Out with the Old and In with the New?

*Understanding “New Power”*

David P. King, Ph.D.

October 2015

While most of us readily admit our culture is changing, fewer of us are certain what that means for our institutions. That lack of certainty can be paralyzing. As a result, we often find ourselves following the same course. While such an approach may not bring continued long-term success, for many, it appears safer than retooling our own skills or recreating our organizations in a changing world. Staying the same, however, is not the answer. Understanding the dynamics of “new power” may serve as an avenue for faith communities to embrace change in these new contexts.

As our 2015 Lake Institute Distinguished Visitor, Henry Timms, addressed these issues with several hundred non-profit leaders, students, and faith leaders last week in Indianapolis. Each year, Lake Institute on Faith & Giving brings a visionary philanthropic practitioner to Indianapolis to share stories with community leaders and inspire our local community in working for change broadly around the twin themes of faith and philanthropy. Timms fit the bill. He serves as the Executive Director of the 92nd Street Y, the renowned cultural and Jewish community center in New York City. Over 300,000 people visit the 92Y annually and millions more participate in its digital and online initiatives. Timms also founded #GivingTuesday, which only in its fourth year has already engaged over 27,000 partners in a global day of giving the Tuesday after Thanksgiving. There’s still time for your nonprofit to participate. >>Learn more

In speaking to Indianapolis leaders last week, Timms’ theme focused on the notion of “new power.” In our own courses at Lake Institute, we discuss what we see as a paradigm shift from institution-centered to donor-centered fundraising. While taking a broader picture, Timms’ own thinking mirrors a similar approach. Timms notes: Institutional models are shifting. Old models, such as many traditional denominations, are managed top-down, rely on professionalization and expertise, while asking for long-term affiliation without broad participation. New models, however, are more focused on transparency and co-production. They allow individuals to opt-in around mutual interests and share in leadership rather than require exclusivity and formal membership. For new power models, think Etsy and Uber versus big box stores or regulated taxis.
As Timms defines “new power” it’s not simply institutional models that are shifting, but institutional values as well. Timms emphasizes that some institutions have new power models without new power values. I think the reverse might often be true for faith-based communities. They often champion values of empowerment, transparency, and broad participation but their institutional frames sometimes lead them away from practicing what they preach.

When it comes to leadership and fundraising, what might faith-based organizations learn from a new power lens?

1st We can continue to work on cultivating owners over donors. Developing a relationship is more important than securing a gift. Donors have a need to engage with our work, and our institutions need that level of engagement. Through the lens of new power, donors are often co-collaborators, not simply resources to be developed.

2nd We should focus on developing context more than content. Polished marketing materials are important, but creating space for those invested in your work to come together and share their insights might lead to greater collaboration and even better ideas than those our closed systems have to offer.

3rd We need less superheroes and more super-conductors. Timms’ views of new power treats leadership less as a currency that some have and others do not and more as a current that others can tap into. Therefore, leadership is defined as less celebrity pastor and CEO and more shared with those inside and outside the organization in order to make social change a reality.

For new power, social change is defined less by institutions and more by movements, and a movement only exists if it can move without you. Are we willing to open our institutions to experiment with new models and values? Like most paradigm shifts, rarely are these changes immediate or comprehensive. We are clearly in-between old and new power. Even if we have embraced many new power values, our institutions are often rooted in old power models. Yet, the question is how can faith-based communities be bridge builders across these cultures? How willing are we to embrace change even when we are unsure of the final direction? Considering such questions may be key for the continued success of faith-based philanthropy into the future.