

Could I be co-opted?

by Greg Bourget

When a citizen group makes demands to industry or government, a common way to lose, or having a win diluted, is becoming co-opted by the opposition, or by other participants. For the purposes of this paper I define "co-opt" to mean:

"to assimilate, take, or win over into a larger or established group

to appropriate as one's own; preempt"

Co-opt has another meaning regarding elections by group members that does not apply here.

So being co-opted means being assimilated or appropriated by another, a group or individual with an agenda that is different than yours.

Here are two quotes to illustrate this undesirable loss of one's power and authority:

"The students are co-opted by a system they serve even in their struggle against it."

— Arthur Danto

"The best way to control the opposition is to lead it ourselves."

— Lenin

Wikipedia offers a more detailed definition of "co-opt":

"the process by which a group subsumes or acculturates a smaller or weaker group with related interests; or, similarly, the process by which one group gains converts from another group by attempting to replicate the aspects that they find appealing without adopting the full program or ideals."

The quote above delineates two types of groups that may attempt to co-opt you, one with related interests, and the opposition. In regard to grassroots politics, further delineation between groups with related interests who may try to co-opt you include

grassroots groups and grasstops groups. Below are explanations of these three types of groups and why co-opting you or your group can be desirable for them.

Co-opted by Opposition Groups

Government and industry co-opt grassroots groups by making deals with community leaders, or high profile factions to avoid giving into more radical demands. Such relationships between government and industry opposition and community leaders attempt to divide and conquer.

"When U.S. Senate candidate Rand Paul of Kentucky said that, if elected, he would join forces with Tea Party-minded senators like Jim DeMint and current senate candidates like Mike Lee of Utah and Sharron Angle of Nevada, Trent Lott of Mississippi told *The Washington Post*, "We don't need a lot of Jim DeMint disciples." The former Senate majority leader added, "As soon as they get here, we need to co-opt them."

— Jack Hunter. Are Grassroots Conservatives Simply Being Co-opted by the Republican Party?

The quote above by Republican Trent Lott is an example of a grassroots movement, the Tea Party, being co-opted by government. Industry does this too. Lott would like to assimilate Tea Party leaders into the Republican Party without giving in to Tea Party ideals and demands. Doing so aims to maintain a Republican agenda while minimizing Tea Party backlash.

Co-opted by Grasstops Groups

"Fake-grassroots organizing — also dubbed 'grasstops' or 'astroturf' lobbying — isn't new. The phrase has been around since at least the 1980s... *Campaigns and Elections* magazine estimated that it's close to a billion-dollar industry, and an unregulated one at that: where traditional lobbying firms have to disclose their contracts and clients, grasstop lobby shops argued successfully to Congress in 2007 that any

monitoring of the collection of people's voices would infringe on free-speech rights.

What *is* new is how the method has become increasingly refined. "You used to see things like mass faxing and patching through calls to congressional offices," says Ken Silverstein, a Washington reporter who a decade ago wrote an expose on astroturfing for *Mother Jones*. Now, he says, suspicions have grown, leading grasstop organizers to take ever more subtle approaches: 'When the old tactics become too obvious, these people become more clever to not get caught.' There's an undeniable effectiveness in grassroots protest. The act of people making the time and energy to assemble themselves, despite their lives and personal responsibilities, is the clearest form of democracy at work. But the success of ground-based organizing has given rise to more sophisticated forms of professional astroturfing, effectively choking out any semblance of the organic groundborne movements that decades ago pushed issues like civil rights and the end of wars."

—Daniel Stone. *How Grassroots Organizing Has Been Co-opted*, *Newsweek*

The article above is about industry and rich individual donors masquerading as a grassroots movement to influence politics. Another form of "grasstops" group is organizations that are entirely or mostly grant funded. Such groups are beholden to their foundation funding and not directly to the community they are supposed to serve. Perhaps the most successful forest protection worker in US history, Judi Bari, had a humorous term for such grant funded groups that would involve themselves with, and take credit for the wins of Earth First!'s massive citizen movement. Naomi Wagner, Judi Bari's coworker in Northern California's Earth First! movement heard Judi use the term occasionally: "pavement dwelling, espresso sipping, yellow bellied grant suckers."

