

Management Assistance Group

Network Leader Innovation Lab

MOVEMENT NETWORK LEADER CASE STUDY



EVELINE SHEN

The Network Leadership Innovation Lab

The Network Leadership Innovation Lab is a multi-year program of dialogue, analysis, and active learning. It convenes social change leaders and taps the best thinkers and practitioners to advance our shared knowledge at the intersection of leadership development, organization and network strengthening and movement building. The Lab stimulates innovative thinking and new learning; captures how highly effective network leaders are currently working; and identifies ways to support and strengthen their work.

In the planning and design phase, the Lab brought together a diverse group of leaders to develop an agenda for learning and action. We identified a “design team” of seven executive directors who, in addition to leading their own organizations, are building and working within networks that are achieving real-world results. We then produced this and two other case studies that probe the characteristics of successful network leaders. In the next phase, we will work with this group of leaders as they deepen their learning and innovation, so that they can take existing networks to the next level—and we can learn from their efforts.

The Network Leadership Innovation Lab is in a nascent stage, but already it has produced a wealth of intriguing questions—and identified some promising practices. Some pioneering leaders are developing effective forms of leadership, organization, and capacity to connect across organizations and issue divides, constructing networks with the potential to achieve meaningful social change. The Network Leadership Innovation Lab will track the lessons learned from their triumphs and missteps—and seed new innovation more broadly.

About the Network Leadership Innovation Lab

A challenging context

Workers' rights. Reproductive justice. Environmental protection. Immigration. Human and civil rights. On issue after issue, progressive social change leaders are locked in high-stakes struggles with well-funded opponents. And though we win individual battles from time to time, on a broader scale we are losing ground.

How can we catalyze meaningful, broad-scale change? It is increasingly clear that traditional approaches are not up to the task. In conversations with social change leaders, the same concerns emerge repeatedly. We spend too much time and energy on short-term, small-scale battles, rather than on systemic change. We construct tactical and transactional relationships, rather than lasting alliances. And we focus on organizational capacity and identity, often at the expense of movement building and increasing political power.

These blinkered approaches are not the result of individual or organizational failings; too often, an array of external factors and internal expectations keep us locked in. But, using these methods, we have not built the political power we need to win big.

The value of movement networks

Turning that around will require innovation at every level—in how we lead, connect and fund organizations working for social change. Today, many leaders are experimenting with a potentially game-changing approach: forging “movement networks” (Katcher, 2011) that:

- Build long-term relationships among activists across organizational and issue divides, often with the support of a lead convening organization;
- Intentionally contribute to a broader social movement;
- Use and coordinate multiple strategies;
- Focus on long-term gains while also advancing immediate opportunities; and
- Have relatively fluid boundaries of structure and membership.

The goal is to build movements that are larger than the sum of their parts; to amass political power; and to win on a broad range of progressive issues — not only in policy and legislation, but also in the battle for hearts and minds.

This approach shows great promise. For example, Catalyst for Kids was fighting to implement FAR (Family Assessment Response) in Washington State but they were concerned that the Governor would not sign the bill. FAR is a nationally recognized model that seeks to provide services rather than punish and separate low-income families. By aligning with the Strong Families network, Catalyst for Kids was able to mobilize allies who “connected the dots” between economic and racial justice and the criminalization of poor families. Ultimately, the Governor signed the bill in a public victory for poor families in Washington.

The definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again expecting a different result. For those of us working to advance progressive social change, now is the time to do something different.

But movement networks also present significant challenges. Like the social issues they address, movement networks are complex and must juggle many varied and seemingly contradictory elements. They must balance the autonomy of individual members with the need for collective action and accountability. They must address the needs of existing and emerging members, while

straddling political disagreements and differences in power, worldview and approaches to the work. And they must maintain transparency and engagement in decision-making processes while rapidly responding to changing conditions.

To realize the promise of movement networks, we must learn, together, how to address these challenges. We must embrace new models of leadership, build organizations that think and work differently, and create spaces for leaders to innovate and evolve. To those ends, the Management Assistance Group is developing the Network Leadership Innovation Lab (see inside front cover).

The definition of insanity, as Albert Einstein is thought to have said, is to do the same thing over and over again expecting a different result. For those of us working to advance progressive social change, now is the time to do something different. The Lab will connect, inform and support us along the way.

About this case study

This is the second in a series of three in-depth case studies that seek to better understand networks, the effective leaders behind them, and the contexts that aid their success. To develop the case studies, the Lab observed several networks that span organizations and movements to achieve measurable results. Next, through a series of interviews, we identified effective leaders within those networks.

The leaders we spotlight in the case studies are exemplary, named by colleagues and funders as especially skilled at navigating network dynamics. But it is important to note that no one person leads a network; by definition, leadership in movement networks is widely distributed. The networks we studied have countless leaders, working at all levels—from neighborhood block captains to the CEOs of national organizations. The leaders we have selected would be the first to note that their success depends on the efforts of many others. Still, there is much to be learned from close examination of a few highly effective leaders who are innovating and experimenting in this area.

It is also important to note that networks, per se, are not new. Networks can be found everywhere—in the natural world and in human cultures across the globe. Successful network leadership is a feature of winning social movements throughout history. But, given the challenging political, economic and social context for social justice today, the rise of new technology that supports interaction, and the need to respond to opposition tactics, effective development of networks and navigation of their dynamics is particularly critical to success.

This case study focuses on Eveline Shen, Executive Director of Forward Together (FT). FT evolved from Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, changing its programs, geographic scope, and role in the reproductive justice movement. In addition, FT staffs Strong Families, a fast-growing network that currently includes 70 organizations and 12,000 individuals across multiple movements. To complete the case study, we conducted in-depth interviews with Eveline and with 10 of her colleagues, collaborators and funders. (A full list of interviewees is available in Appendix B.) From these interviews, we sought to distill the principles that guided Eveline's leadership during the remarkable evolution of these networks, and to explore how Eveline embodies those principles.

Because we are at the beginning of this exploration, readers are cautioned not to assume that our findings apply beyond this case. As we complete additional cases, we hope to identify which of these initial findings hold up across multiple cases and which are more idiosyncratic. We welcome feedback from readers on how well these preliminary findings resonate with your own experiences.

