



The Economic Crash and the Advocacy Movement

At this stage, it is clear that we are headed for extraordinarily difficult financial times. The cash crunch for the advocacy movement will be as bad as we can imagine and far worse than we can easily manage. We need a plan for how to remain effective.

We should all begin to operate with new assumptions:

1. The decline in the national economy is going to reduce the **cash flow into the advocacy movement by between 20 and 50 percent**. Almost every organization will lose staff. The progressive advocacy movement at the end of 2010 will look very different from the movement at the end of 2008.
2. Unlike large, centrally managed corporations, the movement is going to dissolve in unpredictable and erratic ways. The sector's many externalities, as well as its unregulated and dysfunctional reward and punishment systems, will bring about a rapid, non-linear unraveling of capacity. This means that the most effective groups might not survive, and the least effective groups will not automatically disappear. Nor is there a model to predict which group, partner, campaign staff, or policy wonk is going to be around next month. No one knows what regional offices national groups will close. The groups are not coordinating reductions. The talent and assets that remain are going to be scattered across the landscape. The movement will be left with a bunch of loose threads. **The economic crash is going to require a sustained effort to repair and reconnect these threads--the elements of our movement--in order to continue to mount successful campaigns.**
3. The deepening recession, environmental changes, political shifts, technological evolution and the ongoing wars will combine to create movement toward rapid change and cultural instability. There will be a quickening of political, cultural and individual behavioral change. For at least two years, the federal government is going to be dominated by Democrats. They are going to be able to move legislation and government action quickly on issues like health care, energy and public works. **Opportunities to influence significant events and policies are going to come in tighter and more intense waves.**

These assumptions will drive the way leaders in the nonprofit sector plan their organizational budgets. In the advocacy and social change movement, however, we rely on networks in addition to organizations to lead and drive change. **Just as managers are creating plans for their organizations, the networks need plans to rationally deal with the reductions in overall capacity while also capitalizing on the opportunities that these disruptions will produce.** We need something that is not "more of the same," only smaller. The network plan should take advantage of the technology and organizing tools developed in the last several years to manage a constructive reorganization and establish a new model for

organizing that is smarter and more effective than the current model primarily dominated by large silos of competing institutions.

The network plan must be able to evolve; it must also be created and implemented by the network itself. This document presents the context, challenges, opportunities, draft principles and ideas to further the network planning and the discussion.

Context: Cascading Failure in the Financial Network

The concept of cascading failure is perhaps the most critical lesson of the current economic crisis. Over time, a self-perpetuating destruction mechanism has evolved within the financial network. Interdependencies are so complex that actions produce unforeseen reactions. The new global market is so complex no one can grasp the moving parts in play.

Banks and investors are working feverishly to protect their self-interest. The actions of each bank may well be rational and logical—their decision, for example, to not expose themselves to additional risks and focus instead on holding onto dollars. Ironically, it is the combined effect of many similar actions that creates cascading failure. Thousands of banks and many more investors are locking down resources in order to survive. However, their actions have actually worked against their desired goal. The combined impact of these rational acts of self-preservation led to the acceleration of banks collapsing and the crash of the market on a global scale. And so a “run on the banks” —a comparatively manageable problem—quickly cascaded into a “run on the global financial network”¹ that wreaked havoc. Once the cascading failure mechanism kicked in, there was no way for individual banks to reverse their strategies without getting destroyed in the process.

The lesson of cascading failure is among the most important for us in the advocacy and campaign networks.

Cascading failure in an advocacy movement would be triggered in similar fashion. The cash flow that sustains advocacy is disappearing. The movement is faced with significant downsizing and restructuring. It is safe to assume all sources of funding are going to be reduced (let’s assume between 20% and 50%).

Nobody knows how donors will respond to the crisis. No one knows which investments each individual group depends on or which foundations are taking the biggest hits. The funding in the sector is provided by a complex set of sources, and those sources might not even fully understand the fall in their own fortunes.

