Why Do We Have Caucuses?

The purpose of caucuses is to bring together individuals who are united by a specific oppression, an additional layer of discrimination over and beyond our common oppression as women.

If we are to become inclusive then we must develop strategies that change the power imbalance within existing organizations, including our own programs.

For example, in a democracy the majority is seen as the norm, and because they are the majority, their decisions are always carried out. The minority always looses because it only represents a small group within the democracy.

The development of caucuses of traditionally under-represented groups is one way to equalize the power structure in an organization. By giving equal power to oppressed groups we allow them to be part of the decision making process. In order to truly hear all voices you must equalize the power between all members of a group.

The Coalition strongly believes that all voices must be heard and equally represented if we are to have unity and inclusiveness in the Battered Women’s Movement.

Benefits Caucuses Provide To An Organization

- Provide coalition building and insure inclusiveness of all members.
- Help non-caucus members to value diversity and learn to respect others’ differences.
- Decrease risks to individuals by speaking in a united voice.
- Keep organizations “on task”, mindful of the under-represented group and the organizations’ commitment to empowerment.
- Provided support for women who differ from the “mainstream”. They are the “safe space” for women who are, by nature of their differences, less safe in the organization.

Questions Commonly Raised About Caucuses

⊙ Why is there a need for caucuses? We are all women and if we value inclusion, why do we separate into different groups?
   Answer: We are all women, but we are not the same. Women, especially those who must forfeit their differences to be involved and accepted, need space to celebrate their uniqueness, formulate issues that are critical to them, and feel supported and safe. Caucuses empower women to be equally involved. They help eliminate tokenism and establish meaningful participation.

⊙ Don't caucuses divide rather than build unity?
   Answer: Unity implies equality, acceptance, mutuality and organizational sharing. Until access to power and leadership is equalized on all fronts within our movement, there can not be true unity. Unity does not mean sameness but a respect for differences. Caucuses help to equalize power that in turn builds unity.
Should white, middle class, straight women also have a caucus?
Answer: There is no need for “mainstream, privileged” women to organize a caucus; historically they have had power in organizations by the nature of who they are. In most cases, their needs are well represented by the organization and their concerns are reflected at all levels.

Why are caucus meetings closed?
Answer: Meetings are closed to protect persons who self-identify as members and to provide safe, confidential space. Although we would like to believe that we celebrate the diversity these caucuses bring to us, the reality is that many women continue to be at risk in a discriminating and oppressive society.

Remember, that caucus members are seldom, if even afforded time to do work relevant to their lives as “different” women. For example, most women of color are the only person of color in their organization. Imagine how lonely that is as a daily work experience, and how refreshing and empowering it is to be with other women who face the same situation.
Claiming the power to name and define ourselves is a radical act of self-care and determination. Use of the term Woman of Color is a political statement that represents women who self-identify as African, African-American, Arab, Asian Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and South Asian; this also includes women who are multi-racial, bi-racial, or self-identify as non-white.

Also see articles on Internalized Oppression in attachment sections.

**Determining Group Focus & Agenda**

On the topics of motivation and leadership, renowned author Judy Tagger writes: People usually join a group because they want to improve their community. However, they also want something out of being a member. You should find out what motivates your members and make sure you manage them so that they stay motivated and involved. First, we must understand why people join groups.

**Motivation**

- **To solve problems.**
  - Expand knowledge and improve skills (courses, readings).
  - Develop best practices (case studies, articles, journals).
  - Obtain second opinions (advice, counsel, feedback).
  - Find information (policies, laws, regulations).
  - Access tools (samples, templates, software).
  - Find resources (new hires, partners, suppliers).

- **To meet social needs.**
  - Networking (meet new people and old friends).
  - Belonging (affiliating with a greater good).
  - Celebrating.
  - Success (or failure) sharing.

- **To meet economic needs.**
  - Find a new job.
  - Qualify for a promotion.
  - Earn a pay raise.
  - Win a contract.
  - Find a sponsor.
  - Find a partner.

- **To exercise leadership:**
  - Organizational skills.
  - Motivational skills.
  - Public speaking skills.
  - Financial management skills.
  - Team building skills.
  - Networking skills.
Recruiting Members

Before you start recruiting, make sure you have a proper strategy in place.

