

Horizontal Strategies for Shifting Cultures from Within and Reducing Social Violence

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Introduction

Communities living with painful public health dilemmas—high levels of violence, HIV, or drug-abuse, for instance—face issues that require complex (and multiple) solutions. While we do see positive results from legislation that reduces access to guns or increases access to health care and clean needles, etc, we also see the ongoing pain of communities facing lives lost or compromised. Many people see the solutions as either top-down (like legislation) or individual, like urging people to put down their guns, use condoms or exercise more. At the Design Studio, we feel that a critical third option to solving complex social issues must be further explored.

We want to share what we've learned about deploying horizontal strategies in these situations. By horizontal strategies we mean solutions that are designed and deployed by the population which is experiencing the problem, and which are targeted towards creating widespread change within that population. We are particularly interested in strategies that take on complex social and cultural norms that are intertwined in the problems that communities are addressing from within. (Perhaps the most famous public health example of a horizontal strategy is Alcoholics Anonymous.)

Examples

In this paper we are going to look at violence as a complex social problem that we believe needs to be tackled with horizontal strategies. We will use two examples that are both youth-driven, although youth are certainly not the only population in which horizontal violence emerges from being at the bottom of a strong vertical power structure. (We also see horizontal violence between ethnic groups which are largely oppressed—and economically marginalized—by dominant groups in power.) In these examples, we will explore two divergent horizontal strategies deployed by youth in two different contexts.

“THE SEA OF PINK”: a horizontal strategy against bullying

If emergent behavior like bullying is to be reduced, it requires a commensurate amount of horizontal strategy because bullying is a form of horizontal violence. (Horizontal violence is generally non-physical inter-group conflict that is manifested by overt and covert behaviors of hostility (Freire, 1972, Duffy, 1999). It is one arm of the submissive/ aggressive syndrome that results from an internalized self-hatred and low self-esteem as a result of being part of an oppressed group (Glass, 1997)). We believe horizontal violence like bullying is a natural result of youths' desire to assert power for themselves within a very adult powered environment, like a school.

In Nova Scotia, two high school seniors witnessed a freshman being bullied for wearing a pink shirt on the first day of school. After school, they went to a local discount store and purchased as many pink shirts as they could find. They then emailed as many students as they could to tell them to wear pink the next day. Hundreds of students did! And many who came to school without pink quickly looked around and grabbed one of the extra shirts.

Critical elements to this strategy:

- **Understanding the power at play:** The boys intuited that the real power dynamic here was within the student body, so they didn't go to adults to complain or get the bullies into trouble. Instead, they shifted the dynamic by empowering the hundreds of students who were neither the bullies nor the bullied.
- **Making it accessible:** The boys created a plan that had a low bar for entry. Even for the students who were too scared to wear pink to school, once they saw how many kids did, they could take one of the extra shirts that the leaders had brought.

“LET’S FLIP IT”: a horizontal strategy for reducing social violence amongst youth in Boston

“Let’s Flip It” is a communication system developed by and for young people most affected by social violence in Boston. It is a way for them to say “it’s time to stop” without saying it directly. Addressing the current block-vs-block structure of violence in Boston, youth interns at the Design Studio decided to intervene in the symbol of the fitted baseball hat, which is frequently used to denote someone’s block or gang affiliation, often causing friction that escalates to violence. Team caps with an “H” logo come to represent Heath St, “A” caps rep Academy Homes, etc. With help from over 75 youth interviewed on the street or in youth-led focus groups, youth identified that a blank, all-white cap could represent a decision to step away from block-vs-block violence, without its wearer having to step away from his (or her) block. We also designed pins, posters, t-shirts and stickers to go along with the campaign to spread the word. Pins were particularly important to the strategy because memorial pins can frequently up-the-ante for retaliation, and because many young women told us they do not wear hats.

So far youth have given out over 10,000 flyers, 3,500 pins, 4,000 stickers and 500 hats. Design Studio interns are now tracking where they are giving out supplies, where they are seeing youth wearing LFI gear or stickers up, where they are getting call-backs from asking for more supplies and all of the social network likes/follows/etc.. In this way they are trying to measure where and to what degree the intervention has gained its own legs.

Critical elements to this strategy:

- **A youth-to-youth campaign:** Let’s Flip It is not a glossy public health campaign with posters on buses. When a youth first sees the logo, it is most likely coming from a peer or something stuck up guerrilla-style, rather than looking sanctified by the powers-that-be.
- **Using the symbolic:** Since the hat is an important way for youth to rep their blocks, it becomes a powerful symbol that we can literally work to change the meaning of. Using the symbolic within a horizontal strategy can address cultural norms in ways that legislation and policing can not.

Conclusion

We are still learning as we go in terms of designing effective horizontal strategies. As youth get more and more fired up about the Let’s Flip It campaign, we are seeing some key challenges, as well as elements of success.

Our biggest challenge is in the spreading and scaling up of the strategy. Conveying authority to a population that is usually told it has none is complicated. It is critical to have a core group of youth (or whatever the marginalized group is) believing they have the authority to take on the strategy, but it must also grow its own legs. Youth who come into contact with it must have an easy way to step in and spread it and/or tweak it to make it their own. In the Sea of Pink, youth could decorate their own shirts or pick up one at school if they hadn't brought one. In Let's Flip It, youth can text a hotline to pick up supplies and take them to their community, event or school. However, we're still looking for youth to take the next step in imagining a new tool for the campaign to truly expand it beyond the Studio.

A final challenge is in keeping horizontal strategies cleanly distinct from the powers—and aesthetics—that be. For example, we have a hunch that once schools started to have sanctioned "Sea of Pink Days," the impact was reduced. To be fair, both youth and adults tend to default to familiar messaging tools, and powerful new strategies can be sidetracked into PSAs or posters on buses. We urge that folks intent on designing true horizontal strategies need to work hard to maintain the original intent and poetic aspects of the initial design.

If you are interested in designing a horizontal strategy or sharing one you know about, please contact the Design Studio at: kdb@ds4si.org