¹ “With the worth of those securities now being questioned — and no equivalent of deposit insurance — some who financed the securities want their money out, a fact that has created the 21st-century equivalent of a run on a bank.”
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/10/business/10liquidity.html>

Falling stock prices are more a symptom than the main event - the real crisis is unfolding in specific cogs of the world's economic machinery.-
http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/10/26/off_the_charts/?p1=Well_MostPop_Emailed3

When the movement battens down the hatches in order to survive, the threat of cascading failure comes into play. Like banks, the organizations in the movement act rationally in their own interests; they refocus on core mission, cut back on meetings and travel, reduce work with allies, and withdraw from “risky” collaborative projects. Like the financial system, the movement then “loses liquidity”—meaning, in this context, it sees a decreased capacity to collaborate due to a drying up of the social trust and communication channels it needs to synchronize. This seizing up of the system leads to cascading failure: the creation of a negative feedback loop that will result in the collapse of more groups, the shedding of more capacity and talent, and a slide into cultural and political irrelevance. The tensions over funding and the disconnect because of staff loss and decreased peer-to-peer communication accelerates bickering and dysfunctional coalitions. The work of advocacy organizations in survival mode becomes less exciting, cohesive, collaborative, and visible. Donors, in turn, are forced to further reduce funding because the increased immediate need created by the bad economy for social services on one hand overpowers the ever smaller and more fragmented social action and advocacy networks.

We must plan to deal with the unraveling of larger and more complex advocacy and issue networks.

Draft Starting Principles:

- As sector-wide cost cutting kicks in, the plan must have deliberate protections to prevent a “run on the advocacy networks.” As many groups cut collaboration and communication costs, we need to make sure that critical collaborative infrastructure doesn’t collapse.
- The key incentive and metric used in networks needs to be the amount of **overall** capacity, infrastructure, and talent maintained at lowest cost. Most big initiatives (climate, genocide, etc), campaigns, and interest areas of foundations are not driven by single organizations, so the work, strategy, and guidance that results from the plan must not just think of the impact at the organizational level. Are there ways to reduce overall costs across the network, rather than only looking for savings within groups? What are the best ways to manage costs for networks, coalitions and movements?
- The plan must offset the tension, frustration and competition for resources that will occur within the sector as the economy worsens.
- People—not brands or job titles—are the assets that keep the campaigns, coalitions, networks and the movement consistent. As organizations lay off staff, and brands merge and disappear, the people will move around. We need to focus on ways to rewire the connections between these people and help them make the transition. We need to actively help them manage increased and different workloads and patch them together in new ways.
- The new movement and new structures are going to require new work skills. As the sector reorganizes the network, it is imperative to provide far-flung participants the skill, tools and management skills to execute highly complex campaigns.
- There must be a deliberate strategy to continually “map and weave” the threads together to do campaigns.
- Assets (people, skills, funding) moved as groups disappear, along with new investments, should not be locked within silos of issue areas, geography or brands.

Plans will evolve in the weeks and months ahead.

In the meantime, however, our people and key institutions (organizations and funders) can begin to make changes in how they operate and how they think about work in the next three years. Following is the start of a list of recommendations that will position groups to stay up to speed with the evolving principles of cutting costs, sustaining connectivity and adopting to the new culture. As the recommendations become more formal and demanded training and step-by-step programs can be developed for activists, volunteers, organizations, coalitions and funders.

Draft Prescriptions:

- **Build cooperative capacity first, THEN internal capacity.** The internal capacity of most organizations is going to come under intense pressure. The ability to cooperate will enable you to know more about what capacity you “need to own” and what services you will be able to count on from people across the network. Get cooperative. Leverage more of others’ investments. Share more services. Outsource more. Reduce overhead costs. Look for deals.
- **Invest in Social Capital.** It will be the only growing market in 2009. Look at it as part of your organization: There have always been good reasons to build your social network, but now it is a matter of strategy. You need social capital to help in difficult times. Add Board members from a broad set of the movement. Give staff time to participate in Happy hours and lunches with peers.
- **Be hyper communicative.** Talk with partners early and often. Be over communicative. All networks “live” on the strength of one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many conversations and exchanges. Invest more heavily in outreach and communication efforts and infrastructure (newsletters, blogs, etc). Talk extremely openly about your challenges and opportunities. Discuss openly the staff, departments and offices you are likely to cut; with them first, then to the open network. Being highly communicative also means more listening for trends and opportunities.
- **Revisit your Strategic Communications plan.** Identify the new target audiences, and determine whether the recession has changed what they need to believe in order to change their behavior. Increase the volume to your target audiences; they are going to be focusing on more issues and more channels. If your campaign is going to proceed, you are going to need to increase your media and new media outreach.
- **Focus on common story and shared vision.** It is time to refocus on why our staff, donors, boards and volunteers are motivated and passionate about our work. For most of us, it is to solve the problem wrapped in the common story of each segment of the movement. In order to open up new opportunities for collaboration and partnership organizations, and give staff the authority to think creatively, key leaders should continue to tease out what will change if people stay networked with your organization and vision. Build excitement about the big picture items, not the allegiance to a particular brand. Think and communicate more about the story. Organize around the stories to stay plugged into the broader movement and partnerships that are going to be more carefully scrutinized.

