

Creating a National Movement

Case Study of The National Gay-Straight Alliance Network Movement

by
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Summary

Many advocacy-focused nonprofits established in a local community or in one state want to promote a national movement in their specialized field. The desire to build a national movement can be driven by a desire to influence national policy, increase national awareness of the issue(s), and/or support emerging local groups working in the field.

Research question

When an advocacy-oriented nonprofit serving a local community or single state wants to influence social change at a broader level, what organizational structure can best support this objective? In particular, what should it do when there are other independent local organizations around the country that are doing similar work?

An association model might seem the most appropriate way to build a national movement under these circumstances; that is, to focus resources on creating a supra-organization at the national level linking local, regional, and state-level organizations and providing services including networking, training, and lobbying. However, an association model is not necessarily the best approach to building a grassroots movement. What other options are there?

This paper describes the findings of a research project designed to answer these questions. I conducted this project in partnership with the Gay-Straight Alliance Network (GSA Network), a nonprofit based in San Francisco and serving California. The project was funded by the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund.

Findings

Based on the findings of my research, we determined that GSA Network could be most effective in promoting a national GSA-movement by developing a strong national program under its sole authority, dedicated to teaching its methods to other groups. We term this a “sole control” or “replication model.” Although GSA Network is committed to a collaborative approach to building the national GSA movement, control over the content and values of its “investment” is, rightly, important. Thus, operating its own program focused on building national support is the preferable option, rather than focusing on the development of an association into an independent national group to play this role. This method can be effective for creating a broad and strong base of local and state / regional organizations that will promote nationwide awareness and a voice in shaping national policy.

Key audiences for this study

The research findings provide insight into a “best practice” approach that any local or state organization should consider when promoting a national movement. The findings are most relevant for groups that:

- ◆ Focus on an emerging issue, not directly addressed by established national institutions
- ◆ Are relatively under-resourced
- ◆ Are primarily focused on change at a local or state level, even though that change may have national-level impact
- ◆ Are not the only such group in the country and acknowledge at least a handful of other local or state groups working on similar issues

Project Overview

We can all name issues that have significant support on the national policy scene today, but that were not publicly acknowledged forty years ago, such as drunk driving and domestic violence. Organizations built to address these issues were started in local communities, yet somehow a national movement caught hold and the country's awareness of, and attitude towards, these issues changed irrevocably. At any point in time there are similar fledgling movements. The question is: What is the best structure for building this kind of major social and policy change?

Research question:

How could the GSA-movement best be promoted?

La Piana Associates, Inc. was hired by the Gay-Straight Alliance Network in California (GSA Network) to consider this question:

Could the GSA-movement nationally best be promoted by creating a national program under the umbrella of the San Francisco-based and California-focused GSA Network or by creating a separate, independent, national association of local organizations?

Our research for this project provides insight into a “best practice” approach that any local or state organization should consider when promoting a national movement.

GSA Network, a California-based organization

GSA Network:

Serving California, GSA Network is the largest and most experienced of several independent state and regional organizations across the country.

Based in San Francisco and serving California, GSA Network is the largest and most experienced of several independent state and regional organizations around the country that provide support to local Gay-Straight Alliances¹ (“GSAs”) within their “service area.” GSA Network has had impressive success in nurturing greater engagement of an expanding number of local GSA’s in California schools.

In recent years, other state and regional groups have approached GSA Network for advice on how to achieve similar success. GSA Network has responded to these requests as it was able, but wanted to have a greater impact in growing the national GSA movement. There was clearly a need and demand for this, but the optimal approach to take to achieve this was not so obvious.

