

# Organization Development for Social Change: An Integrated Approach to Community Transformation

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## Introduction

*Do you sometimes stay up at night wondering if your organization is actually making a difference? How often do you see groups moving from one organizing campaign to the next without stopping to think about the bigger picture? Are you sure of what we as progressives are ultimately fighting for? When is the last time you heard about another social justice organization that does vital work falling into the throes of staff tensions and nearly shutting down? How many people do you know who decided to leave their social justice work to spend more time with their families, go back to school, or find a less stressful job that would actually pay the bills?*

As people working for social change, we currently face serious dilemmas about our organizational ability to grow, change, and stick around long enough to nurture broad social movements. As vehicles for social change, nonprofits are an important building block in a broad-based movement aiming to reinvigorate democracy and achieve real racial and economic justice. Nonprofit leaders committed to movement-building face this central question: **How can our organizations both be bold enough to alter the fundamental structural relationships in society, and wise enough to act according to principles of organizational sustainability and community transformation?**

The elements of collective action, political analysis, organizational structure, and individual reflection are critically important to building a social movement that on one hand embodies sustainable practices, and on the other is politically shrewd and powerful enough to contend with oppressive forces. At the same time, each element presents a different approach to change that surfaces contentious questions about the value of internal work (both personal and organizational), the centrality of power-based analysis, and the primacy of action above all else. Differences of opinion in each of these areas crystallize sharp tensions and can impede even the most concerted efforts to work together.

This article explores organizational and movement-building tensions, like the ones above, in order to unearth potential places of unity and develop a more holistic framework for change. This framework contains four approaches to transformation that we believe are vital components to social change, and that are frequently at odds with each other within organizations. They are: Community Organizing (CO), Power Analysis (PA), Organization Development (OD), and Spirit/Sustainable Practice (SP) (See Appendix A for our working definitions of each of these approaches to change).

## Origins of this Paper

The ODSC (Organization Development for Social Change) model emerged through the work of a group of consultants convened by the Movement Strategy Center over the course of three years. These consultants share a commitment to working with organizations in service of our visions for social justice.

The group met monthly for two years, at the end of which Lisa Russ created the first version of the ODSC model as a way to summarize the group's work over the previous six months. The next round of the group, with support from the C. S. Mott Foundation, worked to develop the thinking further. We wrote extensive chapters about each of the four quadrants, and worked hard to reach a collective understanding of these concepts. Zak Sinclair has served as primary author and editor. Susan Lubeck provided essential editorial contributions, and Lisa Russ has continued to refine the ideas contained here. In addition to their thinking on the model as a whole, Pia Infante, Ernest Mark and Nghia Tran each contributed to the creation of background papers. The work of this group of six is the foundation for this paper and the ideas contained here.

## Tensions Brought to Life

Imagine a staff meeting where an organization is trying to decide whether to take on a new initiative or campaign. Do these conflicting statements from different staff members sound familiar?

- “Hold on, I think we really need to step back and actually look at how we make decisions around here before we even talk about taking on this new campaign.” (*Reflecting an Organizational Development approach*)
- “I’m not really sure how this campaign will increase the leadership and political education of our members, and I don’t think we’re really addressing the issues of power imbalance in our own organization.” (*Reflecting a Power Analysis approach*)
- “You know, we really need to start looking at issues of staff capacity. I haven’t had a day off in two months, and I’m losing hope that we can actually win our current campaign much less take on a new one.” (*Reflecting a Spirit/Sustainable Practice approach*)
- “Look, as far as I’m concerned, we have one organizational priority, and that is to improve the conditions in this community. If we sit around debating our internal process all day, and don’t take on this new campaign, we’re being unaccountable to our constituents.” (*Reflecting a Community Organizing approach*)

Whether they are aware of it or not, these organizers are grappling with four distinct approaches to change. Such debates are longstanding among activists, although they take different shapes in relationship to current organizational and political realities. Since organizers are first and foremost concerned with “making change”, the topic of *how* to make change, in what realm, and with what priority can spark intense debate, and if not done with conscious consideration, thwart an organization’s attempt to move forward.