- **Monitor trends on broadest scale possible.** In a rapidly changing, environment the search for variables that can influence your group, security and agenda needs to be broader. The tempo of healthcare reform and financial bailouts can effect after school programs. Cut back on museum hours can impact house party strategies. The broader area of trends that you monitor the more likely you can observe opportunities and perceive threats before you chance for action has disappeared.
- **Develop more robust programs to recruit support and leverage volunteers.** Develop talent-swapping initiatives with others and provide surge capacity to allies in the movement. The goal is to find resources and manage in a way that can accept a surge of capacity from volunteers or other groups. Find ways to exchange or loan staff across organizations.
- **Develop redundant paths** for projects that are partner dependent.
- Develop management systems for ad hoc work team management. Find **new ways to assemble and manage capacity** in real time on projects. Build a network of vendors (consultants, nonprofit partners, volunteers) that with some premium investments can come together to work on project but that you don't have to sustain throughout the year.

Draft Recommendations for individuals working in advocacy movements.

- **Get your finances in order and know your needs.** Surviving disruptions is going to require that people understand their risk and options as the job market collapses. Most people can't focus on work if they are worried about losing a job, house, car or health benefits. Go through your personal "worst-case" scenario planning so you understand what you need, and make sure you understand what it will take to keep safe. Feeling out of control adds to stress, and not knowing your breaking point puts the life you are building at risk. Continue to focus on what is fun, important and meaningful to you.
- **Get social** (new movement – face to face and online). You need to get on the phone and on the road. Get out there and socialize. Do more dinners and cast your feelers for opportunities to collaborate 30-60 percent wider than you normally do. Double the number of your regular trusted advisors. It will be good to blow off stress, add to the richness of your work and build redundancy and outreach capacity you may need to build teams, gather information and find work. Spending more social times with collaborative partners will take the edge off the stress caused by the same projects with less staff. Social ties may matter as much as ties with your peers in your organization or your managers.
- **Reconnect with the common story you have with your peers and the common language you share with other progressives.** Work in campaigns and advocacy has, of late, been too concerned with explaining nuance of differences because there are so many groups and so much overlap. The tension and division created by this legacy of infighting and competition will be ramped up as resources shrink. But what is good for the group may not be good for the activists and actors.

It is time to reconnect with your personal priorities and motives, as well as with the voice you share with your peers. The actors must realize that we have much more in common with partners that we compete with locally and across the county. Brand loyalty is not a great strategy in a climate of disruption. Foundations are also going to be losing staff, donors are going to move on and some groups and campaigns will be merging. Partners you stab in the back may be the only groups moving legislation in a few months. It will serve you well to spend time rediscovering the common language of the movement.

- **Broaden your skills.** The movement is undergoing a transformation. Make sure you hone some specific skills that will enable you to operate effectively as teams become spread farther apart and groups cut overhead. Learn how to use some of the free network tools that are valuable in day-to-day operations; shift your perspective on what is possible. Learn to use Skype. Use an RSS reader, go to training course on communications, figure out how to blog. Set up an account on Facebook and Linked-in and tune in once a week to understand how they work. Pick up skills need for long-distance team management or project management.
- **Redefine your role. Pick new network roles (weaver, operations, director). Lead in new ways.** Network leaders must monitor resources, communications, responsibilities, feedback and output. They must be able to see and respond to trends, and have the power to make decisions and redirect energies as appropriate. Network weavers must be able to bring together network resources, tie the network together and reconnect fractures. The network must also have people supporting network operations.
- **Broadcast your skills, talents and costs.** In the nonprofit sector, we have a huge opportunity to retain more of the money that we do have within our networks. But first we need to better understand the skills, talents, and capacity available. What are the resources that partners within our networks need? What can you deliver and how can you advertise it?
- Each organization needs to be able to pitch its services, labor, field organizing capacity and management skills to others across the movement so that they can leverage their existing investments. Individuals will need to document and communicate their own skills and talents. As nonprofits cut back, the staff who bring in revenue or reduce overhead are going to be the last to go.
- Generate cash flow and opportunities. In tight times, everyone should be looking for cash flow ideas and opportunities. All of us need to be reminded that we have multiple bottom lines and one of those bottom lines is that revenue needs to meet expenses. **Be supportive and be flexible.**
- **Borrow.** Start asking for help. A big part of building ties actually starts by incurring social debt. In a network-based economy, it is essential that each individual understand how to borrow.

Borrowing is the currency of issue and political networks. Each request increases the value of the market.

