

Branching Narrative
of Power Shift Network Organizational Sunsetting

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Final Report

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Executive Summary

The Power Shift Network (PSN, formerly the Energy Action Coalition) was an intergenerational network of organizations and campaigns that centered on the diverse young people most impacted by the climate crisis. They worked to mobilize the collective power of young people by establishing and supporting a network made up of interconnected nodes and horizontal relationships, each adding to the strength and resilience of the whole. Network members often aligned for joint action, nimbly adapted to changing circumstances, and were given the autonomy to self-organize through providing strategic support, including training, coaching, networking, connections, and resources. Rooted in the [Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing](#), PSN worked for a safe climate and just future where communities are thriving and own their power—whether that power is electrical, economic, social, or political.

Just after the 2023 Convergence, a meeting hub for thousands of climate and social justice activists to share knowledge and deepen the interpersonal kinships critical to the fight against oppression and climate destruction, PSN announced that it needed to furlough its entire staff due to a large financial deficit, and in 2024, decided to sunset the organization. Conflict between staff and board members over the decision escalated over time, and ultimately, PSN realized it needed external support to honor the history of accomplishments, the harm and resulting impact of the past year, and the hopes for the greater youth and environmental justice movement. They recruited the Branching Narratives team, a group of four external healer-organizers, to meet with all stakeholders and construct a closing report detailing what happened and lessons learned through the process.

The Branching Narratives team employed a multi-faceted approach that embraced both traditional research methodologies and innovative practices, such as ethnographic storytelling, affinity diagramming, narrative inquiry, and other qualitative research methods. The team met with past board members, interim board members, past staff members, past executive directors, and network members to gain a rich and nuanced understanding of PSN's journey and how it arrived at its end. We uncovered stories of burnout and overwork, lack of role clarity, and slow erosion of relationships. External factors such as COVID, rapidly intensifying climate change, and the changing landscape of funder interests clashed with internal tensions around mismatched expectations and unaddressed moments of harm and erasure. It became clear that the narratives pointed to an interconnected and expansive confluence of events and systems failures that so many of us in the nonprofit and social justice sector are susceptible to, actively moving through, or have previously experienced. We strongly recommend that folks read Maurice Mitchell's article, [Building Resilient Organizations: Toward Joy and Durable Power in a Time of Crisis](#). So many of the named dynamics are uplifted in that work - and it is a foundational read for movement organizers in the present moment.

Our goal in this work was to tell a full story and offer recommendations for the youth and climate justice movement, built from key learnings from PSN interviews and shared in hopes of establishing more alignment and strategy, stronger relationships, more communication and trust, less urgency and burnout, and more collective care and responsiveness. From those interviews, we drafted seven recommendations:

- Practice direct democracy and self-accountability
- Embody transparent and hybrid models of power.
- Tend to and maintain network member leadership, expectations, and knowledge turnover.
- Practice intentional mentorship/accompaniment and clarify staff and board roles.
- Strategize collectively to adapt to changing conditions and get more honest.
- Rethink resources to get to more sustainable and autonomous funding

- Acknowledge capacity limitations and move with grief together

The legacy of the Power Shift Network is deep. PSN organized college campus students from over 700 campuses around climate activism and hosted several national and regional Power Shift convergences, gathering thousands of young climate leaders to learn, strategize, and build the movement. The Convergences acted as a birthplace to several youth climate organizations, hosted presidential candidates and prominent climate activists as speakers, and informed follow-up actions that activated 350,000 new young people as climate voters and leaders. Many of those young people went on to inspire and activate countless more young people. PSN offered fiscal sponsorship to grassroots organizations and campaigns with limited resources, microgrants to grassroots organizations and climate justice leaders, and developed a [Resource Bank](#) as a critical tool for climate justice organizers, compiled over years of collaboration with network members, youth climate justice organizers, and Power Shift Network staff.

PSN transformed youth climate organizing over two decades and leaves this story behind, along with generations of collectives, organizations, and people who recognize the necessity of movement building in the climate justice space and the resounding power of youth voice.

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1.0 Introduction

As the final chapter of the Power Shift Network (PSN) draws near, a profound sense of gratitude and accomplishment permeates our collective. This final report, crafted by the Branching Narrative Sunsetting Team, is intended to both celebrate and grieve the experiences of every individual who has breathed life into PSN's mission. Since its inception, PSN has empowered young activists with the knowledge, tools, and networks needed to confront the multifaceted challenges of the climate crisis. The organization's comprehensive [resource bank](#) has been instrumental in fostering a well-informed and engaged community. At the same time, the dynamic "Convergences" have provided pivotal moments for strategizing, organizing, and building solidarity amongst diverse teams.

Navigating an ever-shifting and often oppressive political landscape, PSN's work has been a testament to collective adaptability and unwavering commitment to justice. From advocating for marginalized communities to influencing policy changes and programming that supported youth leadership, PSN has consistently championed a sustainable and equitable future for all. This report serves as a window into that transformative journey, encapsulating the milestones reached, lessons learned, and the enduring impact of the efforts of countless people.

As we bid farewell to PSN, we do so with an unwavering belief in the lasting legacy of its work. The stories, struggles, and triumphs woven throughout its history have created a rich tapestry of collective action, one that we hope will continue to inspire and empower future generations of changemakers. This report is not merely a conclusion but a celebration of a shared commitment to a more just and sustainable world.

We extend our deepest gratitude to every member of the Power Shift Network, the staff, partners, and the countless young activists who have been the beating heart of this movement.

Thank you for being an integral part of this transformative journey. Together, we have shifted the narrative and laid significant groundwork for a more equitable and sustainable world.

The writers of this report are an external team of healer-organizers working with the Power Shift Network to attempt to gather and present an interconnected story honoring the history of accomplishments, the harm and resulting impact of the past few years, and the hopes for the greater youth and environmental justice movement.

You may have seen the email from the Board of Directors on March 6th, sharing the news that PSN will be closing its doors by the end of April (which was extended to allow for this branching narrative process to occur). In an attempt to honor the spirit of what staff members have been asking for regarding a reconciliation, we invited all PSN stakeholders into a narrative-building process, and this report is a result of those conversations.

2.0 Approaches and Methods: A Tapestry of Inquiry

In our quest to understand the complex tapestry of the Power Shift Network's (PSN) history and its implications for the movement, we employed a multi-faceted approach that embraced both traditional research methodologies and innovative practices. Recognizing the inherent subjectivity in organizational analysis, we aimed to create a rich and nuanced understanding of PSN's journey by weaving together diverse perspectives and analytical lenses.

Ethnographic Storytelling through Interviews:

We conducted in-depth interviews with former staff, board members, volunteers, and partners, creating a space for individuals to share their lived experiences, perceptions, and insights. These interviews allowed us to capture the personal narratives, emotions, and nuances that often go unnoticed in traditional research. By listening to the stories of those who were intimately involved with PSN, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of the organization's culture, challenges, and triumphs.

KJ Process (Affinity Diagramming):

The KJ process, also known as affinity diagramming, is a collaborative method for organizing and analyzing qualitative data. We used this process to identify common themes, patterns, and relationships within the interview transcripts, allowing us to distill key insights and develop a shared understanding of the organization's experiences.

Narrative Inquiry:

Narrative inquiry is a research methodology that focuses on the stories people tell about their lives and experiences. We employed narrative inquiry to analyze the interview transcripts, paying close attention to the language, metaphors, and narrative structures used by participants. This approach allowed us to uncover deeper meanings, hidden assumptions, and underlying values that shaped the organization's culture and decision-making processes.

Additional Lenses:

In addition to these methodologies, we also drew upon the following lenses to enrich our analysis and broaden our understanding of the complex factors that shaped PSN's journey:

- **Disability Justice:** We examined how PSN addressed issues of accessibility and inclusion for individuals with disabilities, both within the organization and in its broader advocacy work.
- **Transformative Justice:** We explored how PSN responded to conflict and harm within the organization. We sought to understand how transformative justice principles could be applied to create a more just and equitable environment.
- **Racial Justice:** We investigated how PSN addressed issues of racial equity and justice, both internally and in its broader advocacy work, recognizing the interconnectedness of racial justice and environmental justice.
- **Organizational management:** We analyzed PSN's financial records, organizational structure, and decision-making processes to gain insights into the factors that contributed to its financial challenges and eventual closure.

Weaving together this diverse range of approaches and methods, we have created a comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of the Power Shift Network's legacy. We hope that this report will serve as a valuable resource for future organizations and activists working to create a more just and sustainable world.

3.0 Analysis

3.1 The World in the Last 4 Years

There was so much going on in the world that the PSN community was situated in over the last four years, not to mention in the existing historical context of racialized capitalism. We feel it's important to explicitly lay out just a few of the major events that the human beings involved in the Network were contending with while trying to maintain the organization. In highlighting the major events of the past few years, we intend to acknowledge

the reality that every organization can't emerge whole in the present moment of 2024. All resources (financial, energetic, mental, spiritual) were stretched, often beyond a breaking point. We also simply cannot examine (let alone judge) internal decisions and limitations without acknowledging and giving grace to everyone involved due to the realities they were facing. The following events and trends were all implied or directly mentioned in our interviews and research.

Firstly, since 2020, [over a million people in the US have died of COVID-19](#), and there are [estimates that close to 2 million more have become disabled](#). Many of the rippling indirect societal impacts of the global pandemic are hard to quantify at this point, but many of us have experienced profound changes.

Across the country, there are measurable trends about how much the pandemic has affected young people and nonprofit workers. [For example](#), “during the first three months of the pandemic (i.e., March, April, and May 2020), it was conservatively estimated that nonprofits lost at least 1.64 million jobs from 2017 baseline levels, reducing the nonprofit workforce by 13.2% as of May 2020. Following these initial estimates, [...] the nonprofit sector’s workforce was still down by nearly 500,000 workers as of December 2021.” [Another survey](#) indicated that 90% of social sector organizations had experienced lost revenue by May 2020.

While their jobs often became more anxiety-provoking and challenging, countless young people invested their energy into critical organizing work in their communities. For example, author and educator [Mariame Kaba has said](#), “Tens of thousands of mutual aid networks and projects have emerged around the world since the COVID-19 pandemic began.” This included several PSN network organizations that shifted their focus from climate organizing to mutual aid work. The pandemic also contributed to a surge in [labor organizing](#) and support for unions, particularly among [people of color](#). There was additionally a [surge in tenant organizing efforts](#) that saw the implementation of eviction moratoria and expanded rent relief programs.

These organizing efforts were even more critical as economic problems were sweeping the country. There was [a significant rise in the cost of living beginning in 2020](#), driven by high inflation (peaking at over 9% in June 2022), soaring housing costs, and increases in other essential expenses.

We can only imagine how deeply PSN activists in all parts of the organization were impacted by the racist killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and countless other Black people in 2020. Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly youth, marched and protested [across more than 2,000 cities and towns in the US](#) and [at least 60 countries, across all continents](#). This resulted in an uptick in funding commitments toward racial justice work, [but much of it was short-term and not multiyear](#).

In the spring and summer of 2021, we witnessed the beginning of the Block Cop City movement. The Atlanta-based movement is resisting the establishment of a “Little Gaza” type police training facility that would also require the destruction of 300 acres of precious forest area. The year 2023 began with the state murder of Atlanta forest defender Tortuguita, which marks possibly [the first documented police killing of an environmental defender in the US](#). This movement represents a particularly intersectional moment between environmental defense, racial justice/abolitionist struggles, and more.

