

[Fight the Right Action Kit](#) (1993)

Working with Communities of Color: The Asian and Pacific Islander Experience in Oregon
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Lesbians and gay men of color have always been involved in the lesbian and gay movement and the struggles of people of color in this country. This reality stands in sharp contrast with the relative isolation of white gays and lesbians from communities of color, Japanese Americans or African Americans, for example. Increasingly, however, sexual minority communities and racial and ethnic minority communities are recognizing, and must recognize, that cooperative efforts are necessary and will benefit everyone over the long run.

At one level, the motivation of white gays and lesbians working with communities of color is a matter of self-interest. Lesbians and gay men can learn from the political experience that communities of color have developed over the years. The understanding and support of communities of color in our struggles also results in much more leverage in terms of publicity, credibility among the electorate, votes, dollars, volunteers, and resources. However, this is only the short-term view. If we only reach out our hands to take, the relationship will be short-term indeed.

At another level, lesbian and gay organizations working with organizations of people of color is absolutely vital to creating long-term change. How credible is it to demand justice for ourselves from the rest of society when we would do nothing or even oppose justice for some others in that society? If the lesbian and gay movement or any other movement is on track, it has to seek justice for all, not justice for "us," whomever that may be. To do otherwise is inconsistent and hypocritical. It is also self-defeating because it suggests that it is acceptable and appropriate for those who have resources to ignore the injustices done to others.

This essay tries to describe steps that help in multi-racial organizing campaigns. In broad strokes, these steps include:

- 1) getting started
- 2) developing an initial work group
- 3) finding and making appropriate contacts
- 4) accomplishing your mission with the help of your contacts
- 5) overcoming hurdles
- 6) developing long term relationships.

The steps are generic enough that they can probably be applied to any community. However, each community is different (e.g., size of locale; urban, suburban, or rural nature; region; culture), so the details of such steps will differ. I have drawn on the Oregon experience of working with a number of Asian and Pacific Islander organizations to obtain endorsements and to put together a joint Asian and Pacific Islander press conference opposing the draconian statewide Ballot Measure No. 9 that was put to a vote in the November 1992 election.

Getting Started

Gaining agreement that communities of color should be involved in campaigns for gay and lesbian equality is the first step. In many campaign situations, there is at best a very loose coalition of groups involved in a campaign. If there is a central coordinating body, such as a steering committee, the generation and acceptance of the idea may come from that committee. Regardless of commitment among official campaign leaders, however, an effort to reach out to communities of color for help can be successful. In Oregon, the idea to gain unified Asian and Pacific Islander opposition to Measure 9 did not come from the No On 9 Campaign, but instead from Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbians and Gays (APLG), a Portland-based group for lesbian and gay Asians and Pacific Islanders in Oregon.

Depending on the nature and function of any campaign steering committee, it will probably be helpful to contact them regarding the idea to make sure there is no duplication of effort, and to determine whether they can or will take on the idea, devote resources to it, or have any helpful advice.

Asserting the idea can be as simple as contacting the campaign steering committee, and, if at all possible, offer potential contact people who might know how to help to make the approach to the community. Follow up to make sure the idea was accepted and is being actively pursued. Or, you can assert the idea and volunteer to assist in the effort to involve the community, working either with or outside of any established coordinating group working on the campaign. Getting the idea on the table as an appropriate measure, however, is the first necessary and hopefully easy step.

If there is no coordinating group for the campaign, you can speak with others you know who may be supportive of the idea, have contacts in the community you hope to reach, or might be interested in checking to determine whether anything is being done and where potential support may lie. Examples of contacts include local lesbian and gay organizations for people of color, politically active lesbians and gay men of color, and people knowledgeable about civil rights and community groups in the area.

Thus, you don't need any significant sum of money or to personally have numerous contacts in the community you hope to reach to get started. And, the sooner you get started the better. A tremendous amount can be accomplished even in the relatively short span of two months, which is the approximate amount of time APLG took to initiate the idea and to accomplish the mission of getting endorsements for the campaign against Measure 9 and holding an Asian and Pacific Islander press conference opposing the measure.

Establish a Working Group

Once it is determined to go forward with the attempt to work with the community of color on the campaign, commit to creating a working group. The working group will develop a mission and a rough work plan. The working group must have some person or persons who will make the first contacts with leaders within the community you want to reach. Ideally then, the working group should include at least one person who already has personal contacts with community leaders.

The working group can be quite small. In our case, the working group consisted of three people from the leadership of APLG. One person had significant contacts among other Asian and Pacific Islander community organizations, the second person had some limited contacts, and the third person had virtually no contacts.

Develop a Mission & a Draft Work Plan

The working group should develop a mission that can serve to direct the group's activities and that can be communicated as you do outreach. In our case, we determined that our mission should be to:

- 1) contact and educate leadership in the various local Asian and Pacific Islander communities
- 2) to get endorsements from community organizations for the campaign against Measure 9
- 3) to get endorsing organizations to publicize their endorsements and the campaign to their members
- 4) to hold an Asian and Pacific Islander press conference opposing the measure.

This mission was consistent with and helpful for the ongoing statewide effort to defeat Measure 9 in terms of publicity, votes, and solicitations for money and volunteers. The mission was significant in other ways. For example, the work group was making contacts as openly gay and lesbian people with the hope of opening the doors of Asian and Pacific Islander community groups to openly gay and lesbian people in the future.