- Be clear about who you want to recruit - your target group/groups.
- Decide a goal for how many members you want to recruit and how much time it should take.
- Identify different areas, organizations, and sectors where you will find potential members.
- A membership system must be in place.
- Look at the human and material resources you have available to use for recruitment.
- Decide on the best methods and times for recruitment.
- Work out an action plan and budget.

Every organization needs a proper system to record members, their contact details and their status. Discuss the type of system that will work best for your organization. Here are some of the issues you should consider:

- Will you screen members or can anyone join?
- Will you charge membership fees - if yes, how much?
- Do members have to renew membership every year?
- If you have a renewal system, how will it work?
- Will you give members a card or some other proof of membership?
- Will you keep your records electronically (on computer) or on paper?
- What details do you need to know about members?
- Who will administer your membership system?

Many organizations lose members as fast as they recruit them. There are common problems we all have in keeping members involved and active. Here are some of the things you should do to keep members motivated and involved:

- Do an introductory induction workshop for all new members so that they understand the group and its work.
- Welcome and introduce all new members at the beginning of each meeting.
- Run regular education and development sessions for all members - either as part of regular meetings or in special workshops.
- Encourage members to get involved in projects and campaigns.
- Give people responsibilities and tasks and team them up with experienced members - they will feel useful and valued.
- Thank people and praise them in meetings for work done.
- Structure your meetings so that they are exciting and everyone gets a chance to participate.
- Organize social events for members such as picnics, parties and outings.
- Leaders should spend time talking with members and getting to know them.
As a 43 year old African-American woman, I unwisely passed up a lot of opportunities as a younger woman and I tell you that at the conference I met you at, I was awed by all the outstanding women of color present. I would love for you to add me to your email mailing list for I would like to stay informed about any upcoming gatherings in the future, or any information that would be of value to me. Thank you so much. God Bless.

-New WOC Caucus Member, V. Russell

Positioning Your Group for Success

Step 1: Set goals
Results oriented.
- ___ new members each month
- ___ new student members
- ___ new community allies

Activity oriented.
- ___ new organizations reached
- ___ emails sent
- ___ VIP visits made
- ___ phone calls made
- ___ letters sent

Step 2: Identify target populations
From traditional sources.
- Local member programs.
- Members from allied organizations (local Latino center).
- Members from the faith community.

From new sources.
- Small businesses.
- Commercial companies.
- State and local governments.
- Institutional organizations (universities).

Step 3: Prepare the program plan.
- Time: when will work be done? What are milestones?

- Resources: who will do what? What money will be needed? What tools, information, and skills will be needed?

- Tasks: what actions will be taken?
Position Your Group for Success

Step 1: Set goals
Results oriented.
- ___ new members each month
  - ___
  - ___
- ___ new student members
  - ___
- ___ new community allies
  - ___

Activity oriented.
- ___ new organizations reached
- ___ emails sent
- ___ VIP visits made
- ___ phone calls made
- ___ letters sent

Step 2: Identify target populations
From traditional sources.
- Local member programs.
- Members from allied organizations (local Latino center).
- Members from the faith community.

From new sources.
- Small businesses.
- Commercial companies.
- State and local governments.
- Institutional organizations (universities).

Step 3: Prepare the program plan.
- Time: when will work be done? What are milestones?
- Resources: who will do what? What money will be needed?
- What tools, information, and skills will be needed?
- Tasks: what actions will be taken?
Caucuses are groups of individuals who identify with each other because of similar cultural or ethnic characteristics, economics or life circumstances, who share a common sexual identity or experience. What distinguishes Caucuses from other affinities or support groups is that Caucuses are formed by groups whose members are traditionally underrepresented due to the presence of discrimination and institutionalized oppression in our society.

-Beth Richie

External Challenges

Board of Directors and Staff Relations

The nature and extent of interactions between Board of Director (BOD) members and staff (employees) depends on the BOD model used by the organization. Oftentimes, the model is not intentionally and explicitly chosen -- it's the result of how members ended up working together. Working (or hands-on) Boards often include members that interact with employees on a regular basis. In contrast with Policy Boards, BOD members and employees often do not have strong interaction with each other, although employees might attend Board meetings to give reports or participate in certain Board Committees.