This period, of course, also included historically apocalyptic wildfires, specifically [the 2020 “August Complex” “gigafire.”](#) the largest in California history, burning over a million acres over four months. And during [“the 2022 western wildfire season](#), severe drought and extreme heat sparked and sustained damaging wildfires in New Mexico (including the state’s largest and most destructive wildfire on record), California, Oregon, Washington,

Idaho, Montana, and Alaska.” Then, the [2023 fire in Hawaii](#) saw the deadliest natural disaster in the history of the state.

As of the 2020s, reports also indicate that the [“frequency of heat waves in US cities](#) has nearly tripled since the 1960s.” And one “of the [harshes heat domes on record settled over the US northwest](#), a place used to more temperate climates, in the summer of 2021, causing temperature records to be shattered and dozens of people to die.” Monsoons meanwhile also increased. Hurricane Ida struck South Louisiana in 2021. There was even a [“1000-year storm” in Death Valley](#).

And in resistance to these conditions, members of PSN were, of course, fighting the oil and gas pipelines including the notorious MVP and Line 3 projects. There were also rallies, strikes, and civil disobedience actions against climate change.

Within this broader context, we are not surprised that many PSN staff and leadership were struggling. They were not alone. For example, in 2021 and 2022, [43% of US workers reported experiencing stress during much of the previous day](#), the highest level ever recorded by Gallup. A 2021 study looking at burnout rates for workers showed that [56% of US workers were at least somewhat burned out](#). Another study in 2023 also showed that [68% of Gen Z workers and 64% of Millennial workers were experiencing burnout](#).

We speculate that trying to keep working and holding organizations together has become much more challenging under the prevailing national and global conditions since 2020. Particularly for many PSN staff and community members, the needs of families, communities, and the earth itself were adding numerous direct responsibilities inside and outside of the workplace.

We cannot reiterate enough how important the past few years are for understanding why the organization dissolved when it did. We hold the heavy hearts of everyone in the network with great care and grief. In many organizations, the norm is to just pretend these things don’t matter for a team’s ability to get the job done. But we don’t need to do that here, and we can be real about the world and how it affects us all.

3.2 Context Setting: Energy Action Coalition & Power Shift Network

So many of our stories rest on the backs of people that came before us. There are generations of collectives, organizations, and people who recognize the necessity of movement building in the climate justice space, and the resounding power of youth voice. That history informed the establishment of the Energy Action Coalition (EAC) in 2004 through the collaboration of over 125 actions led by environmental justice networks across the country advocating renewable energy and decreased dependence on fossil fuels. The EAC mobilized the collective power of young people to mitigate climate change and create a just, clean energy future and resilient, thriving communities for all. Some of the work it led included organizing college campus students from over 700 campuses around climate activism and hosting four national Power Shift convergences, gathering thousands of young climate leaders to learn, strategize, and build the movement. The Convergences acted as a birthplace to several youth climate organizations, hosted presidential candidates and prominent climate activists as speakers, and informed follow-up actions that, in 2008, activated 350,000 new young people as climate voters and leaders. Many of those young people went on to inspire and activate countless more young people.

At various moments through the history of the EAC, while the organization accomplished radical and life changing work in the climate justice space, it struggled with organizing itself and its members around racial justice conversations. A decision to prioritize racial justice training for all member organizations splintered the

coalition. Still, the organization maintained its focus and intention to center race despite the splintering, and over time also became BIPOC-led.

In 2016, the EAC became the Power Shift Network and continued its deep support of youth organizing across the country. For many young people, PSN was their first full-time job and was an entry point into social justice movement work. The adaptable structure of the organization allowed for staff to deepen their commitment to existing climate justice issues and increase their avenues for political education. The organization's work expanded to offer fiscal sponsorship to grassroots organizations and campaigns with limited resources. Additionally, PSN offered microgrants to grassroots organizations and climate justice leaders, continued hosting regional Convergences, and began to develop a [Resource Bank](#) as a critical tool for climate justice organizers, compiled over years of collaboration with network members, youth climate justice organizers, and Power Shift Network staff.

Young people have always been at the center of PSN's work. However, despite [PSN's network operating principles](#) that celebrated an organization focused on bottom-up governance, power sharing, and participatory processes, it became difficult over time to actualize these goals. Further, as PSN made efforts to operationalize the new structure, it became clear that network members, independent organizations that were actively involved in their own climate organizing, had difficulty coming together to make decisions on behalf of the network.

The Board of Directors was primarily composed of youth and network alums who possessed significant experience and investment in PSN's mission and goals but acknowledged that it didn't have the nonprofit expertise and oversight capacity needed for the moment, a common experience for volunteer non-profit boards led by people closest to the injustices being addressed. For example, most of the college-age board members were only able to commit to one term on the board because their lives changed and they needed to move on from their board responsibilities. Over time, the Board of Directors became disconnected from the staff and the culture of the organization, which is also a common experience in nonprofits - as the Executive Director(s) is often the primary contact point for all parties as well as the steward of the organization. In hindsight, almost everyone involved wished that there was more intention and time geared toward trust and relationship building between staff and board members. We'll go into much more detail about these dynamics in later sections.

As PSN deepened its commitment to racial justice in its work, shifting leadership (moving from a white-led to a BIPOC-led organization) meant significantly more work to retain donor relationships and networks. Also, large amounts of new grant funding in 2020 centered on racial justice work and BIPOC leadership led to increased programmatic work. Yet, they didn't invest in the organizational infrastructure tools, training, and coaching to support the development of existing staff. Much of that funding was not renewed and drastically impacted the financial stability of the organization.

We can see, even from the beginning, in the shift from EAC becoming PSN, that the organization was taking on an ambitious journey, fraught with risks resulting from the (at least perceived) necessity of operating both within and against the dominant system.

3.3 PSN Timeline

Energy Action Coalition (EAC) formed - June 2004
First Power Shift (DC, 7000 students) - 2007
Other National Convergences (Power Shifts) - 2009, 2011, 2013
Transition from Energy Action Coalition to Power Shift Network - 2016
Regional Convergences (Northeast in Philly, Midwest in Detroit, Southeast in Orlando, and West in Berkley) - 2016
Five-Year Strategic Plan Ratified by Network Member Vote - Spring 2019
Online Convergence due to Covid - 2021
FY2023 budget conditionally approved - June 2022
Longstanding ED leaves, new co-EDs promoted - October 2022

**Narratives Branch regarding who had access to what
financial information and power to effect change
*October 2022 to Present (June 2024)***

2023 Convergence - April 2023
Board informs staff of May 1 furlough - April 27, 2023
Staff responds with [collective letter](#) - April 27, 2023
All staff furloughed - May 1, 2023
Board email network informing of furlough - May 9, 2024
Staff collective letter made public - June 2023
Branching Narratives team recruited - April 2024
Official sunset of organization - Summer 2024

3.4 Interpersonal Impacts, Sunsetting & Branching Narratives

In every conversation we had with folks who have been a part of the PSN ecosystem (i.e., former board, interim board, staff, network members, and former executive directors) over the last several years, a continuing sense of burnout and overwork, lack of role clarity, and slow erosion of relationships were named as major contributions to the eventual sunset of the organization. External factors such as COVID and the changing landscape of funder interests clashed with internal tensions around mismatched expectations and unaddressed moments of harm and erasure. Running on urgency, scarcity, and an unsustainable pace - largely in response to systems pressures and attempting to maintain the integrity of the work with limited resourcing and accompaniment - broke down internal trust and responsiveness to neurodiversity over time. That complex storm, which also faces so many other nonprofits in this field and across the world, led to a series of events from 2022 through 2024 that brought us to this moment and the need to sunset. Below, we describe some of the relational dynamics, hindsight recognitions, and perspectives shared by board members, former executive directors, and staff - all people who were actively doing the best they could and faced enormous pressure to show up for themselves, for each other, and the youth climate movement.

At the board level, board members reported experiences of being recruited because they were connected to the climate movement and would add value, but ultimately their ideas or contributions were minimized or disregarded. Some board members also named a chasm between an identity as a governing board, but often practicing as a working board - which drew on time expectations that were not clear or mutually agreed upon. Their role as a board also felt unclear at times, given that bylaws stated that the network directed the

organization (and the board approved that direction), but the board had little communication with the network (outside of the annual meeting) to clarify concerns, risks, and capacity gaps.

Managing crises was a common experience, as the executive directors were furloughed at least once a year over several years due to funding scarcity. In 2020, PSN received several three year funding commitments, on the heels of the George Floyd uprisings. After approving the 2023 budget and setting things in motion for the Convergence, making several commitments (such as hotels and venues from before COVID) that could not be refunded, PSN discovered that much of that funding would not be renewed. Simultaneously, the Executive Director began a transition out of the role shortly after a sabbatical period - and the board was simply not equipped for such a huge amount of change.

Over the last few years, meeting the needs of the moment often resulted in shorter-term band aid solutions. The disconnection between staff and board grew with time - as the board reckoned with the right balance of being too involved versus not being involved enough, and how to account for expertise and oversight gaps. Once decisions needed to be made around furloughing staff in 2023 and making up for a significant financial deficit, there was no deeply invested foundation of trust and mutuality, nor experience navigating such major conflict to rely upon. Leadership wasn't resourced for action, and the relative inaction that came about led to staff to publicly call attention to the current state of the organization and the financial impact on staff, which included publishing the names and personal email addresses of two board members to shift the power dynamic. Board members noted that these actions hampered their ability to meet their intended fundraising goals over the past year.

At the (co) executive director level, the EDs reported the confluence in funding trends shifting away from youth climate and racial justice work, creating ongoing financial crises that were managed with furloughs, until that was no longer an option. There was a sense that the financial crises had been present over the better part of a decade, often inherited from outgoing executive directors with little support or clear transition of relationships. The lack of overall fundraising expertise across the staff and board placed this burden squarely on the shoulders of the ED, which became exhaustive over time, and reduced the amount of time available to train and support existing staff. The organization restructured at various points to respond to the fundraising needs, with the goal of hiring a Co-Director to focus explicitly on fundraising and development, but that plan never fully materialized as intended. Once it partially materialized with two fundraising staff positions, the organization was too deep in a deficit to pull itself out of - largely manifested by the focus on (and apparent necessity of) the 2023 Convergence.

In the role, EDs had different strategies and approaches to their leadership, which impacted the staff members in various ways. For example, one ED wrestled with how much to share about the changing financial landscape with the staff on a day to day basis, when things changed so much from one moment to the next, and there may be an overwhelming amount of context needed to provide a full picture, which also might detract from overall capacity to fundraise. EDs felt trapped by the nonprofit fundraising landscape to keep their fundraising requests within the parameters of funder priorities, and were ultimately unable to receive the kind of long-term, radical, movement building funding that was more aligned with organizational values and staff/network interests. One ED reported unintentionally enacting parental roles, quickly becoming the place for any and all frustrations to be put upon without reckoning with nuance or bringing in a larger systems analysis. And they reported that the level of [overwork and burnout often went unseen](#).

By the time the final Co-EDs came into their roles in late 2022, they inherited an unrecoverable financial situation, and wished for more coaching and support on how to move forward.

At the staff level, staff members experienced the direct impact of this confluence of events, and named frustrations around financial governance and oversight, staff management, and cultivating a culture of accountability in the organization.

