In preparation for the 2007 Minnesota Legislative Session, the Minnesota Council of Nonprofit’s Policy Day brought together nonprofit leaders and advocates to understand actions that organizations can take to advance their issues. It was an opportunity to involve key staff and board members in an event which set the stage for the critical session ahead and for long term advocacy efforts. Frances Kunreuther gave the keynote address.

**Power and Participation: The Role of Constituents in Nonprofit Advocacy**

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Frances Kunreuther

In keeping with the theme today, I labeled my talk Power and Participation: The Role of Constituents in Nonprofit Advocacy. I wanted to talk about the role of constituents because I think sometimes when we advocate for our issues, whether its money or policies or laws, we forget to look over our shoulder and see who is with us. That doesn’t mean that I only think we should advocate for popular issues. What I mean is that we often speak on behalf of people we work with and serve, and we could go even further if we work partnered with them and worked hard to let them find their own voice.

In fact, I want to argue that nonprofit groups have the responsibility to promote democracy by engaging their constituents, especially the people the serve.

To be clear about what I mean by this, I plan to cover four areas:

1. What it means for nonprofits to be sites of democratic practice;
2. What nonprofits have to offer in developing constituent power and participation;
3. The barriers we face; and
4. A transformational model, meaning how you can get started.

So let me start with **what it means for nonprofits to be sites of democratic practice.** I used to complain that everyone used words like democracy and civic engagement without really say what they meant. So I want to be clear. I think that
nonprofits can play an important role in supporting democracy. So I borrowed the term definition of democratic practice from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (not because they fund me – I was doing a web search and this is one of the ones that came up!!)

What they said under their Democratic Practice program was this,

“For democracy to flourish and deliver on its promises – including political participation, human rights, access to justice, a good education, an improved quality of life, a healthy environment, and personal security – citizens must become more engaged, empowered, and assertive, and institutions of governance must become more inclusive, transparent and responsive.”

This is their definition for their global and local work and I think it applies to us. Nonprofit groups work in the all the content areas where democracy “should be delivering on its promises,” but we don’t usually pay as much attention to the part where “citizens (and I am sure they didn’t just mean legal citizens) must become more engaged, empowered and assertive.” So this is an area where nonprofits can make a real difference.

But it won’t just happen. It is something we have to focus on. In other words, we still need to think about what we are delivering to people, but we also have to pay attention to how we doing our work to make sure the people we engage with have a voice, and help them to develop one if their voice it has been squashed, denied, or ignored.

Now on this democracy piece, I can’t help myself but I have to talk about Alexis de Tocqueville – you know the French aristocrat who came to the US in the 1830s and ended up writing *Democracy in America* about the vibrancy of the United State’s democratic practice because of its strong voluntary associations where ordinary citizens came together. Tocqueville is claimed by both progressives and conservatives, and I have no interest in idealizing French aristocracy who write about how great the US is during slavery.

However, it’s important to understand that what he thought was so great about the U.S. democracy was the associations that gave people a collective voice to express what they thought, believed, cared about.

So when we discuss nonprofit groups’ role in the democratic practice, we are talking about engaging constituents and to encourage them to have that voice, and we are not saying they should be neutral or have no opinion.

In fact we need to say the opposite; we need to help people develop opinions, ideas, and demands. We have to be nonpartisan but that doesn’t mean we leave our good thinking at the door.
We have an obligation to provide a place where ordinary citizens – those people we serve – can come together to be more engaged, empowered, and assertive.

So how can nonprofits be sites of democratic practice? Well I’ll quickly offer three ideas:

1. **Nonprofits can help people learn and form opinions**
   It is hard to know what to think about so many issues today – taxes, health care, the environment. Nonprofit groups can be places where constituents are educated about these important issues.

2. **Nonprofits can convene people and support them to develop a collective voice**
   Coming together, people learn from each other and they can go beyond feeling they are individually responsible for systems or policies or other causes for why they are in distress.

3. **Nonprofit groups work beyond their own self interest**
   To build democracy, our policy and advocacy needs to extend beyond ensuring funds for our organizations’ work. It’s important that we demand the support we deserve from government and other sources. But we have to make sure we have a broader vision that extends beyond organizational survival and truly promotes democracy.