Eveline Shen: Portrait of a Network Leader

Forward Together is the new name of the organization Eveline Shen directs. It is also an apt description of her core philosophy: Eveline firmly believes that collective vision is bolder and more powerful than that of any one person—and that the best way to advance social justice is by forging connections among those working for economic, racial and reproductive justice.

Eveline is deeply committed to forging those connections. As executive director of Forward Together (formerly Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice), Eveline has helped launch networks that connect reproductive justice organizations and activists from across the country, and that link them with others working in a broad range of movements.

Eveline began working for Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) as an intern while she was in graduate school. Her first task was to develop a summer program for low-income Asian teenage girls. The program offered the kind of support Eveline wished she'd had growing up as a first generation Chinese-American in Colorado: it featured lessons on community organizing, media literacy, body image and safe sex, as well as daily exercises that helped the young women get in touch with their physical and emotional needs and strengths.

That work became the foundation for ACRJ's youth organizing project curriculum, now called Sisters in Action for Issues of Reproductive Empowerment (SAFIRE). It also embodied the kind of holistic approach that Eveline brings to her leadership of Forward Together, and to movement-building more generally.

Forward Together

Forward Together “leads grassroots actions and trains community leaders to transform policy and culture in ways that support individuals, families, and communities in reaching our full potential. In the world we envision, all people will have the economic, social, and political power and resources to make decisions about our gender, our bodies, and our sexuality. We are developing leaders with vision, building networks across communities, and implementing innovative campaigns to make our vision a reality.”

Forward Together leads and staffs Strong Families, a fast-growing network which currently brings together over 70 organizations and 12,000 individuals to work together for change. Other leaders in Strong Families include: Young Women United, Western States Center, Political Research Associates, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, Movement Strategy Center, Choice USA, California Latinas for Reproductive Justice, and Advocates for Youth.

When Eveline became executive director of ACRJ in 1999 (at age 31), the organization was at a low ebb, its staff dispirited from years of playing defense. To help reenergize them, Eveline worked with Norma Wong to develop a mind-body practice called Forward Stance, which became a central part of the organization’s culture. Forward Stance engages the body as well as the mind; it encourages attention to how one is standing, sitting and being in one’s body. The goal is to bring one’s whole self to the work of social transformation. Forward Stance, Eveline says, is “a practice that cultivates fierce individuals, effective organizations, and powerful movements for social change.”



Eveline Shen facilitating an EMERJ meeting in 2010.
Photo: Anthony Damaano

Since taking the helm of ACRJ (now FT), Eveline has played a critical role in the evolution of her organization, and of the reproductive justice movement more broadly. Because she is unattached to particular organizational structures or forms, Eveline has been able to grow her own organization and the networks she supports at a rapid pace. And Eveline is skilled at creating “containers” for dialogue in which new questions can be asked and new answers found.

With Eveline’s guidance, a reenergized ACRJ emerged as an intellectual leader in the reproductive justice movement—a movement with many antecedents.¹ In 2005, ACRJ published “A New Vision for Advancing Our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Justice,” a groundbreaking analysis that helped further refine and explore these three previously indistinct concepts.²

In addition to advancing the understanding of reproductive justice, Eveline and her colleagues have also helped define—and implement—a strategic agenda for the movement. To that end, ACRJ built a national network called *Expanding the Movement for Empowerment and Reproductive Justice*—EMERJ—that linked reproductive justice organizations from around the country. EMERJ created a space for activists to meet and think strategically—“a think tank that acts,” as Eveline described it.

¹The reproductive justice movement has roots in the 1970s, when African-American feminists observed that the “choice” framework for reproductive rights fails to account for the many forms of oppression that limit women’s capacity to make decisions about sexuality and reproduction. The term “reproductive justice” was coined by Loretta Ross and other activists who had attended the 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, and sought to bring that gathering’s expansive vision of reproductive autonomy to communities in the U.S.

²For the full report see <http://forwardtogether.org/assets/docs/ACRJ-A-New-Vision.pdf>

Because reproductive justice is intimately linked with other dimensions of social justice, EMERJ members began to align with other social change movements. As the network expanded to encompass and connect more movements and organizations, members realized they needed to develop a new frame for their outreach, communication and collaboration. They settled on “Strong Families,” which became the network’s new name.

According to Eveline, “The Strong Families initiative is a 10-year effort that is changing the way we think, feel and act in support of families. By transforming culture and policy change, we will create conditions so that all families—including your family of origin and/or your chosen family—can thrive.” Strong Families seeks to build political and public will to address the needs and concerns of the 77% of American families that no longer fit the traditional model of family—including single parents, blended families, LGBT families, kinship groups and many other configurations. While Strong Families’ work centers on the most vulnerable—such as families of color, low income families and immigrant families—the network addresses issues of concern to all families, enabling its member groups to build more political power to shift local, state and federal policies.

As Strong Families became an important focus of its work, in 2012 ACRJ changed its name to Forward Together. The change reflects an intentional effort to build a multiracial organization as a way to bring more people into the reproductive justice movement and have a greater impact on key issues. The change also reflects an evolution that Eveline helped bring about: while women and girls of color are still at the core of the reproductive justice movement, that movement has matured into a platform for many different communities to engage in discussions and advocacy around gender, sexuality, and family.

Eveline’s approach to network formation

The networks Eveline Shen has created—EMERJ, Strong Families, and Forward Together—all bear the hallmarks of a distinctive approach to network formation. That approach is informed by her experience with Forward Stance, hard-won lessons from prior coalition-building work, principles drawn from the reproductive justice movement, and concepts hatched in collaboration with other movement leaders—notably, Taj James of the Movement Strategy Center.

While many network-building efforts use a “big tent” approach, drawing in as many stakeholders as possible, Eveline chose instead to start with a smaller group selected for very specific reasons. She reached out to leaders who were mission-, rather than ego-driven, who had a demonstrated track record of successful social change work, who deeply valued and were skilled in collaboration, and who were hungry to learn and share with other leaders to innovate their work.