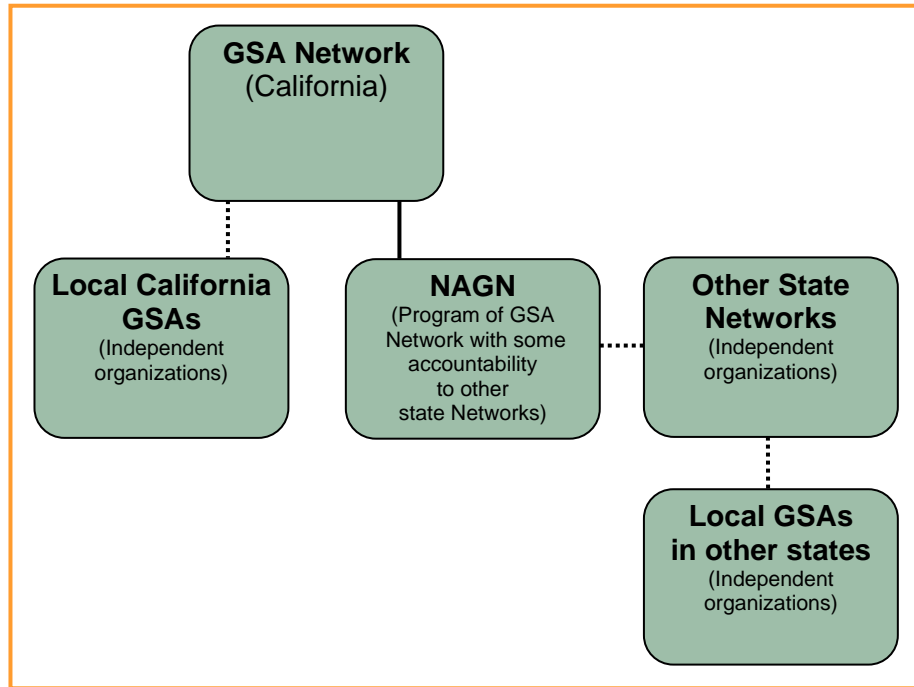
¹ Gay-Straight Alliances are student-run clubs, typically based in a high school, that provide a safe place for students to meet, support each other, talk about issues related to sexual orientation, and work to end homophobia. Each GSA is independent; many have grown with resources provided by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). GSA Network (based in California) was the first GSA Network established to bring together local GSAs to share information and support each other. At present there are more than twenty state and regional GSA Networks. The local, student-run GSAs are completely independent from a legal standpoint. Most GSA Networks are also independent organizations, although several are affiliated with GLSEN or other local organizations.

Note that, while the California-based GSA Network does not use the state name, the GSA Networks in other states and regions reference their state in their name.

NAGN:

GSA Network initiated a loose national association, NAGN, but wanted to have a greater impact in growing the national GSA movement.

Prior to La Piana’s involvement, GSA Network had initiated a loose national coalition of these independent state and regional sister organizations, the National Association of GSA Networks (NAGN). A program of GSA Network, NAGN’s purpose is to promote networking and shared learning across the field. The chart below shows the relationships among these entities.



Research Method

Research method:

Five associations, similar to the GSA Network and NAGN, were studied.

In order to help GSA Network identify the optimal way to achieve this outcome, I researched five associations², selected because they reflected characteristics similar to GSA Network and NAGN. That is, they involved a national movement connected through independent local and/or state organizations. Further, these associations³ provided insight into the GSA movement’s current growth stage. None of these was a perfect model for GSA Network and each manifested significant differences from GSA Network and NAGN. My research consisted of both secondary research (such as, reviewing websites and other documentation) and primary research: interviews of key informants within these organizations.

Subsequent to this initial research, I conducted research into five nonprofit organizations that had sought to grow nationally (or internationally) through a replication or sole-control model; this article does not discuss these findings although they informed our conclusions.



² This case study maintains the anonymity of these associations.

³ For the purposes of this project, we defined “association” as an organization consisting of independent member organizations serving a common mission.

Conclusion:

A single organization with a strong vision is best suited to driving a national movement.

Success factors for sole control model:

Organizational capacity:

- ◆ Demonstrated leadership
- ◆ Proven programs
- ◆ Sufficient resources

Impassioned leadership with a compelling vision

Strong, positive partnerships with funders

Key findings:

- ◆ There are five key drawbacks to the use of the association model for driving a national movement
- ◆ Associations serve an important role in facilitating networking and information-sharing

Summary Research Findings

We concluded that a single organization with a strong vision is best suited to driving a national movement. Or, stated another way, associations of loosely affiliated independent local, statewide, and/or regional organizations, sharing the same mission and objectives, do *not* provide the best structure for creating a national movement.

We base this conclusion on the observation that success is likelier with a unified vision, clear responsibility, and focused attention—all emanating from an efficient decision-making process. The individuals we spoke with in the course of our research identified specific drawbacks to the use of the association model for building a nationwide movement.

This is what we term the “sole control” (or “replication”) model. To be successful, this lead organization should meet basic criteria. These include:

- Strong leadership
- Proven programs and methodologies
- A relatively large internal infrastructure

The leader of this group must have:

- A compelling vision
- A clear and strong passion for the mission and for creating a national movement

Good relationships with funders

The key findings of my research, which led to the above conclusion, were:

- ▶ The local imperative drains resources from the national movement
- ▶ Egalitarian ideals outweigh effectiveness
- ▶ Securing sustainable association funding is a significant challenge
- ▶ Support available to start-up groups through an association is not aligned with their needs
- ▶ Core values of association members may be compatible, but not identical
- ▶ Associations serve an important role in facilitating networking and information-sharing

These findings are reviewed in detail in the next section.