And that leads me to my next point, which is **what nonprofits have to offer in developing constituent power and participation**. Minnesota has already taken great leadership in developing constituent participation with your voter engagement work, the Minnesota Participation Project. You really are a leader along with Massachusetts.

So let me briefly remind you why nonprofits are important places to engage people and amplify their voices, but first let’s me back up and let you know what I mean when I talk about constituents. I am talking about those people involved in your organization. This includes board, volunteers, community members, staff, funders; but really I want to emphasize the people you work with and serve – those people coming to your organization to see a performance, to find affordable housing, to leave their kids off, to get treatment, to visit your exhibit – they are the constituents (or participants, or clients or consumers). I am going to focus on them since that is where I believe we have enormous untapped reach.

So why are nonprofits so important in building constituent power and participation?

First, we are trusted institutions in our communities. We don’t exploit people or ideas for personal gain (I hope). And we offer important service to communities.
Second, most of our organizations have an ongoing relationship with constituents, which is another way we have built trust. And many nonprofit groups have a deep reach into communities that would otherwise be ignored. Nonprofit groups have contact with thousands of people every day. The resulting relationships are key to engaging constituents, where they can try out having voice and power.

Third, as we talked about earlier, nonprofit groups have information and the ability to educate people on the issues that affect their lives. We can also help people to think critically about what they hear and see. I was thinking about this earlier in the week when I heard how the Sen. James Inhofe chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee held a hearing on how the press accounts have "over-hyped" predictions of global warming. I think our organizations – through their relationships – can be places where issues like this are discussed and information – good information – is dispensed in ways that would ripple through communities.

Fourth, when we bring constituents together to be “engaged, empowered and assertive” we learn a lot. We find out information, we hear more about what they think, want, believe in, and care about, and the more we engage, the better our work.

And finally, nonprofits actually have important resources. When I ran a nonprofit, it was easy to focus on what we didn’t have. I was struck by a recent article in the nonprofit quarterly that describes how organizations can feel like their constituents – battered, poor, under siege. Now we could all work with the rich and feel really good!!! Or we can remember that we have resources and power.

To name a few: We actually have a lot of money between us all. We have physical resources like space for people to get together, telephones, copying machines, computers, and so on. We have our people and connections, and information. And we could go on. But these are important resources to build constituent voice, if we choose to use it that way.

So I would like to propose one way to go about this work, but before I do that I want to stop and address some of the barriers groups might come up against if we do this type of work in a serious way.

**The barriers we face**
It is easy to think – we already do this or we could just add a constituent engagement person – but in fact, what I am asking is for you to really think about doing your day to day work differently. That you would be part of making sure that the people you work with are engaged, empowered and assertive, and with them ensure that the institutions of governance are more inclusive, transparent and responsive.
So let’s just touch on the barriers – that of course we need to take very seriously.

First is funding. The fact is we might not be funded to do this work and actually some of those groups or people who give us money might not always want build constituent power and participation. No one’s work is completely dictated by funding sources or we would never innovate or solve problems or move ahead. The reality is we need funds to survive. Yet this part of our work -- to engage constituents and build democracy -- may have to start first and the funding may (or may not) follow. So we have to think of ways to integrate it thoroughly into our existing work.

One of the reasons funding is important is because probably none of you have staff sitting around looking for something else to do. People in our organizations are already asked to do too much with too little. So we need to be very careful in how we introduce and integrate this work – we need to expect push back. It is true that we may ask ourselves and our staff to do something different -- to address the root causes of problems. Their early participation and involvement is important.

Another barrier is fear. It’s scary to try to make fundamental changes in our organizations. It’s unpredictable. Leadership is important to manage the fear. We need to anticipate that not everything will go smoothly, and there may be new demands on the organization once we engage constituents and we want to prepare for that.

So that leads to another barrier; it’s just easier to do business as usual, even when it’s not really getting us anywhere, because we have so much else going on. So if we talk about how nonprofits need to change how we do our work, we need to know why. We have to make sure we understand that changing a culture takes time but it also has rewards.

The fact that it does take time is another barrier in this age of immediate measurable outcomes. We have to plan for change that may occur over several years in such a changing world. We need to think about the institutional strategies that moves this type of work ahead.

