



**COGNITIVE
POLICY
WORKS**

Building Trust for Effective Governance

A Strategy Brief for Reframing Local Organizations

October 12, 2009

Overview ¹

This strategy brief is intended to clarify the role of local organizations in American democracy. Our hope is that the following recommendations and analysis improve the integrity of our democratic institutions by offering clear steps to rebuild trust in our political system.

The emphasis will be placed on *cognitive frames*² that shape how political issues are thought about. It is important to note that frames are the mental structures activated in our brains every time we think about the world. They give form to the concepts and ideas that underly political language, thought, and action.

This work was commissioned by Chuck Watts and the Empathy Surplus Campaign.³

Recommendations

The following analysis reveals two distinct understandings of how politics works:

1. Insider Games with Power Players
2. Grassroots Movements for Effective Governance

The current political system is largely comprised of elite institutions that have been corrupted by special interests. The lack of resonance between elected officials and the citizens they are meant to represent has turned many people off to the political process. All too often, citizens don't feel that their concerns play any serious role in acts of governance.

The **Insider Game** creates a disconnect between citizens and their representatives - corroding trust in democratic institutions. This *problem of trust* lies at the heart of our

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² Learn more about frames and their role in political thought online here: <http://www.cognitivepolicyworks.com/archives/thinking-points/chapter-3-part-1-frames/>

³ The Empathy Surplus Campaign is a non-profit organization dedicated to expanding freedom by promoting strong, empathetic precinct leadership in county party central/executive committees by encouraging responsibility for ourselves, and others. They are focused on identifying strong, empathetic and responsible public policy directions, organizing grassroots support for the policy directions and electing public servants to implement the policy directions. Find them at <http://www.empathysurplus.com>.

broken political system.⁴ Continued involvement in top-down political structures driven by political insiders does nothing to ameliorate this disconnect, and has considerable potential to make the problem worse.

The **Grassroots Movement** perspective allows for accountability and transparency through direct engagement of citizens in political processes. This lays a vital foundation for rebuilding trust after decades of dissonance between the concerns of citizens and the actions of their elected officials.

We recommend thoughtful consideration of the frames that currently shape local organizations with an emphasis on promoting the Grassroots Movement Frame as part of your efforts to engage local citizens in politics. This includes getting involved in your church, local civic group, and local political party (be it Democrat or Republican) to demonstrate how local organizing contributes to the strengthening of your local civil discourse.

The Insider Game Frame should be confronted directly to reveal how it perpetuates an elite form of rule that contradicts the founding aspirations for democracy in the United States.

Brief Note About Local Organizations

This analysis lays out two different overarching perspectives about how local organizations relate to regional and national entities. Every local organization will have a particular culture, specific people involved, and a nuanced history that makes the application of these frames a delicate matter. We recommend taking care not to apply too broad a stroke when critiquing the organizations you work with in your own community.

That said, we encourage you to engage in lively and respectful debate with fellow community members about insider politics and grassroots movements to clarify where people stand. Only when the differences are brought to the fore can your organization select the perspective that best suites (a) the values of your community and (b) the objectives you seek to achieve through your organization.

⁴ For an expanded discussion of trust in politics read *Building a Culture of Trust in Politics* by Joe Brewer: <http://www.cognitivepolicyworks.com/2009/05/02/building-a-culture-of-trust-in-politics/>

Two Models for “How Politics Works”

Our analysis reveals two competing frames that shape how politics is understood. The first is the Insider Game Frame, which focuses on power players who compete with one another to advance their personal interests. This is contrasted with the Grassroots Movement Frame that focuses on the coordinated efforts of local advocates to influence political outcomes that serve the needs of everyday citizens.

Insider Game Frame

Discussions of politics focus on those who have money and influence. Emphasis is placed on *power players* who accumulate money and supporters into a *resource pool*. The only players with an active role are these “insiders” who control the levers of power. Citizens are thought of as “social capital” to be utilized by players.