Detailed Findings

Finding: Local imperatives drain resources from the national movement

Association leaders are first-and-foremost accountable to their local organizations. As a result, they are unable to allocate adequate time and talent to meet the needs of the national organization.

“...95% of the time the local work wins out over the national.”

The barrier most often cited to the effective use of associations to grow a national movement was that participants drawn from the member organizations (be they community-based, statewide, or regional in focus) are primarily accountable for the work of their local organization. The focus of national association leaders is routinely pulled away from the development of the national work towards local imperatives. This is especially true when members are providing financial support for the national association. As revealed in the interviewees' comments below, conflicts may emerge between the interests of the local members and those of the national association:

Where you have management of local programs trying to manage the local work and balance the national commitments, 95% of the time the local work wins out over the national.

The association's⁴ board does not raise money. Their number one obligation is to their state organizations. Also, the national association includes “sub-Executive Director” members on the board who generally don't have the time, skills, or buy-in from their bosses to do fundraising for the national association.

[As the only board member who does not represent a local organization], I feel that I am the only member on the board that thinks about the association as an organization. Others think about it as their coalition.

“It is very difficult for board members to take off their state hat and put on a national hat.”

There is lots of “wringing of hands” on the association board.... It's not their fault that they don't have the resources [to devote to the national work]. It's a huge issue: whether board members are to act as individuals or as representatives of their organizations. It is very difficult for board members to take off their state hat and put on a national hat. It's a problem.

In short, association leadership is primarily accountable to local organizations and is thus unable to direct adequate time and talent towards meeting the needs of the national organization. This reality prompted one association to undergo a process to transition from an independent national association to becoming a project of the largest member within the association. The Executive Director of the organization that has steadily absorbed nearly-complete responsibility for the association over the course of several years explained the choice:

There are two options, either my [local] organization decides where resources go or outside, disinterested organizations [or individuals] decide and oversee [the national work].

⁴ In all quotes in this article, I've replaced the actual name of the association with the generic term “association.”

This association found itself rejecting the association model and choosing between a dedicated program at an existing organization or creating an organization free of member groups and solely focused on driving the national movement. It chose the former. Both of these options are different from the attempt over the past decade to create an independent association run by and accountable to an interested membership of participating local organizations.

Similarly, a considerable investment of time and some cost must be made in creating a functioning association before any meaningful work can actually occur. This drains resources from the locals. One interviewee described the result as “*wasting energy on window dressing.*” Combined with the pressure of members to stay focused on local issues, this can turn into a lose-lose situation: resources are drained from the locals to create the national association, but these resources aren’t sufficient to create a viable national movement.

Finding: Egalitarian ideals outweigh effectiveness

Compounding this lose-lose situation, and despite their good intentions, locals do not contribute resources equally to the national association. This results in tension and resentment amongst those who need to work together.

Many of the associations interviewed for this study maintained an egalitarian ideal that all members will be equally responsible for the success of the association—a somewhat inevitable assumption and goal when no single organization or person is in charge of an organization. However, the reality is that some organizations put more time in than others. Inevitably, tension results. Instead of pretending that all members are contributing equally, and fostering resentment among those who are contributing more, it is better to be frank about resources and to acknowledge the different levels of effort that some members make.

Locals also engage in a little game, perhaps of denial, saying that “we’re going to be this other entity” and it doesn’t matter that all the resources are coming from one place. We’re going to act as if we are national when in fact it is one local organization that is holding it all together.

The drive for collegiality forces the association to spread its resources equally to maintain member buy-in, rather than focus resources where they might be most effective.

One goal the studied associations shared was to secure funding for a fledgling movement that local organizations were not able to obtain on their own. However, the false belief that the egalitarian ideal, referenced above, has been achieved can only be maintained if association members maintain a high degree of collegiality. Distributing funds made available through the association became a recurring challenge for groups rooted in this drive for collegiality. Funds available for improving or expanding the work nationally were likely to be distributed to all members equally, rather than through an assessment of how to make the greatest impact. When talking about money, associations were primarily driven by a need to protect relationships among members rather than a commitment to make business decisions based on a group’s ability to further the objective of promoting the national movement.