Although groups that are grant funded do a lot of good for environmental protection and social justice, such groups are different from grassroots groups. Grassroots groups can be defined as being "of the people." The majority of funding for a grassroots groups is by numerous persons from the community they serve. Grassroots leadership is comprised of stakeholders.

Foundations like to hear that grant recipients are working with community members, people of color, stakeholders, affected citizens. Such financial pressure to have ties in the community can lead to grant funded groups wanting to co-opt grassroots groups, and their leaders, to satisfy their foundation, bolster their media image, and increase their political power.

Co-opted by other grassroots groups

Finally, other grassroots groups may attempt to co-opt you or your group. Incentives to do so include recruitment of your workers, community prestige, enhancing perceptions of popularity, and being associated with your wins without expending the effort of doing the work. The most likely motivation is bargaining power — government and industry are more likely to make a deal with you if you "represent" more local people, more local groups.

How to Avoid Being Co-opted

Grassroots groups and individuals get co-opted generally because they give their power away, not because others forcibly take it. Enticed by funds, assistance, or other benefits, it can be easy to not look for there being strings attached.

"Lateral" AKA "horizontal" power structures are the best defense against those who wish to co-opt you. A lateral power structure in a

political movement is a system of agreements that defines decentralized cooperation among like groups or individuals. Such a cooperation is not a coalition, where one person or group speaks for other groups or person. In a lateral power structure, decisions about the use of your group's name, participants' names, group successes, and accomplishments are made only by your group.

Is another group offering you assistance? Ask for a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that defines the relationship. Specifically, MOU can limit the use of your group's name, participants' names, successes, and accomplishments being used without the group's permission by specifying such use requires case-by-case consent. Groups who co-opt like to claim credit for or association with other groups. An MOU can forbid this practice. Non-disclosure Agreements are another way to clarify the relationship between grassroots groups, grant funded groups, and other participating individuals. If your political movements involves numerous diverse entities, such written agreements among the players can provide informed consent regarding negotiations with opposition, media disclosure, who will take credit in public statements, specify clear roles, and prevent one group from publicly or privately representing another without express consent.

The following except from Lee Staples' 2016 book *Roots to Power, A Manual for Grassroots Organizing* explains the basic mechanism for using lateral power to avoid being co-opted. Although the following two and a half pages focuses on avoiding being co-opted by government opposition, Staples focus on internal accountability can address co-option from each type of entity mentioned above.

Dividing by Lee Staples

bold and italics unchanged from original

Perhaps the most insidious type of countertactic is the old standard, *Divide and conquer*. If an organization's power lies in the strength of its numbers, then anything that splits and separates its members and leaders will weaken it. That's exactly the goal of divide-and-conquer tactics! The target attempts to create discord and dissension within the organization or between it and other [Grassroots Community Organization (GCO)] GCOs, thereby diminishing its ability to wage an effective campaign. Counteracting such tactics can be especially difficult, since they create the kinds of divisions that make consensus difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Thus, there may be disagreement as to whether a tactical dilemma even exists, let alone how to overcome it.

One of the most effective ways adversaries can divide a group is by winning over a few key leaders. Often, they appeal to people who are the most moderate, offering token or symbolic concessions. in some cases, these agreements are contingent on the group abandoning certain militant tactics. Of course, the purpose of the GCO's strategy is to force concessions, but when the divide-and-conquer tactic is employed, the offer to deal with the Action Group's requests/demands isn't made in good faith. Rather, the targeted decision-maker tries to induce leaders to drop an effective tactic prematurely, before offering anything significant in return. This type of deception may not work with the entire group, but by making overtures to leaders who aren't comfortable with militancy, the target sometimes can create enough internal chaos to upset the group solidarity.

The best antidote is a careful examination and analysis by the leadership of the proposed "concession." *The question at issue shouldn't be the organization's tactics, but rather the nature and quality of the target's offer.* There should be a reassertion of the campaign's goals and objectives, a determination of whether this proposal is a substantial step forward, and then, only if appropriate, a reexamination of the Action Group's tactics. *The key is to return to the areas of consensus, reestablish them, and then move to any discussion of differences.* When such disagreements break out in public during the course of an action, the group should **caucus** immediately in private so differences can be worked out and a united front can be presented to the target.