They wanted a culture that prioritized more leaderfulness, and clearer communication around decision making and roles during leadership sabbatical and transition periods. Some staff named little mentorship or coaching support, largely due to overextended managers. Staff also reported that rapidly changing staff charts and job descriptions made it increasingly difficult for people to develop real expertise in their roles, which impacted overall enthusiasm about the work. And once settled into a role, information related to their responsibilities felt gate kept or hoarded at times, making it difficult for key staff members to perform their jobs to the best of their ability. Staff sought structures to support a more aligned and functional team, with hiring processes to ensure skill sets were matched with roles and leadership development plans were clear and prioritized.

Staff noted not receiving enough transparency about the full state of the finances of the organization (especially in 2022 and 2023), and that participatory budgeting ideals were never fully actualized. They felt that delayed decision making about finances only made deficits worse. Staff also expressed that their efforts to make information transparent or to effect change in the organization often felt blocked by inaction or dismissal from leadership. Staff with more social and structural power acknowledged that, at times, they didn't trust their own intuition around organizational concerns. They also had difficulties building key relationships with other staff members to support their development in the organization. Despite uncertainty and concerns, and largely due to already established financial commitments, the April 2023 Convergence went forward at a much smaller scale than originally planned, with far fewer activities, due to deep funding shortfall, low enrollment, and limited staff capacity as staff hours were also cut. The network was never made aware of these challenges.

At the end of that month, it became achingly clear that the financial deficit had become too large. An announcement from the board to staff about a furlough came just before the weekend, to begin the following Monday. Because there had been little opportunity for relationship building between the staff and board throughout PSN's history, staff had few options available to draw attention to their own needs at this critical moment. Staff released a public letter describing the harm they had experienced over the past several months, calling for accountability and community solidarity.

The narratives above point to an interconnected and expansive confluence of events and systems failures that so many of us in the nonprofit and social justice sector are susceptible to, actively moving through, or have previously experienced. The concept of the "Non-Profit Industrial Complex" ([in section 4.1](#)) will add an important lens for understanding why these difficulties may have played out in the way that they did.

3.5 Accomplishments

These words were written by Akilah Sanders-Reed (organizer on staff at PSN from 2016-2023) in collaboration with the BN team based on interviews with early (2000s) and mid (2010s) EAC/PSN staff and leadership. This is not by any means an exhaustive depiction of the accomplishments of EAC/PSN and the contributions of those in the movement to changing the political landscape of the United States, but a limited overview. The Energy Action Coalition / Power Shift Network is a significant, diverse piece of global history.

EAC/PSN was solving for three things:

- 1) Young people with climate angst wanting change, usually on their campus or at the local level, often felt isolated or alone. EAC/PSN built solidarity by creating a community across the country and across campuses so these youth didn't have to feel like they were the only ones who gave a shit.*
- 2) To make change happen, you have to know how power works and how systems work, so there's training that's fundamental to being an activist and advocate.*
- 3) And EAC/PSN contributed to building the power that's needed at scale to win on climate for everyone, not just young people.*

Community. Training. Power Building.

- *Paraphrased from interview with Lydia Avila*

Early EAC

Energy Action Coalition began in 2004 as a northeast regional coalition of 7-8 organizations brought together by the founders to develop a youth climate coalition.

Before this point, these groups were working in wildlife, recycling, corporate campaigns, and some environmental justice work, but nobody was calling their work “climate” and very few were doing clean energy work. “Climate” work was too big of an issue to go after individually. But together, they formed the kernel of the EAC that started talking with other groups and developed a cross-class, cross-race coalition of 60+ organizations that did consensus-based budgeting, was funded to the tune of \$5-6 million per year in philanthropy, and developed a base of power that changed the face of climate justice organizing.

Billy Parish, one of the founders, shared with us that in the early 2000s, climate goals looked like ‘a 10% reduction from 1997 baseline levels of carbon pollution’ - which was not ambitious or inspiring enough to build the kind of movement we needed. EAC was part of staking out bolder, more visionary “rallying cries” like 5 million green jobs, no new coal, and 100% clean energy for all. “Climate was such a big issue, it felt unclear how to go after it,” said co-founder Billy Parish. “The powerful thing we created was a space for people to figure out how to do climate organizing at a scale that began to match the challenge.” A big part of that was developing clear rallying cries that attracted lots of hands into the coalition. And the sheer scale that resulted was attractive to donors.

EAC held the largest climate justice lobby day ever as part of Power Shift 2007, with young people from every congressional district, and then launched the Power Vote campaign in 2008-2009 that reached over 1 million young people, building the base to pressure Obama into taking climate action more seriously and laying the groundwork for Obama-era federal climate campaigns like No KXL as well as the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act in 2009 which was at that point one of the most significant climate policies in the world.

These large organizing efforts in the late 2000s and early 2010s (along with films like [An Inconvenient Truth](#) and youth-led orgs like [350](#)), built power in youth to be audacious in organizing for the future they deserve. Organizing for climate justice broadly, is no longer seen as “too big of a goal.”

Power Shift Convergences

The flagship accomplishment of EAC/PSN were the Power Shift Convergences that assembled and trained tens of thousands of young people over the last two decades. The first Power Shift Convergence was in 2007.

There were national convergences in D.C. in 2007, 2009, 2011, and in Pittsburgh in 2013. The 2011 convergence was the largest with over 10,000 young people at the convention center in D.C. In 2016 (coinciding with the organization's public announcement of the restructure to a network model and the rebranding from EAC to PSN) we held four regional convergences - Northeast in Philadelphia, Midwest in Detroit, Southeast in Orlando, and West in Berkeley.

Following these, a group of EAC/PSN veterans and Network members put together a [recommendation on the future of Power Shifts](#), reflecting on the lessons learned in the previous decade and emphasizing the ongoing value of Power Shift Convergences that welcomed and trained young people. The Power Shift 2016 Convergences reached nearly 50% BIPOC registrants, and the recommendation laid out specific goals and commitments to racial diversity, accessibility, financial aid, and other ways of aligning the Convergences with PSN's values. The Network as a whole reiterated its commitment to Power Shift Convergences as **the** priority for the Network and vehicle by which to accomplish the rest of PSN's goals in a Network-wide refocusing vote in 2019 (See the [2019-2023 Strategic Plan](#) and [this document](#) that lays out the focuses the Network subsequently voted on). The 2019 decision stated:

“PSN will focus on bringing in and training young people in the climate movement, and supporting them in building community, skills, and identity, as well as plugging them into movement spaces our Network members occupy....PSN has been an invaluable on-ramp to grow the youth climate movement, and we see that it might be an equally invaluable opportunity for us to build trust and connectivity across the Network.”

The Power Shift Convergences also inspired attendees to organize similar local and state-wide convenings in their areas, and were replicated internationally.

“The diaspora and training impact has been enormous.”
- Billy Parish, Co-Founder of EAC

The planning for Power Shift 2021, the first national Convergence since 2013, launched at the PSN Annual Meeting in February 2020, and embodied a structure of planning teams led by and for the Network, leaning on the previous years' practice in network-style organizing through 'action teams,' facilitated by rather than imposed by staff. Unfortunately, the pandemic forced Power Shift 2021 online.

Power Shift 2023 brought 700 young people together in Bvibanca (New Orleans), emerging from the pandemic with the theme of “interweaving audacious joy in the face of apocalypse,” and training on movement history, mutual aid, organizing skills, and local stories from across the movement. 75% of the participants self-identified as BIPOC. Feedback on Power Shift 2023 from participants was overwhelmingly positive, focused on the value of connection, community, and embracing radical politics. As one attendee said, “I spent three days in the future.” Power Shift 2023 was, however, intertwined with the financial collapse of PSN, and especially for staff, those experiences are inseparable.

“I will always be the proudest of the fact that we spawned an entire generation of environmentalist and climate activists who are still in the field today. Just last week at a wedding somebody I had never met before recognized me from Power Shift - he was at Power Shift 2013, and he's still in the movement...It's so invaluable that there's a training ground that sparks a lifetime of activism and advocacy.” - Lydia Avila, Executive Director

Later Programs

Between 2015 and 2019, as Energy Action Coalition underwent the transition to Power Shift Network, the organization leaned into programmatic work, bringing on organizers in divestment, pipeline resistance, and environmental justice to add capacity in key efforts our member groups were already aligned on. PSN organizers:

- Convened strategic conversations about energy democracy
- Launched the Frontlines to Power training program for young folks of color interested in running for office
- Developed youth-centered strategies for resistance against oil infrastructure in the Midwest, and took on key national roles to organize mass mobilizations against Enbridge oil pipelines
- Hired Community College fellows in collaboration with local Network members in Detroit, Birmingham, and Minneapolis, to participate in local organizing projects and receive intentional mentorship and training from PSN
- Started the PSN Fiscal Sponsorship program, which supported over a dozen projects
- Built the PSN Resource Bank, a collection of organizing resources from across our member organizations, and a Trainings Peer Learning Circle for trainers

These programs had profound impacts in their respective issue areas. (Check out the [2017](#), [2018](#), and [2019 Annual Reports](#).) PSN also leaned into a convening role, hosting and co-hosting spaces for young people and eventually Network members to strategize and train together, including the Midwest Youth Climate Convergence, Gulf South Rising Climate Justice Convergence, Spring Forward State Strategy Summits, the Global Climate Action Summit, a youth convening adjacent to the second People's Climate March, network theory trainings at partner conferences, and a broad variety of actions.

Contributions to Innovative Organizing Practices

EAC started out organizing differently. The coalition did consensus-based budgeting across larger environmental organizations and local grassroots groups, other organizations were generally not doing this. "We got funding for over 80 organizers across all these different groups that then leveraged all their organizations and their resources and their members," said Billy Parish. "The things we were then able to do together were incredible - we ran powerful, highly impactful national campaigns that none of the groups could have pulled off on their own."

The EAC was a hub-and-spoke style, centralized coalition. The founders had built relationships with all the point people in the coalition and spent an enormous amount of time tending to those relationships and this was the source of power for the coalition. Big money could come in because large numbers of people were participating in audacious central campaigns. It was a combination of top-down and bottom-up organizing. This was innovative practice. However, when someone with liaison relationships left central EAC staff, the relationship with the coalition member had to be rebuilt. As staff and leadership turnover occurred, maintaining these liaison relationships in a centralized manner got more difficult.

Additionally, the focus on unified national campaigning, large boom-and-bust cycles around Convergences, and increasing frustration at the lack of racial justice in mainstream climate campaigning and within EAC, forced a reckoning for the organization. The centralization in the EAC organizing strategy didn't seem to have clear mechanisms for accounting for dissent at lower levels of the member orgs and of EAC itself. The 2015

Annual Meeting convened a coalition that was feeling directionless and reeling from a walkout at Power Shift 2013 led by BIPOC youth.

In what became a hallmark of the organization, the staff and members took a critical look at their structure and purpose, and adjusted course. “We decided we needed to reinvent the organization from the ground up to become a decentralized network model with a lean and mean staff machine,” according to former PSN staffer Sophia Nova. In their Network member orientations PSN described their decentralized model as “a type of network structure in which daily operations and decision-making responsibilities are delegated by core staff to parts of the network web.”