Recognizing that the reproductive justice movement needed a place where leaders could strategize and collaborate, “Eveline decided to fill that gap in the movement,” recalls one network member. “And [she] did so by bringing together a fairly small group of us. It was never meant to be representative of the movement.” Instead, “because it was really a strategic space, it was meant to bring together folks who felt ready to really think beyond their own organizations and to think about what were some critical contributions we could make collectively to the [reproductive justice] movement.”

This approach, says Eveline, “allowed us to build the coalition ten times faster because the folks involved embodied the values of movement building.” After all, “it’s who the people are that are going to make this successful,” she adds.

It is an approach that was born of hard lessons learned. “I had been part of many coalitions that had fallen apart,” Eveline says. “That’s just the way coalition building is: power struggle, egos....I wanted to figure out how to build something that would have strong enough glue that could utilize the inevitable disagreements that people are going to have when they work together as a point of building collective understanding and strength.”

By all accounts, the glue that binds EMERJ/Strong Families and Forward Together is indeed strong. Part of that strength comes from a network culture that is intentionally instilled and nurtured. (See “Manage the culture to manage the network,” page 14.)

From that base of trust and strength, EMERJ/Strong Families has been able to expand the movement. “They have created a culture strong enough to now reach out and welcome others who may be new to movement-building work,” says one network member. In addition to the original core group, EMERJ/Strong Families now includes a broader range of organizations that think, learn and act together on specific issues, strategies or on the basis of shared geography.

Eveline’s approach to network formation has not been without its critics, however. As one network member recalls, there have been “tensions with organizations that wondered if ACRJ was trying to move into their turf, or [were] perplexed at why they were being excluded.”

Nor has ACRJ/Forward Together been immune to a divide that exists in many movements, between those who focus on short-term policy changes and those who focus more broadly on movement-building. The transformations Eveline and her colleagues are working toward don’t happen overnight. “EMERJ is talking about culture change on a ten-year timeframe,” remarked a funder. “That is not the framework for a lot of the groups in DC or New York.” And movements—especially those working for profound cultural shifts—are necessarily complex, with niches for a diverse range of methodologies. As the funder cited above added, “I actually think it’s a healthy tension to have people that are really in it for the short term, and also to have this counterweight of somebody talking about...the long term goal and vision.”

Assessing impact

It is difficult to assess the impact of leaders within networks; the very nature of networks is that leadership is jointly held and distributed and credit for any success is also shared. But it is safe to say that the networks Eveline has nurtured have been effective, and many observers say that Eveline played an important role in ensuring their success. While EMERJ has a record of accomplishments in movement building and policy, its successor—Strong Families—is a relatively new endeavor and its impacts are emergent.

Movement building. Since its founding in 2006, EMERJ—and now Strong Families—has helped transform the landscape of the reproductive justice movement by:

- Articulating and disseminating a shared movement framework;
- Increasing resources for smaller, less well-known organizations;
- Connecting the groups working on these issues for increased political power;
- Building the leadership skills of network participants; and
- Creating the foundation for intersections with other movements.

Building on the earlier work of ACRJ and others, EMERJ helped further refine the reproductive justice framework, language and approach. One result, according to an EMERJ member, is that many younger movement members now self-identify as reproductive justice, rather than as pro-choice, activists. This clarification of identity, and the space EMERJ created for reproductive justice organizations to convene, coordinate and strategize—was especially valuable for smaller women-of-color groups working in this area.

In many cases, those groups were able to leverage more resources and pool those resources for greater impacts. As one EMERJ member recalled, “We were able to organize some town halls or community forums with some other groups that were sitting at that table. We wouldn’t have been able to pull those off on our own. Being able to do that with two or three other groups meant a lot from a resource perspective.”

Another EMERJ member describes how the network magnified the groups’ visibility, political power and fundraising capacity. “We...had a platform to speak to funders, to speak to the public, to speak to policymakers that I’m not sure we would have had [without] EMERJ... The strength and collaboration with other groups helped elevate individual organizations’ work and, in some cases, it increased their funding.”

At the same time, EMERJ/Strong Families have cultivated a deep bench of leadership within and beyond the reproductive justice movement. The networks organize “strategic cohorts” to create tools and political actions of value to the movement. The cohorts help cultivate secondary leadership within those groups, boosting the confidence and competence of many who see themselves as leaders for the first time.

And, by expanding the frame, Strong Families has enabled the reproductive justice movement to align with a broader array of organizations and movements. As one network member remarked, Strong Families is “immediately much more accessible to people who are outside of the [reproductive justice] movement.” For example:

In Helena, Montana, the potential of a new framework was revealed in a contentious battle over sexuality education. The Montana Human Rights Network, a Strong Families member, worked to get a comprehensive sex ed curriculum adopted by the local school system. As Eveline recalls, “They were struggling to reach beyond their core activists to mobilize the scale of community involvement necessary to win. When they began to connect sex ed to building stronger families they broke through to a larger audience and succeeded in mobilizing the hundreds of supporters necessary to secure the win.” Ultimately, the Helena School Board voted 6-3 to approve the curriculum.

The Strong Families “Mama’s Day” campaign seeks to connect a broad base of supporters by celebrating the voices and images of “Mamas” who are often overlooked in the mainstream narrative of Mother’s Day. This innovative campaign combines the use of original art e-cards portraying Mamas on the margins, using social media vehicles such as blogging, Twitter and Facebook, along with online advocacy. The goal is to leverage the power of a multi-sector base to support policy campaigns impacting families of color and low-income families. In 2012, Mama’s Day e-cards reached over six million people and were featured in 40 blogs which were covered by 25 media outlets. One of the bills featured in the campaign, which allows parents who are arrested or detained to make suitable arrangements for their children, was recently signed into law by the Governor of California.



Forward Together staff, from left to right: Melanie Tom, Shanelle Matthews, Jeanine Shimatsu. By expanding the frame, Strong Families has enabled the reproductive justice movement to align with a broader array of organizations and movements.

