



The Power to Win Framework

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FCYO
Funders' Collaborative
on Youth Organizing

PART 1: A CALL TO LEVEL UP

"Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it." - Frantz Fanon

Young People in a Pivotal Moment

Throughout modern history, young people - particularly young people of color, working-class young people, young women, and queer and trans youth - have stood at the forefront of movements for justice and equality. From the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee sit-ins to the undocumented youth movement's impact on the immigration debate to the millions of youth today who have poured into the streets to rise up against the police killing of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others, young people time and again show themselves to be those most willing to take the actions that spark movements.

The past few decades have been a remarkable period of growth and development for the U.S. youth organizing field. During this time, organizers committed to the development and leadership of young people have passionately built a movement infrastructure that now spans the entire country. Youth organizing groups pioneered an approach that integrates holistic leadership development and political education. With these scaffolds in place, youth have achieved substantial victories for education justice, immigrant rights, health, environmental justice, the fight against mass incarceration, and more.

Despite these successes, many youth organizers realize that addressing the challenges of the current moment will require the field to make some critical shifts.

Today, both our people and planet face historic levels of crisis, including climate change, a global pandemic, mounting wealth inequality, severe voter suppression, rising white supremacy, and rampant sexual and gender-based violence. Though our organizations have won notable victories, as a whole, conditions for our communities are worsening. At the root lies centuries of an unrestrained social and economic system built on intertwined predatory capitalism, racial oppression, and patriarchy, which we call racial patriarchal capitalism.

We are now in a pivotal moment where society will either move toward greater justice and equity or greater fear and repression. Advancing justice for those who have faced the brunt force of oppression and reversing the destruction of our environment will require fundamental social and economic transformation. This can only be done through powerful social movements capable of organizing people in the millions.

And our read on history and our time in the movement makes it clear: organized young people will play a critical role in creating a movement for structural transformation.

The Road to “The Power to Win”

Since 2000, the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) has been committed to supporting a strong, stable, and interconnected youth organizing field. In 2017, FCYO began a deep exploration into the role of young people in building meaningful power through our Pipelines to Power initiative. In 2020, we convened the Youth Power Lab with a Leadership Team, including representatives from the Alliance for Educational Justice, Dream Defenders, Poder in Action, Power U Center for Social Change, and Youth United for Change.

The Youth Power Lab brought together more than 70 organizations to assess their organizing approaches and the broader field and to build alignment around what it will take to achieve transformative change. From the Youth Power Lab, the Leadership Team produced the Points of Alignment, including a call to action for youth organizers to level up three key growth areas necessary for achieving greater power. These growth edges, though present in the youth organizing world, are not particular to it - they are challenges across the social justice landscape.¹



1. We need power, not just empowerment. While youth organizing is often on the frontlines of social justice fights, many groups struggle to ground their work in a coherent long-term strategy for building power. Youth organizing often emphasizes youth empowerment over actual power. And groups commonly employ strategies that mobilize small numbers of leaders in an attempt to persuade decision-makers. While it is possible to win some things this way, it is nearly impossible to win transformative changes or ensure that victories are implemented in meaningful ways. To win the change we need, youth organizing must tap the social leverage of young people to organize entire communities, build bases at scale, develop strategic alliances, and shift public narratives.



2. We need campaigns that are fights for today and training grounds for tomorrow. Campaigns are not just about winning policy change but also vehicles for political and human development. Our work must engage young people in issues directly impacting them while also developing their consciousness and skills to be lifelong organizers and activists. We need young leaders who can ground their struggles within a broader ideology and vision of social transformation. They should also have core organizing competencies, including how to build a base, develop meaningful alliances, and forge a strategy based on a concrete power analysis.



3. We need intergenerational infrastructure that leads to political life beyond youth organizing. Youth organizing should be an onramp to a life of movement work. When young people age out of youth organizing groups, there should be clear pathways for them to continue engaging in political struggle - whether as professional organizers, rank-and-file workers, or grassroots community leaders. This requires developing enduring collaborative relationships between organizations working with people across different ages - including youth, young adults, and beyond.