As organization development consultants with backgrounds in community organizing, we hope to resolve some of these familiar organizational conflicts by looking more closely at the underlying values, assumptions, theories of change, and practices of each approach. We believe that possible resolutions to these conflicts

actually reside in a deeper, more nuanced understanding of each of these approaches to change. What we have found is:

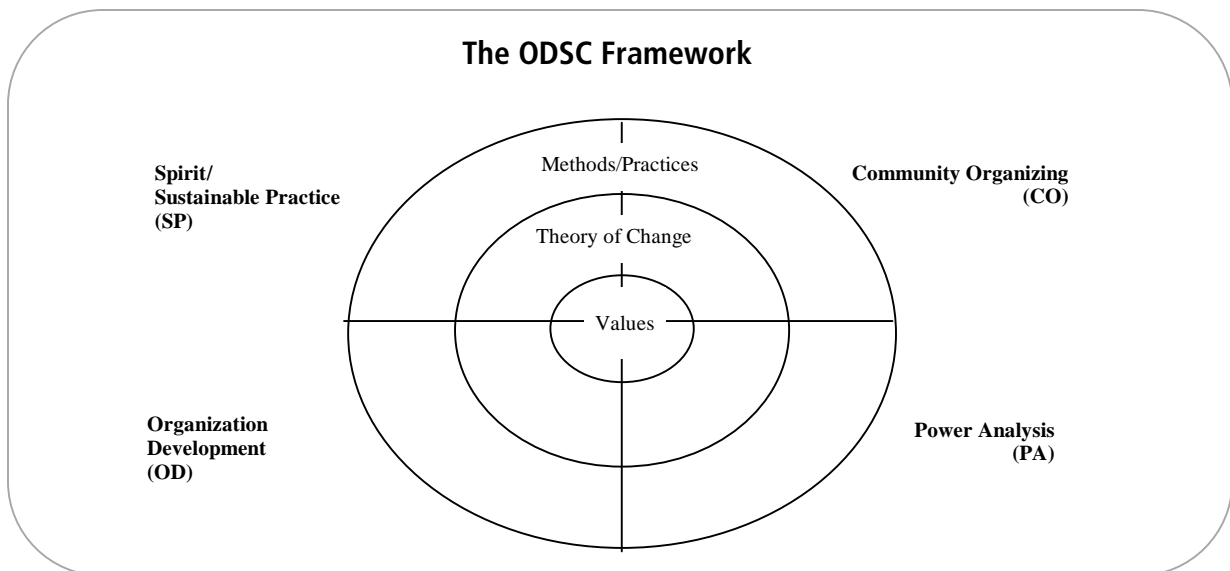
- Social justice organizations often engage these four approaches to change in isolation from each other, and miss the power of a more integrated approach.
- Each realm on its own provides unique contributions to social justice work and can improve our ability to build a more sustainable, strategic movement for change.
- Our organizational practices do not always line up with our stated values within each realm, which can cause organizational dissonance and conflict.
- On a fundamental level, each of these realms shares a set of values that are more similar than they are different.
- For many reasons, a growing number of practitioners are already integrating two or more approaches into their work. For example, more and more consultants are coming from an organizing background within their own communities, and as a result are already steeped in community organizing and/or power analysis. More consultants are bringing their commitment to working against racism into their practice. And an increasing number of practitioners are integrating spirituality into their work.

## The Four Approaches in Relationship: the ODSC Framework

The practices of Community Organizing (CO) and Power Analysis (PA) are fundamental to social movements. Together, they offer a powerful motivating force, political clarity, and grounding in the real-life conditions of oppressed people. However, organizers find that these approaches have limited effectiveness on their own because they miss the deeper human and relational elements necessary to fully engage constituent communities, inspire long-term commitment and sustain hope in the face of adversity. Social justice organizations provide a critical sphere in which to put into practice our visions of social change, so that activists actually know *how* to build the society they envision. It seems important, then, to find other approaches to transformation that can augment the more commonly wielded tools of CO and PA.

An emerging generation of activists is beginning to embrace Organization Development (OD) and Spirit/Sustainable Practice (SP) – methodologies that build organizations from the inside out, but that have been traditionally distrusted in the social justice field. OD and SP do have the potential, each in their own way, to steer activists off course. OD can become too focused on “organization for organization’s sake” with no clear political purpose. SP can become overly concerned with individual growth, spiritual renewal, and healing disconnected from a broader social/political context. **However, when OD and SP are grounded by social justice values and goals, they can offer precisely the counter-balance CO and PA need in order to be broadly successful in the long-term.**

The ODSC framework, as illustrated below, shows these four approaches to transformation in relationship with each other. The diagram allows us to map out the tensions that exist between each quadrant, in terms of Values/Assumptions/Beliefs (VABs), Theory of Change (TOC), and Practices. The image below illustrates our working model:



As we spoke to fellow activists and reflected on our own experiences, we realized that many of us carry disappointments and vulnerabilities around these approaches to change. For example, nearly everyone can recall a time when power analysis was applied internally to their organization and resulted in a meltdown of painful accusations, staff departures, guilt, and resistance. Others can think of a strategic planning process that took many more organizational resources than they expected and never produced the needed organizational change.

