Organising for Social Change: Navigating the tension between Counter-Discourses and Hegemonic Structures

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Abstract

Activist groups throughout the world have for a long time understood the Foucauldian insight which asserts that language and discourse actively construct our collective realities, and reinforce power dynamics within a society. Therefore, appreciating that the way we talk about and frame issues has a very real consequence, many activist groups have enthusiastically perused the development of 'counter-discourses' which challenge dominant understandings of reality. This paper explores the way two organisations organising for social change construct and maintain counter-discourses as a powerful form of activism. The paper then goes on to explore the tensions that often emerge as organisations pursuing social change aim to maintain and build a powerful counter-discourse while seeking to operate successfully within the constraints of 'mainstream' discourses. To illustrate this point, the paper draws on two contemporary activist organisations perusing social change in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The first is an organisation called *LegaliseLove*; a youth driven initiative which is currently pursuing 'Marriage Equality' by promoting an amendment to the *Marriage Act 1955* which would legalise same-sex marriages. The second is another youth driven organisation called *JustSpeak*, which is dedicated to encouraging youth to become actively involved in advocating for issues of justice and seeking change in the criminal justice system. The paper draws on experiences within these two organisations to highlight the challenges which may be faced by many organisations pursuing social change to balance the need for a level of assimilation and acceptance of hegemonic discourses, while maintaining a strong counter-discourse which challenges dominant ways of knowing and empowers those marginalised by hegemonic systems. The paper goes on to suggest that the pursuit of social change can often lead organisations to accept dominant discourses and lose their ability to reframe the issues they seek to change. However, failure to operate within the hegemonic discourse can also be a significant barrier to social change. Therefore, this paper concludes by arguing that in order to actively pursue social change through the development of counter-discourses, while maintaining relevance within hegemonic structures and wider society, organisations pursuing social change must cultivate a reflective approach to organising, which calls them to constantly re-evaluate their actions in relation to their core values and mission, and encourages the organisation to remain cognisant of the ways their counter-discourses are sacrificed in the pursuit of change.

Introduction

Embedded in the dominant discourses within our society are strong messages about the beliefs and values we 'should' assume to be natural (Conrad, 2011). These discourses often frame our 'common sense' of what is right and acceptable, who are deserving or undeserving (Ganesh, 2008), and how we should understand and interpret different events. Moreover, these discourses usually support the status quo and legitimise power structures which oppress and marginalise certain members of our society; particularly those who do not fit within the dominant view of virtue or success (Mumby, 2001; Fraser, 1990; Cheyne, O'Brian and Belgrave, 2008; Schneider and Ingram, 1993). However, hegemonic discourses are not fixed phenomena. They are actively created and recreated through everyday communication and interaction (Burr, 2008; Jeppesen, 2009; Mumby, 2001). As Foucault (1978: 101) explained, "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also but also undermines and eposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart". In other words, "discourse is the source of power and resistance" (Jeppesen, 2009: 495). Such a view is supported by Mumby (2001: 614) who explains that "communication practices construct identities, experiences, and ways of knowing that serve some interests over others". Therefore, in all forms of organising it is important to become mindful of whose interests are served by a particular framing of reality, and to actively interrogate the ways oppressive power structures are reproduced through discursive actions (Harter et al., 2004; Mumby, 2001).

Counter-Discourses

The reproduction of oppressive power structures through communication events, which are guided by dominant discourses, suggests one potent way of challenging hegemonic structures, and seeking social change, is to contest the legitimacy of these discourses though the creation of counter-discourses. Harter et al. (2004) explain that while marginalised groups have historically been excluded from participating in the construction of discourses surrounding political and social issues, there is much evidence to show that subaltern groups will often develop alternative public discourses. This view is supported by Fraser (1990: 66) who suggests "subordinate social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs". In other words, subaltern or

marginalised groups will often respond to their exclusion from the process of discursive construction by creating an 'alternative discourse community' (Ashcraft, 2000) which challenges the privileging of certain values of assumptions, and crafts out a new way of conceptualising their reality in a manner that does not dis-empower, blame, or further marginalise them. Instead, these counter-discourses are interned to empower and validate the 'outsiders'' identity and reject the oppressive notions implicit in hegemonic discourses (Conran, 2011; Mumby, 1996).

