practicing jo helps me feel strong and less victimized.”

Every year BOLD hosts a National Gathering and at the conclusion participants are asked to commit to 30 days of practice with accountability. Although several interviewees mentioned teaching their families, organizers or staff somatics techniques, few spoke of seeking out support, partners, or accountability to help them maintain their own practices.

13

LEADERS ARE DEVELOPING RESILIENCE

Black movement leaders have many responsibilities and unique challenges. Not only do they manage the normal complexities of managing organizations, advocating for communities and campaigns but they also do this while navigating structural racism, sexism, and homophobia. Resilience is a quality that organizers of color must cultivate to survive. One BOLDer explained it this way:

“There's a necessity for Black people to have spaces for play and respite there's a necessity for people to be vulnerable and radically honest and in touch with their emotions. Those are equally as important as our spaces of political education and organizing.”

BOLDers gave numerous examples of flexing their post-BOLD resilience in personal and professional settings. One leader spoke of a greater sense of confidence and bravery despite being in the minority in white spaces. She recounts encouraging herself during a difficult meeting;

**"This is your moment - tell them what's happening."
Maybe it will compel other people to action."**

Another BOLDer reflected on their ability to juggle multiple roles while remaining present; “I'm able to have authentic conversations with my kids, not just the 'How was your day, how was school? Cool, bye, I'm gonna go lay down.' I'm actually able to have conversations, to do things, because my energy level is different, and I'm actually engaged in a real relationship with them versus just ...checking off the tasks.”

14

LOOKING FORWARD

The study participants shared many stories about the impact BOLD had on their life and concrete examples of how they were applying transformative organizing. They also discussed their hopes and dreams for what BOLD can accomplish in the future:

- include a gender analysis. This included paying more attention to language, analysis of the intersectionality of race and gender, and sensitivity to women's trauma in particular.
- More local connections, including trainings, meetups, and practice groups. A leader requested " BOLD regional, being able to have regional convening once a year, so it's like something between one year of BOLD national and the next."
- Provide more levels; advanced training made available for those who completed the directors training.
- Lead a push for "investing in organizer training for new organizers. The movement doesn't invest enough in teaching people how to develop strategy, run a campaign, or how to manage others."
- "More preparation for returning to home organizations." Organizers are returning to their jobs with clarified values and new approaches to the work, but sometimes struggle to find their way in an environment that has remained the same.



15

CLOSING RECOMMENDATIONS

Because BOLD's work is so distinct and transformative, there is no surprise that the participants want more engagement. A recommendation would be to build upon the city-based work that BOLD and BOLDers have begun and encourage alumni to pilot regional events. TedX is a good example of this; groups use the TED format and principles but organize themselves. BOLD can provide some guidance and funding however local leaders leverage their organizations and local networks to execute the event. This provides leadership opportunities and time for relationship building for new and old BOLDers while recreating maroon space. Having smaller regional gatherings could also provide the platform for testing new extensions of BOLD that alumni are interested in such as a "BOLD junior;" a version of the programming for youth ages 14 to 20.

There is a clear ask for BOLD's leadership to provide more support to the leaders after they complete the program. First, BOLDers want to go back and responsibly share the tools of transformation their home organizations. A recommendation is to provide a tool-kit with resources alumni can share that provide a bridge between the training and their home orgs. This tool-kit could include materials that explain somatics language, include instructions for practices they can use with their team, and have links for readings and other online resources.

16

Secondly, BOLDers need more accountability for maintaining the practices they learn in training. One leader described the need for BOLD to help them “dive deep back into the commitment.” The 30 days of practice could be expanded to provide more touchpoints for organizers to stay in practice over time. This could include maintaining an online list of participants who want to connect with others for mutual support, providing best practices for peer coaching through the BOLD website, and providing the technology for alumni to host monthly online meetups or virtual calls.

Zora Neale Hurston called research “formalized curiosity,” and I believe this project embodies her sentiments. The best research is done out of a commitment to deeper understanding and the leaders who contributed to this work have given us just that. The study participants bravely shared many stories about how BOLD impacted their life in unexpected and complex ways. The concrete changes in the way they view their lives and roles within their organizations are a testament to BOLD’s approach. The first year of this project has provided deeper insight into the outcomes of a new generation of Black leaders who are boldly changing the world around us.

ENDNOTES

[1] The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences (2014) <https://www.nap.edu/read/18613/chapter/4>

[2] Poverty in the United States: 50-Year Trends and Safety Net Impacts (2016) <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/154286/50YearTrends.pdf>

[3] Historically, maroon space is created by Black and indigenous people in response to colonization. It is a space with rules and ways derived from group tradition, wisdom and practice wholly separate from the influence and control of the colonizing force.

[4] These principles are connected to the transformative organizing theories developed by Steve Williams, Ng'ethe Maina, and Eric Mann.

[5] Conditioned tendencies are automatic responses people develop based on past experiences. These habits may have been protective in response to trauma but are often counterproductive when utilized in normal life situations.

[6] 'Shape' is a somatics term that is used to describe a person's way of being in their mind and body: how they interact with others, their mindset, habits, and worldview, and how they show up in their physical structure such as tight hips or rounded posture.

[7] "Jo" is the name of the wooden staff used in the practice of Aikido katas (sets of coordinated movements).