A group of six OD consultants who work with social justice organizations spent many months developing this model. We delved deeply into the historical origins, central values, theories of change, and practices of each quadrant to identify both the gifts and the limitations of each approach. We found that each realm contributes something valuable to individuals, groups, and organizations working for social justice. What follows is a synthesis of what each quadrant has to offer to the process of movement-building and social change.

- **Community Organizing (CO)** translates community concerns into collective action. This realm offers community members the power and satisfaction of acting boldly on their beliefs, and presents a unique opportunity to be in direct relationship with others who share their values. It holds a distinct understanding of systemic injustice and the transformative power of righteous indignation.

*VABs, TOC, and Practices:*

Community Organizing values action, believes that building the collective power of those most directly impacted by the problem will create change, and utilizes confrontational power-based practices in the public sphere (i.e., direct action), and more collective power-sharing practices in the community sphere (i.e., one-on-ones, leadership development).

- **Power Analysis (PA)** provides organizers with a framework for understanding the broader context in which we all live through the lens of power. It analyzes the social, economic, and political systems that shape our material, personal, cultural, and even spiritual realities. This framework creates a collective analysis of structural inequalities, and how they play out in our lives, with the desire to motivate more strategic, collective action.

*VABs, TOC, and Practices:*

PA values theory and analysis, believes that change will come about when organizers and impacted communities understand exactly how structures of power and dynamic forces work to oppress them, and utilizes the practices of grassroots political education and anti-oppression training.

- **Organization Development (OD)** examines systemic change on the organizational level, and provides tools and frameworks to improve an organization's ability to meet its goals. It aims to help the group understand itself better and looks at the relationship of the individual to the group. OD offers the potential to create organizational communities in the present that reflect our values, aspirations and visions for the future. This approach can help groups align their vision, values, structure, and purpose, and enact democratic principles of power sharing. Ultimately, OD honors both the inherent worth of each individual and the power of collective process to achieve its highest aspirations.

*VABs, TOC, and Practices:*

OD values the interpersonal realm and group process (i.e. believes that *how* work gets done is as important as *what* work gets done), believes that change occurs mainly by increasing a group's awareness of and capacity to change their internal process and patterns, and practices organizational assessment, visioning, planning, and group development.

- **Spirit/Sustainable Practice (SP)** views self-knowledge, healing and cultural grounding as key to transformation, and offers tools to build authentic connection with oneself, others, and the outer world. In the context of spirit and healing, one's full humanity is recognized – emotions, intuition,

creativity, motivations, desires, and struggles. This framework offers powerful practices and methods for addressing core wounds and trauma in an organizational context.

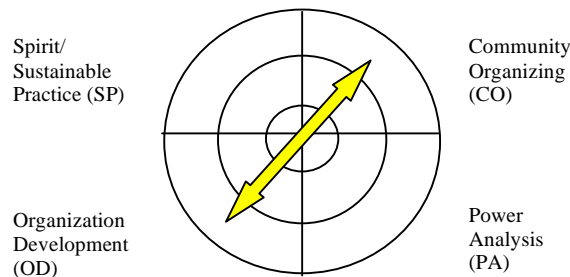
*VABs, TOC, and Practices:*

SP values deep reflection and connection with the heart, believes that change happens from the inside out and includes recognition of one's own humanity and the humanity of others. Sustainable practices include self-reflection, collective healing, and spiritual awareness.

While each of these approaches values different things, there is a natural affinity between them that makes them more powerful together than on their own. For example, Community Organizing values action and OD values process, yet CO does not claim that action *on its own* without attention to creating democratic group process (OD) or a clear analysis (PA) is enough. Similarly, Power Analysis relies on the collective action of CO to motivate people to engage a developed political analysis, and believes in the inherent ability of individuals to reflect, learn, and change (SP) their own relationship to power and privilege in order to create larger systems change. In practice, however, activists often inhabit one quadrant more fully than the others, and push each other into polarized positions that obscure these natural overlaps. We present two scenarios to better illustrate the ODSC framework in practice.