However, the cultivation of counter-discourses can have implications that go beyond the validation of identities and norms within a marginalised group, and can also be a powerful agent of social change, particularly when enacted by organisations pursuing reform. Harter et al. (2004: 410), for example, give an illustration of a Chicago based street paper called *StreetWise* which, alongside providing employment, attempts to challenge the taken for granted assumptions perpetuated by dominant discourses and provide a different space within the public sphere which "aims to expand public awareness of homeless issues to a 'diverse' readership". Harter et al. (2004) suggest mainstream media outlets reinforce dominant power structures in society, largely because of their close funding relationship (via advertising) with big corporations. The authors argue this has caused mainstream media to become silent on issues such as poverty and homelessness, and to focus only on the needs and concerns of the upper and middle classes; employing discourses which reinforce and legitimise the privilege experienced by these social groups. To contest this injustice, Harter et al. (2004: 414) suggest "*StreetWise* works to expose and critique the problems endemic to standard journalistic conventions … and rethink stories from the position of the unprivileged". Further, the authors explain that *StreetWise* constructs and reinforces a counter-discourse by actively questioning and contradicting the ways of knowing which are privileged in traditional media, focusing on issues which are deemed important to the homeless community, and presenting stories *from the position of* the marginalised group (not merely *about* the marginalised group). Contesting traditional discourses in this way can potentially be very powerful as exposure to this counter-discourse may disrupt hegemonic discourses and challenge dominant frames (Jeppesen, 2009). Harter et al. (2004: 415) suggest the success of this approach lies in its ability to produce a discourse which recognises groups and individuals who sit outside of the hegemonic centre, "thus creating empathy for and identification with the struggles these individuals and groups endure".

<u>Dialectic Tension</u>

The pursuit of a counter-discourse, which challenges dominant and oppressive framings of reality, is vital to many activist organisations seeking social change. Actively contesting dominant ways of framing issues, which reinforce the status quo, is often an important step in the process of social reform as it helps to undermine the communicative structures which legitimise and maintain oppression. However, as activist organisations seek social change through engagement with external publics they may be forced to negotiate a challenging balance between rejecting disempowering discourses and holding fast to the counter-frames and values emphasised by the counter-discourses advanced within the organisation while, on the other hand, seeking to engage with 'mainstream' publics, via 'mainstream' discourses, in order to advance their goals. To illustrate this point I will draw on two examples of organisations pursuing social change which I have engaged with recently: *JustSpeak* and *LegaliseLove.*

<u>JustSpeak</u>

According to the organisation's website, "*JustSpeak* is a non-partisan network of young people speaking to, and speaking up for a new generation of thinkers who want change in our criminal justice system" (JustSpeak 2012a). *JustSpeak* is made up young New Zealanders who are deeply concerned about the failings of New Zealand's current, heavily retributive justice system and the prominence of the 'tough-on-crime' rhetoric perpetuated by hegemonic groups, especially in the media and political discourse.

The Hegemonic Conceptualisation of Crime and Criminality

With the second highest rate of incarceration in the western world (Treasury, 2009b), New Zealand's current corrections policy framework is seen by many as a national failure. The 'tough-on-crime' rhetoric that has characterised the dominant discourses surrounding discussion about crime and justice policy in New Zealand over the past two decades has contributed to a system which focuses almost entirely on retribution and continues to victimise and vilify the most vulnerable sectors of our society (Durie, 2007; Workman, 2011b).

While there is strong evidence pointing to the detrimental effects a punitive, prison-based, justice system has our society (Brown, 2010; Brooking, 2011; Centre for Mental Health, 2011; Chen

and Shapiro, 2007; Doob and Webster, 2004; Gendreau, Goggin and Culen, 1999; Tonry, 2005; Tonry, 2008; Workman, 2011a; Justice Policy Institute, 2009), the discourses surrounding criminal justice policy often leave us blind to the damaging effects of prison as they construct an idea that offenders' and victims' rights are fundamentally opposed. This discourse has been largely propelled by retributive focused law and order lobbyists who have hijacked many victim support groups and pursued a 'win-lose argument' whereby any protection of the offender's human rights is equated to the loss or diminution of the victim's rights (Strang, 2002). At the heart of the victim's rights discourse is the fundamental belief that crime involves "good people" suffering at the hands of "bad people" (Workman, 2011b).