Citizens are inherently weak themselves (because they lack money and access) and, therefore, only have a passive role in the *power plays of political elites*. This leads to the understanding that central governing bodies use local organizations to advance their agenda because power flows “out and down” from leaders to followers.

Grassroots Movement Frame

Discussions of politics focus on the coordinated efforts of individuals who work locally to promote desired changes. Emphasis is placed on *agents of change* who get involved in their communities and build movements that transform political culture. These individuals seek out like-minded people and strive for a “game change” that transcends insider politics by spreading a grassroots base into an emerging call for change.

Engaged citizens are thought of as the “locus of action” who challenge political insiders by making them irrelevant to their social change efforts. This leads to the understanding that the elites are “out of touch” and need to become more responsive to the people they claim to represent - or get out of the way. In this view, engaged citizens use local organizations to consolidate their power and advance an agenda.

These competing frames influence how people think about political engagement. Through an Insider’s Game perspective (as in political lobbyists or a top-down state-to-county party structure), engagement might mean getting website visitors to sign online petitions, or

donate money, or show up at polls. The “real” action is distant from the here-and-now debate with your neighbors of goodwill.

In the Grassroots Movement perspective, on the other hand, engagement means community organizing and sustained civic engagement. Citizen actions are expressions of political power. No disconnect exists between the citizen and her politics. Transparency and accountability are *enforced by the citizens themselves*, providing a foundation on which to build the trust that allows a democracy to thrive.

This frame analysis reveals how these competing models for politics operate implicitly in American society. Both models can be made explicit by articulating how they function in the context of local organizations - churches, civic groups, local political parties, etc. Identification is straightforward once their differences are apparent. Simply ask whether the organization is understood to be a *community accountable to its members* or a mechanism for some *central authority to push its agenda* at the local level.

Contested Meanings of Authority

It is helpful to note that authority means different things in top-down and bottom-up situations. The central issue is *legitimacy* - who is considered to be a legitimate and valid authority figure.

In the context of top-down organizations, a decision-maker is considered legitimate if s/he holds those lower on the hierarchy accountable for their actions. Subordinates must answer to those above them. *Legitimacy is determined by one's place in the hierarchy.* Anyone outside the hierarchy (e.g. not an “insider player”) will not be recognized as a valid authority figure, especially if they challenge decisions that come down from up on high.

Bottom-up organizations treat authority differently. A person is considered to be a legitimate voice if s/he resonates with the concerns and values of the community. Leaders are held accountable to the people they presume to represent. Anyone who acts against the will of the people - as expressed through collective actions within the grassroots movement - is seen as an invalid spokesperson. *Legitimacy is determined by one's responsiveness to their community.* Anyone outside of the community (e.g. not part of the movement) will not be recognized as an authority figure.

About Cognitive Policy Works



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Cognitive Policy Works is both an educational center that provides professional training to people in politics and a research/consulting firm that analyzes the workings of the political mind for non-profits and social businesses. We're a team of experts in political behavior and social change with a powerful combination of skills ranging from psychology and linguistics to media studies and strategic planning.

At the heart of our work is an understanding of human thought and behavior. We analyze cognitive frames, conceptual metaphors, moral worldviews, cultural narratives, and other aspects of political thought to demonstrate the significance of understanding how the mind works in social and political contexts. Unlike other organizations that work in this area, we seek to share our knowledge in the form of practical steps taken by practitioners to incorporate these insights into their daily work. In other words, we focus on the process (how to change what you're doing) instead of merely providing products (in the form of reports and articles). This sets us apart from the standard think tank or consulting firm.

We seek to empower non-profit leaders and grassroots activists alike, through innovative marketing models inspired by the open source software movement. Our goal is to develop new "best practices" and make them widely available to advocates of progressive social change as they face the major challenges of the 21st Century.

Find us online at <http://www.cognitivepolicyworks.com>.