## A Familiar Scenario: Community Organizing and Organizational Development

*"We are a grassroots organization that is dedicated to building power among young people of color in our community. I started this organization as a youth myself about four years ago, and I've learned pretty much everything I know about running an organization from taking leadership here. As a reflection of my own values and experience, I've hired almost all of our staff from the community. We are truly constituent-led. Now, though, we're at the point where we need to really step back and evaluate. In order to get to the next level as an organization, I think we need to bring on people with more developed skills and expertise, rather than simply picking the most dedicated participants and trying to train them on the job. Honestly, this approach hasn't really worked out so well, because it turns out we just don't have the resources or the time to invest that intensively in staff development and supervision – everybody ends up frustrated, and staff morale is pretty low."*



In this familiar scenario, a community organizer is struggling with the demands of building a sustainable and effective organization and remaining consistent with her political values. On the one hand, this leader values one of the core tenets of community organizing which is to build member-led organizations, and on the other, she is aware that her organization lacks needed skills and expertise that goes beyond simply staff

development. This organization seems to be hitting a familiar choice-point for community groups: staying small and “scrappy” with a lot of heart and limited impact, or growing in size and “professionalism” in order to exert more influence and gain more victories on community issues.

While it might seem at first glance that OD could really help CO navigate this tension, often this is not so obvious to organizers. OD’s primary context is organizations, not communities, movements, or society as a whole. As a result, the framework of many OD practitioners will likely seem too narrow to help answer the set of questions facing CO groups, for example: *How does the organization’s mission advance an overall movement strategy?* Additionally, OD works from a humanistic orientation that primarily values the human dignity, meaning, and growth of *individuals*. This outlook can seem initially alienating to many organizers who spend a good portion of their lives devoted to building collective power and community structures. In reality, OD takes this humanistic frame and applies it to collective group processes in order to encourage more healthy organizations, a concern that is shared by both organizers and OD practitioners. OD even aims to increase democracy in organizational life, however it pays more attention to individual needs within group life than CO does. In this way, OD can actually offer CO an important competency that it lacks by helping organizers attend to individual needs in the collective and find a balance that will increase organizational success.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, OD lacks the attention to power relationships and community leadership that CO values deeply. As the vignette above points out, the commitment to hiring constituents onto staff is not simply an issue of organizational stage of development (as OD might frame it). This commitment also reflects the organization’s broader political goals of increasing community leadership, as well as being genuinely accountable to its constituents. There is an inherent imbalance of power when an outsider with more expertise works in a community organization. Often the notion of “expertise” places more value on educational attainment and access to elite power structures than the valuable lived experience and know-how that community members bring. Ultimately, the community should “own” the organization and use it as a vehicle to solve community problems themselves, in a way that increases their voice and builds their collective power.

Applying Power Analysis methods to OD could help the organization move through this conundrum. PA can help groups understand and then re-constitute dynamics of power on both institutional and interpersonal levels. PA can offer OD a framework for understanding how power is structured in society, and then how it plays out in organizations.<sup>2</sup> In this instance, an OD facilitator might lead the organization through a process that clarifies individual assumptions about power, and addresses the seeming contradiction between building community leadership on the one hand and building a more powerful organization on the other. OD could also offer the understanding that each person subjectively constructs their own meaning and that, whether or not that meaning is immediately transparent to another, it has intrinsic value.<sup>3</sup> In other words, OD could minimize the binary thinking that is often characteristic of PA, for example, the idea that there is only one “correct” understanding of how societal power is structured. If OD operates from the assumption that everyone has a claim on some aspect of the truth, then it can open up the space for the organization to step

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<sup>1</sup> Sinclair, Zak. *Organization Development Success in Grassroots Social Change Organizations: How Change Happens*, MA diss. JFK University, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Sinclair, Zak, Susan Lubeck, and Lisa Russ, eds. Unpublished manuscript. *Four Approaches to Transformation in Social Justice Work*. For more on this see: Power Analysis chapter by Pia Infante and Zak Sinclair. Oakland: Movement Strategy Center, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* For more on this see: Organization Development chapter by Susan Lubeck and Ernest Mark. Oakland: Movement Strategy Center, 2006.

