

OUTCOME SUMMARY: MUJERES UNIDAS Y ACTIVAS

“For us, the question is: ‘How do we take a marginalized group and create a space where they feel at home, model leadership and change, and take the sense of power they feel and bring it into the political arena?’”

— Andrea Lee, Co-Director for Development and Administration

Budget: \$40,000

Duration of the Consultancy: January 2008 – June 2009

MAP Consultants Utilized: Margi Clarke and Rebecca Johnson

Organization Overview: Mujeres Activas y Unidas (MUA) recently celebrated its 20th Anniversary of serving and organizing Latina women in the San Francisco Bay Area – and nearly a decade as an independent, member-led organization. MUA is a self-described ‘learning organization’ with a dual mission of empowering Latina women to take positive action in their own lives and to organize collectively, in the political arena. The majority of MUA’s 450 members are immigrants, with Spanish their primary or sole language. In addition to its dues-paying members, through its media and community outreach work, MUA reaches thousands of additional marginalized women.

Goals: MUA focused its MAP engagement on managing staffing shifts and strengthening its internal organization during a time of significant change and growth. The primary goals were :

- To develop secondary staff in support of program development and program integration.
- To support the co-directors to manage staff growth, new structures and shifting roles.
- To develop the board, including training in personnel policies and co-director evaluation.
- To build grassroots fundraising skill and capacity.
- To launch a strategic planning process with preparation and research.

NOTE: MUA received a 2010-2012 leadership capacity grant from the Haas, Jr. Foundation. This grant provides for continued coaching. It also supported developing and finalizing the strategic planning process begun under MAP.

OUTCOME SUMMARY

In January 2008, MUA was adding staff, changing roles of some staff, and moving members into staff roles. It was building the board and expanding its fundraising base. This time “could have been very destabilizing,” according to Andrea Lee, Co-Director for Development and Administration. Instead, MUA used its capacity building assistance from MAP to become a more cohesive organization. “When growth and change came again, more recently, it was less scary. It was actually exciting for people,” she says.

Most members initially enter the organization seeking direct services and find what Juana Flores, Co-Director for Programs refers to as a “place of fellowship among the members.” MUA’s services include job training for domestic workers, legal assistance related to immigration, education about workplace and immigration rights, support groups, and peer counseling or ‘Soul Clinics.’ It also helps members access other Bay Area services. MUA provides a great deal of support related to domestic violence. Its work looks at gender dynamics, healthy and strong families, and parenting skills. Many women, regardless of what draws them in, begin to examine these areas of their lives.

MUA designs its programs not only to address immediate needs, but also to develop leadership skills. “Woven throughout our organizational model is a belief in and commitment to developing the capacity of Latina immigrant women to be leaders of their own lives, in their community and of their own organization,” Andrea notes. “The work is deeply personal and political.”

Political education, issue strategizing and community organizing are at the core of MUA’s approach. MUA provides the lead organizer for California’s statewide campaign for a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. “Five years ago we had never run a statewide political campaign,” Andrea says. Now, MUA has a clear internal process for deciding what the political work looks like inside the organization and where it stands on issues.

MUA’s members and staff are a force locally, nationally and internationally. They have carried the voice of excluded women from Bay Area streets to city halls; from the U.S. Congress to the Geneva Human Rights hearings. In addition to its statewide campaign for domestic worker rights, MUA is a founder of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, placing it at the forefront of organizing the informal sector of the U.S. economy.

FINDINGS

Secondary Staff Development Strengthened MUA’s Programmatic Work

While MAP focused on secondary staff—those in supervisory or program management roles—it reached into all levels of staff development. Margi Clarke, the primary MAP consultant, supported staff with coaching, workplan development, retreats and evaluation tools. Intention, reflection and structure throughout the staff helped to strengthen programmatic cohesiveness.

Staff members at MUA often come from the membership. Members run support groups, provide mentoring and community education, and serve as organizers. The staff development pipeline includes the potential for members in these roles to move into staff positions. The number of members in this pipeline and coming on staff increased during MAP. Changing roles called on more of the staff and members to relate differently to one another. This required structured practices as well as systems for developing and implementing these practices. For example, considering how to ensure confidentiality when women who formed personal relationships as MUA members, move into also having professional relationships.

“MUA assists in the development of each person. Our work helps make each woman’s leadership stronger and stronger with a good base and deep foundations so they truly are the leaders of the organization.”

— Juana Flores, Co-Director for Programs

Those moving from membership to staff roles possess strong leadership skills and at the same time are likely taking on their first job in an office. Most are also balancing their new staff responsibilities with parenting young children. Margi notes that the new staff she coached often put high expectations on themselves. “They would look at step X, those women who were further ahead in the pipeline, and be afraid they could never do those things, instead of focusing on getting from C to D, and seeing they had already gotten from A to C.” In coaching, “we could look at how they managed to do that successfully and make a plan to build on it.”

As part of the staff changes during MAP, several staff members moved into secondary leadership roles. In coaching them, Margi reviewed ways to keep their program work on track and improve their supervisory skills. Margi notes how coaching and retreats she facilitated got directly into the power shifts

brought on by changing roles. “We talked about race and power, and about how you can engage the lens of power as an entry point, not wait for an explosion.” This built confidence and professionalism, including relationship-building across difference and across privilege, as well as the ability to handle conflict proactively and respectfully.

Co-Director Coaching Supported More Effective Management Decisions

Juana came up through the member-to-staff pipeline at MUA. She had been on staff for several years when Andrea came on, two years prior to MAP, with a professional background as an organizer and popular education trainer.

For Juana, coaching with Margi during MAP helped her “see my role more broadly and how to fulfill all the different expectations in my job description.” As a result, “I am more organized in my personal workplan, the monthly program plan and plans of the overall organization. I have become better able to make decisions in many areas.”