Creating a Counter-Discourse

Recognising that these discourses, which are grounded in ideas about *victims' rights* and being *tough on crime*, lie at the heart of a disempowering and oppressive justice system, *JustSpeak* members actively challenge the dominant discourses when talking about issues of crime and justice, seeking instead to cultivate a counter-discourse which reframes crime and criminality. One such example of how *JustSpeak* members might do this is when having discussions about policy there is a preference to talk about the *victims* of crime rather than the victim and the offender. This approach to discussing criminality rejects the idea that offenders' and victims' rights are fundamentally opposed, and acknowledges that offenders are often victims themselves: victims of poverty and extreme inequality; victims of a culture of violence; and victims of a system that fails to give them any *real* alternatives. Moreover, this subtle reframing of crime moves the analysis of crime away from a conceptualisation of an isolated event, where the 'poor victim' is harmed by the 'bad offender', to a more holistic conceptualisation which recognises crime has many causal factors and occurs within a system which often oppresses and marginalises those who are usually conceptualised as 'offenders'. While such a view may starkly contrast, and even offend, mainstream values, it is supported by much evidence (Durie, 2007; Workman, 2011a), and exemplifies the development of a strong counter-discourse which contests the dominant discourses used to justify the injustice of New Zealand's 'Justice' system.

Working Within the Dominant Discourse

Although this example shows *JustSpeak* members partaking in the cultivation of a seemingly radical counter-discourse which challenges hegemonic views of crime and criminality, it appears *JustSpeak* members are often forced to partially sacrifice the values they hold and espouse though this counter-discourse when engaging in wider political activism. One such example of this is a blog written by a *JustSpeak* member on the organisations website (*JustSpeak,* 2012b). In this blog, the writer is presenting the case for a stronger focus on restorative justice within our criminal justice system. While the blog is seeking to achieve the political aims of the organisation, it appears the author has accepted the dominant 'victim-offender binary' discourse to present his case. For example, the authors emphasises the need for initiatives which "help victims recuperate", and goes on to express the need to be "tough on criminals" through the use of therapies which force "them" to confront their demons. This is clearly shown when the author says:

> Restorative justice; encouraging prisoners to meet the victims of their crimes and understand the consequences, is being tough on criminals. Helping them to realise and deal with their ongoing issues, addictions, and weakness, is being tough on criminals.

While this blog remains true to the ethos of *JustSpeak,* it demonstrates the way this organisation has to constantly navigate a tricky road between maintaining the integrity of the values they wish to express though their counter-discourse, while appreciating that in order to communicate their political aspirations to a wider audience, and ultimately achieve social change, they must (to some extent) work within the confines of the hegemonic discourse which can be seen to be at the heart of the oppression they are rejecting.

The tension between the organisation's core mission and the need to achieve social good within the current system can also be seen by the way members may, at times, position agency at the micro level, rather than focusing on the larger structural issues within the justice system. This was exemplified, for example, by a *JustSpeak* member who works with troubled youth. At a public *JustSpeak* forum, this member talked about the extremely difficult circumstances in which these young people have grown up, often experiencing sexual and physical violence, poverty, malnutrition, and neglect throughout their lives. The speaker went on to express the need to instil

the values of personal responsibility in the young people he works with, and suggested they needed to learn to be accountable for their actions.

Rather than focusing on the need to challenge the broader social system which allows children to live in such horrendous circumstances, this speaker believed that the best way to help young people today was to teach them that they have the power to change, and to encourage them to "turn their lives around". Such a perspective is consistent with the hegemonic discourse of neo-liberalism which prizes personal responsibility and places the individual at the centre of their life circumstances (Cheyne et al., 2008). While such an approach may serve to improve the life chances of the individuals receiving the support from this speaker, the focus on the personal responsibility of the marginalised young people illustrates the risk of excusing or supporting an oppressive system when seeking to work within it. As Harter et al. (2004) explain, working within the dominant discourses of neo-liberalism may offer temporary relief, but they do not address the deeper social, political, and economic inequalities which most *JustSpeak* members would hold as the major causal factors of social dysfunction (*JustSpeak,* 2012b).