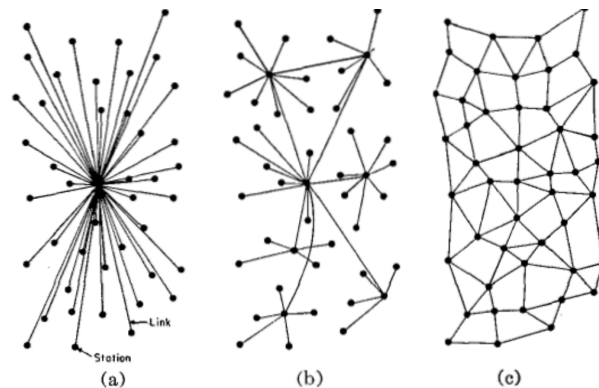


Fig. 1—(a) Centralized. (b) Decentralized. (c) Distributed networks.

The [2016 Organizing Principles](#) came out of this reinvention process and through the ratification of this document, the Energy Action Coalition officially became Power Shift Network. We believe that generally, the move to a network-based model is an innovative practice that focuses on handing power to network members to shape the overall organization, and create a structure that built power aligned around ecosocialist values but allowed groups to pursue different, complementary strategies and tactics without being constrained by a singular objective.

Over the next seven years, the people of PSN refined that structure and relentlessly pursued the goal of developing a left wing core of the youth climate justice movement that was welcoming for Black, Indigenous, and/or People of Color youth. PSN cultivated and disseminated [political analysis](#) developed by the Black folk leading the organization and [built a BIPOC](#) Network base.

The Network structure, and the organization’s commitment to internal evolution, made it nimble. When Trump was elected in 2016, PSN was well-positioned to open public digital space on our Slack for emergent rapid-response organizing and support member organizations in building power together through the bases that had built in the recent Convergences. When COVID hit in 2020, PSN held a series of online webinars on topics like organizing lessons from the AIDS epidemic and mutual aid, keeping hundreds of young people in community and providing tools to navigate the challenges of the pandemic.

After interviewing Sophia Nova (2015-2019), Jessy Tolkán (early years), Billy Parish (2004-2007), and Lydia Avila (2015-2018), Akilah reflects on our past work and need for future efforts like PSN:

Some of the former staff I talked to expressed curiosity and/or uncertainty about how the network model played out. I feel so proud to have seen it flourish. In early 2020, we held an Annual Meeting just outside Minneapolis / St Paul and introduced the [Network Member Handbook](#). We launched planning for Power Shift 2021, and had robust planning teams made up of Network

member reps who were so energized and excited to be building this huge youth climate convergence by and for the Network that would bring in, train, and educate thousands of young people. And then COVID hit. Power Shift 2021 was virtual. Annual Meetings that had previously been energizing in-person time that revitalized relationships became brittle zoom marathons. Our Annual Meetings were usually the biggest invigoration of energy into the Network and a core manifestation of the Network functioning; without them as a model, the structure stumbled.

Unfortunately, I think the need for Power Shift Convergences is greater than ever. The Network model was maturing into a really powerful organism, and the staff structure that was being developed internally in 2022 was exciting. I told folks often that the reason I loved PSN was that the organization repeatedly asked 'why do we exist,' answered, and then pursued the answer with a passion. It's agonizing to me that the labor to build and refine PSN has been snuffed out; it takes time and enormous effort to build and refine things that could last, so there won't be something that can immediately take its place. There are no shortcuts in organizing.

At the same time, PSN never enjoyed stable finances and it was in constant need of refinement. The pursuit of a more democratic but equitable, base-building but principled, staffed but decentralized organizing space was audacious. In so many ways, it's an incredible feat that it lasted at all.

- Akilah Sanders-Reed

"We can't lose touch with each other. The stakes are too high."

- Sophia Nova

4.0 Discussion & Recommendations

Throughout the rest of this report, the Branching Narratives Team members will discuss key considerations and make recommendations based on each of their personal frameworks and sets of practices. These range from somatics training, participatory organizing, direct democracy, non-profit executive leadership experience, and relational analysis of cooperation.

The Branching Narratives Team is:

Blair Franklin - a Black queer femme facilitator and transition doula deeply rooted in Baltimore, MD. Her work is focused on sustaining infrastructure and supporting cultures of collective care and accountability through coaching, facilitation, conflict transformation, and integrative healing - primarily via her practice called [Alight Alchemy](#). She is a trained death doula, somatic abolitionist, emergent strategy practitioner, and energy worker - and she incorporates these modalities throughout her work.

Sierra Ramírez - a full-time low-income grassroots organizer living in Washington, DC, a proud organizer in the Woodner Tenants' Union, a trained somatic coach and bodyworker, as well as a cooperative communication trainer. Sierra teaches "grassroots civics" and facilitates organizations and groups through the Direct Democracy Institute, where she also develops the theory and practice of direct democracy. She is a mixed ethnicity POC (Mexican and white), queer, neurodivergent, woman.

ripple - a transfemme, white-bodied somatic coach, bodyworker and organizational consultant practicing in St. Louis, MO. ripple works with individuals, groups and organizations to cultivate space for humanness and cooperation within dynamics of power. ripple helps groups make new structures to share power that build accountability into their culture from the body up.

Stencil - a QTBIPOC somatic practitioner and facilitator specializing in empowering individuals within change spaces through cooperative communication processes and power-informed analysis. Stencil embraces conflict as an opportunity for growth and transformation through grief and understanding.

Our individual contact information can be found at the end of this report.

In the following section, we discuss the power structure of EAC/PSN and overview of ways the non-profit industrial complex impacted the events that transpired. Of course, our analysis is necessarily limited as we did not live through these experiences within PSN and are viewing it from the outside. There are also certain advantages to this perspective. To develop our analysis we did interviews with staff, network members, leadership, board members, and early founders as well as extensive review of various meeting minutes and other documents.

This frames the rest of the recommendations to organizations in this movement who wish to learn from the experience of Power Shift Network. These recommendations are:

- *Practice self-accountability through direct democracy praxis development - section 4.2 (Sierra)*
- *Embodying hybrid models of power with transparency - section 4.3 (ripple)*
- *Tend to and maintain network member leadership, expectations, and knowledge turnover - section 4.4 (Stencil)*
- *Practice role clarity and intentional accompaniment / mentorship with staff and board - section 4.5 (Blair)*
- *Strategize collectively to adapt to changing conditions and get more honest - section 4.6 (Sierra)*
- *Rethink resources to get to more sustainable and autonomous funding - section 4.7 (Blair)*
- *Acknowledge capacity limitations and move with grief together - section 4.8 (Stencil)*

We hope these recommendations are useful to the future of the youth climate movement and the greater struggle for liberation against oppressive systems of domination that pervade our lives in the United States and globally.

4.1 Discussion: PSN Power Structure and The Impact of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC)

A key theme that emerged from our interviews with stakeholders was the economic, structural and cultural norms of the non-profit industrial complex and how they shaped organizational direction, financial and decision-making transparency and resulting burnout. We also applied an analysis of the direct interactions that were noted in these interviews to create a fuller picture of the flows of power within and around the organization. We notice many themes that are relevant to any organization operating in the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC), especially those wanting to create equitable internal power structures.

The term non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) has various origins, namely [“The Revolution Will Not be Funded”](#) by INCITE!. In this book (and in this report), the term NPIC is used to identify a “a system of relationships between the State (or local and federal governments), the owning classes, foundations, and non-profit/NGO social service and social justice organizations.”

The Context for 501c Critique:

The social fabric of society has been unraveling. Much knowledge and practice around how to organize together has been lost. In fact, over the past 70 years, *all* forms of in-person group social connection [have decreased significantly](#). This trend parallels a decline in popular power and community social capital. Scholar [Robert Putnam argues](#) that “the relations between individuals form social networks, norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness.” “These characteristics of social life are social capital. They allow the participants to act together more effectively to reach collective goals.”

We argue that this situation is largely due to the systematic dismantling, coopting, and suppression of mass organizations in the early 20th century. All kinds of transformative, member-oriented organizations, from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as countless other visionary groups, were targeted in response to the threat that their work posed to the dominant social order.

This aggression would continue and escalate in the second half of the century. Leaders would be deported, jailed, or assassinated. And even today, police and neo-fascists continue to target and murder folks doing radical community-based work. Distributed networks of community power that took generations to develop were lost.

This is the historical context for movement work. And a more recent part of the story has been the ways in which the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) came into being, in an effort to defang radical work, while also co-opting current and future efforts to develop distributed mutual aid networks and social infrastructure that radical large scale organizing depends on. Again, we highly encourage everyone working in these spaces to read [“The Revolution Will Not be Funded”](#) as it names in detail many of the themes we develop in this report.

The Power Structure of PSN:

In 2016, the Energy Action Coalition (EAC) officially transitioned from a “coalition” to a Power Shift “network” at the recommendation of the network members. Before this point, EAC was running central messaging campaigns across thousands of college campuses. They had anywhere from 15-20 staff and did significant intermediate grantmaking for many coalition members. Grants often funded entire positions within member organizations. Early organizers reported employing consensus based-budgeting and mixing top-down and bottom-up organizing practices. PSN also put on three “Power Shifts” from 2007-2013 (large conferences of

>6000-10000 students and climate change workers). The number of staff and centralized operations was considered a “top-heavy” organizational structure by many network members up to this point. This “top-heavy” framework was beneficial as funders got the perception that their donations were going not just to support one organization, but the cohesion of many efforts around a central mission that their funding had direct influence upon.

However, the transition to a Power Shift “Network” in 2016 marked a moment where the organization no longer sought to get alignment from coalition members to centralize, but the operations of the organization would emerge from the needs and desires of the network members. This was codified in the [2016 Organizing Principles](#). Enacting these principles proved to be more difficult than anticipated, as it typically takes years for real base building to take root.

Generally, coalition building around central ideas is important for building the power of a member base. There are things that only a collective effort across many organizations can accomplish and these kinds of big goals are energizing and life bringing. Yet focusing only on the things that everyone agrees on can leave out key minority factions with less power, such as those dedicated to racial justice.

Indeed, we know that this transition from a “coalition” to a “network” had roots in a walkout, led by organizing fellows and BIPOC youth, that occurred at the 2013 Power Shift Convergence. From what we were able to gather, the fellows performed significant labor to organize Convergences and were not satisfied with their treatment as workers. Another critique of those in the walkout related to the sheer rate of racialized murder in the US (this the time just before the killing of Michael Brown) and resistance from some coalition members around including racial justice trainings as a central tenet of the Coalition. It would seem that there were not adequate forums to negotiate this dissent within the organization at the time and those who participated in the walkouts felt that they were the best possible move to claim power.

We believe that key features of sustainable consensus-based coalitions are strong practices for centering and digesting dissent. We have a lot of curiosity for what power the dissenters in 2013 could have accessed in the EAC power structure. Within the answers to that inquiry likely lies the crux of our critique of the early EAC organizing model.

Unequal Organizational Power Dynamics (due to the NPIC)

We don’t have direct access to the organizing practices of the EAC from 2004-2013, particularly those related to “consensus-based budgeting,” but we assume that EAC coalition members had key powers to dissent within these processes. From what we can tell, getting agreement on certain central messages from coalition members was also key to their strategy. We believe these are good organizing practices. In the transition to a network-based model, some of the emphasis to *actively* develop wider consensus may have been lost. After 2016, central PSN was operating responsive to the network and fit in only to support collaboration that was *already* happening. We think financial scarcity of the organization after this period may be related to decreased active consensus building (see quote below). Existing unequal dynamics of organizational power within PSN made it hard to develop funding opportunities attractive to traditional philanthropy.

“[Around 2018,] it was about finding strategic intervention moments where we could add staff capacity where people were already coming together around short term and long term strategies....we started seeing these deep structural contradictions around being able to incubate these organizations and have institutional memory,

while not wanting or being able to take enough credit to make PSN a financially sustainable venture.”