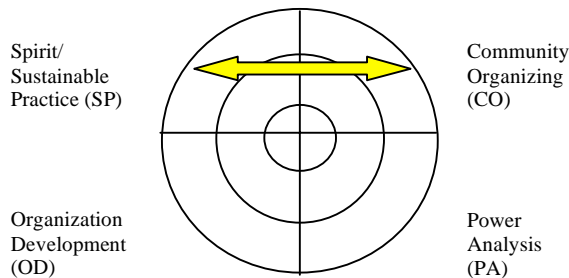
out of a more ideological debate, and take on the much more difficult task of creating its *own* specific analysis of power *as a group*.

Additionally, OD could help this group get a better grasp on the complexity of power relationships in organizations. This approach could help staff think through their relatively crude analysis of simply bringing community members on staff in an attempt to equalize power, without first understanding the needs and skills of those individuals. Although guided by the best intentions, the end result is that there is a mismatch between organizational needs and staff capacity to fulfill their roles. This mismatch is demoralizing for everyone involved, and produces exactly the opposite effect of what they seek – community empowerment. Here again, OD offers CO the gift of paying attention to both individual needs and needs of the collective overall.



## Another Familiar Scenario: Community Organizing and Spirit/Sustainable Practice

*“My organization works to end police brutality. We organize communities of color across the city to ensure officers accused of brutality are actually disciplined, and we work to increase public oversight into police policy and practice more generally. In the middle of our current campaign, a cop shot an unarmed young man from one of the communities we work with closely. It was awful, and at the same time it seemed like a real political education moment for our members. We held a rally and a vigil to honor this victim, and our numbers increased for a while. People were really angry. But lately, things have quieted down and our community leaders are harder to track down. I’ve also been noticing that our numbers are down. Fewer people are coming to the meetings, and those who do come seem pretty unengaged.”*



This vignette illustrates the tension that exists in social justice organizations between the realms of Community Organizing and Sustainable Practice. Organizers all too often encounter tragic events when working closely with oppressed communities, yet traditional organizing methodology doesn’t adequately address community trauma. With its emphasis on action, community organizing taps into the energy of anger and outrage and tends to shy away from a full range of emotions. In order to “stay strong,” CO often rejects displays of grief, sadness, or fear. Stoicism is almost a rite of passage for veteran organizers who have spent years in the trenches. Not acknowledging the trauma that comes from oppression negatively impacts the relationships between organizers and community members, and can have all sorts of unintended consequences. For example, frequent noticeable effects are fewer members and a lack of sustained commitment by community leaders.

Sustainable Practice believes that resisting oppression requires communities to access a full range of emotions including heartbreak, tenderness and hope. These emotions provide fertile soil for new growth and life to emerge, and can sustain community action far beyond the initial expression of outrage. For example, without a process for community healing that goes beyond the initial vigil, community members’ collective power will be eroded by unaddressed grief and sadness. These emotions often manifest as depression, cynicism, or withdrawal from the movement altogether. SP encourages organizers to slow down and create ongoing space for community reflection on the impact of trauma. Opening to deeper emotions not only allows our own healing, but makes our movement more inviting, more human, and more accepting of people as a whole.

Like a mirror, when Sustainable Practice is held up to Community Organizing, it reveals a fundamental contradiction that also weakens activists’ ability to make change. On the one hand, CO values relationships as

a vehicle for the development of collective power, and on the other, it holds a theory of change and practice that is highly oppositional. Consequently, organizers are torn between their desire to create a more grounded, heartfelt culture of social change, and their organizational imperative to react quickly and antagonistically (e.g., to take a position against an injustice, fight, and win.) As a result of this contradiction, many community organizers lack the tools to build the community that is necessary to sustain their struggle. Unfortunately, this lack of connection with each other takes its toll on the movement, and splits organizers off from a source of vitality and power that is central to collective action.

In this instance, both SP and OD can strengthen Community Organizing practice. SP offers core principles to build a culture that reclaims the full humanity of community members and taps into their collective power. SP believes we have an imperative not only to act in the face of great injustice, but also to act from a source of love and compassion to bring about healing and justice. bell hooks writes that “as long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation, we will not be able to create a culture of...[resistance] where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination.”<sup>4</sup> Additional principles include acting from an understanding of the interconnection of all beings, as well as drawing from the wisdom of one’s own cultural and ancestral knowledge to support more sustainable organizing practice.<sup>5</sup> As a complement to SP, Organization Development offers concrete practices such as active listening, giving and receiving feedback, and appreciative inquiry that can also recalibrate CO’s culture and increase connection, as well as offering organizational structures and processes to support building collective power.