¹By growth edge, we mean the limits of our current capacity - those areas in need of intentional work to change our practices and unlock new possibilities.

The Road to “The Power to Win”

Following the Youth Power Lab’s conclusion, key youth organizers called on FCYO to directly support youth-led and intergenerational organizations to identify and transcend these growth edges and build transformative power. At FCYO, we are keenly aware of the inherent power imbalance between funders and organizers, and with this in mind, we made a conscious decision to heed organizers’ call to use all the power we have in this critical moment. This meant stepping outside the typical role of a funding intermediary in order to challenge ourselves, organizers, and funders to reach beyond our existing work toward a new level of power.

To meet this charge, we developed the **GenPower Labs**, a three-tiered, cohort-based, strategic grant initiative designed to support the youth organizing field to build the capacities and alignment needed to realize its full power as a force for transformative social change. At each phase of the GenPower Labs’ design and execution, organizers have and will continue to provide input, from advising on grantmaking strategies and cohort decisions to offering feedback and assessment on the program’s design. We believe that by maintaining deep partnerships based on mutual accountability with organizers, we can rise to the challenges we face together.

The Power to Win Framework is the touchstone of all FCYO’s grantmaking programs. In addition, we are currently in the early stages of developing *Resourcing to Win*, a companion document designed for our philanthropic partners who are interested in adopting or sharpening a strategic approach to power building within their grantmaking. As with the Power to Win Framework, we are committed to co-designing *Resourcing to Win* alongside our trusted partners and look forward to these formative conversations along the way. In the meantime, we hope the Power to Win Framework offers a greater understanding of power building and youth organizing and ultimately deepens your commitment toward a strong, sustainable, and well-resourced field.

The Power to Win Framework rests on four core assertions:

1. The roots of poverty, hardship, trauma and poor health in our society are an economic and social system of racial patriarchal capitalism that is structurally unequal and reliant on economic, racial, and gender oppression to reproduce itself as a system.
2. To make a just society, we must build mass social movements and achieve the power to control the social and economic conditions of our communities and society as a whole.
3. Working-class young people, particularly those that are racially and/or gender oppressed, play a critical role in catalyzing the movements we need.
4. For youth organizing groups in the U.S. to facilitate the transformative role of these young people, significant shifts are needed in the areas of theory, strategy, and program.

The Road to “The Power to Win”

To realize its vast transformative potential, the youth organizing field must identify and reconfigure the embedded practices we have adopted that are antithetical to collective power building, including but not limited to those outlined in the Points of Alignment above. These tendencies can be traced to several influences, including philanthropy, academia, and broader political conditions that emphasize individualism and empowerment over collective struggle and structural change.

The Power to Win Framework is FCYO’s attempt to outline what it will take for the youth organizing field to address its growth edges and take leadership in a movement for structural transformation. The Framework begins with a definition of the Power to Win, the term we use to describe the ability of organizing groups to advance structural transformation and change conditions for people in their communities. This is followed by descriptions of four distinct but interconnected pillars: Long-Term Strategic Orientation, Transformative Leadership Development, Organizing for Power, and Assessment and Experimentation.

The Power to Win Framework represents our current best thinking, driven by lessons from our work. It will inevitably need to be revised and improved through the hard work of applying these concepts via assessment and experimentation. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to organizing. On the contrary, there is a great need for experimentation in designing strategies to fit the specific conditions of individual organizations.

Shifting our ingrained practices will require a rigorous and disciplined approach. It will also require emotional intelligence, compassion, and joy as we support each other to achieve our full potential. We present the Power to Win Framework in the same spirit as all experiments worth testing: with enthusiasm, ambition, humility, and a deeply held belief that something different is possible.



PART 2: THE FRAMEWORK

“Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political and economic change.”
- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Defining The Power to Win

Truly advancing a more just society requires youth organizing and the broader movement to build a new level of power. The term power is used frequently and often with wide-ranging definitions. We align with Dr. King’s assertion that power is the ability to achieve purpose. It is not enough to feel empowered or have a seat at the table. We must set our sights on something more.