Strategic cohorts. EMERJ/Strong Families strategic cohorts link network members from different locales to work on time-limited projects (18 months maximum) of mutual interest. Some of these projects include:

- *SexEd!*, a strategic cohort that worked to build momentum and tools for comprehensive sexuality education in communities where there was a great need for those resources.
- *Groundwork*, a cohort led by the Western States Center and supported by EMERJ/Strong Families that brought together eight social justice groups to develop a new analysis and approach to advancing reproductive justice in Idaho, Oregon and Washington.
- *Movement Building Indicators*, a tool that provides ways to assess leadership development, policy advocacy, communications, and relationship building specifically for reproductive justice groups.

Evolving approaches to organizing. In addition to the cohort model, Strong Families is pioneering other strategies to advance its agenda. For example, the network has established “Action Sites,” where an anchor organization agrees to provide leadership for groups coming together around a particular strategy, geography, cohort or constituency. For example, Forward Together leads Strong Families New Mexico, a multisectoral network of reproductive justice, environmental justice, LGBT and immigrant-rights organizations that moves an organizing and policy agenda at the community and state level. And over the last two years, Western States Center has brought together racial justice organizations in the Pacific Northwest that are committed to advancing a Strong Families agenda.

Other forms of organization are emerging within the network. After a Strong Families Summit hosted by Forward Together in June, 2012, a group of young network members from around the country are working to advance the Strong Families agenda through a youth lens. And, inspired by the Summit, a group of African-American women bloggers created the Strong Families’ Black Women’s Media Collective to highlight the voices of black women on issues capturing national attention.

Policy wins. The EMERJ/Strong Families network has also achieved policy wins at the state and local level. For example:

- *Defeating ballot initiatives:* In 2006 and again in 2008, EMERJ members helped defeat California ballot initiatives (Propositions 85 and 4) that would have required parental notification for minors seeking abortion. A multiracial, cross-movement coalition achieved this policy win through a combination of voter registration, get-out-the-vote efforts, multilingual voter research and education, and media outreach. As described in ACRJ’s, “Prop 4 Victory Brief: Reproductive Justice at the Ballot Box,” this effort was not just a short-term policy win, but was also “a catalyst for increasing our efforts to engage communities of color in critical voter education strategies while simultaneously supporting new leaders and



Youth leaders testify against California Proposition 4, which would have required parental notification for minors seeking abortion.

building new coalitions that will serve our communities over the long term.”

- *Addressing African-American infant mortality:* Western States Center (WSC), an EMERJ leadership team member, worked with the Urban League of Portland – which had not previously addressed reproductive justice issues – to address extraordinarily high rates of infant mortality among African Americans in their community. WSC identified and coordinated research support to document that African-American babies in Oregon are twice as likely as white babies to die in their first year. Armed with that research and analysis, the Urban League crafted policy recommendations for state, county and city governments, and presented them to a packed room of decision makers and community members. The League is now working with the Multnomah County Health Department to implement and monitor those recommendations.
- *Changing the conversation about substance use:* When a mass grave of 11 young women of color was found in New Mexico in 2009, media coverage compounded their families’ grief by referring to the victims as “drug addicts” and “prostitutes.” Young Women United, a Strong Families network member, launched a campaign to stop the demonization of substance users and to expand treatment options. Their campaign succeeded in passing four bills in the state legislature that would prioritize treatment versus incarceration, especially for pregnant and young women. Although the bills were vetoed by New Mexico’s newly-elected conservative governor, the campaign resulted in changing policies at detention centers and a state resolution that recognizes teen and young mothers. They were also successful in shifting the public discourse toward providing services and compassion for young women in challenging situations.

Keys to Effective Network Leadership

As the examples above make clear, networks expand our notions of what change is possible and grow our collective capacity to realize that change. At the same time, networks are dynamic and complex, requiring leadership that differs from traditional notions of nonprofit management. Here, we explore the capabilities of one leader in order to illuminate broader principles of effective network leadership.



Ensure trusting, resilient relationships

The EMERJ/Strong Families network was built on—and is maintained by—high levels of personal trust. The network’s founders knew that building the voice and power of smaller, less powerful players in the reproductive justice movement would not be easy. They knew it would take time and that there would be many disagreements along the way. Not only would this nascent network need to deal with hostile forces external to the movement, but also with significant differences in approach and power among reproductive rights and justice groups. Strong, trusting relationships are key to the network’s resiliency and sustainability.

*“One of the things I noticed, having been somebody who came less than a year into the Strong Families work, is that what the few people at the table had in common is that they already had trust. Even though it was a small group, it was really working from this place of ‘We know each other, We trust each other, We have a few things in common,’ which are thinking big and thinking about what can and should long-term work look like for us.”**

“Absolutely we know that people are not going to agree all of the time and what are we going to do about it? How do we create a culture where there’s direct communication, where you can have really tough conversations with other, and that we know in the end, when people walk out of that room, that people have each other’s backs?”

– Eveline Shen

How Eveline does it

By starting with a close, trusted group:

“In the first meeting of the strategy team...[Eveline] went around and personally talked about why each of the people...were individually there. She talked about their strengths. She talked about what she loved about them. She talked about...what made them special as human beings and what unique

*Throughout this document, quotations are italicized, and those from Eveline Shen are identified as such. To preserve the confidentiality of interviewees, all other quotations remain unattributed.

contribution she felt like they had to bring to move the work forward. By doing that...she basically was trying to build a community that was based on trust by communicating and expressing her own trust and confidence...."

By inviting members' whole selves to the network:

"People bring their partners and people bring their children. We've shared stories about difficult times we're having. I would say that Strong Families convenings, phone calls and the times we're together are a space where people can bring their whole selves. If you're going through a hard time, you're not expected to just turn that off and be a professional and mask those feelings – unless that's what you choose to do.

"I feel it a lot when I go to national meetings where you're just constantly positioning yourself. So I think it's been really refreshing for people to have a space where we could just be ourselves bring our whole selves and be supported in who we are and the work that we do."

—Eveline Shen

By staying attuned to network members:

"We provide the container and then we listen. We do a lot of listening – a lot of putting stuff out there and testing what other people are thinking and trying to provide a fertile ground for people's best ideas and their best thinking to come forth."

—Eveline Shen

"I think that she really has gift for talking to people and hearing what their needs are and then figuring out ways to support them on a one-on-one basis, but also to build structures that make sense for them that's not an add-on to their work."