Finally, there is the barrier of working across organizational boundaries, a necessary part which you folks seem to have worked out better than most. But it is still a challenge in whatever work we do.

Yet despite these barriers and others, I think for nonprofits to survive, to have meaning that is different than a for-profit and from government, to get to root causes of recurring problems – we have to move ahead.
**Transformational Process**
So let me talk about what we have learned about this building constituent power so far.

**The Transformation Process**

We found that at the Building Movement Project in working with several groups who were trying to increase their constituents participation and power, learning from others engaged in similar work, that there was a process groups went through – individually or in cohorts – to prepare themselves to engage their constituents in ways that moves them to participate in the organization, the community, and beyond.

The model that we came up with (above) is one way to start the process. We don’t believe in a model; but it does sometimes help to look at something to get started. We call in the Transformation Process because we have found that both individuals and organizations go through a type of transformation in order to think differently about their work.
It has six components: **Learning, awareness, vision, strategy, action and reflection.**

**Learning:** One thing that really struck us in this work was how much we do and how rarely we stop and learn about what we are doing. It’s easy to overlook how important it is to take time in your organization to learn, before engaging constituents. We found it was important for staff members to learn about the neighborhood they work in, other people’s work in the same area, the larger issues underlying a problem they are trying to solve. I ran a youth organization for seven years and we had a mandatory staff meeting every month. I think back to it now and I realize we never once read and discussed an article relevant to our work. What on earth could I have been thinking?! We found that it was important to start with staff learning, and then later to do learning groups with constituents as well.

**Awareness:** One of the results of learning is that people began seeing the world differently and one of the most important parts of that is the way they see power. If we want to have voice and power, we need to be able to talk about where power lies – everyone has some power and some people have more – and the role power plays in our lives. It helps people see the larger structures of power. People in nonprofits are often afraid to talk about power, but if we don’t, we are not giving ourselves, staff members, and constituents important information that is vital for the future of democracy. For example, there was a case worker in the soup kitchen who was still resistant to seeing the “guests” she served as having voice until she came into her learning group and said that she had been thinking about what they had been talking about she realized that though she had always thought of herself as middle class, she really wasn’t because she couldn’t pay her bills; then it dawned on her that the people who came to the soup kitchen, the “guests”, were not simply people with mental illness or substance abuse problems or people without homes but they were all people who lived in poverty. And she told the group that at the soup kitchen they had really never talked about poverty. So this is the type of transformation that goes on with individuals.

**Vision:** One of the things that we all know is important is our vision. Our mission tells us the problem we are working on but our vision is the world we want to create. Vision is important because it is not something we can do alone, it is what we do together – across organizations, with constituents and communities – and it helps guide our work for larger change beyond our own self interest.

**Strategy:** The next step is to create a strategy, one that involves our constituents who have hopefully been brought in to discuss the vision. Strategy is the time when we analyze what we will do – what steps and actions we need to take – to move us closer to our vision. It is where we talk about our theory of social change, look at our assumptions and define the results we want to achieve. For example, one group didn’t feel they could confront a state representative but they
worked closely to develop a strategy with an organizing group that could do the confrontation.

**Action**: All this work is great but it doesn’t mean anything if we don’t take action. There are two places people get stuck – they either forget to do learning, awareness and vision and they just stick to strategy and action; or they never perfect their strategy so they never get to action. Your voter engagement project – action; talking to legislators – action; but remember when we talk about action it includes constituents. For example, one settlement house in NY took one year to implement an internal policy that encouraged case workers to ask clients/constituents if they wanted to give anything back. Constituents were thrilled because it changed the power dynamic – they had something to give, not just receive. Then when the summer youth employment program was cut, it was the seniors who were shut-ins and wanted to do something – who knew the youth – who wrote letters to the city council that saved summer youth employment program. Two groups that are usually pitted against each other worked together.

**Reflection/Evaluation**: We have been so inundated with outcome measures that we forget sometimes to sit and reflect on our actions and figure out what worked well and what didn’t. Doing this with constituents is especially important. And the cycle starts again.

**Conclusion**
In a way, this model is counterintuitive – as we are asked to do more for less, we are encouraging people to stop and think. We do this because we believe we need to fundamentally change how we do our work so that nonprofits promote democracy – for our own survival and for the people we seek to serve.

Thank you.

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