LegaliseLove

The tension between ascribing to mainstream values, in order to seek social change, and cultivating a counter-discourse can also be seen when looking at an organisation called *LegaliseLove. LegaliseLove* is a youth driven organisation, which is *"standing up and asking for equal marriage and adoption rights for New Zealanders, regardless of their sex, sexual orientation or gender identity"* (*LegaliseLove*, 2012a).

Queer Counter-Discourse

LegaliseLove is one organisation which stands on the shoulders of many activist organisations which have fought for the recognition and equal treatment of queer[1] people in New Zealand and globally (Ganesh, 2008). There is much evidence to show that queer people are among the most vulnerable in our society, and are often marginalised by hegemonic discourses which assume and naturalise heterosexuality. The pervasiveness of this dominant discourse is often referred to as

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[1] "*Queer* is a reclaimed word that represents sexuality and gender diversity. It is used it to encompass lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, fa'afafine, and takataapui identities, as well as everyone in between and not sure" (Riches, 2011: 7).

heteronormativity (Grossman et al., 2009; Yep, 2003). This discourse, as Yep (2003: 18) explains, "is the quintessential force creating, sustaining, and perpetuating the erasure, marginalization, disempowerment, and oppression of sexual others". However, Walling (2008) explains that as queer identities have become more visible in our society they have also become more invisible, as queer communities are assimilated into heterosexual norms and expectations.

For a long time queer rights movements have pursued liberation though the assertion of a right to be different and to exist outside of the norm (Jagoes, 1996). This non-conformist approach has meant that, in order to empower marginalised queer individuals, many queer organisations such as QSA Aotearoa and Rainbow Youth actively cultivate cultures grounded in discourses which reject heteronormative assumptions and question the power structures established by hegemonic heterosexual norms (Riches, 2011). This means, for example, that queer activists and organisations often reject the way dominant discourses celebrate monogamy and long-term stable relationships, viewing the social pressures to form long-term committed relationships as "the straightening of LGBT culture" and the "mainstreaming of LGBT lifestyles" (Ganesh, 2008: 272).

Straightening Up?

LegaliseLove would probably not be conceptualised as one such organisation, however. While the core ethos of *LegaliseLove* is to "fight homophobia", its approach – which includes seeking the same legal rights to marriage and adoption for queer couples as heterosexual couples – could be viewed as assimilatory and potentially moving towards the erasure of queer identities (Ganesh, 2008; Slagle, 2007). The focus *LegaliseLove* places on seeking Marriage Equality suggests it has, to some extent, brought in dominant heterosexual ideals and the hegemonic discourses which naturalise and celebrate a certain type of relationship.

While the focus of *LegaliseLove* might be interpreted by some as a sign that the organisation has failed to uphold queer counter-discourses and accepted heteronormative discourses, it is important to recognise that there are many signs of the organisation seeking to maintain and develop a counter-discourse whilst pursuing social change within the parameters of the dominant discourse. This is shown, for example, on their organisational website where members of the executive state they are not actually supportive of the institution of Marriage, but feel legal

equality is very important and should therefore be pursued. Joel Gilmore, for example, states "While I have mixed views about marriage per se, one thing I absolutely do not think it should be is only available for certain people" (LegaliseLove, 2012b). Such a view symbolises an attempt to reject the hegemonic frames celebrated in the institution of Marriage, while acknowledging that legal equality would benefit members of the queer community.

Like the example of *JustSpeak*, this analysis of *LegaliseLove* illustrates an activist organisation which is forced to tread a challenging line between the rejection of hegemonic discourses in the pursuit of counter-discourses on the one hand, alongside a need to work within the dominant frames produced by hegemonic discourses in order to realise social change within a society.

The Best Way Forward

The examples of two activist organisations – *JustSpeak* and *LegaliseLove* – illustrate a necessary compromise an organisation may need to make when pursuing social change. Like the examples given, many organisations seeking social change cultivate a counter-discourse which rejects the oppression, marginalisation, or re-victimisation implicit or explicit in the hegemonic discourses they wish to challenge. However, as these organisations seek to actualise social change within the confines of the hegemonic system it is often necessary to forgo some elements of the counter-discourse in order to communicate with a wider public and within the frames produced by the hegemonic discourses. Getting the balance between assimilating with and rejecting the dominant discourse is, however, a major challenge for organisations pursuing social change.