Ultimately, the greatest asset SP can offer organizers is *hope*. Community organizing is not a theoretical exercise, but is practically grounded in people’s lived experience of taking the risk to speak out together and seeing conditions improve. For Community Organizing, hope is primarily cultivated through action – and victory. This is a powerful orientation, but it does not always work in practice. Given current political conditions, our communities continue to face more losses than gains. Like the example above, police are taking innocent lives even as we fight for increased community oversight and accountability. At this point, hope is rarely found in concrete conditions. Sustainable Practice expands the terrain and offers organizers an opportunity to cultivate hope on a higher level with awareness and mindfulness. Reflective practice, creative expression, playfulness, and joy all open our hearts up to hope, and when we do this as a collective practice it buoys our movement.

We often wonder why our current movement lacks strength, vision, and strategy. SP suggests that it is because we ourselves do not possess enough hope, and that our communities face similar levels of despair. If we do not possess hope, how can we expect others to join us in this fight? As Lynice Pinkard, Director of SF Department of Public Health, says: “Hope is not a feeling. Hope is a discipline that we cultivate every day by taking a small action.” Cultivating hope is a daily practice, and SP holds the space for that hope to emerge in our organizations and our movement in a conscious and collective way. While indignation is often the default motivator for organizing, hope is the only thing that will truly sustain our movement through the ebbs and flows of social change.

The above scenarios illustrate the potential power of integrating these four quadrants. The vignettes also reveal the need for us to stay clear about the unique strengths of each approach, while also allowing each quadrant the flexibility to be shaped by the other methods. Finally, it is important that social justice

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<sup>4</sup> Outlaw Cultures: Resisting Representations

<sup>5</sup> Sinclair, Zak, Susan Lubeck, and Lisa Russ, eds. Unpublished manuscript. *Four Approaches to Transformation in Social Justice Work*. For more on this see: Spiritual Activism chapter by Pia Enfante and Nghia Trung Tran. Oakland: Movement Strategy Center, 2006.

organizations take the time to reflect and align their core values and practices, as well as adopt new approaches to transformation that will help them bring about more far-reaching social change.

## **Implications for Social Justice Organizations and Movement-Building**

Below are key areas in which social justice organizations could utilize these different approaches to change, and as a result, have both the internal capacity and the power-building strategies necessary to win their campaigns and form strong, vibrant movements for change.

### **1. More empowered leadership**

Many organizers hesitate to make clear-cut decisions due to fears of abusing authority or being accused of it. This can lead to unclear campaign direction and missed strategic opportunities. If social justice organizations can clarify their relationship to power and decision-making authority by employing PA and OD as they relate 1) to their campaign goals and 2) to their organizational practice, then they can unleash the potential for stronger, more decisive campaign victories and more accountable leadership.

### **2. Increased accountability and decreased burnout**

Similarly, many activist groups suffer from a lack of clear supervision and governance structures due to timidity around asserting any form of hierarchy in the organization. Rather than creating equity, this lack of structure often leads to less accountability, lack of support for one's work, and burnout. By using tools in both the OD and PA realms, social change organizations can clarify their roles, create power-sharing organizational structures, learn to set more realistic outcomes, and increase accountability to each other and the community.

### **3. More supportive organizational environment**

Many organizers act out the personal impact of oppression through distrust of each other's true motivations and a high level of judgment and criticism for any perceived act of injustice.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, organizers often engage in conflict as the most acceptable way to make the human connection necessary for change. In order to stop this cycle, activists must prioritize healing themselves and their organizations. SP and OD provide two different ways to bring our whole selves to the table and increase the level of trust in activist organizations.

### **4. Deeper, more lasting social change**

History has proven that society will not truly change until people's hearts and minds also change. Progressive movements need to harness their faith in the human capacity to transform in order to make change on a level that will bolster the "staying power" of progressive wins on the structural level. SP can help guide organizers in this realm by connecting them to their most powerful visions and internal sense of hope, and then translating that vision and hope into action.