What we call the Power to Win is about building the power to determine social and economic conditions for our communities and transform society as a whole.

Building the Power to Win requires the ability to make decision-makers do something they did not already want to do or replace them. It means building power along three key dimensions:²

1. **Base building** to move significant numbers of our people into action
2. **Strategic and tactical alliances** to unite the sectors and constituencies capable of winning our goals
3. **Shifting public narratives** to promote our vision of social justice and true democracy.

In addition, organizing groups must shift from a primary focus on moral power to a greater emphasis on social power to create fundamental social change.

Moral power is the power that is asserted by making public arguments about right and wrong. Many organizing groups were built on models of empowering small numbers of leaders to tell their stories to decision-makers to urge them to do the right thing. While this can be effective in certain circumstances, moral power alone cannot create structural change.

Social power is the power that masses of people can use to force decision-makers and institutions to act. It is based on the premise that these decision-makers and institutions rely on the consent of the people they govern and that people can exert power by withdrawing that consent. For example, workers have social power relative to their workplace to strike, and students have social power relative to their school to walk out, voters can replace elected officials, etc. However, this power remains unrealized unless activated through collective action.

In the pages that follow, we detail the four key pillars of organizing that the field must embody to build the Power to Win:



**Long-Term
Strategic
Orientation**



**Transformative
Leadership
Development**



**Organizing
for Power**



**Assessment and
Experimentation**

²These three dimensions are adapted from the Grassroots Power Project [2013] article, “The Three Faces of Power.” The article is available at: <https://grassrootspowerproject.org/analysis/the-three-faces-of-power/>



PILLAR I

Long-Term Strategic Orientation

“What can we do today, so that tomorrow we can do what we are unable to do today?” - Paulo Freire

Creating a just and equitable society requires fundamentally transforming our current system. Over the last forty years, corporate interests have used coordinated strategies to shift the nation's policies in their favor based on their assessment of the landscape and vision for the world.

Advancing justice for our people requires organizations to have a similar long-term strategic orientation, allowing them to keep moving toward a shared vision of a just and equitable society while addressing the daily attacks on our communities. This requires an assessment of the root causes of injustice in the current system, the power needed to transform it, and a strategy that connects actions today to a long-term vision.

Core Components

Vision: To achieve long-term change, organizations need internal alignment around the key components of the society they are trying to create, including how that society is socially and economically organized. This vision serves as a north star to guide their work.

Structural Analysis: Ending injustice and oppression requires an accurate understanding of the root structural causes of those injustices. FCYO utilizes the framework of racial patriarchal capitalism. While one organization's particular framework may differ from another, alignment around a clear structural analysis is an essential building block in determining the organizational strategy to take on the root causes of systemic injustice.

Long-Term Strategy: A long-term strategy guides an organization's work to create transformative change. This includes choosing campaigns based on a structural analysis, winning victories that improve people's lives today, and increasing power to move toward the society they envision.



PILLAR II

Transformative Leadership Development

"Be willing to be transformed in the service of the work!" - Mary Hooks

Transforming society requires changing institutions and structures and developing people into agents of a new and more just world. Youth organizing faces a unique task: to build power now and support the next generation of leaders to become lifelong political workers with the skills to win transformative change.

We need an approach to leadership development that recognizes the interconnection between learning and action and elevates both as essential components of a member's organizing praxis. Organizations must also be clear about the limitations of their work - a single organization cannot heal the impacts of systemic oppression on its members. In many cases attempting to do so without the necessary skill sets can cause harm to members and movements. A leadership development program that recognizes people where they are at and supports members' continual growth as strategists, organizers, and whole people - both within and beyond the relationship to the individual organization - is vital to building the power to win.

Core Components

Organizational Culture: Organizational culture is the conscious or unconscious set of values, beliefs, practices, norms, and expectations an organization holds that define how they do things together. Organizations produce and reproduce their culture in everything they do - from membership meetings and direct actions to supervision check-ins and social activities. Organizations must intentionally work to shape their culture in a way that is grounded in purpose, honors the experiences and history of their communities, and reaffirms the dignity and potential of their staff and membership.