In another version of the divide-and-conquer tactic, the adversary may attempt to "buy off" or *co-opt* some of the stronger leaders by meeting their personal needs. The hope is that those leaders, having met their own needs, will then "sell out" the rest of the Action Group. Attempts to co-opt leaders can be dealt with by a combination of solid preparation and ongoing discussion and analysis as the campaign progresses. By laying out the possibilities for co-optation ahead of time, there's an opportunity to *prepare every-one to be watchful for the first signs of such countertactics.* This will make it more difficult for targeted decision-makers to fool people with token offers. And top leaders will be more hesitant to sell out, knowing that other members and second-line leaders are aware of the possibilities.

Sometimes, divide-and-conquer tactics will be geared more toward causing internal dissension than converting or seducing various segments of the leadership. Targets will attempt to create schisms within the organization by raising issues, subjects, and

solutions designed to pit one faction against another. Here again, the best defense will be preparation that anticipates the likely use of such tactics. In a practice session, someone should play the part of the target and make a concerted effort to raise points that are likely to divide the group. Often, like cracks on a sidewalk—ready to split apart under pressure—these potential divisions are predictable along race, ethnic, class, gender, age, sexual orientation, homeowner-tenant, newcomer status, disabilities, political parties, and other sociocultural "fault lines." By working through some of these issues privately beforehand, the leadership will be able to *present a united front* when the issues arise publicly.

At other times, potential external divisions between the Action Group and other GCOs may be the challenge. Frequently, when coalitions or alliances approach a target, offers of concessions may be made that appeal deeply to the interests of several groups, while other organizational members remain dissatisfied. The danger exists that some groups will want to "settle," while others will be committed to continuing the campaign until their own interests are met. Cooperation between the participating GCOs may be based on *quid pro quo* trade-offs, whereby organizational members agree to support one another's objectives and demands in return for backing on their own priorities. Adversaries usually will be quick to identify likely fissure lines based on differential organizational interests. Divide-and-conquer proposals are very apt to follow. The best antidote will be a *reaffirmation of the principles of solidarity that brought the groups together in the first place.* If there are multiple objectives, they should be prioritized; and "bottom-line" guidelines for acceptable

agreements on "asks"/demands should be established.

In all cases, there's a basic preventive measure that can stymie "divide-and-conquer tactics," namely, *a clear system of internal accountability*. The Action Group, not the targeted decision-maker, should have tight control over who has the right to speak for and to negotiate for its members. Another divisive tactic that adversarial targets often use is verbal attacks on the organizers, attempting to isolate them from the rest of the organization. Clearly, organizers will play a key role in preparing leaders for actions and helping them offset some of the countertactics discussed herein. This fact usually won't be lost on decision-makers who become infuriated by such "agitators," whom they see as "stirring people up." The situation is especially exacerbated when the organizer plays a visible, aggressive role during the action. Predictably, targets will pounce on staff members if this is the case, especially those who are "outsiders." There may be attempts to "red bait" organizers or to goad them into inappropriate overreactions that offend the GCO's members. These countertactics usually are coupled with appeals to the Action Group's leadership to purge themselves of such "troublemakers." *The key to dealing with this countertactic is not to allow the organizer to become the focal point of debate.* These attacks can be minimized or prevented if organizers adhere to their proper roles and stay in the background. The organizer who gets too far out front and begins to play a leadership role simultaneously undermines organizational development and becomes vulnerable to attack. This is a fundamental violation of the role of the organizer!

Nevertheless, there will be times when staff members are singled out, regardless of their behavior. When this does happen, the

organizer shouldn't rise to the bait but should look to the organization's leaders to take up the fight. If she or he has functioned properly, leaders usually become highly insulted by the suggestion that they can be manipulated, controlled, or led astray by staff members. Under these circumstances, this countertactic can backfire in the target's face, adding to the anger and determination of the leadership.

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