## **Key Conclusions**

Ultimately, the ODSC framework opens up the possibility for people working for social change to move beyond the polarized thinking in each of these approaches, and to create a more sophisticated analysis capable of guiding a more grounded and strategic practice for social change. We know that almost every social justice

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<sup>6</sup> Sinclair, Zak. *Organization Development Success in Grassroots Social Change Organizations: How Change Happens*, MA diss. JFK University, 2003.

organization grapples with at least some of these central tensions, and has come up with some level of resolution and new practices to address them. We hope this inquiry pushes our collective thinking a little further along. What follows are some suggestions of how organizers and consultants can incorporate this framework into their organizational practice:

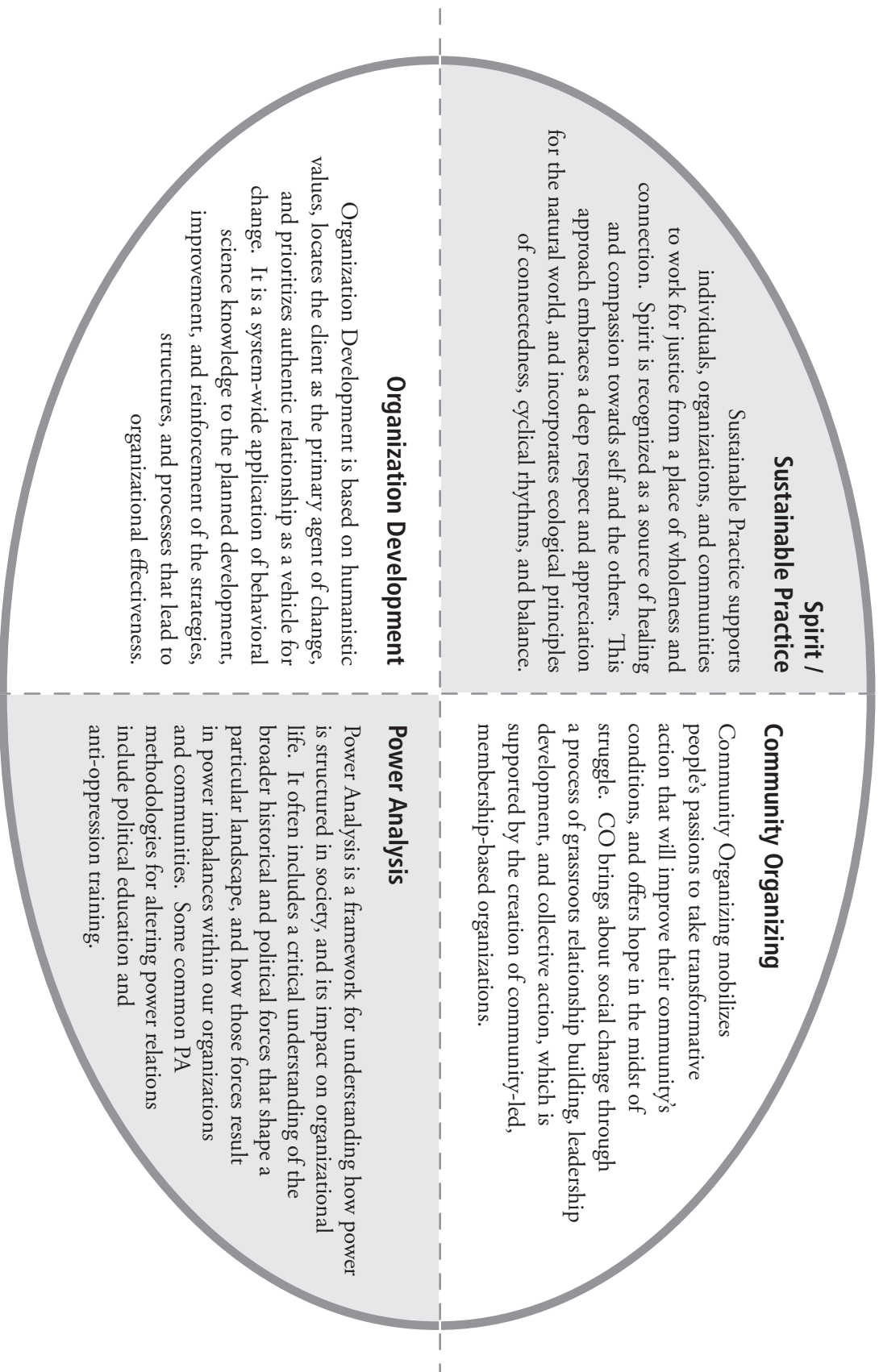
1. Identify your organization's capacity in each of the four realms, resolve any key areas of tension, and strike a balance *that is right for your organization* between these approaches to transformation in your work.
2. Ally and partner with other social justice organizations that are stronger in the realms that your organization is less developed in.
3. Pinpoint areas of incongruence or unintended consequences of a singular approach to change, and draw on gifts across the quadrants in order to offset the limitations inherent to each approach.
4. Utilize the synergy of all the realms working together as a unified, and multi-dimensional approach to movement building and social change; support individuals and the organization to strengthen their practice in multiple quadrants.
5. Surface your own assumptions about these different approaches to transformation and work to balance them in your own life.