By maintaining the right amount of conflict:

"From the minute we walked in the door to our first EMERJ convening, there was (a) an assumption that everyone had an organizational agenda; (b) no judgment about that agenda; (c) an expectation that there would be conflict; and therefore (d) we had to have something in place to handle conflict so that we could move on, so that we didn't set ourselves up for a situation where if we disagreed about something deeply, people would leave EMERJ."

"I literally learned a new approach – that you could address conflict head-on without damaging the person, the organization or the entity that you disagree with. The idea that we don't have to engage in politics of destruction if we have very different points of view, and that if we have different points of view, that doesn't mean we can't ever work together again, that you can stick to your own principles and disagree in this very big way and that you don't have to demean yourself or other people."



Manage the culture to manage the network

Growth of the EMERJ/Strong Families network relies on the conscious modeling and reinforcement of several powerful elements of the network's culture. By cultivating these elements, the network appears to have taken on a self-managing character. That, in turn, frees Eveline from having to manage so many issues and people herself, and supports the long-term sustainability of the network and its members.

These cultural elements include:

Being in it for the movement:

"When you come into an EMERJ/Strong Families space, the expectation is that you bring yourself fully, and that you are able to let your guard down and really listen and share deeply because what you contribute isn't just for your own organization or even just Strong Families, but for a stronger reproductive justice movement."

"What I think is amazing about Eveline is that she has the ability to be in it for the movement, not for her organization. That I know makes her rise to the top and see a bigger picture around it."

Creating a sense of abundance and transparency, especially around funding:

"The other key piece...is this culture of abundance and not competition. We put out that we want to be able to work together in a way that doesn't result in us being pitted against each other in any way. A lot of that comes through fundraising, so we talked about how we can do collaborative fundraising."

"We are not competitive in any way—not competitive for air time when we're in meetings, not competitive for resources. We don't hoard information."

Valuing alliance and collaboration:

"Everyone had their own individual projects but wanted and agreed that when we're done with them, and even in the process of making them, that it was going to be a shared piece."

Valuing family:

"We in the social justice movement get so many demands from funders and everyone to just do, do, do and implement and implement. Then we run ourselves into the ground and then we leave or we get sick. I don't want to do that. I think part of Strong Families is about making sure that we create strong families along the way and we don't ruin our families."



Denicia Cadena (Young Women United) and others at the Strong Families Summit (2012). Photo: Hillary Victoria Jones-Mixon

Getting things done:

"We spend a lot of time thinking about [what we value] and figuring out a way to bring these into the culture of the way that we do our work. [B]ut...we also do a lot of strategizing and we get a lot of work done."

— Eveline Shen

How Eveline does it

By modeling important cultural elements and living her values:

"By saying it and then doing it and leading it within her own organization, I feel like it helps other organizations who are working with us feel confident that they can do it too."

"[B]ecause the quality of her work is so high, it raises the bar in ways that people begin to emulate. ... [T]hat quality of really demanding excellence of oneself and the folks that you're in relationship with is an important characteristic."

"I think that's in her nature that she doesn't thrive on charismatic leadership. She really enjoys partnership."

By using Forward Stance as foundational methodology:

"If you just study and understand the Forward Stance practices, you'll understand all of her network building practices. It's direction, energy, momentum, rhythm, stance, critical mass. Those are all things that are required to get a group of people or a group of institutions moving in a common direction in an impactful way."



3 Allow for continual emergence and innovation

Eveline's own organization and the two networks she has supported have undergone extraordinary changes in a relatively short amount of time. ACRJ has become Forward Together and grown significantly; EMERJ has become the Strong Families network, and the issues, number of organizational members and movements and geographies involved have expanded greatly. But rather than resulting in confusion or disunity, the organization and network appear to be characterized by an expanding bench of leaders, deepening levels of collaboration, clearer and bolder purpose, and more personal sustainability than is common in social justice work. Many colleagues believe that Eveline has played a major role in fostering continual, healthy adaptation to changing needs and opportunities.

"This is a staff that has doubled and more in size in the last two years. This is a staff for whom most people's job descriptions have changed at least once in the last two years. This is an organization that five years ago was locally focused, then had a reproductive justice network, and now has changed its name and is a multiracial, national, movement-building organization. So there has been a lot of change and ambiguity."

How Eveline does it

By remaining open to learning:

"[S]he really has, over time, been willing and open to picking apart the challenges of [reproductive justice], both as a theoretical construct, but also as a movement."

"Because I'm so committed to growing and learning, and I know I'm really different than I was 20 years ago and I've hopefully learned from my mistakes, I give people room to grow."

—Eveline Shen

"She is not afraid of being wrong. She is not afraid of being questioned....She is not afraid of telling people, "This is what we tried and it didn't work, so let's try something else." She's not afraid of diverging from whatever container she's worked really hard to set."

By creating new "containers" to ask and answer emerging questions:

"[W]e set up strategic discussion containers that (1) brought us all together into the same experience so that we could see each other's struggles as our own and (2) very strategically put forth new questions and new ways of thinking about what we could do together, which I think is a unique and important leadership quality."

By having the confidence to take risks and do new things:

“They really stood out as a group that’s willing to take risks and do proactive work, be creative, and not just hunker down in your bunker as it’s easy to do with the onslaught on reproductive rights.”

“They’re very assertive, proactive people. I guess they’ve gotten it into their bodies in some way that has manifested in the work.”

By having effective ways to deal with uncertainty:

“One of the ways she deals with uncertainty is the physical work, [Forward Stance] where you’re teaching them weird postures and things they’ve never done before. A lot of the philosophy is we are all people committed to change, and many of us are deeply uncomfortable with changes. That is the irony of this work, is that people hate change but we’re all social change people.”

“At the beginning of the economic downturn, it was a really scary time for many of our organizational members and people just didn’t know if they were going to be around to indulge in a conversation about movement building for reproductive justice the following year. Eveline made sure that there was space in our convenings...for people to talk about what they were feeling and the uncertainty, fear, and hesitation.”