The national association can never be the boss of the locals. It is not a good thing that the association decided who to give money to based on the local work.

Anything would have been a better way than the way the national money came in. First, the local organization sought the money without full buy-in [from the other members], then the local organization had to [manage use of the money]. Since then, when we got money [we spent it] to provide scholarships for travel, to provide concrete things, and that has gone much better than things that created conflict.

In some cases, conflict arose when the association pressured locals to *not* seek certain funding; this created tension among the membership.

[For one grant] we all went in together and got it. Upon renewal, other organizations were applying for the same grant. We got one local not to apply. One local organization was the fiscal agent, and there were some problems over deciding who would get how much money. There was some money to give to [member organizations] as a perk of membership.

In the end, this interviewee felt the process for managing and distributing grant funds among members was successful, but the quote above identifies numerous pitfalls in the process. In fact, most of the associations found a way to successfully re-grant funds, but underlying the pride in making this work one can detect a disappointment in the resulting lowering of expectations. A weakness of this model for use in building a movement is revealed: the association must spread its resources to maintain member buy-in, rather than focus resources to be most effective.

[Re-granting did work.] We provided concrete things, such as travel grants. By giving small amounts of money to a large number of groups we gave a little infusion of cash to those who needed it, but this also served as a story for visibility where the association can say 'here we gave mini grants and these groups are using the money for the mission.' Local programs can also leverage the money for local visibility.

An additional structural conflict is that an association that hires staff must placate national funders in order to stay afloat. Thus a conflict may emerge between the association staff and the member organizations: members may perceive that national staff is more interested in raising funds for their own salaries, in conflict with the desire of members that funds be raised for re-distribution to them.

Outside of this tension, we found fewer conflicts between association and local fundraising than expected, partly because association fundraising was limited and also because fundraising audiences tended to be distinct.

The limited mission of most associations, focused on networking and information-sharing, is not appealing to most funders.

“Several funders suggested not starting the association. Their concern was that there was not a need for another national organization.”

Finding: Securing sustainable funding for the association is a challenge

Associations faced the challenge of identifying funders who wanted to support their efforts over time. The limited mission of most associations, focused on networking and information sharing, along with weak leadership primarily committed to serving and maintaining consensus among member organizations, is generally not appealing to funders over time.

Several associations said that funders generally support strong, charismatic individual leaders rather than organizations. This reinforced our conclusion that funders are more likely to support a strong leader who has a well-thought-out, well-articulated, and inspiring vision for achieving an impact at the national level rather than a collection of organizations seeking to stay connected.

The hardest nut to crack is how do you build a diversified funding base that you can rely on, given that the pool of foundations that support [our] work is so small. And then there is the difficulty of attracting private donors. I worry about the long-term viability of the association because we have not been able to crack that nut of sustained funding.

Several funders suggested not starting the association. Their concern was that there was not a need for another national organization.

Finding: Support for start-up groups is not aligned with their needs

The technical assistance provided by the association to emerging members was not in line with their needs.

Ironically, associations that attempted to share information between more established organizations and start-up groups were often unable to meet the needs of the emerging groups. All the associations identified trainers from the stronger members, but few resources were available for trainers to fully research and become specialists in the needs of emerging groups.

The result was that technical assistance provided by the association to emerging members was not in line with their needs. Given their limited capacity and very basic requirements, these start-up groups simply could not make use of the services provided by the more sophisticated members.

The association has had a really difficult time integrating [groups just starting out]. I don't think we've been good at all at doing what we've always stated we've wanted to do, which is to bring emerging programs up to speed. Part of that is the experienced staff and part is the 'Cadillac dreams' v. shoestring budget: the advice established programs can offer is a mismatch.

A stand-alone national support program allows control over the values implicit in the program methodology (i.e., for “replication” as the model for movement-building).

Finding: Core values of members may be compatible, but not identical

A final, important consideration for GSA Network was a commitment to building its core values into any national work it undertook. In the case of the GSA movement, some models are built around adult support for youth activities; the GSA Network (California) model, in contrast, is built around a principle of youth empowerment and within a context of a broader social justice movement. Although it is sensible for GSA Network to support the growth of GSAs throughout the country as long as their values are not in conflict, the organization was only comfortable making a more significant expenditure of resources on this effort if they were able to promote their core values. By operating a stand-alone national support program, GSA Network would be able to retain control over the values implicit in the program methodology it would share. The consensus imperative of an association would have watered down these values in order to accommodate current NAGN participants.