A Dualistic Approach

A dualistic approach to understanding this organisational communication issue would suggest organisations are placed in an either/or position when negotiating the prominence of their counter-discourse in their communication with external publics. In other words, a dualistic approach conceptualises an implicit duality between the maintenance of the counter-discourse and the acceptance of the hegemonic discourse (Mumby, 2005). Taking this approach to the communication problem forces organisations to choose between (a) holding fast to their counter-discourse, or (b) sacrificing their counter-discourse in order to work effectively within hegemonic structures.

There are obvious problems with both of these approaches to this communication issue. If, on the one hand, an organisation decides to hold fast to its core values and maintain a counter-discourse which rejects the values espoused by the hegemonic discourse there is a risk that it will fail to communicate effectively with a wider public and therefore be unsuccessful at achieving social change. Moreover, Harter et al. (2004) exemplify that, in the context of *StreetWise,* such an approach may be idealistic and only acceptable or accessible to the already privileged. Similar conclusions could be drawn when reflecting on the example of *JustSpeak* provided above. While it might appear favourable to uphold a counter-discourse which rejects hegemonic values in every aspect of the organisation, the reality is that for the youth worker providing support to troubled young people mentioned above, holding true to a counter-discourse which sees the system as accountable, rather than the troubled young person, would not improve the immediate circumstances of the young people the youth worker works with or provide them with the skills to create a better life for themselves. Therefore, the suggestion that an organisation must be steadfast in its commitment to a counter-discourse could be seen as a position only available to the already privileged who are not directly confronted by the daily struggle of working within an oppressive hegemonic discourse and social structure.

On the other hand, the decision to sacrifice an organisation's counter-discourse, seeking instead to pursue social change within the confines of the hegemonic discourse, presents a significant risk to activist organisations. Failing to uphold a counter-discourse which challenges the values and assumptions at the heart of the oppression can lead the organisation to become complicit in perpetuating the dominant discourse and can undermine the organisation's ability to pursue change. Harter et al. (2004) illustrate this point by showing the way the *StreetWise* newspaper has come to celebrate and reproduce middle-class values such as meritocracy and self-sufficiency. Moreover, the authors highlight a tendency within the organisation to seek to have homeless people treated as 'normal' people. This apparent shift towards 'mainstream' values and an acceptance of 'mainstream' discourses suggests that, while the organisation is endeavouring to improve the lives of homeless people, they are allowing the terms of reference to be negotiated within the dominant discourse. Therefore, through their attempts to work within the hegemonic discourses, they may actually be legitimising values and assumptions which continue to oppress homeless people.

The problems with rejecting the organisation's counter-discourse in order to pursue social change within the hegemonic discourse can also be clearly seen in the two organisations described above. The *JustSpeak* blog, for example, provides an example of the organisation sacrificing elements of its counter-discourse in order to pursue social change. However, this blog, by subscribing to the 'victim-offender binary' perpetuated by hegemonic discourses, may be contributing to the normalisation of this conceptualisation of crime. Further, the blog's focus on being "tough on criminals" reinforces the neo-liberal idea that the solutions to crime lie at the level of individual accountability. While the blog is clearly pursuing social change, it could be argued that by accepting the values and frames perpetuated by the hegemonic discourse the author fails to radically challenge the values implicit in the hegemonic discourse and may even be contributing to the 'mainstream' framing of crime and criminality.

A Dialectic Approach

While it is convenient to propose a dualistic problem, which pits one option against the other, many authors suggest it is more helpful to take a dialectic approach to such organisational problems (Mumby, 2005; Harter et al., 2004; Bledom et al., 2009). Bledom et al. (2009) explain that a dialectic approach emphasises a tolerance and acceptance of contradictions, and suggest it is healthy to embrace paradoxes and allowing seemingly contradictory concepts to coexist within an organisation. Such an approach is supported by Harter et al. (2004: 421), who argue the most healthy way to confront the tensions outlined in this paper is to avoid attempts to resolve contradictory elements, and instead to attempt to "accept tensions and ... live more comfortably amidst the ambiguity". Thus, the dialectic approach calls organisations to accept the need to straddle both discourses simultaneously, and to realise that they should pursue a counter-discourse which challenges hegemonic values and assumptions while working within the frames produced by the hegemonic discourse.