By ensuring alignment at many levels:

“They’re very clear that they need time physically together in the same room to be able to be aligned, and that if too much time goes by when you’re not all in the same room you’d go out of alignment.”

By partnering with other agile, adaptive leaders:

“A critical factor for us has been agility – finding organizations that are led by individuals who have great capacity to be flexible because ...the political moment or the opportunities ahead of us could change at any moment. When they do, we then have to be ready to respond with something different.”



Aimee Thorne-Thomsen (Advocates for Youth), and Aimee Santos-Lyons (Western States Center) practicing Forward Stance at a 2010 EMERJ Meeting. Photo: Anthony Damaano



Promote generous collaboration

No one would say that network development is easy. But the rapid growth, high trust levels and proliferation of fruitful alliances among EMERJ/Strong Family member organizations all speak to an ease with collaboration. Clearly EMERJ and Strong Families have found ways to reduce the barriers—resource competition, turf and ego battles, issue and movement silos and conflicting interests—that so often inhibit network collaboration.

How Eveline does it

By working with those who are ready:

“Eveline constantly talks about bringing people together who are ready. There is a readiness factor that has been absolutely essential for every single strategy team or leadership team member that we’ve ever asked to come on and help us lead any network that we were forming. Because if folks are not ready – ready meaning [that they can] see the opportunity, have the capacity, and are willing to create spaces in their organizations and their own organizational work to do something together – then it won’t work...or will only get us so far.”

By skillfully working across differences and movement intersections:

“She really understood that in order to move work forward in an intersectional way, we had to identify what are the core values that we share across movements that are going to propel us to that next level of collaborative work, action, and social change.”

“Reproductive justice is a way of looking at the world with a lens. You can look at any issue through the RJ lens, and if you’re looking at it through that lens, you’re going to notice certain things that you wouldn’t otherwise notice....In doing that, you find partners and allies in other communities who don’t have a political identity as reproductive justice advocates. They might be environmental justice advocates or human rights advocates, or education advocates. But in engaging them through the RJ lens, you’re able to actually forge a cross-sector, a multi-sector alliance or strategic initiative around a new frame or objective.”



Advance a long-term vision through specific, short-term impacts

Successful networks articulate and embrace an inspiring long-term vision, while responding to what Martin Luther King called “the fierce urgency of now.” Together, network members must understand, integrate, and

contribute to a shared analysis of the movement and its context as well as a compelling vision of success in the face of that reality. At the same time, success on social justice issues is often elusive, and repeated losses can be demoralizing. Accordingly, respondents say that it is essential to articulate a bold vision while pursuing achievable “wins” that keep network members motivated.

This balancing act is challenging for leaders of all organizations, but it is exponentially more difficult in networks, which require buy-in from a much larger and more diverse set of actors. Nor is this a one-time effort: a movement network’s analysis, vision and action are constantly shifting and evolving in response to changing circumstances.

“An effective network leader – or I would say an effective movement leader – is somebody who can have that clarity of long-term vision and be able to apply it on multiple levels, but simultaneously being able to develop short-term strategies that are building blocks and important steps on the path to that longer view.”

How Eveline does it

By articulating a compelling vision for the movement:

“People really respect and value her vision, her perspective on the field.”

“I can count on one hand the number of true thought leaders in this movement, and if I’m starting with my thumb, she’s the thumb.”

By combining long-term vision with short-term benchmarks:

“You have to really balance the short term and the long term and you have to structure things in a way where you deliver enough of the short-term victories that you can highlight with funders to keep the resources going on the long-term stuff and then hitting those benchmarks along the way. They’ve done pretty good at being very specific about benchmarks.”

By linking others’ visions into a coherent whole:

“[O]nce people put all their variables of the big picture out on the table, she has an incredible discipline to see what’s connected, how each variable or how each dot is connected and what would be the most effective way to connect the dots to have the greatest amount of impact.”

By using the vision to attract others:

“Part of the power of their work was the ability to articulate a galvanizing, clarifying, unifying and directional vision through which Eveline was able to identify kindred spirits, and folks who were able to take that articulation and use it to sharpen and strengthen the impact of their own work.”



Grow leaders to expand reach and impact

The success of ACRJ/Forward Together and EMERJ/Strong families cannot be attributed solely to one extraordinarily talented Executive Director and network leader. Eveline has consistently sought to share power, create new leaders within her own and other organizations, and to delegate tasks and relationship management to others. This enables her to focus on those things she is best positioned to do, and to achieve a sustainable work-life balance. And, as Eveline's organization and networks have grown, she has continually reshaped her own roles and supports and built out additional network leadership. This approach requires certain personal qualities, as well as conscious approaches to leadership and management.

How Eveline does it

By minimizing her centrality and status:

"She doesn't have ego about her leadership, to be honest. She's not driven by ego. She's not driven by applause. She's not driven by outsiders. I think she feels a real accountability to the people she is in community with...."

"She's a very facilitative leader, so there's very little ego in [her] leadership. I think she has a clear vision and she steps up when she needs to, but she also recognizes leadership in the room and encourages other people to step up and lead."

"[T]here is this one image of...a charismatic, lone leader that's leading the way, right? I think what it takes to do this work successfully is that you contribute what you can but you create ongoing opportunities for people to lead and you do what you can to lift all boats – to shine the light on as many leaders as possible, as many people as possible."

– Eveline Shen

By building leadership development into every level of organization and network:

"[T]hey are very intentional in thinking about not just the executive director or the first tier leadership in an organization, but how do you build a deep bench in an organization. I think ACRJ does this better than almost any group that we fund in this portfolio as an organization, and they've translated that into EMERJ."

"Every staff member, except for our operations and finance people, is responsible for managing a set of relationships. There's no way I could do that on my own and I really think it's good for other staff and for their leadership for other people to get to know and benefit from the relationships with the staff here."

– Eveline Shen

“I think she delegates really well. I see when Forward Together [is] represented publicly, there’s a number of people that play that role. There are several staff that do presentations at funder conferences for example, not just her.”

“It’s both really giving people a sense of agency and giving them the space to really explore their full leadership potential, supporting them to do that – not just throwing them in the deep end and saying, ‘Lead.’”