To get things done, the work group should immediately develop a rough work plan consisting of objectives provided by the mission, tasks necessary to accomplish those objectives, time deadlines, and personal assignments of the tasks. Our work group started by contacting those with whom we already had some prior contacts.

Find and Make Contacts in Communities of Color

Besides losing the potential support for your cause, to leave out significant segments of the community invites criticism and bad feelings. Given the limitations of a small working group, however, there will undoubtedly be significant segments of the community of color with which members of the working group have no personal contacts. This was particularly so in our case given the numerous Asian and Pacific Islander communities as a whole (for example, Vietnamese, Hmong, Laotians, Koreans, Chinese, Filipinos), not to mention the major community organizations, including churches, within those individual communities. Thus, part of the organizing must include identifying significant segments of the community and finding and making contacts within those segments of the community.

The way our working group did this was to repeatedly ask ourselves and then people outside our working group who else we should talk to. We considered a variety of sources, e.g., different ethnic groups, churches, business organizations, family organizations found in some of the Asian communities, community and political groups, and news media. Whenever we talked to community leaders, we got their input regarding other community organizations and leaders. Eventually, we started receiving the same names of groups and of individuals from a variety of sources throughout the Asian and Pacific Islander communities.

Accomplish Your Mission with Your Contacts

Our small working group was able to accomplish its mission through the help of our contacts. Although we were unable to expand our working group with fully participating members, we asked others to help us and received their help to do discrete tasks.

We asked for the contacts that others had. We asked some people to go to their organizations and ask for endorsements when we did not have personal contacts. We asked others to introduce us to leadership and to encourage endorsements by their organizations. We engaged the media coordinator from the statewide campaign to help us write a press release, to disseminate it, and to advise us on how to get the media to attend. We also relied on our contacts to help us to obtain the location for our press conference. I believe that we were able to accomplish what we did in part because we took time to develop contacts with the appropriate or key people.

In the end, we as a working group had spoken to dozens of people. We obtained endorsements from a cross section of the Asian and Pacific Islander communities in Oregon. Our press conference was held at a major institution of and for the Southeast Asian community, and we received print and television coverage despite the fact that our press conference was held late in the election campaign. An openly gay man from APLG was on a panel at the press conference that included speakers from religious organizations, Southeast Asian refugee groups, a Korean small business owners organization, from progressive coalitions of or including Asian and Pacific Islanders, and from a local chapter of a national Japanese American civil rights organization. This sort of unified Asian and Pacific Islander press conference, not to mention one that included a lesbian and gay organization, was unprecedented in Oregon.

Hurdles and a Few Ideas for Overcoming Them

The biggest hurdle for lesbian and gay communities working together with people of color communities is likely to be fear, racism, homophobia, fears of experiencing racism or homophobia. Our working group also encountered defeatism and resignation, those who believed their piece of the pie would diminish if lesbians and gay men were to ever obtain full protection from civil rights discrimination, and those who trivialized or reduced lesbians and gay men to nothing but sexuality.

One idea for overcoming these fears is to forge ahead with an appropriate work plan. There was significant disbelief among lesbians and gay men and among Asians and Pacific Islanders that we would be able to get many Asian and Pacific Islander organizations or individuals to help or to oppose Measure 9. At times, we as a working group were surprised by the support we received. If we had not attempted to do something despite this prevailing attitude of resignation, we would have missed the opportunity and success ultimately achieved. Our experience counsels that it is well worth it to take the risk of rejection.

Sometimes we were subjected to rejection or were unable to dispel fears. However, some fear was countered because the working group was Asian and our passion regarding the campaign as vital to everyone's civil rights. Additionally, our descriptions of our oppression as people of color and as gay

men and lesbians were perhaps more believable or better delivered and received by an Asian and Pacific Islander audience because we are Asians and Pacific Islanders. We were able to go forward despite the rejection because of the successes along the way, our clarity regarding the mission, and our mutual support for each other.

Support & Work with Others Afterward

You have developed a valuable network of people who were willing to help you on your issue. After the work on the campaign has been completed, don't abandon your contacts. That network can help the next time there is an issue that requires concerted action, whether it is gay and lesbian discrimination or an issue directly concerning people of color. In addition, by failing to maintain any contacts or to help other organizations, gay men and lesbians and their organizations lose credibility. Claims of justice for all ring hollow when it is apparent that you are willing to work only for your own interests.

One small way to maintain the network is to write to everyone to thank them for helping. APLG in our case wrote notes thanking people for helping and wrote letters to each organization that made an endorsement or participated in the press conference. APLG asked to be contacted regarding issues of interest to that organization and promised to notify the other organizations of issues in which they might have interest. Another way is to distribute a mailing list. We did so to people who requested mailing lists of the organizations in the network.

Once work on a particular issue has died down, however, use your contacts to continue to build an ongoing working relationship in an active way. The work can be on issues of mutual interest. APLG and other Asian and Pacific Islander community organizations are working together with Asian American journalists in Oregon to put on a workshop for our communities on utilizing the media. It promises to be outstanding and is helping us to build a stronger movement towards an inclusive and just society.