- Sophia Nova, PSN Organizer 2015-2019

It was perhaps idealistic to transition to a fully network-based (bottom-up) model without concrete mechanisms to rebalance the dynamics of power in the organization, particularly between the Network member groups and the PSN Central Staff. The central EAC/PSN organization (board-ED-staff), was highly developed relative to the existing coalitions of the nascent network member base of the organization. Similarly, an unequal power dynamic existed between Executive Leadership and Staff, who had no union. Both of these dynamics are due to the norms of the nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC) in 21st Century American culture. And we believe they contributed to the closing of the organization.

Unequal Power: Network Members and Central PSN

Under NPIC norms, nonprofit organizations are funded to do full-time work serving another party “for the greater good.” This establishes power within the organization to do the work of serving. Often, when NPIC norms are enacted, the serving doesn’t build lasting power in those who are served. So, for example, in 2016, when PSN Network Members are officially given organizational power through the [2016 Organizing Principles](#), they are starting from far behind the power of central PSN. In fact, Network Members at this time are nearly entirely reliant on central staff to create settings where they can access power in the greater organization. Central PSN has all the keys to information about money and the deployment of money. Network Members only have power within their ability to influence Central PSN.

Unequal Power: Staff and Executive Leadership

Generally in NPIC norms, Executive Director level leadership is not only unilaterally responsible for all operations of subordinate employees and leads donor relationship management personally, but presents a clear direction and vision for the organization and stewards resources toward these ends. This power is then checked by the Board and executed by Staff. This organization of power is most commonly enacted without a clear structure for organizing staff’s collective power and autonomy (hence the common need for unionization). Staff often has no visibility into financial dynamics and very limited influence on strategy and tactics. Executive Leaders make decisions on behalf of everyone. The norms of the system leave staff with less access to power.

Not only do hierarchies often harm those with less power, NPIC norms also create immense pressure on Executive Leadership to be everything to all stakeholders. This pressure is isolating for leaders in the NPIC as they increasingly cultivate the niche skills required for navigating relationships with the State & owning class. This isolation and pressure drives much of the burnout epidemic we see within the NPIC, [particularly among Black leaders](#).

The result of NPIC norms is that everyone (staff, executive leadership, network members) are alienated from their agency. People on all sides, and particularly those in “one-down” organizational power positions, are left feeling mystified as to why their experience is so difficult and full of oppression.

Based on our stakeholder interviews, the Energy Action Coalition (and later PSN) were not ultimately able to escape many of these norms, even with consensus-based budgeting. The norms are built into the 501c structures themselves! The original EAC “top heavy” approach (2007-2016) was built to support central messaging campaigns and grantmaking, and empowered the *donor* experience. As the organization transitioned to “PSN” in 2016, two factors increased the pressure on the organization:

First, donor experience shifted from: “we are pushing a centralized message through these specific youth organizations nationwide” to “we are cultivating and supporting whatever emerges from these organizations” which, frankly, contradicts the internalized savior complexes of much of the owning class. Moving to a decentralized network naturally results in a smaller scale of organizations in consensus. And it's a harder message to “sell.” Not to mention this is a reversal of the effective flow of power within the organization from functionally donor-centric to network-centric, a radical, difficult to execute move within the NPIC.

This is a continuation of EAC radically pushing the envelope as they started in the early 2010s by mandating racial justice training which also resulted in donors and member orgs leaving the coalition for fear of “alienating white people.” It is around the time that all these changes are initiated that the executive directors begin to be furloughed (and later repaid) about once a year due to fiscal scarcity.

And **secondly**, a “rescue dynamic” occurred between leadership and staff, as well as central PSN and network members. Largely due to unequal power dynamics where staff and network members did not have access to key information and organizational power.

What is a Rescue Dynamic?

The dynamic where one body is expected to serve another body often creates what we call a “[rescue dynamic](#).” A rescue is a type of power transaction where someone does more than their share of the work to “rescue” another person (or in an alternative definition, more than they want to). The other person often becomes the “victim” as they internalize the labor of the rescuer as necessary, they get the message that they can't do what the rescuer can do for them. Inevitably, the rescuer burns out from over-giving and feels like a victim themselves. And once someone is in the victim state for long enough, they tend to rebel and “persecute,” which can take the form of power plays (making someone do something they don't want to do or preventing them from doing something they want to do). Usually, we then feel guilty which puts us in a position to go right back to rescuing. The cycle continues. We can fight these dynamics by radically negotiating for what we actually want, which in the case of rescue, is often that the rescuer stops rescuing and makes space for the victim to grapple with their relationship to their own power.

The rescue framework identifies the patterns within an unequal distribution of “helping out” or self-sacrifice that often occur across unequal power dynamics. This highlights where power needs to be built in participatory organizing through directly democratic structures. In the case of real unequal power dynamics, people simply have less access to power due to real structural dynamics and are thus real victims of those dynamics. This is certainly the case in PSN, where network members have less access to power to affect change across the organization than central staff and leadership. In these cases of real unequal power, rescuing victims becomes attractive because it seems simpler than addressing the greater issue of unequal power (or all of the overgiving we have been doing historically). We can often go into serving the person we are organizing, rather than inviting them into an experience of their own power with us. *Even when there is real unequal power, we can share the load of rebalancing power more or less equally by asking for what we want.* A great example of this is the Network Support Team, made up of network members themselves, that PSN built and empowered to create the process of how new member organizations are accepted into the network, planning the PSN annual meeting, big picture strategy, and managing the regranting program.

It's useful to apply rescue analysis because naming the dynamic of power helps us negotiate power. One way to negotiate and reduce rescue is to support the person in the “victim” state to access their own power to negotiate for what they want and care for themselves. This often takes time and patience. And this is the core of base building in any directly democratic organization.

PSN's work to change course and build power directly within the network must be highlighted. In addition to the Network Support Team that placed key powers of decision within the network, PSN also did extensive consultation with network members, had a network elected board, network strategy votes, developed extensive Convergence volunteer and program setting roles. These efforts were nuanced, sophisticated and innovative. Some staff believe that by 2023, the Network was maturing, becoming able to hold more and more power for itself (see section 3.5).

And yet the fact remains that quarterly Network meetings were largely informational. For the network to access sufficient organizational power (and thus begin to truly share their part in the work), they would need to have *both* access to financial information transparently *and* capacity to organize itself to directly influence central PSN. Such a dynamic would have been necessary to keep with the vision in the [2016 Organizing Principles](#). Yet these principles were never fully enacted as previously mentioned. Network capacity for self-organization had not had time to fully develop and executive leadership of PSN didn't make financial information transparent to network members or to regular staff.

Without an empowered body that had capacity to represent the network and transparency to negotiate with the PSN on behalf of the network (as is outlined in the [2016 Organizing Principles](#)), executive leadership and staff of PSN would have to fill the gaps in their knowledge about what they thought would be best for the network. Again, some say that the capacity of the network was maturing in its ability to self organize. Yet, an unequal organizational power dynamic around information and decision-making remained which influenced central PSN to do more than their share to maintain the ops and funding for the organization, without visibility of this from the network.

Maintaining a clear organization-wide mission may have also been increasingly difficult to negotiate, especially since the organization moved away from the active coalition building practices of EAC (which while consensus-based, were also centralized), into more responsive practices. This can be good practice when rebalancing power, and also can turn into its own kind of rescue. We also think this may have made space for folks on staff and in the network to drift towards their own interpretations of the mission. While that may have good effects, without a central, self organized space for network members and staff these differences can't be coalesced into power. The result is mission drift. We thought it was notable that the Board of Directors (who are elected by the network to represent them) reported that at various points that staff and executive leadership couldn't satisfactorily describe the mission and vision of the organization for them. The Board also reported not really understanding the operations of the organization.

While board members were elected by the network to represent their interests, the board also had the responsibility to support staff and director leadership. These responsibilities can be contradictory, as in the case of the 2023 Convergence (which was desired by the network, but harrowing for staff to execute). Board members reported that they didn't fully know they had the option to not do the convergence. And the network itself didn't have visibility to these challenges. The board thought they had to advocate for their perception of what network members wanted, even though in hindsight they reflected it may have been best to put the brakes on the whole effort.

What would network members have wanted for the 2023 Convergence if they had more operational and financial visibility? What did network members really want from participating in PSN? Could PSN have engaged in active coalition building and empowered network members? These are the important questions we are left with.

Turning to dynamics internal to central PSN, much of the dynamics around rescue, mission drift, and unequal power culminated in the fall of 2022 when the organization went through a massive transition. The executive director, who had worked at PSN for several years, left the organization. At this point, the newly onboarded co-executive directors did not have the experience nor support required to sustain the pressures of the moment, specifically a sizable budget shortfall (which was believed to be manageable with significant operational cuts to the upcoming 2023 Convergence and/or significant additional fundraising). Yet the Convergence operations were indeed cut significantly and the shortfall remained a barrier. The budget had been provisionally approved by the board in June 2022 with the caveat that operations would be reduced if sufficient money didn't come in.

However, the culture within the organization up to this point was to default to the ED's direction. Both the ED and staff expressed frustration at this dynamic. Both were "rescuing" each other in different ways, while staff had less access to organizational power. The ED was overstretched with fundraising and executive responsibility and staff were dealing with the wake of executive burnout which created consistent obstacles to creating meaningful change, compounded by no union for collective power building.

Then in Fall of 2022, the ED role was no longer present in its previous form. Two new, more inexperienced co-EDs had stepped into a new hierarchy. And these new leaders were learning the deep difficulties of donor management and cultivation in the environmental youth non-profit industrial complex. Without taking up another solution, they were subject to many of the same dynamics that had burnt out the previous ED and limited opportunities for negotiation of unequal power.

Indeed, those interviewed mention that before and through this time, staff and executive leadership frequently felt intensely siloed from one another. Staff often felt as though they were having conversations about operations but not feeling like the power was "in the room" enough to make decisions. They wanted more transparency about finances, more influence in hiring people, and more support in shaping their own roles. The organization was struggling to emerge into a brand new form.

So while the FY2023 budget required significant shifts, there wasn't financial and operational transparency, nor the necessary mentorship and access support for the new leadership to make informed, difficult decisions. On top of that, there was no clearly understood culture of consensus building amongst new leadership. These are all key ingredients to negotiating power.

And yet, FY2023 was a period of time that demanded a great deal of action, which would also require deep trust in the central PSN team. It's not surprising that it took as long as it did for folks to start stepping into their power together. Importantly, when staff organized, they accomplished a great deal, as seen in the power they built together in Spring-Summer 2023. Unfortunately, this came after the 2023 Convergence, which had contributed to a large budget shortfall and organizational crisis. Even with reduced operations at the Convergence, the organization was unable to recover. Had staff organized in 2022, the unequal power dynamic within the central organization may have been less harmful. Many staff reported that they wished they had trusted themselves and organized towards their instincts earlier on. What would have come of collective power building internally to rebalance NPIC hierarchical norms? What would have happened if a third operations co-ED with a focus on fundraising had been hired in 2022?

Even with sustained work, cooperative governance systems take commitment from all parties and years to build. It doesn't mean we make every single decision together, but that the way that we make decisions is

explicit and negotiable. And as mentioned previously, it's incredibly difficult to build cooperative governance when we are constantly needing to fundraise and execute to get outcomes to keep the money flowing. The oppressive NPIC environment persists. It's important that we account for significant internal organizing work when doing strategic planning and capacity assessments.