Finding: Associations serve an important role in facilitating networking and information-sharing

The association model serves an important role in meeting the needs of locals for networking and information-sharing.

Despite all of the arguments against using the independent association model as the optimal vehicle for growing a national movement, there are several valid reasons to create national associations. In particular, they are excellent vehicles to:

- Promote networking among individuals working on similar issues nationwide
- Reduce isolation among these individuals, even when specific information-sharing was limited
- Help local groups connect with communities or resources they might not otherwise know how to find

The over-riding prerequisite for successful associations is intensive, informal communications using a variety of communications tools, including email, phone, and in-person. Given the far-flung nature of members’ physical locations, email is a key communications tool.

We realized new state leaders could really benefit from talking with each other...[We needed] an information and knowledge-sharing body. The first thing was to create an email list, which is still the most central thing.

For these reasons, GSA Network decided to continue supporting the work of the National Association of GSA Networks (NAGN), which they had been instrumental in founding and which they operate as a program.

Finally, associations can be helpful in creating a national presence, or a place at the national policy table, for local groups with *bona fide* knowledge of a subject. While my research revealed that the association model is not the *optimal* way to secure a seat at the national policy-making table, a national

association can help deliver the locals' message to a national audience:

The local organizations did not want membership or ownership [of the national association], but they did want one voice and one vision. So, when the national association issues a statement, I talk with every Executive Director. I make sure I can speak for everyone.

Finding: Potential risk of sole authority model

Potential risk:
The sole control model is dependent on the strength of one organization.

There are some potential disadvantages to having a single organization take a primary role in growing the national work. The main one is that the national work becomes necessarily dependent on the strength of one organization. This is fine if the organization is strong; however, if not, this puts the entire national presence at risk should the organization encounter difficulties. In sum, if the local sneezes, the national work suffers pneumonia.



Discussion: Attributes that an independent organization must have to be successful in fostering a national movement

Success factors for sole control model:

Organizational capacity:

- ◆ Demonstrated leadership
- ◆ Proven programs
- ◆ Sufficient resources

Impassioned leadership with a compelling vision

Strong, positive partnerships with funders

I did not specifically investigate the criteria that a local organization needs to meet in order to be successful in fostering a national movement. However, GSA Network exhibits key criteria that are directly responsible for its success in accomplishing what a national association cannot:

- GSA Network has key organizational strengths:
 - ◆ Practical and policy leadership demonstrated over time,
 - ◆ Proven programs and methodologies, and
 - ◆ A relatively large budget and staff.⁵
- ◆ The Executive Director of GSA Network carries a passion for the mission and has devoted her entire professional life to improving the situation for LGBTQ youth; she has a powerful vision for creating broad culture change that will make life better for this population.
- ◆ Deep partnerships exist between GSA Network and several institutional funders who are willing to work with GSA Network to realize a more expansive vision for the movement.

These characteristics elevate GSA Network to a leadership position among other statewide and regional GSA Networks. These other organizations look to GSA Network to provide the leadership to grow the national movement.



⁵ Although GSA Network is a small organization of 10 staff, most sister organizations are much smaller, consisting of one, two, or no staff.

Conclusion

Supporting independent grassroots groups, drawn together by their shared mission and values, in becoming an effective national movement is no small undertaking. This case study examined two basic approaches to structuring this effort. The first is to create an association of the groups; the second is to allow one of the groups to take on this leadership role.

Through research into the experience of five independent associations, we learned that this model, while a good way to encourage networking and information-sharing among member groups, is not ideal for nurturing national movements.

The better option is to identify a strong local group from among the members to take the lead in developing a national program.

The better option is to identify a strong local group from among the member organizations to take the lead in developing a national program. This lead organization should meet basic criteria. These include:

- Strong leadership
- Proven programs and methodologies
- A relatively large internal infrastructure

The leader of this group must have:

- A compelling vision
- A clear and strong passion for the mission and for creating a national movement
- Good relationships with funders

Knowing the importance of these success factors will make it easier to identify the local organization best suited to carry the banner of the national movement.

This unique combination of skills and characteristics is not easily replicated. However, in a growing movement, knowing the importance of these success factors will make it easier to identify the organization best suited to carry the banner of the national movement.

In the case of GSA Network, the organization has secured funding and hired a National Program Manager whose responsibilities include bringing the GSA Network (California) model to other parts of the country. The organization will continue to support NAGN, but will direct the bulk of its movement-building resources to replication.



About the author

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