Organizational Wheel of Power:
A Conversation Tool for Nonprofits

Goal

The Minnesota Council of Nonprofits has created this tool to spark conversations within nonprofit organizations about the power and privilege that the organizations hold. **Our goal is that more organizations, especially those with the greatest influence, will consider how to use that position to act with purpose and connection in responding to attacks on the nonprofit sector or the communities the sector supports.**

The Wheel

The original version of this image was created by Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, a nonprofit in Duluth, Minnesota, to identify the common tactics used by abusers to establish and maintain power and control over their victims.

The framework has since been adapted in many contexts, including as a visual tool to illustrate how social identities, such as race, gender, class, religion, and others, relate to societal power. This version draws inspiration from adaptations by many contributors, notably the version created by Sylvia Duckworth.

The center of the circle represents identities that hold the most privilege and influence in a given context, while the outer rings represent identities that face greater marginalization or barriers. It is used to help individuals recognize where they have power and where they may experience marginalization, deepening understanding of systemic inequities and fostering cultural humility. By making abstract ideas about privilege more tangible, the circle encourages reflection, empathy, and more intentional efforts toward equity and inclusion.

Important Context

This exercise is intended to examine forms of power in organizations, particularly nonprofits, that have historically influenced access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making in the United States, and that continue to shape how institutions and policymakers respond to individuals and organizations today. **The categories included in the Wheel of Power are not a reflection of MCN's values, and do not include many forms of power and influence**, like deep community trust, cultural knowledge, and lived experience, which can be tremendously influential and which carry the deep strength, wisdom, and value that are essential to nonprofit work. Institutional power is not the same as organizational worth.

Instead, this exercise focuses on characteristics and identities that have historically been associated with institutional power: the ability to influence public policy, resource allocation, and other decisions made by those in positions of authority. We have selected these categories because they have been relevant throughout U.S. history and remain relevant in the current political and policy environment.

As we witness attacks on the nonprofit sector, it is critical that organizations understand what risks are or are not present if they choose to speak out. *This tool will support nonprofits in understanding their place in the dynamics of power.*

The more privilege and power an organization holds, the more responsibility it has to call for justice and act in ways that other organizations cannot. Your organization may be privileged in some ways and marginalized in others. This is an opportunity to consider where the organization can step up, and where it makes sense to step back.

Using This Tool

Conversation is very important for this exercise. Gather a group of people close to your organization to do the exercise together, like the Board or staff. The exercise should be voluntary. If you are in-person, print a copy of the wheel to write on. If you are meeting virtually, mark up the wheel digitally.

- Start by sharing the goal(s) of the conversation and the context above.
- On your own or in small group conversation with others, consider each slice of the circle and determine where your organization best fits. You can color in the area that most closely represents your organization, or place a dot there.
- If you completed the circle on your own, converse with your colleagues or board members to see where you have clear agreement and where you've answered differently, or why a slice is difficult to answer.
- Review the questions below. In addition to all the Nuts & Bolts questions, choose 2-3 in each category that are most pertinent to your organization for the group to discuss.

Questions for Discussion

Nuts & Bolts

1. Do any of the categories not make sense for your organization?
2. Are there categories you want to add to make it more meaningful to your organization?
3. What are the areas of most power and privilege for your organization?
4. What are the areas that are most marginalized for your organization?
5. Are there nuances to any of the wedges that need to be acknowledged?
6. What decisions has the organization made in the last year related to speaking truth to power? What repercussions or rewards were there?

Assessment

1. Organizations are made up of individuals, and the power and privilege held by each individual person will affect how they each view the organization. How does your own power and privilege impact your assessment?
2. Consider what emotions come up as you do this exercise. You may find that some areas bring up discomfort or strong emotions and that's okay – growth often begins in uneasy spaces.
3. Were you surprised by any of your assessments, or the way your colleagues assessed the organization?
4. Are there places where multiple alignments intersect to create unique experiences of privilege or marginalization for your organization?
5. Were you previously consciously aware of these identities before this exercise?
6. Which of these alignments do you think about most often, and least often?

Actions

There are many factors that must be considered when deciding to take risks as an organization. This tool is meant to put some of those factors into context, but does not cover every consideration.

1. How does your power and privilege affect your ability to speak out or take risks?
2. What feels risky for the organization right now? Can the organization recognize those risks without letting them silence your organization?
3. How can your organization use power and privilege to build connections?
4. How has your organization historically used its power and privilege, and what would it look like to do so differently?
5. In what ways can you use your power to support organizations that aren't in the same position? What is one concrete action you could take in the next six months to help another organization succeed? (ex. Sharing funding opportunities, relationships, visibility, credibility, physical or operational resources, advocating for systemic change)
6. Consider a difficult decision the organization has made recently – how did power and privilege factor into that decision?
7. What support would you need from peer organizations or funders to act more boldly?
8. What forms of advocacy or action are within your reach right now? What messages or stories can you share that others can't, or won't?
9. How can you participate in shaping the broader nonprofit narrative around equity, justice, democracy, and nonprofits?

Questions for Organizations with <u>More</u> Power and Privilege

When we acknowledge the privileges we carry, we can embrace them and use them as a resource to support one another. Rather than denying or defending privilege, we can see it as something useful. Acknowledge where your organization holds privilege and influence and what that means in this moment. Powerful organizations may have the capacity, influence, resources, and responsibility to incur risk in this moment.

How can power and privilege be used to push back on threats to nonprofits, create positive change, or dismantle systems of oppression?

1. What actions can your organization take to support nonprofits that are more marginalized than the organization being discussed?
2. How has your organization obtained its privileges? Consider each of the categories on the Wheel that were rated as closer to power.
3. Looking at past actions, what has the organization valued and protected most?

Questions for Organizations with Less Power and Privilege

While this tool was made with the goal of encouraging conversations at nonprofits that hold power in today's context, we hope that otherwise-positioned nonprofits also find value.

1. Where do you have credibility and trust in community, and how can you put that power into action?
2. Are there examples of when your organization has used its limited power and privilege effectively? What made that possible?
3. Which organizations have greater power and privilege and could be allies with us? How can you strengthen your connections to those allies?
4. What values cannot be compromised in pursuit of power?
5. What kinds of power would strengthen your organization's ability to fulfill its mission? Are there opportunities to cultivate that power?

Power Beyond This Moment:

What forms of power, credibility, or influence may be overlooked or undervalued in today's environment? How might those forms of power still shape your organization's ability to create change?

Suggestions for Next Steps

1. Connect with similarly situated organizations to discuss how you can collectively make change. Seek out advocacy coalitions that work on the same issues as your organization. Consider who is not at the table, ideally at inception, and whether you have the power to include them. If you do, make room.
2. Power isn't static; it shifts with circumstances and context. Revisit your organizational power circle periodically, especially as external dynamics change, to assess how your organization's position and responsibility may evolve.
3. Accountability matters. Organizations who hold disproportionate power and privilege must use them responsibly. How are they ensuring community with expertise or lived experience are designing solutions that impact them directly?
4. If your organization has relationships with other organizations, especially those in different positions on the Wheel of Power, invite them to complete this exercise and then discuss your reflections together.

Wheel of Power