While this approach offers more hope than a dualistic approach to this issue, it may not help organisations to navigate the best way forward as it is hard to know what this will mean for organisations on a daily basis and it may be very difficult for organisations to actualise in practice. From the dialectic perspective, the organisation should attempt to hold both approaches at once, allowing the tension between the two to reside within the organisation. However, it is

unclear what this really means for organisations seeking social change. How can one remain true to one's counter-discourse while navigating within the confines of a hegemonic discourse that perpetuates opposing norms and values? Alternatively, how much of their counter-discourse should the organisational actors sacrifice, and how much should they uphold?

A Reflective Approach

While a dialectic approach allows organisations to straddle the difficult road between maintaining the integrity of their counter-discourse while navigating hegemonic discourses in order to attain social change, it is unclear what this will look like for activist organisations on a daily basis. Therefore, this paper argues that, alongside promoting a dialectic approach to the problem of maintaining a counter-discourse while working to achieve social change within the confines of the hegemonic discourse, it is vital that activist organisations are constantly reflecting on the effects their actions have on dominant constructions of the problem they are confronting as well as on the wellbeing of those marginalised by the social structures they oppose.

This approach to the problem suggests that it is not enough for organisations to attempt to find a balance between the two opposing discourses; they must actively engage in a reflective process which investigates how their values are being upheld or undermined by their discursive actions. It is important that the organisational actors cultivate an awareness of the way their counter-discourse may be violated by attempts to work within hegemonic frames. On the other hand, organisational actors need to be mindful of the ultimate goal of achieving social change, and therefore attempt not to be restrained by a blind loyalty to a counter-discourse which alienates the organisation and prevents it from achieving social change.

One way to ensure the organisational goals are at the forefront of any discursive action is to maintain a central awareness of the organisation's core mission. Alongside this, the second aspect organisations need to reflect on is the implications their discursive actions have on the marginalised groups they support. Taking the example of *LegaliseLove* provided above, the organisation has (to some extent) let go of the queer counter-discourse which emphasises difference, and somewhat embraces heterosexual norms, like monogamy, in order to seek legal equality and ultimately reduce feelings of 'otherness' and marginalisation amongst the queer community. Under the reflective approach, this form of compromise could be viewed as

successful because the acceptance of hegemonic models of relationships promotes the normalisation of queer people and reduces the marginalisation often experienced. However, it is also important that the organisation remains mindful of the negative implications this compromise can have on queer individuals' sense of identity. For example, proponents of Marriage Equality often champion slogans such as "born this way" or "being gay is not a choice". While these messages support the campaign for Marriage Equality, they buy into heteronormative discourses in a way that can potentially further marginalise and delegitimise queer identities. The suggestion that "being gay is not a choice" is an important aspect of the debate which is grounded in the heteronormative assumption that heterosexuality is preferable, and homosexuality is only legitimate insofar as it is something an individual is forced to endure. Such an argument may, therefore, undermine the legitimacy of queer identities as whole and valid in and of themselves. Thus, it is vital that well intentioned activist organisations constantly cultivate a critical awareness of their discursive actions and interrogate the implications of the inevitable compromises they will need to make in order to seek social change within a hegemonic system. While it is important that activist organisations straddle the tension between the two discourses, it is essential that such a compromise is done in a way which protects the marginalised groups they seek to support, and advances their ultimate goal of social change.

Conclusion

Organisations organising for social change may by confronted by a tension between the desire to develop and maintain a counter-discourse which rejects the norms and assumptions perpetuated by 'mainstream' discourses and the need to work within dominant discourses and hegemonic structures in order to achieve social change. Failure to accommodate or work within dominant discourses can further marginalise an activist organisation and undermine an organisation's ability to achieve social change. Conversely, working within the confines of the dominant discourse can result in the organisation become complicit in the ongoing marginalisation it opposes. Therefore, in order to maintain the integrity of the organisation and achieve social change it is vital that the organisation cultivates a reflective awareness of the ways their counter-discourse is sacrificed in their activism, and the implications it may have on the organisation and those they seek to support.

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