Importantly, we want to highlight the central innovative practice of EAC - *active coalition building*, along with the central innovative practice of PSN - *developing direct organizational power structures for network members*. We believe these practices are complementary with each other rather than mutually exclusive.

To us, it is key to remember that the closing of PSN is no one's fault. While individuals are responsible for particular decisions they made or avoided, what occurred overall is a product of a greater oppressive and hostile ruling class which aims to mystify people from one another through the often difficult to spot norms of the non-profit industrial complex. We are all learners when it comes to building new structures together. And PSN was an incredible experiment that we should all continue to learn from.

4.2 Recommendation – Practice self-accountability through direct democracy praxis development

Throughout the interviews we heard stories where people felt like they didn't understand what was going on, why things were happening, or how to generate changes. It is not surprising because of all of the contextual reasons we explored in the previous sections. Something we eventually accessed in our research (and mentioned previously) was the [2016 Organizing Principles](#) document. It outlines some very promising and worthwhile democratic practices meant to facilitate the work of the organization as a whole, from the bottom up. Unfortunately, we learned that many of the structures and practices present in the document were not being fully implemented. For example, we understand that the new participatory budgeting approach was never fully enacted. Other aspects of the Principles were enacted on a limited basis.

Directly democratic and autonomy-oriented systems require a significant amount of culture-building to get the most out of them. This is a praxis that needs to be consistently developed on all fronts, and it does not represent a normative way of operating. For example, in the dominant culture, we are often punished for discovering what it is that we truly want. In contrast, in a direct democracy, we must learn to be able to tap into our authentic desires with relative ease. To survive a dominant culture that encourages distrust, we instead have to cultivate deep trust, including self-trust. To fight a dominant culture that punishes mistakes on an individual level, we must experiment, iterate, and invest in the power of unfolding adaptations over time. If the dominant culture is a river, we are all required to move upstream, against the current, in order to create justice. We can't succeed in developing just systems unless we hold space for them at all levels of the organization, always to the greatest extent possible. And we also simultaneously have to recognize that what the greatest extent *is* will always be in flux.

There is enormous wisdom in the PSN community, and we understand that there ultimately is no way to know whether doing any particular step differently would have resolved the challenges faced by the organization over the past several years. However, there are a few areas we would want to highlight for any person or group who wants to build on and learn from the successes and shortcomings of this organization. **A first recommendation is slow and steady growth in the area of collective self-accountability, through direct democracy praxis development, at any and all levels of the organization.**

Here are some ways this kind of praxis development might have looked:

1. Staff could have explored unionization, especially before or soon after the shift to a network-based strategy.
 - a. Staff's instinct to claim collective power in order to try to salvage the organization in Spring 2023 was reasonable, but there was not enough time to complete the process, and the organization was perhaps too fractured and fragile to handle labor struggle by that point. Unionization in the years prior might have helped.
 - b. It would then potentially have been possible to integrate union decision-making and collective negotiations (bargaining) into the Organizing Principles. This step could have clarified power and communication flows.
 - c. If the organization as a whole had been able to opt into this process in a cooperative way and early on, it is possible that more of the people doing work in the organization would have felt true ownership.
 - d. The generative tensions inherent in labor organizing may have been able to surface power disparities and information bottlenecks that were preventing the organization from being operated in the most cooperative ways possible.
2. Develop an annual or biannual collective process for staff to propose a plan for how many of the network's articulated priorities (and what scale) they can meet.
 - a. Staff would listen and present proposed plans. Then the network can ratify those plans, or the process can be repeated if needed. Tension between the priorities of these two bodies is inevitable, but without clear mechanisms for negotiating through that tension, it can leak out, showing up in less generative ways.
3. Provide consistent, ongoing, learning and exploration of case studies and living examples of organizations that are doing certain things well.
 - a. Two examples worth investigating further are the book [Reinventing Organizations](#) and some of the thinking done about unionized cooperatives by the [Industrial Workers of the World](#).
 - b. At their best, directly democratic systems can provide the mechanisms necessary for organizational re-attuning in rapidly shifting contexts.
4. Center and study the Organizing Principles.
 - a. If something isn't working, propose and carry out updates, and document them.
 - b. When we are trying to operate in a "leaderful" way, limit hierarchical behavior, and prioritize bottom-up decision making, it's necessary to take agreed structures very seriously because they represent and facilitate the will of the group.
 - c. The nervous systems of group members may be less overloaded when group members can depend on systems to hold more complexity and group memory, than they can hold in their individual minds
 - d. If we are to eventually operate without top-down authority figures, domination, or coercion, we need to be able to depend on strong adaptable systems.
 - e. If we are to operate with students and youth at the center, it will require a consistent focus on teaching and learning these systems. They cannot be built and then expected to succeed by nature.
5. There should be a clear and consistent way for network members to negotiate with operational staff.
 - a. This communication/negotiation space did not seem to be fully articulated in the PSN Organizing Principles but it enables a necessary dialectic to operate.
 - b. An outline of how this could look that still maintains the bottom-up vision of the organization:

- i. Network members as a group say what they want in an organizational forum, with individual members articulating proposals. The network (the base) arrives at some basic mandates through these proposals.
- ii. Then staff takes those mandates and translates them into a proposed work plan, given the available time, resources, and skills that they have access to.
- iii. Some comprehensive summary of these proposed work plans would then be shared back to the network, so the network can understand better how much of what they want is actually possible, and so the network can have the opportunity to give feedback, provide additional ideas, or raise concerns.

The development of direct democracy praxis is key for any bottom-up organization. The sections below expand on the themes and practices of direct democracy and exemplify the importance of these essential tools for organizing in collective spaces.

4.3 Recommendation – Embody hybrid models of power with transparency

We believe in and work to help create cooperative organizations. But where should an existing organization start when either trying to transition to a more cooperative model, or when existing cooperative structures have stopped working well? **In these cases, we recommend “hybrid” models of power and transparent, explicit decision-making processes, as key for any sustainable organization being able to move into more and more cooperation.**

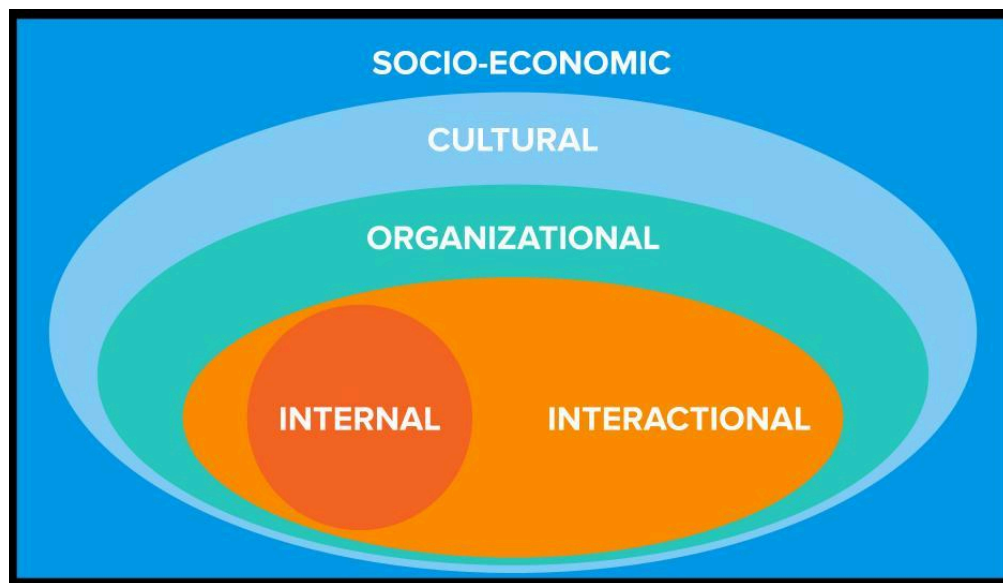
Creating a “Hybrid” Power Structure consists of attending to two key factors:

1. The Now: How is power operating internally right now? What dynamics need to be maintained for sustainability? What existing contextual dynamics do we have to contend with? and
2. The Ideal: How do we *ideally want* power to operate internally? What dynamics need to be shifted? How do we *ideally want* to relate to and influence our context? What steps can we take over time?

Simultaneously holding both (1) current maintenance power dynamics alongside (2) how we dream our work to be is how we embody a Hybrid Model of Power. We work toward “the ideal” pragmatically.

Examples of analysis of current dynamics (1 - The Now):

- Any power dynamics that are unequal (staff and leadership, network and central PSN) or relatively equal (staff with each other, board members with each other). We use a [types of power](#) analysis for this. See image below.
- We might also recognize the historical/socio-economic reliance on large donors or a certain kind of small donor and how that impacts the need to materialize a certain kind of deliverable to keep getting that money.
- “Rescue” analysis is a great tool for further understanding both unequal and equal power dynamics (where are both people doing more than they want to? Or less than their share?). For more information about Rescue look [here](#) or [here](#) or [here](#).



Radical Therapy Types of Power by [Beth Roy](#)

And regarding how we dream our work to be (2 - The Ideal) we might dream of a self-organized network integrated into the central PSN seamlessly. Or of trust and cooperation between staff and executive leadership and more equal access to power to determine organizational operations.

Often the way to make a real plan for the present taking into account both The Now and The Ideal is to hybridize between consensus-based and more hierarchical organizing. This is because our toxic capitalist culture truly does oppress us in the domains of time and money (so nimble decisions are useful) and human bodies have a need for autonomy and community. Consensus based decisions are advantageous because the most dissenting opinions are taken into account. Hierarchical decisions are advantageous because they can be completed more nimbly. These pros and cons can be blended with hybrid decision making. More on this [here](#).

Accountability to the "Base"

One example of a true hybrid decision-making process and hybrid model of power that we would recommend for future consideration for any bottom-up organization, is **full financial and operational transparency** and **approval of yearly budgets and strategies** both **internally among central staff** and with **the entire set of network members**. We radically assert that no organization is truly "bottom-up" or accountable to its base without this sort of transparency. This could be done as either a moment of *cooperation* within a hierarchical container (where central PSN has more say to shape outcomes) or a moment of *delegation* from the network member base to central PSN within a cooperative container (where central PSN is a delegate of the network member base). PSN was indeed a hybrid structure, albeit one where the base was both capacity and transparency limited in key ways. This structural limitation drove many of the dynamics that resulted in the organizational sunsetting.

Another power structure would be to empower a smaller, more nimble committee of network members (not the board) to have fuller visibility into finances and operations, as well as some kind of payment structure so that serious, at least part time, work could be dedicated. This would be more than an advisory role. It would be a committee of network delegates that the organization is accountable to. It's important that this group be separate from the board as the board of directors has important 501c3-style fiduciary and leadership responsibilities (as well as a limitation that they cannot be paid which severely limits capacity). The network

delegates could then report back to the wider network base. This would get the central PSN team out of the role of reporting on themselves.

It's key that when using hybrid models of power (The Now + The Ideal) and hybrid decision-making structures (consensus + hierarchies) that they be 1) transparent to those that relate to the organization, 2) designed based on the existing capacity of the organization, and 3) account for the varying cultural dynamics of its members.