Andrea also cites the importance of team coaching with Juana and Margi: “We could sit together and have deeper conversations than looking at our checklists,” she says. “Such as how do we open up with one another about the challenges of growth and the benefits of growth and do that with our staff. It was about creating a space to build our relationship. We could define and redefine our roles to face the challenges of the growth.”



Andrea uses the analogy of a leadership ladder to describe what she and Juana are cultivating at MUA. This ladder includes developing a set of skills in someone in one area then bringing that same person into a new role that stretches her. At the same time it creates the space for another woman to emerge, and to see how she has the capacity to do something she never thought she would be able to do. “During MAP we had the space to look at this,” Andrea reflects, “and to figure out the structure that would need to be in place to do this successfully.”

The co-directors used coaching and staff retreats to address program growth. The results include MUA’s current work in the East Bay. During MAP “Margi helped us tap into the passion for growing bigger, while looking at our capacity,” Andrea points out. “We decided to do outreach in new communities, get to know the people and organizations. Expansion would be a pilot where we would work with an existing organization. We would offer some of our basic services and use that to build our geographic breadth and political power.” MUA is now putting this into action, successfully collaborating on a project to bring MUA’s expertise in community outreach and peer counseling to the Emergency Shelter Program in Hayward.

In addition, the organizing campaign staff at MUA has doubled. The political work overall is more balanced with the direct services work, and more equally resourced.

Board Development Created More Effective Leadership

Previously a project within an immigrant rights organization, MUA moved toward independence in 2001 and obtained its 501(c)3 in 2005. During MAP, it created its own board of directors. A majority of the board members are from MUA’s constituency. Many are overseeing finances, personnel and other board matters for the first time. The board now has a clearly defined structure, which allows the co-directors to interact with the board effectively. Its improved systems include using model agendas so that board members can consistently manage meetings themselves. The personnel committee of the board leads the annual co-director evaluations, a process originally facilitated and modeled by Margi. It revised personnel policies to reflect the values of the organization. Still, the learning continues. “We have a great, functioning board,” Andrea says. “It does what a board is supposed to do. At the same time, we are still trying to figure out if that is what we want our board to be. Do we get the most out of what it could be?”

Grassroots Fundraising Training Led to a Dedicated Staff Position

MUA worked with Rebecca Johnson on grassroots fundraising. “I have a lot of passion around grassroots

fundraising,” Andrea says. “Rebecca shares that passion and could help us learn new structures.” At Rebecca’s suggestion, MUA created a dedicated staff position for grassroots fundraising. In addition, all staff members now have some responsibility for fundraising. A new staff meeting format includes discussion and planning for fundraising and finances.

A grassroots fundraising training for members, developed during MAP, graduated its first cohort of 15 women in 2009. MUA continues to offer training to new cohorts of members every other year and has launched a new fundraising internship program to deepen 2 members' skills and leadership each year. The intention is to prepare a member to take on the staff role. The recent 20th anniversary celebration raised \$55,000. Member-led endeavors such as an evening of sampling members’ cooking specialties tap their creative fundraising energies. As in all that MUA does, it seeks to fundraise in a way that reflects its mission: maximizing outcome while developing leaders.

For Juana, this represents a new area of work. “At first it takes time just to understand,” Juana points out, in terms of taking the first step of having more ownership of organizational finances, “especially in the areas where I had no background.” She cites Rebecca’s support in figuring out “what things would be the most effective and most important for me to focus on,” Juana says. “I have more leadership in making decisions about the budget. I can talk more honestly with the other co-director about our funding, and about other financial information.”

Strategic Planning Preparation Yielded Strong Strategic Plan for 2011-2015

During the MAP engagement, MUA defined its long-term strategic questions. Margi introduced tools such as member surveys, graphic presentations and studies. With the support from the Haas, Jr. Foundation, MUA used this information in a full strategic planning process. MUA recently launched its 2011-2015 strategic vision.

CONCLUSION

As a stronger organization now in scope, staffing and geographic reach, capacity building at MUA remains a priority. “It’s not a one shot deal,” Andrea affirms. MUA’s current investments in organizational development, including continued coaching, “feel more advanced,” Andrea says. “What we are doing now is more nuanced. But it is clear to me that we could not be doing what we are doing now without having done MAP.”

One area of exploration that began in the co-director coaching with Margi involves succession planning and looking at the co-director model. “We’re looking at what serves the organization well with this model? What are the challenges? Who should be in those roles? We would never be anywhere near having these conversations without the work with Margi,” Andrea believes.

In reflecting on MAP, staff and consultants recall realignments in the workplan that caused some frustration. At least several elements of those struggles with focus now seem related to the needs and to the timeframe that capacity building requires. Margi points to “parallel tracks of development and implementation” that she suggests she regularly encounters. “There is a tension between the big wish list versus what is relevant to a particular organization at a particular time. That is the art of it.” With MAP providing ample support, MUA and the MAP consultants effectively managed this tension and laid the groundwork for continued development.

“A lot of the things Margi was helping us to move toward in MAP are things we are doing now, such as better integrating our service and campaign work. I see now that Margi had a vision for us,” Andrea says. “We did not get there with her, but we are getting there now.”

METHODOLOGY

This case example describes the impact of MAP’s capacity building assistance on MUA, a FACT grantee. The author conducted interviews via telephone and e-mail with MUA’s co-directors and the primary MAP consultant for the project. The goal of these interviews was to assess how the organization views the strength of its capacity now in comparison to its capacity prior to MAP, and how it believes MAP contributed to its current capacity. The author conducted the survey from January-February 2011 and concluded the findings in March.