By flexibly adapting roles and structures to leverage staff strengths:

“Rather than get stuck in structures or systems where folks are not able to leverage their best assets, Eveline has a real willingness and desire to shift up the process and systems, the very approach of the work, so that whatever strengths people are bringing to the table, that we have the opportunity to leverage that.”

“We really have the sense that there are actually no bounds in terms of the amount of leadership an organization can contain. Rather than feeling like there’s a limited ceiling — ‘We can’t move you up because there’s nowhere to go’ — we instead build out, so that there is more space for more leadership.”

By sharing power internally to expand her reach externally:

“She has created an infrastructure that has allowed her to focus on other things; the fact that we have a Finance Director now, the fact that there’s a Deputy Director, and that there are the work teams. She has really shifted the infrastructure of the organization, again, to better serve both her role as a leader, but also the organizational vision for the network.”

“I’ve had to struggle with...letting go of the stuff that I used to think, ‘As a traditional ED, this is what I do. I’m supposed to be running staff meetings. If I’m not running them, am I doing my job?’ The job description that I came in with is so different than what I do now, and it was a transition.”

— Eveline Shen

Through strategic use of a sabbatical:

“One of the things that encouraged me to take that sabbatical was that this was a way to potentially transform the organization. In a nutshell, we set up a situation so that, during my sabbatical, we were able to test out different ways of operating that would basically increase the leadership of everyone involved and would set up these team structures in which we were able to integrate the work more than ever.”

— Eveline Shen

“She went away on sabbatical and everybody stepped up their responsibilities. She came back and nobody wanted to give anything up, which is kind of an amazing story.”

7

Leveraging power from members' strengths

Working in networks with small, under-resourced organizations puts a premium on making good use of people's time, and not overburdening member organizations with a lot of new, added-on work. Many commented on the ways in which this network gets an enormous amount done with relatively few resources, while also respecting members' desire for input and collaboration.

How Eveline does it

By maintaining focus on what's most important:

"She is laser focused. I think she has a clearly mapped out vision for the work the network needs to do. She's adaptable, but doesn't get wholly sidetracked."

By setting realistic goals:

"At the same time that they're doing something that's really bold and broad and ambitious, I think there are moments in which their imagination has been limited because, rightly so, they don't want to take on a strategy or set of work which extends beyond their capacity."

"We have an agenda; we want to move it together. It's going to be very collaborative. But we're not going to sit here and have great conversation and then leave the room and then everyone feels overwhelmed with the amount of work that just got generated and nothing happens."

—Eveline Shen



Jasmine Burnett (New York Coalition for Reproductive Justice), Nicole Clark, Yamani Hernandez (Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health), and Shanelle Matthews (Forward Together) at the Strong Families Summit (2012). Photo: Hillary Victoria Jones-Mixon

By adding value to ongoing work:

“One of the things that’s been brilliant about Strong Families is that they weren’t asking people to add some whole new thing onto their plate. They were basically saying, ‘Okay, we’re going to work together to develop this framework and this set of tools and you can weave it into whatever campaign you already have on the ground.’ It was a value-add that wasn’t a heavy lift and having to do something completely new.”

Through rigorous pre-meeting preparation:

“Time is really valuable for everyone who comes. We request two and a half days. I know what it takes to get people there so we want to make sure that we maximize the time that we have together. We don’t start from scratch.”

“Sometimes we’ll brainstorm from nothing, but most of the time we will have talked to people individually, brought everything together before we get to the meeting, synthesize the material and then say, ‘Here’s what we’re getting from people’s input and here’s our recommendation.’”

—Eveline Shen

By leveraging resources from other movements:

“The RJ movement doesn’t have a huge base. It doesn’t have a lot of power and we felt like [Strong Families] was an opportunity for us to leverage the resonance that families had with other sectors to basically have something which has reproductive justice and women of color at the center to move a national initiative forward.”

—Eveline Shen

8 Lead with personal integrity

Many respondents commented on the degree of integrity Eveline brings to every level of her network leadership. The strength and prevalence of these comments indicate that this aspect of Eveline’s network leadership goes beyond the oft-cited relationship between a leader and the culture they create. Leading by example, Eveline encourages, teaches, and inspires other social justice leaders both within the EMERJ/Strong Families network and well beyond it.

“Because of the alignment between her personal spiritual practice [and] the translation of that into principles for strategic impactful action, there’s a level of alignment and integration in her life that gives a depth to her leadership...”

“I’m not there yet, but I’m trying to get there. As I see leaders that inspire me, it’s not really about what they do but who they are, what their character is, how they are in a room with people, the care that they take with their work or with people.... It’s about who you are as a person versus what you do.”

—Eveline Shen

How Eveline does it

By maintaining personal disciplines, and bringing that into the network:

“There’s the Zen training part. I’ve made it very clear that what we do [in Forward Stance] is not Zen training, but it does come from Zen training. The other part that I have done is a meditation practice....I’ve been very engaged in that practice in different ways, and that really strengthens and deepens the Forward Stance work, but it also allows me to be a better, more effective leader.”

—Eveline Shen

“Her vision around transformative practices, around showing up to a room differently and how do we get people to move from a defensive to a proactive stance—she really embraces that herself and I think that it makes it easier for other people to follow her lead because you feel like it’s authentic.”

By bringing her personal story into the work:

“She brings a very personal perspective to the work and holds her own personal storyline throughout her leadership and in everything....Not only her own personal family narrative but her values, even how she’s raised her children with her family and her parents and her partner. She may not talk about them all the time, but you know that that’s where a lot of the values come from.”

By being a calm, peaceful presence:

“She’s pretty unflappable. Her calm presence helps when people feel scared. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her panic....She doesn’t try to dodge anything.”

By caring for herself:

“It’s about how can I take care of myself in a sustainable way while also contributing the best I can? How can I be the best person that I can be and what does that mean? What does that mean in the work and the people that I’m with?”

—Eveline Shen

“She’s one of the few advocates that I know that has managed to be an ED and have any semblance of life-work balance. This new crop of EDs on the East Coast that are having kids are like, ‘How does anybody do this?’”