- 1) Transparent decision-making processes are key to organizational sustainability. It sows seeds of confusion and distrust when decision-making occurs outside of agreed-upon mechanisms. This is often the cultural norm as explicit and negotiable decision making structures are niche and countercultural. Often culturally standard executive power is not made explicit.
- 2) It can also be quite difficult to balance existing capacity with organizational vision. Oftentimes this pushes individuals to overstretch beyond their capacity to hit common benchmarks of success (eg, people touched, dollars raised and spent, services provided etc). That norm then creates an external image of organizational success but long term comes at the price of cooperative internal power dynamics. Unilateral decisions are increasingly made via hierarchical authority or personal power (which typically manifests as burnout). Individuals themselves become more important to success rather than their organizational function. This often further fogs up decision-making.

In PSN there was an added complexity that many staff were new to the professional workforce and were learning key professional expectations and skills for the first time, including expectations containing oppressive norms. To get to a point where they could have more effectively navigated the complexity would have required more training capacity!

- 3) Further adding fog to decision-making, when organizations operate on a standard NPIC or corporate model, there is most often a real lack of deep participation and influence on strategy from lower level staff and volunteers. This gets people used to not having much power and also used to being receptive to structures being set for them by authorities within the organization. This is often one of the biggest dynamics we are combating when adding direct democratic processes: getting people empowered to FEEL into the ways that they can influence not just tactics, but strategy. It often takes months to years for folks to feel the power that exists in their consciousness and body AND to be able to act on that in consistent reliable ways. They are recovering from being the "victim" of rescue.

Conversely, it can also take months to years for folks conditioned to higher levels of authority hierarchies and those who tend to do more than they want to (thus taking more power) to *allow* for more space so that those who don't have access to positional power in culturally standard dynamics. If those with conditioned access to positional power within an organization tend to fill the space, then there's no room for lower level staff and volunteers to influence direction. The clearest symptom of this is often lack of organizational mission alignment with context.

When an organization goes through a big transition in model, it's even more critical that these factors are attended to. For example, changing from a more centralized to more distributed model, like in the case of PSN, was attempting a significant reversal of the flow of power. The organization pivoted from a functionally donor-centric structure to an explicitly network-centric structure as outlined in the [2016 Organizing Principles](#). As previously mentioned, these principles were never fully embodied. We would have recommended that the

structure of power in the 2016 principles be the goal for the organization long term (“The Ideal” in a hybrid model), and that innovative organizing that focuses on building network capacity be the working goal of central staff in this new model. To us, this would include active coalition building. Indeed, exceptional organizing efforts did move the capacity of the network closer and closer to being able to embody these principles (as outlined in sections 3.5 and 4.1). *We believe the movement needs the work of organizations like PSN to do network capacity building through participatory organizing and directly democratic structures.*

4.4 Recommendation – Tend to and maintain network knowledge turnover, expectations, and collective leadership

The Power Shift Network, which was deeply rooted in democratic values and collective leadership, acknowledged frequent turnover as a natural occurrence in the youth climate movement. This turnover, especially in student groups, posed a challenge in maintaining knowledge, consistency, and efficient operations.

A challenge lies in the fact that, generally, students need time to learn to assume responsibility for their contributions and to actively shape their communities into what they desire. Obedience indoctrination is rampant and we have to unpack this to fully embrace the practice of organizing collectively. Often, by the time students would acquire the necessary skills and experience to engage effectively in this process, they would typically be graduating and preparing to depart from college organizing environments. Additionally, college students often contend with various commitments and undergo significant life transitions, making it a less stable period in their lives. As a result, college students are extremely difficult to organize in long lasting bottom-up organizations.

To address this, we would have suggested that the Power Shift Network focus on building a member support base from people who are most likely to participate in organizing beyond a 4-year period. This would include staff members at key climate and youth climate organizations as well as college students who make longer-term commitments to the work. While working directly with high-turnover college students is a key need in our culture, due to time and capacity limitations we suggest emphasizing investment in those more likely to make long term commitments to the collective. We also recognize that many groups are directly student-run and must necessarily be directly organized with, in order to organize youths. We also believe that Power Shift engaged in many of these practices, though we are not clear to what extent.

Amongst the key network members targeted for collectivization, implementing a structured knowledge transfer process would have been advised. This process would ideally prioritize the documentation and dissemination of key insights, network organizing strategies, operational procedures, and cultural values and practices. Such an approach can help combat the prevalent (dominant) culture of disposability that new network members, representatives, and volunteers may be accustomed to. For instance, the network initiates could establish a "member objectives statement" for themselves that is visible to and negotiable by the broader network as well as the central PSN staff/leadership. This member objectives statement would outline how the network member representative themselves would intend to engage and contribute to the organization. Additionally, outgoing or senior representatives could share their plans for mentoring new members in their member objective statement. This would allow network representatives to refer back to, modify, and establish consensus on their roles within the Power Shift Network, fostering agency and accountability. Ideally, these knowledge and culture

transfer processes would be primarily managed within network member organizations, minimizing the need for extensive involvement from central PSN staff.

This self-sustaining knowledge transfer model would take years and deep organizing from PSN central staff to develop. It would be imperative to gradually evolve towards this distributed labor model, beginning with small-scale initiatives and progressing methodically. The preferred approach is to delve deeply and progress steadily, as spreading resources too thinly across numerous organizations (especially those with high turnover) may only yield superficial outcomes.

PSN had developed a [Network Member Handbook](#) that effectively communicates participation expectations, which served as a valuable resource. However, we would recommend refining this handbook to focus more on understanding what network members seek to achieve through their participation and empowering them to take ownership of their contributions (embodying "leaderfulness"). The handbook should also include templates for knowledge transfer processes that pair with training sessions at the PSN's Annual Meeting.

Within the member objectives statement, it would have been beneficial to set expectations that members commit to a specific level of capacity, such as envisioning a specific network-oriented project, or engaging in peer or alum mentorship roles as previously outlined. Active involvement in shaping the network according to their preferences should be encouraged. Additionally, recognizing and celebrating members' contributions in ceremonies can further reinforce their commitment.

Unfortunately, this approach may diverge from mainstream practices and may not appeal to funders who prioritize numerical outcomes. This dilemma presents a significant challenge for PSN, as described in previous and later sections.

And while these recommendations come after the closing of the organization, we hope that other innovative bottom-up organizations can learn from this analysis.

4.5 Recommendation – Practice role clarity and intentional accompaniment / mentorship with staff and board

The theme of role clarity, accompaniment and mentorship came up across several interviews with members of the PSN community. Our recommendations below respond to **developing a shared understanding, identifying movement mentors, creating clarity around roles, and making space to adjust and pivot when necessary.**

- Do group training across staff, board, and network members on the boundaries of nonprofit infrastructure. The [National Council of Nonprofits](#) is a solid starting place for information and introductory training on this topic.
 - As the group discusses together, ask yourselves the following questions:
 - What is possible within this structure?
 - What is not possible within this structure?
 - What can be stretched/reimagined within this structure?
 - What can we dismantle within this structure and still maintain our legal and financial responsibilities as a nonprofit?

- There are a lot of possibilities here. You may want to work with a local nonprofit law firm to help guide and support these conversations.
- Consider if your nonprofit infrastructure is the right container for all of the work you intend to do. There are legal restrictions with having a 501c3 status, and the field is often seen as beholden to the narrow perspectives of funders - which feeds into the nonprofit industrial complex. Consider doing collective reading (i.e. [The Revolution Will Not Be Funded by INCITE!](#))
- Have regular (at least annually) meetings across staff, board, and network members to negotiate and reorient everyone to the ideological vision, direction, culture, and accountability practices of the organization.
- Identify movement elders who can accompany the staff and board with ongoing coaching and support, and provide consistent external wisdom and insight about sustainability, care, common pitfalls, and focused action.
- Hire people slowly and with intention. Ensure that alignment and experience are matched with the goals of the organization and needs of the role. Ensure that there is capacity for supervision, mentorship, and leadership development support for new hires.
- Honor the learning curves of new people in their roles. Create safe space for exploration, inquiry, and discovery of how one's talents can be applied to their work. Practice letting go of responsibilities when new hires come on board.
- Establish clear roles and responsibilities for all members of your nonprofit ecosystem: board, staff, network/community, etc. Create static charts clarifying how each role interacts with the broader ecosystem, and do an annual review of this chart to determine:
 - Are people clear about their roles and responsibilities?
 - What needs clarification?
 - What needs to change to ensure folks are working within their capacity, skills, and learning edges?
 - Examples of a staff chart and an ecosystem map are below:
 - <https://miro.com/templates/organizational-charts/>
 - <https://miro.com/templates/ecosystem-mapping/>
- Complete regular capacity assessments to ensure that the organization, and its community, can hold the work it is committed to doing.
- Create clear professional development plans for staff members, maintain regular check in meetings, and connect staff to coaching and support opportunities where possible.
- Board capacity is often deeply limited in traditional nonprofit structures, because they are acting in a volunteer capacity. This works in the case of a well-functioning and well-resourced organization, but can crumble quickly in the face of sudden crises the organization may face - including executive transitions and unexpected fundraising shortfalls. Consider establishing funding structures for external accountability community members (i.e., network members, board members with a clear conflict of interest policy and process) to provide space for more responsiveness during moments of organizational crisis.

4.6 Recommendation – Get more honest & informed: Adaptive, collective strategy with network and staff

If staff and other members of PSN had access to the kind of mentorship and accompaniment detailed above, it would still be necessary to determine when and how to pause, pivot, or adapt to changing conditions.

All of the major components of the collectively designed 2016 Organizing Principles document could be boiled down into workable day-to-day systems oriented toward clear, achievable, adaptable goals and targets.

- One tool that could be helpful would be the use of regular meeting agenda templates and activities designed to align existing meetings and reporting with the 2016 Organizing Principles and its intentions.
- Templates for meetings, etc., would need to include clear instructions for how anyone involved can use power, make proposals, and contribute to decisions. Those instructions can be improved over time. This creates a structure where network members are asked to use their power in the space, which is essential to cultivate capacity and prevent meetings from becoming informational report-outs for central PSN team members.
- Organizational targets should include achieving internal or operational goals, and not limit evaluation to the delivery of public-facing events and materials.

Another useful approach may be Rapid Reflection, a non-hierarchical process developed by a member of the Branching Narratives team.

- The purpose of this kind of model is to align all strategic targets, including organizational/internal targets, with the organization's strategy, important events, and grant reporting deadlines. Then, these elements would be tracked on a monthly or quarterly basis in a collective process that should generally take no more than 2 hours. Longer processes can take place at annual retreats or similar spaces.
- Ambitious goals should be broken down into smaller pieces that can be achieved in the short term. Those pieces should be designed to add up to the full goal over a specific longer-term period of time.
- A non-hierarchical model like this also provides a way for staff and executive leadership to become informed and contribute to the success of all parts of the organization's work.
- [See an example of Rapid Reflections here.](#)

When it isn't possible to meet a target or when another change is required, group members should demonstrate accountability by communicating internally openly, early, and often. That kind of internal transparency is only possible when norms around communication and disciplinary action are such that people *feel safe*, are encouraged to share what they are struggling with, and can reliably find support. In such a culture, plans can then be adapted based on real and reasonably anticipated capacity. Then, to the greatest extent appropriate, updates should be shared with staff, board, network, and funders.

With regular processes like the Rapid Reflection, it is usually possible to determine whether an important target will be missed or if any change in expectations needs to be made, many months before deadlines. That spaciousness can help make it feel safer to negotiate and adapt plans. The lead time provides the opportunity to pause and reevaluate what is possible in the present.

