



Actualizing Equity 2020

From Representation to Co-Governance Advancing Equity in Policymaking

In recent election cycles in the Twin Cities, we've seen local organizing efforts and groundbreaking campaigns that have elevated leaders of color to local, county and state policy-making positions. But equity doesn't end with representation. How are organizers and electeds working to advance participatory processes and co-governance that truly shift power and advance policies that bring meaningful change for our communities? At our first Actualizing Equity event of 2020, we explored these questions with **Chauntyll Allen, St. Paul School Board; Bahieh Hartshorn, Movement Politics Manager at Take Action MN; MK Nguyen, Program Manager at St. Paul Promise Neighborhood; and Nelsie Yang, St. Paul Ward 6 City Councilmember.**

According to the Reflective Democracy campaign, the number of women of color running for political office in Minnesota from 2015 to 2019 increased 142%, and the number of men of color candidates also increased 87%. While Minnesota ranks **#4** for **how well elected officials reflect the state's demographics**, though, it's also home to the most egregious inequities in housing, education and economic outcomes for communities of color.



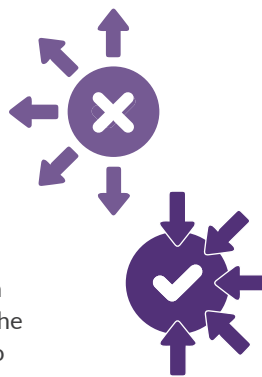
Representation in positions of power is essential but not enough. "We're taught that representative governance is electing someone to bring our voices to decisionmaking and make the right decisions for us — and they're really only accountable when elections come around," Hartshorn said. "That system and that perspective create distance and distrust between decisionmakers and those who are impacted by the issues."

Before agenda setting or policy making, elected officials have to visibilize the ways white supremacy and systems of oppression are embedded in government structures and processes. "If we don't **name when dominant ideology and narrative are showing up and decide to opt into something different** — something that's rooted in our values, in our realities — then we're automatically opting into that dominant ideology," Hartshorn said.



For Yang, a Hmong women and youngest member of the St. Paul City Council, that means taking on both cultural norms and social standards. "I'm trying to be very assertive about my goals and what I need from the beginning in meetings with city staff or other councilmembers or folks in community," she said. "**But I also know that reaching for perfectionism stems so much from white supremacy, which doesn't serve us.**"

On the school board, Allen has pushed back on a pervasive, paternalistic narrative: "I've been told over and over that it's not fair to ask the community to make decisions about things I'm elected to or other people are paid to think about," she said. "Those types of mindsets and systems we have to interrupt. **It's really uncomfortable for some people to let go of that leadership stance, but we have to relinquish that authority to community.**" One strategy for her has been to help colleagues and staff interrogate their own assumptions. "I keep asking questions, even if I know the answer or what they mean, because when they have to explain it, they hear it in a different way," she said.



Nguyen emphasized that policymakers needs to be thinking about influencers (such as parents) and the those most impacted (for instance, children), rather than relying on stakeholders or organizations that advocate on issues. "The further up you are, the more you should be **applying a posture of listening and organizing yourself to structurally integrate** the voices of the influencer, if not the most impacted themselves," she said. "That's a huge mindset shift. We need to be making sure that institutions are doing whatever they can to open up as much space for people to feel belonging." In her office, Yang is trying to foster that felt sense of ease and belonging with a snack cart and toys for children.

While community engagement has become integral to many government processes, the prevailing approaches put the **onus on individuals instead of the system.** "When I hear decisionmakers say, *People aren't showing up* they're thinking *What's wrong with that individual or community?*" Hartshorn said. "If we want more people to show up, we actually have to create the systems that will allow people to show up, like living wage jobs."



"I'm asking people, 'How do you want to be involved?'" Yang said. "When it comes to community engagement, for some people that means being in the room. **Some people can't do that but say 'I would love to send you a Facebook message and have you care about what I have to say.'** We have a very patriarchal expectation around communication and engagement and we have to radically change what it means to 'show up' to be heard."

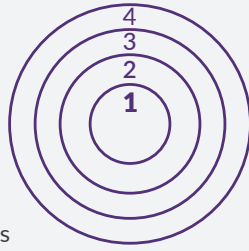
Power Onion of Co-Governance

4: Demands We are on the outside looking in, making credible demands of people in power. With our allies, we stand in solidarity.