Leadership Ladder: To systematically move an ever-growing core of young people to greater levels of leadership, organizations must create a ladder of engagement with well-defined roles, benchmarks, support, and training. Clarity about the different roles, requirements, and opportunities for increased leadership of the base, members, leaders, and staff is critical to building powerful organizations. Members at all levels need support and accountability to advance their development.



Leadership Training: To develop members who can engage in a movement for structural transformation, an organization's leadership development and training must include the following:

- **Political Education:** A robust political education program is essential to ensure leaders are well grounded in an organization's analysis and vision, understand power, and can develop transformative strategies.
- **Organizing Skills:** Organizations must support young people in developing and honing core organizing skills, including but not limited to analyzing your terrain, building a base, developing a campaign, and engaging members. These skills will help them become lifelong political workers and ensure that members/leaders and not just staff drive efforts to build power.
- **Resilience and Emotional Intelligence:** Organizing work is hard, and we are each dealing with the emotional impacts of oppression and trauma. To transform ourselves while doing this work, we must develop the resilience and emotional intelligence to maintain our wellness in difficult situations. This requires us to lean into discomfort as we try new tasks, use direct communication, give and receive grounded feedback, and engage in principled struggle within and among our organizations. Organizations may use various methods to build resilience and emotional intelligence among their people - the key is to ground them in a clear purpose.

Leadership Pathways: Too many youth leaders are lost to movement work as they age out of youth organizing. Organizations must support young people to develop political identities beyond that of youth and to find ways to continue organizing as they get older. Strong partnerships with adult and intergenerational organizations are essential to building leadership pathways that can support young people's continued engagement. Connection across organizations is not the sole responsibility of any one organization and requires all partners to engage with mutual respect, recognizing differences while moving toward a shared purpose.





PILLAR III

Organizing for Power

“Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”
- Frederick Douglass

Building from its Long-Term Strategy, an organization must develop a plan to build the power needed to achieve its goals. This requires a detailed analysis of power in their particular terrain of struggle to determine how much and what kind of power is needed. In making these determinations, organizations must consider the three dimensions of power referenced earlier: base building to move significant numbers of our people into action, strategic and tactical alliances to unite the sectors and constituencies capable of winning our goals, and shifting public narratives to promote our vision of social justice and true democracy. Groups must decide how large a base is needed to win their demands, what strategic and tactical alliances can be built to expand their power, and how they can shift the narrative to change what is possible.

Core Components

Power Analysis: Organizations need a grounded assessment of the power they need to win their demands. This requires a detailed analysis of who holds power in the community related to the campaign or issues. The analysis should account for the interests and influence of decision-makers and stakeholders and determine who supports the organizing goals or demands and who will need pressure. This analysis is the basis for understanding the kind of power the organization must build to win campaigns that move toward its vision.

Base Building: While all three dimensions of power are essential, building a people-powered base of support capable of wielding the social power needed to win is the foundation of organizing. What distinguishes organizing from other approaches is a consistent drive to grow the ranks of ordinary people to take collective action and shift power. Organizations must define a clear constituency, set base-building goals, and conduct rigorous daily work to engage their people.

Campaigns: Campaigns are where organizations exercise power and bring new people into the struggle. They are a vital opportunity to engage people, test power, develop members' skills, and ultimately win victories that improve people's lives and model the world we want. An organization's Long-Term Strategy can help them balance their focus on incremental reforms that provide material benefits to their people and structural reforms that shift the balance of wealth and power in favor of their communities. While a campaign will be driven by a clear outcome, an organization should utilize its campaigns to elevate the organization's long-term vision and expand the public imagination beyond what can be realized in the short term or even within one's lifetime.

Strategic and Tactical Alliances: No single organization or constituency can win transformative change independently. To increase power, organizations can form long-term strategic alliances that unite different constituencies and organizations around a shared strategy for social transformation and short-term tactical alliances with groups that may not share all their interests. In addition, organizations will need to avoid the broader tendency of siloing youth organizing within youth-specific arenas and instead help build and lead multigenerational alliances that can wield significant power.