As Jane Maculvey put it, there are simply "No shortcuts." An example of how a more adaptive process could have been helpful can be seen in the struggle to recruit board members. The goal to recruit and onboard enough board members to have a solid group of perhaps up to 15 could have been broken up and tracked over time. The problem could have been held and understood more collectively. Once the recruitment struggle became apparent, this might have been a critical moment to identify possible organizational culture changes or other strategies that, in turn, could have made it more possible to recruit and retain well-aligned board members. Plans could have been proposed, attempted, evaluated, and iterated.

To be clear, it would be incorrect to imply that PSN didn't propose, attempt, evaluate, and iterate. On the contrary, PSN engaged in many innovative organizing practices. We believe that the sheer scale of what they

were attempting to do is very likely only attainable with more capacity than 8-12 team members on central staff. They also needed significant capacity investments from a large number of network members for the execution and coordination of so much solidarity. We are operating in a culture that often tells us that we need to just work on achieving a string of goals, but so much of the real work is actually to *negotiate* these goals so they can truly be held together.

It's not uncommon for anyone working to create a better world to carry some idealism about how things "should" be now. When what is happening isn't living up to what we would want, it's critical to not only have a culture where we can experiment with solutions but also where we can accept the current limits of our progress. When processes are held, understood, and used collectively, challenges and failures can also be held collectively. We can create cultures where we limit the individual burden of "fault" and recognize that none of us has all the answers. When we come to a collective agreement on an idea, we are acknowledging that we may end up "wrong" together. Then we try again.

To support this kind of collective culture, there should be regular checkpoints where it's possible to ask, "How are we accountable to each other?" "What needs to shift for this to be the culture we hope for and want?" "How do we plan for periods of rest and periods of action?" "What is the ideal culture for this space? And what is possible now?"

The combination of adaptive processes for tracking progress, paired with a culture that welcomes group discussion and individual proposal-making, creates an environment where collective dreaming can start to become material reality.

4.7 Recommendation – Rethink our resources: Sustainable autonomy in finance & funding

The funding landscape can be dire, especially for BIPOC-led organizations. The Nonprofit Finance Fund reports that white-led nonprofits continue to have more financial access, with 41% of white-led nonprofits reporting having received over half of the income in 2021 as unrestricted funding, compared with [26% of BIPOC-led organizations](#). Achieving long-term financial stability, raising funds that cover their full costs, and raising unrestricted revenue continue to be the top three challenges that BIPOC-led nonprofits face.

A recommendation you may expect here is to intentionally focus on raising unrestricted funding to build out a reserve fund for the organization, especially given that, ultimately, the funding crisis is the most central reason why the PSN needed to sunset. And yes, while this is necessary, it's also important to rethink our fundraising strategies, given the ongoing injustice around disproportionate unrestricted giving to BIPOC-led organizations. Finding unrestricted funding can often be a futile effort and is largely dictated by individual donors. One of the emerging models around this is community-centric fundraising, which has come out of conversations with funders of color over the past several years. [Community-centric fundraising](#) works to prioritize the entire community over individual organizations, foster a sense of belonging and interdependence, present our work not as individual transactions but holistically, and encourage mutual support between nonprofits. Examples of this in practice can look like donor education and de-centering, organizational collaboration and sharing of resources, redefining success and metrics, and advocating for more accessible grant applications and increased unrestricted giving from foundations.

Leadership transitions can be a significant challenge for most organizations, as EDs often possess a great amount of relationships and organizational memory that is frequently not fully distributed within the

organization. During transition periods, we often look to succession plans to guide the transition process, but only [27% of nonprofit organizations report having a written succession plan in place](#). During this time, due to fear of instability, funders often decrease or hold back funding. This impacts [BIPOC-led organizations particularly deeply](#), as they are already severely underfunded and [less flexibly funded](#) compared to their white-led counterparts. While transitions are a key moment to examine culture and staffing, they often instead produce rapid responsiveness to sustain the current workings of an organization - maintaining existing labor standards of overwork, unrealistic budgets, and inadequate staffing plans - that [might be in need of more innovation and support](#).

Through our conversations, we want to invite **rethinking our resources as sustainable autonomy in financial infrastructure, funding, and people**. A full list of recommendations are below:

- Engage in finance 101 training with the staff, board, and network about nonprofit financial infrastructure and contingency planning during cash flow or budget shortfall periods (which are common). Add a financial report out for staff alongside Board of Directors meetings.
- Explore community-centric fundraising as a model to share fundraising infrastructure across several partner organizations and adopt fundraising principles aligned with mutual support and interdependence.
- Establish accountability structures with philanthropic organizations that decide to decrease or end their giving. Request clear reasoning why giving has ended, connection to other potential funders, and financial support to develop strategies to seek new funding. Clarify the impact of the changed relationship, and share the impact of the reduced funding with your larger community.
- Explore fee for service models for informative workshops and key resources as a method for diversifying income sources.
- Establish a membership dues system for network member organizations, in order to develop reliable unrestricted funding and regain autonomy based in the community.
- Engage in participatory and [full cost](#) budgeting processes with the staff, board, and network. Provide quarterly updates to all staff and board about the progress in fundraising for the year.
- When patterns arise in your budget shortfall periods that impact largely the ability to pay staff, initiate a reassessment of the budget and fundraising plan and adjust your strategy and reduce costs to meet the current funding landscape.
- Proactively develop succession plans for organizational leadership to easily transition out of their role when the time comes. [Leading Forward](#) has a wealth of resources to support leadership transitions.
- During the transition period, provide additional coaching and mentorship to incoming EDs. Use this time to examine organizational culture and labor standards and create plans to ensure staff and organizational priorities are addressed.

4.8 Recommendation – Capacity & grief-centric ways of moving

The Power Shift Network, like every organization in the United States, operated within a context of deep systemic oppression and intergenerational trauma. Moving beyond PSN, this challenging environment almost ubiquitously manifests in organizational cultures through patterns of harm and burnout as individuals are pushed to work beyond their capacity to meet the real urgent needs of the moment.

To mitigate the harmful effects of colonialism, white supremacy, intersectional oppression, and global hegemony, we can start to prioritize a "grief-centric" or "capacity-centric" approach, which involves

tracking and honoring our capacity for labor, emotional expression, caregiving, and recovery as a key component of strategic planning processes.

This approach necessitates acknowledging the disproportionate burden of emotional labor often placed on marginalized groups, particularly women and femmes of color. Systemic inequalities create an environment where these individuals are more likely to be expected to manage the emotions of others, provide mentorship, navigate cultural sensitivities, and resolve conflicts, often without recognition or compensation. The extractive nature of philanthropic funding further exacerbates this phenomenon.

As mentioned previously, philanthropic funding can create a dynamic where organizations prioritize meeting the demands of funders over their core mission and values. The grant application and reporting processes can be time-consuming and burdensome, diverting resources away from direct action and community engagement.

By understanding the interconnectedness of emotional labor and the power dynamics inherent in funding structures, we can work towards more equitable and sustainable organizational cultures. This involves recognizing and valuing the emotional labor performed by all individuals, regardless of their background, being in a deep understanding and collective practice of the ways [white supremacy culture](#) shows up in our organizations, and advocating for funding practices that prioritize the needs and well-being of the communities served.

Somatic practices that develop energy awareness and embodiment can help us notice organizational and systematic dynamics in our physicality. These often show up through nervous system activation as it is linked with internalized value judgments based on a culture of individualism. There are many avenues for developing awareness of when oppressive cultures are operating in our bodies. We highlight [Somatic Abolitionism](#) developed by Resmaa Menakem and fighting “[cop-in-the-head](#)” as developed by the Radical Therapy Collective in the 60s, influenced by the Black Panthers.

While all situations can be contextualized into large systemic dynamics, sometimes we are just activated because we have a boundary we aren't tracking or because we want something for ourselves. Upholding our integrity to ask for what we want in these moments is just as important as fighting our internalized oppression. Organizations crumble because regular people trust the organization over their own intuition.

Encouraging [peer support networks](#), affinity groups, and caucuses can deepen our commitment to our intuition and foster resilience to dynamics of oppression. Caucuses are a more formal type of affinity group that often have some kind of recognized power within a collective or organization. We highly recommend that, even if staff are not formally organizing, that they have regular check-ins and open, discerning communication. With real talk, we can address issues before they escalate, creating a more supportive and sustainable environment for everyone involved.

Sometimes there are people who have power who aren't tracking their impact on others because of burnout, perceived victimhood, or internalized managerial culture. We recommend addressing these dynamics by tracking the way power operates materially by noticing specific interactions between people and the difference in types of power employed between people. When folks are on relatively equal power and are committed to balancing power, we can often work through very difficult situations and have deeper trust at the end of it. When there are unequal power dynamics and/or folks are not committed to rebalancing power, it is often important to organize collectively to restore balance.

To embody a grief-centric and capacity-centric way of being, we must approach each other and ourselves with curiosity. Both in peer affinity groups and in conflict, when we are noticing specific interactions, we can reframe from generalizations and focus on contextual understanding. We can dissect situations into observable facts, feelings, and mental narratives. By parsing out the differences in narratives we create about a specific situation and sharing them, we can discern shared truths, address differences and gaps, and deepen our comprehension, leading to clearer, more creative, and compassionate big-picture perspectives to consider.

These practices are not embodied in the dominant culture of the United States. It's important to build our power by relating and learning from people who have a depth of practice in what we want for ourselves. These can be coaches, mentors, friends, co-workers, or whoever we notice navigating grief, managing energy and activation, and living from their desires in ways that resonate with us. Through solidarity and exchange networks, we can weave a culture of resilience, change, and mutual support that is long-lasting and integrates each of our unique human wisdom. We need this to survive and fight the oppressive status quo.

5.0 Conclusion

The narrative of the Power Shift Network (PSN) is one of ambition, resilience, and, ultimately, transformation. From its roots as the Energy Action Coalition to its evolution into the Power Shift Network, PSN embodied a commitment to empowering young activists and fostering a just, sustainable future. The organization's emphasis on bottom-up governance, power sharing, and participatory processes aimed to build a network that would center the voices and agency of its members most impacted by the climate crisis.

However, as the organization navigated challenges within the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC) and grappled with internal power dynamics, it faced issues of burnout, lack of transparency, and mission drift. The complex interplay of external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice movements, and financial constraints, intersected with internal tensions around role clarity, leadership transitions, and relationship erosion. These dynamics underscored the broader systemic challenges faced by organizations operating within the NPIC and the importance of self-accountability, transparent power structures, and collective care.

Despite these challenges, the legacy of PSN remains deep and impactful. The organization mobilized tens of thousands of young climate leaders, hosted transformative Power Shift convergences, and supported grassroots organizations and campaigns in their climate justice work.

Every time we share a lesson from our movement work, we build power, equip new organizers with useful tools and strategies, and reduce the possibility of repeating our mistakes. The Power Shift Network is an incredible example of vulnerability practice and legacy building for all of us - to ensure youth climate justice work strengthens and adapts to ever-changing conditions. We believe that by practicing self-accountability and direct democracy, examining our power structures, tending to our collective knowledge, finding movement mentorship, strategizing together, rethinking our resources, and moving with grief together - we can build stronger networks to hold our dynamic visions.

As we reflect on the experiences, challenges, and accomplishments of PSN, we are reminded of the power of collective action, shared leadership, and intentional care within movements for social and environmental justice. The legacy of PSN lives on in the stories, struggles, and triumphs of all those who were part of this transformative journey, laying the groundwork for future generations of changemakers to continue shifting the narrative toward a more equitable and sustainable world.

For a collective future,

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