In any case, it's often wise for Boards and Executives to specify the nature and extent of interaction expected between Board members and employees. In addition, there are certain practices that ensure that Board members and employees have strong appreciation of each other's roles and can contribute to each other's accomplishments. In this case, the challenge for WOC caucuses or task force is that these models typically do not address interactions between caucus representatives that serve on the board and coalition staff members that are part of a caucus.

Executive directors often feel that independent board-staff contact undermines their authority, and creates the potential for staff to give misleading and/or undermining information to the board. Board members want to respect the authority of their ED, but they also know that they can often serve best by meeting separately with staff on program, caucuses, or fundraising issues. And they value the independent viewpoint that can develop when they receive information that has not been filtered through the executive director. Restricting contact between board and staff usually results in suspicion on the part of the board and resentment from the staff.

Things to consider:

- What is the relationship between the caucus or task force and the coalition? How does the coalition view its role with the caucus?
- Is the caucus interested in having a seat on the Board of Directors of the coalition?
- If so, how is their role defined? Are they elected or appointed and by whom? How long is their term of service? Do they have voting rights?
- What is the role of the coalition staff that is part of the caucus?
- What information is to be shared and by whom?
- What kind of support can be expected from the Executive Director of the coalition? Consider what support may exist on the BOD from other WOC or majority allies.
- What plan do you have for capitalizing on opportunities presented by BOD participation?
Member Programs

A successful caucus reflects a strong partnership between its members, organizations, and individuals outside the coalition membership that share similar interests. Through the caucus and WOC organizing, members find support and access to resources not traditionally available to them. Although becoming a member of a caucus is a personal decision, many women of color find themselves explaining or even asking their supervisor's permission to join the group.

Additional challenges that women of color face are:
- Having to ask permission to attend meetings.
- Caucus members are forced to share confidential information about the meeting to their supervisor or white staff in the agency.
- Funds are not allocated for women of color to participate in the meetings or the meetings are not considered a part of their staff development. Therefore, WOC are forced to cover their expenses, take personal leave/vacation to attend the meetings, or make up the time missed from work as a result of participating in the meetings.
- Organizations do not see the need/benefit for women of color to organize and receive additional training, support, empowerment, or networking opportunities.
- Women of color often get discouraged from participating in caucus activities because of the threat to loose employment. Some programs claim that bilingual women of color can not leave the office unless there is someone else that can handle non English speaking clients.

Agency & Staff

Based on research conducted by the American Institute on Domestic Violence (www.aidv-usa.com) the concept of exercising power and control over others is not exclusive to intimate relationships and home life. Less progressive managers and supervisors, perhaps unwittingly, employ various methods to maintain control over their employees that are similar to methods used by abusers. In fact, most business management schools focus personnel curriculum on "how to manage" employees, rather than how to cultivate the human resource within the employee base. This mentality easily and frequently leads to the establishment of power and control in the workplace.

The spokes on the Power and Control in the Workplace Wheel define how employers control the behavior of their employees by implementing certain tactics. Just as with the relationship wheels, consider the behaviors as an overall approach rather than an isolated event. For example, denying overtime or a training request is not, in and of itself, control-based. However, in combination with other behaviors outlined in this wheel, this denial can clearly be viewed as an ongoing attempt to "let them know who is boss." For battered workers [and women of color in particular], this kind of “mismanagement” can be devastating.

Oftentimes for WOC, the type of control-based tactics that are utilized by majority leaders, appear as double standards. For example, a white staff member is allowed to be forgetful, make mistakes, and have a bad day. Whereas for WOC, forgetfulness or mistakes are seen as incompetence, poor management of time and responsibilities, or unwillingness to satisfactorily perform job duties; bad days are viewed as laziness, lack of motivation, or displeasure with the work. These types of double standards usually result in concern and support for white women from majority leaders, and evaluations or reviews of policy and protocol for women of color.
What is P/paradise in the novel? . . . . [It is] as a refuge for the rejected, hurt, lost; can be a sanctuary for anyone who seeks peaceful entry; INCLUSIVE rather than 'exclusive.'

Paradise by Toni Morrison

Internal Challenges

Addressing Internalized Oppression

"Internalized oppression is not the cause of our mistreatment, it is the result of our mistreatment. It would not exist without the real external oppression that forms the social climate in which we exist."