By living her values:

“I think she’s one of the most effective leaders I’ve ever come across in any setting whether it’s the nonprofit sector or the for-profit sector. I think that’s in large part because she moves from a place of principle and really tries to be the same person in each place. She’s not a chameleon....She is very clear who she is and what she stands for and that carries through everywhere. She is fully human, and that’s what makes her leadership so compelling.”

Conclusion

Leadership in movement networks requires traits and skills that are distinct from those of traditional organizational leadership. For example, traditional models call for a laserlike focus on the interests and goals of the organization, while network leaders must balance a more diverse, and often conflicting, set of concerns. Traditional leadership models elevate high-profile, charismatic executives, while network leaders are noted for their humility and willingness to let others shine.

Eveline Shen (like Sarita Gupta, the subject of Case #1) is by all accounts an extraordinary leader; a pioneer who has learned through experience how to navigate and thrive in the fluid context of network-building. The traits of successful network leadership, which Eveline and Sarita embody, can be understood and, to some degree, cultivated. That is the purpose of this series of case studies, and of the Network Leadership Innovation Lab more generally.

Finally, while the focus of these case studies is on individual leaders, our work to date makes clear that effective networks are not all about the individual. Equally important is the “enabling environment” that supports the work of network leaders. The enabling environment, and the ways in which successful leaders shape and navigate that environment, will be a focus of future NLIL inquiry and publications.

Acknowledgments

MAG is grateful to the staff and board of Forward Together, to the people we interviewed in the networks in which Eveline and Forward Together are involved, and most of all to Eveline for so generously sharing of her time, reflections and hard-won learning.

Appendix A

Organizations and networks in which Eveline participates

Forward Together (previously Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice) “leads grassroots actions and trains community leaders to transform policy and culture in ways that support individuals, families, and communities in reaching our full potential. In the world we envision, all people will have the economic, social, and political power and resources to make decisions about our gender, our bodies, and our sexuality. We are developing leaders with vision, building networks across communities, and implementing innovative campaigns to make our vision a reality.”

<http://forwardtogether.org>

Strong Families (previously *Expanding the Movement for Empowerment and Reproductive Justice*—EMERJ) is a “home for the four out of five people in the United States who do not live behind the proverbial picket fence – whose lives fall outside the outdated notion that a family consists of a mom at home and a dad at work. While that life has never been the reality for most of our families, too many of the policies that affect us are based on this fantasy. From a lack of affordable childcare and afterschool programs, to immigration policy and marriage equality, the way we make policy and allocate resources needs to catch up to the way we live.”

<http://forwardtogether.org/strong-families>

Leaders in the Strong Families network

Advocates for Youth “champions efforts to help young people make informed and responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. Advocates believes it can best serve the field by boldly advocating for a more positive and realistic approach to adolescent sexual health.”

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/>

California Latinas for Reproductive Justice is a “statewide policy and advocacy organization whose mission is to advance California Latinas' reproductive health and rights within a social justice and human rights framework. CLRJ works to ensure that policy developments reflect Latinas' priority needs, as well as those of their families and their communities.”

<http://www.californialatinas.org/>

Choice USA: “As a national pro-choice organization, Choice USA gives emerging leaders the tools they need to organize, network, and exchange ideas to build a youth centered pro-choice agenda and mobilize communities for reproductive justice.”

<http://www.choiceusa.org/>

Movement Strategy Center “brings a cohesive plan to strengthen these emerging efforts and build the progressive social justice movement. We do this by supporting individuals, organizations, alliances and sectors to be more strategic, collaborative and sustainable.”

<http://www.movementstrategy.org/>

National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health works “to ensure the fundamental human right to reproductive health and justice for Latinas, their families and their communities through public education, community mobilization and policy advocacy.”

<http://latinainstitute.org/>

Political Research Associates “is a progressive think tank devoted to supporting movements that are building a more just and inclusive democratic society. We expose movements, institutions, and ideologies that undermine human rights.”

<http://www.publiceye.org/>

Western States Center “was established to help strengthen and further develop the progressive movement in the West. For more than two decades, Western States Center has served to connect activists and organizers, building our sense of share values, honing our strategies for building power, sharpening our political analyses, and forging relationships and alliances with the broader movement for social, economic, racial and environmental justice.”

<http://www.westernstatescenter.org/>

Young Women United “is a community organizing project by and for young women of color. We come together to create change, build community, and grow the alliances needed to strategically move our work.... YWU engages our members in organizing for social justice, community building activities, mind-body transformative practices, and movement building within local and national social justice movements.”

<http://www.youngwomenunited.org/>

Appendix B

People interviewed for this case study

Holly Bartling	Program Officer, General Service Foundation
Moira Bowman	Deputy Director, Forward Together
Rocio Cordoba	Program Officer, Ford Foundation
Vanessa Daniel	Executive Director, Groundswell Fund
Dana Ginn Paredes	Training Director, Forward Together
Silvia Henriquez	Board member, Forward Together
Destiny Lopez	Board member, Forward Together
Taj James	Executive Director, Movement Strategy Center, Strong Families leadership team member
Aimee Thorne-Thomsen	Vice President for Strategic Partnerships, Advocates for Youth, Strong Families leadership team member
Gabriela Valle	Field Director, California Latinas for Reproductive Justice, Strong Families leadership team member



Management Assistance Group

Make real change

About the Management Assistance Group

The Management Assistance Group (MAG) strengthens visionary social justice organizations, leaders and networks to create a more just world. To those ends, we develop innovative approaches to capacity building; conduct research on critical organizational issues faced by our clients; and share our insights with the social justice sector and the nonprofit organizational development field.

Over three decades, we have worked in partnership with more than 1,000 local, state, national, and international organizations, leaders, networks, and funders of varying size and focus. We help our clients develop powerful strategies for change, and build the clarity of purpose and effectiveness they need to achieve their goals.

Our work supports individual leaders and organizations, as well as larger multi-organization efforts and movements. This multi-level perspective informs our ability to help clients with strategic planning, fundraising, adjusting to growth and change, managing people, organizational restructuring, board development, coalition building and more. Our diverse team of consultants combines knowledge of organizational development with a deep understanding of the strategies organizations use to advance social justice.

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