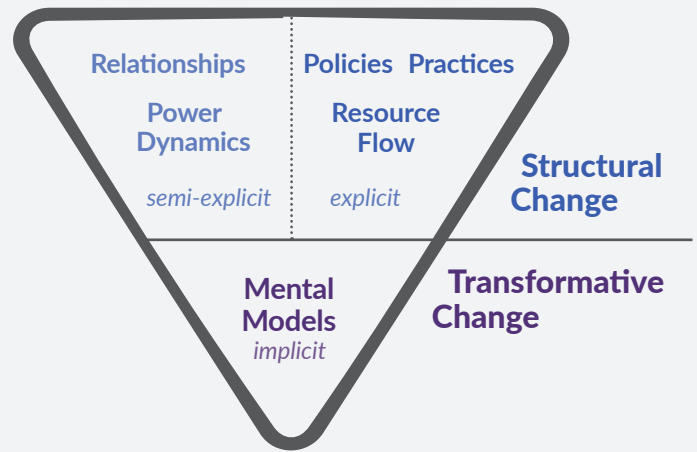
3: Access We can get a meeting with someone in power and possible notification after a decision is made. Allies show solidarity and maybe share information.

2: Influence We have some ability to affect outcomes before a decision is made. We strategize with electeds and coalition allies.

1: Compass No matter the crisis or opportunity, our values and ideology point us — electeds and allies — to the same stance or action. We are the government and it is us and we can create structural change. This is difficult to imagine but what we aim for.

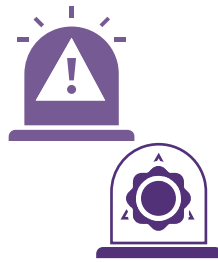


Six Conditions of Systems Change



Power Onion created by Take Action MN; Systems Change triangle created by John Kania, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge

For Nguyen, our approaches to governance, from a community perspective, tend to be urgent and individualistic. “We often focus right away on the policies, practices and resource flow on the institutional level,” she said. But the others aspects of systems change (graphic above) — **relationships, power dynamics and mental models** — “we only practice privately, not in the context off governance or policymaking.”



Most importantly, as we engage in political work, we need to shift our mental models, Nguyen said. As adrienne maree brown suggests, we need to do deep, slow, intentional work that come from a different set of core principles. “We need to do the **invisible work of healing as a deeply political practice** so we can be well enough to engage in the world and to offer love and accountability in that way,” she said.

For so many communities, public policy has been deeply harmful. “A lot of folks I’m in relationship with have been attacked by the system in all different ways,” Nguyen shared. “How do folks who have deep knowledge but have been taught to be severely passive **find spaces where we can practice and build our muscles for shaping our destiny?**” For her, that’s been central to the creation of “We Got This,” a group of her neighbors, who are parents and caregivers, who come together to break bread — and break down the concept of governance.



Another critical shift to our mental models is to, as Nguyen puts it, *practice governance everywhere*. “**I’ve been training myself and practicing with others to rethink this idea of home,**” Nguyen shared. “It’s easy to think about our own budgets and households as our realm of governance, but what if we start to think about this idea of seeing our schools as part of our home, our city as part of our home, the statehouse as our home. Can we get to a place where we feel like being part of **managing these multiple layers of home**; where we can feel governance and ownership are a possibility?”

Our communities already have the solutions — and more are entering elected office. But, as Hartshorn pointed out, even when we have our collaborators in policymaking positions, we can’t expect community members to enter into the current political spaces without support to be re-traumatized by systems that don’t work for us.



Instead, we need to be create intentional, nurturing spaces for leadership development. For instance, the West Side Community Organization created its **Indigenous Women and Women of Color (IWWOC) table** to do just that. “I got really clear that we need to change the container for how we’re developing people into decision making roles,” Hartshorn said.

RESOURCES:

Reflective Democracy Campaign (including Minnesota / Twin Cities data) | *We Got This* Workshop Series
Water Flow Systems of Change | KnowledgeWorks spheres of Influence graphic | Participatory Budgeting

Learn more and access resources from Actualizing Equity events: thealliancetc.org/actualizing-equity