We also need to understand that the more we borrow, the more likely it is that we'll share. So we need to ask freely for help and support. We need to borrow people's conference rooms, borrow staff, printers, location, facilities, or support for an event. The more that we can operate on a borrowed economy, the less financial economy that we'll need to depend on.

Borrowing helps build trust, and creates interactivity across a broader part of the network. It is important to make sure that our network doesn't seize up in tough financial times.

The other side of the mandate for all staff to borrow is the mandate for all staff to share. Share your input, interest or your knowledge. Help people learn lessons quicker. What did you borrow in the last week? What did you share?

- **Scan the widest area of the field.** It's really important now to broaden your radar. You don't know where the next challenge or the next opportunity lies. You don't know which partners you might have the ability to work with, or how your issue may pop in this environment.

It is critical that you start to scan a wider field of knowledge for two reasons: --It affects your job, and your opportunity to add to the cash flow for your organization. --By scanning the field, you will see the trends. You will be able to jump on a policy opportunity with others. You will be able to notice where people are gaining traction, and where the resources are.

It is critical to learn how to scan huge swaths of the news, and of feedback from your peers. Make sure you are on the right list-servs, or divvy up that task across your staff. Make sure you read RSS feeds and use Google alerts. Go to briefings, meetings, conferences, gossip grapevines, and news sites.

If you find something interesting, pass it on to the right people or the right lists. Publish your findings. Try to create or participate in the echo chamber that gets louder and louder around legislative and funding opportunities. In a networked world, thought leadership comes from the analysis process, not the information itself. Publishing and sharing your thinking is a critical survivor skill for a network.

- **Provide feedback.** In the new economy, with large coalitions and collaborations being run on fewer resources, it is more important than ever that we provide feedback on what works and what doesn't: feedback on observed trends from other peoples' activities, feedback on their skills, reputations, and contributions. Without a central boss, feedback is the only way we can control the network. Feedback is the mechanism for collaboration and synchronization. It is the mechanism for enforcing norms and ostracizing troublemakers.

Success “bubbles up” when we learn what works and what doesn't work, and increase our movement’s “trial and error” capacity. The mechanism for that is process is feedback, and it starts with the members of the movement providing it.

Vision

There are many ways to tie a network together. There are many “currents,” aside from money, that can flow through the network and keep it running. The goal of the principals and recommendations is to reinforce the channels that keep the advocacy movement and our networks functional.

Some might argue that the advocacy movement has been overbuilt. Others will call to let some of the smaller groups disappear. But that is not a plan. There are many ways to squeeze more functionality and productivity out of the nonprofit sector. We should focus on infrastructure to support collaboration. If our groups and our advocates are going in many directions, we should plan and build the capacity to coordinate them.

These challenges of collaboration and coordination have handicapped our progress in the past. We can choose either to be stymied by them again, or we can answer the same call that has gone out to the auto, healthcare, and energy industries—do something new, and something better. We must invest and plan carefully to create a new advocacy movement that is more powerful, more productive, employs more people, uses resources better and creates a sustainable mechanism to defend and promote progressive change. Just as the nonprofits and organizations that emerged in the 1930s were the tools that we used for 70 years to organize social change movements, the network that we preserve through this recession will be the network that we use to solve the biggest problems facing us tomorrow.

About the Author

Martin Kearns is an innovator in the field of netcentric campaigns and advocacy. He is also Co-Founder and Executive Director of Green Media Toolshed. He has pioneered integration of network-centric principals to the field of civic organizing and social change work. He provides research, consulting and trainings for other working to build advocacy networks. He is designing software and services targeted to create value at the multi-organizational and movement scale. He is the catalyst and co-founder of MobileActive.org, a global network of activists who use cell phones for civic action and engagement.

Green Media Toolshed (GMT) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping the environmental movement communicate more effectively. GMT offers a professional suite of communication tools, strategic advice, trainings and services. Previously, Kearns also successfully founded the Georgia River Network, a group dedicated to preserving Georgia's rivers. Kearns worked on local, state and national political campaigns. He is a dynamic speaker and is often found at communications, technology and organizing strategy venues supporting progressive civic engagement. He volunteers on the Advisory Board of the New Organizing Institute. He spent three years working at the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Kearns has a Bachelors of the Arts from LeMoyne College and a Masters in Environmental Science from Yale University.

Kearns spent two years as a Jesuit International Volunteer in Kingston, Jamaica teaching computers at St. George's College and working with inner city youth. He is a runner, hiker and fisherman. He and his wife Maryann are raising their three children in Rockville, MD. Kearns writes a daily blog, Network-Centric Advocacy : *Advocacy Strategy for the Age Connectivity* at www.network-centricadvocacy.net.