Micheline Mason

According to Wikipedia, in sociology and psychology, internalized oppression is the manner in which an oppressed group comes to use against itself the methods of the oppressor. For example, sometimes members of marginalized groups hold an oppressive view toward their own group, or start to believe in negative stereotypes of themselves. Internalized oppression is also known as the process by which a member of an oppressed group comes to oppression: accept and live out the inaccurate myths and stereotypes applied to the oppressed group.

We are hardly ever given the opportunity to talk about how a lot of our destructive and negative ways come from oppression. By beginning to recognize internalized oppression within us, as well as understanding how to dismantle these oppressions, we hope to support each other in radical ways to find out what it really means to do revolutionary self-care.

Patterns of internalized oppression cause us adults to find fault, criticize, and invalidate each other. This invariably happens when we come together in a group to address some important problem or undertake some liberation project. What follows is divisiveness and disunity leading to despair and abandonment of the effort. In order for us to address internalize oppression in a group setting we need to develop and increase:

- active listening skills
- knowledge of personal and social identity
- understanding the dynamics of internalized oppression
- group pride and social identity development
- awareness of socially imbedded messages about oneself and other groups
- awareness of impact of oppression on individuals and on group interaction
- ability to approach conflict from multiple perspectives
- ability to build bridges between individuals and groups
- empowerment to effectively act as an ally and to ask for an ally
- skill training to respond to oppression
- commitment to individual and social change
Bridging Cross-Cultural Gaps

Women of Color are inflicted with particularly difficult social issues. They face myths, negative stereotypes and the realities of sexism and racism within such programs as the criminal system and social services that leave women of color with fewer options. Women who experience pain and frustration need support from other women who understand their impact on all members of the group. The caucus can be a safe place for support, empowerment and where they can restore energy, self-esteem and confidence that has been drained by oppression.

People of color must work together to build and maintain our communities. We must make our sisters’ and brothers’ problems our own and solve them together. This is a call for cooperation, accountability, and compassion.

Steps towards bridging the gap:

1st Step
The first step to effect positive change within our groups is to engineer a spirit of cooperation over competition. Cooperation requires us to work together for the common good.

2nd Step
The second step is that we must be willing to take full responsibility for ourselves, our families, the community, and the future.

3rd Step
The third step is that we must treat each other with compassion and respect. We have an obligation to be concerned about the problems and welfare of each other.

“First, know yourself.”

- In order to effectively communicate cross culturally, or intra-culturally, first have a grounded understanding of yourself as an individual.
- It is important to understand your cultural strengths and challenges.
- Begin a journey of adding to your cultural knowledge.
- It is important to understand what your traditional values are and were they come from. Do they complement or are they different from the traditional values of other groups? Some come from a traditional background while others are on a continuum towards assimilation.
The AWARE Model: Communication Across Cultures*

A ACCEPT the other person's behavior without judging it based on what that behavior means in your culture.

W WONDER what the other person's behavior means in his or her culture, rather than what it means in your culture.

A ASK what it means to the person, showing a respectful interest.

R RESEARCH and read about the other person's culture so you are able to place their behavior in the context of their cultural world view. (For skillful practitioners, learning is an ongoing process. We are never "finished" with our learning.)

E EXPLAIN what their behavior means in your culture. Demonstrate or describe the behaviors in your culture that would express similar feelings or meanings, so they can learn new behaviors that will help them function in your culture.

*Based on material developed by Noel Day, Polaris Research & Development, San Francisco.
See the exercise Conocimiento in Attachment N and “Exchanging Stories—Names” in Attachment O

Creating Safe Space & Sanctuary

The Women of Color Caucus should;

1. Work towards strengthening the community by providing a voice for women of color, by women of color; their concerns, their needs, their fears, and their visions for their lives.
2. Strengthen the community by providing a voice for those doubly and triply oppressed and thus help meet the needs of the women in the community.
3. Provide a vehicle for developing leadership skills among women of color in the community.
4. Strive to end oppression and impact society as a whole and create revolutionary change.

In reference to how WOCC events have added value to my life, where do I start first? The conferences, each session I attended I came away with something from learning about other cultures and how to approach DV issues with culture sensitivity, to attending events such as the Women’s Empowerment 2006, to the most recent retreat. I actually realized that I can own a house and get my debts and other things under control and even start saving for retirement. That was an “A HA” moment. Thank you all for listen and acting on ideas you have received, know that we all have benefited in one way or another.

Thank you,
M. McCullough