## **Acknowledgements**

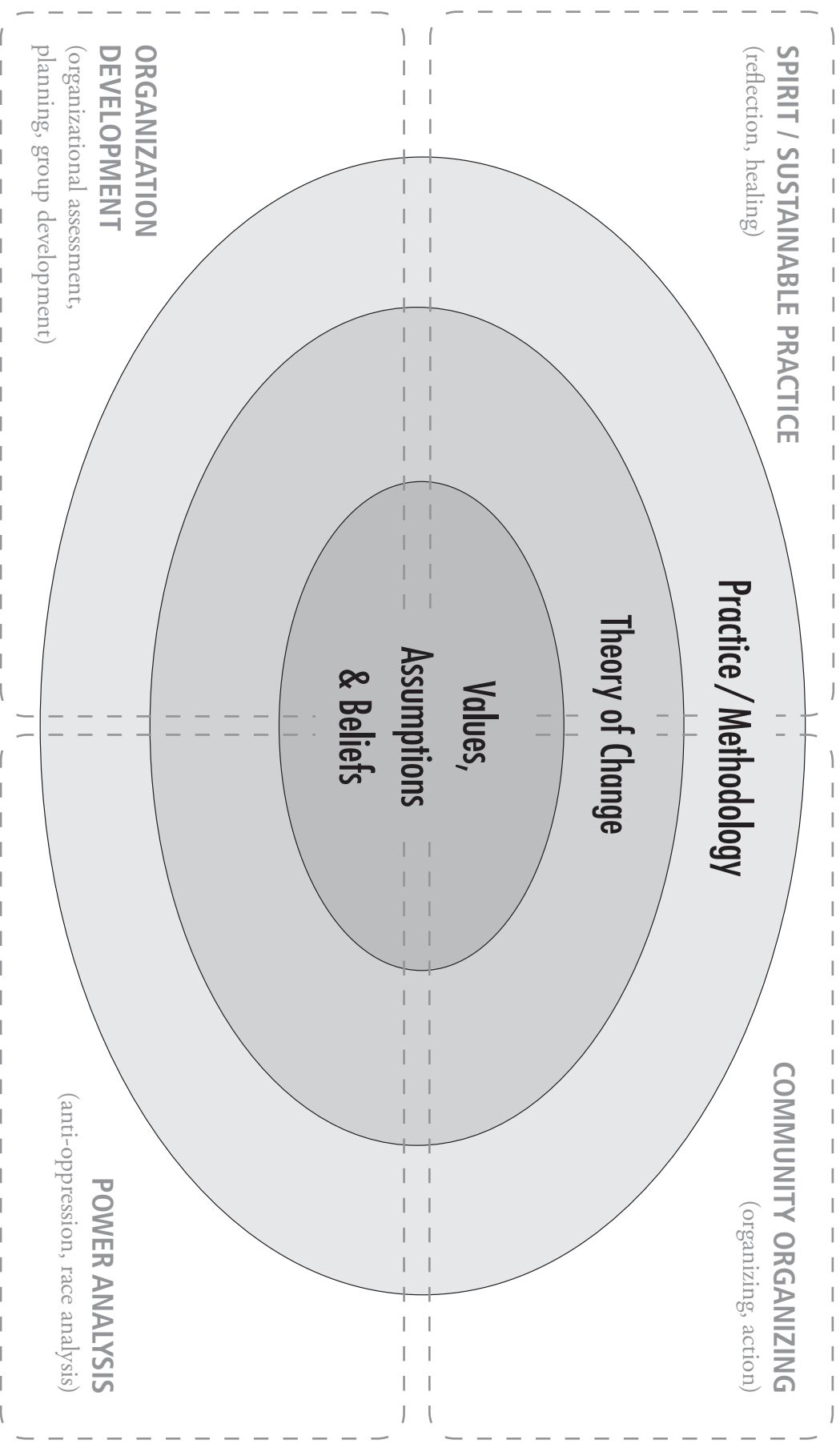
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# Definitions of Four Approaches to Social Change



# THE ODSC FRAMEWORK



# Gifts Each Approach to Transformation offers Social Justice Organizations