PILLAR IV

Assessment and Experimentation

“Hide nothing from the masses of our people. Tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories...” - Amílcar Cabral

Building transformative power requires developing new capacities and methods; no one has all the answers. This means we must engage in bold experiments, be willing to fail, and continually learn from our successes and mistakes to improve our organizing praxis. Building the Power to Win will require continuous cycles of testing, evaluation, reassessing, and retesting as we develop the methods capable of building transformative power. However, it is not enough for individual groups to engage in their own isolated experiments. Instead, groups must invest in shared experimentation across multiple organizations in which collective success is prioritized as much as, if not more than, the outcomes of a single organization. These shared experiments can have a field-wide impact and demonstrate the strengths and limitations of new models. This will require us to engage in honest, ongoing organizational and movement assessments, coordinated strategies, shared practice, and shared learning to determine the best methods and infrastructure for building power. The willingness to be rigorous and vulnerable in learning from our work will strengthen our collective capacity to win.

Core Components

Organizational Assessment: Regular, honest, and thorough assessments of our organizing praxis in relation to long-term strategic orientation and vision are critical tools for improving our power-building efforts. Such assessments diverge from reflecting on why an individual campaign was or was not successful to instead direct an organization’s attention toward the broader tendencies that may be impacting its work. Assessments should measure progress toward an organization’s vision relative to the core components outlined in the Power to Win Framework. For example, through the assessment process, organizations should seek to understand whether and how they are building across the three dimensions of power, developing members’ leadership capacities, and adhering to their organizational culture commitments. In addition, collective assessments of the strengths and challenges of particular sectors and the movement as a whole are necessary to guide our long-term work.

Experimentation and Testing: Organizational experiments can be a powerful tool for developing new approaches to organizing. This requires developing a hypothesis of what we think can be achieved with a new method, testing the hypothesis with a shift in our organizing praxis, and rigorously assessing and evaluating the results. When this first round of testing is concluded, and with our new data, we then reassess and retest. An experimental approach supports organizations to develop new skills and frameworks while building power - just like our goals for our members. And like our members, this requires organizations to build the capacity to be comfortable engaging with our growth edges. In addition, to create the movement we desire, we must share our learnings from our individual and collective assessments and experiments beyond our limited organizational or sectoral reach. By expanding our learning community, we will truly begin to cohere a standard for our collective power-building practices.



CONCLUSION

“Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The times we live in are full of tremendous danger and great potential. Young people, especially those most impacted by injustice and oppression, are once again showing their willingness to take bold action toward a more just world. Amid historic crises, a growing youth organizing field continues to demonstrate its tenacious commitment to the dignity of our people and planet. However, we are at a societal decision point, and it is clear the old way of doing things is no longer adequate. To transform society, we must build power at a whole new level.

We believe that we can build that power. We believe we can win.

For seven years, we have assessed our practices, questioned our methods, and grappled with our role in the movement ecosystem. We have looked to the lessons of past movements and consulted contemporary leaders. We have sought to understand what it will take for us to collectively face and transcend our current limitations.

We offer the Power to Win Framework as a blueprint for the capacities necessary to spark the movements we need. The work to transform our practices and build the organizations and movements that can bend the arc toward justice will not be easy. It will be hard work taken up over many, many years. It will require us to face and transcend our current limitations with honesty and vulnerability.

We look forward to being alongside you on this journey as partners in the struggle. We look forward to the rigor of the work ahead.

We look forward to the joy of a new world.

“Stakes Is High” - De La Soul

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Resources and inspiration found in:

Grassroots Power Project - [The Three Faces of Power](#)
Melanie Brazzell - [Structure/Strategy](#)
James Lopez - [Youth Organizing in the U.S.](#)
Jane McAlevey - No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the Gilded Age
Amílcar Cabral - Unity and Struggle
Grassroots Power Project - [A Brief introduction to Gramsci's Strategic Framework](#)
Ng'ethe Maina and Staci K Haines - [The Transformative Power of Practice](#)
Youth United for Change - [Y'all Tryna Win or Nah?](#)