

Stopping Co-option

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 other participants with seemingly similar goals. 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"

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 quotes above delineate two types of groups that may attempt to co-opt you, one with related interests, and the opposition. In this essay, I focus mostly on avoiding being co-opted by groups with related interests - like-minded groups you might be considering partnering with.

Co-opted by Grasstops Groups

"Grasstops" groups are comprised of opinion leaders and persons who have connections to elected officials. For example, a primary focus on

relationships with politicians and media is often called grasstops organizing. Such groups are often beholden to the foundation that given them money, instead of the community. This can become a problem. Perhaps the most successful grassroots forest protection worker in US history, Judi Bari, referred to many grasstops groups she experienced as: "pavement-dwelling, espresso-sipping, yellow-bellied grant suckers." She worked to have all key decisions made by the neighbors of the loggers and direct action activists, not Executive Directors of grant-funded groups in a far-away city with little connection to the rural people living near the site of the forest protection campaign.

Although grasstops groups do a lot of good for environmental protection and social justice, such groups may have different motives to help stakeholders than grassroots groups who are generally more beholden to stakeholders. Stakeholders are the people most directly affected by a problem. Grassroots groups can be defined as being "of the people." The majority of support for a grassroots group is usually the numerous persons from the community they serve.

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. It is possible for stakeholders to accept the help of grasstops groups without letting grasstops leaders make key decisions without stakeholder consent.

Co-opted by Other Grassroots Groups

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 themselves. The most likely motivation is wanting more bargaining power — government and industry are more likely to make a deal with groups that "represent" more local people, more local groups. A group you want to partner with does not need to speak for you to cooperate and support you. It is possible and desirable for grassroots to cooperate with other grassroots groups in a predictable manner based on informed consent.

Co-opted by Opposition

“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 another version of the divide-and-conquer tactic, the adversary may attempt to buy-off” or co-opt some of the strong 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.”

- Lee Staples. 2016

How to Avoid Being Co-opted

Grassroots groups and individuals get co-opted generally because they give their power away, enticed by funds, assistance, or other benefits with strings attached. To avoid your citizen’s effort being co-opted by industry or government, your individual decision makers should not be authorized to make consequential decisions, deals, or agreements without the rest of your power structure, such as your board.

“The best antidote is a careful examination and analysis by the leadership of the proposed ‘concession.’”

- Lee Staples. 2016

Lee Staples explains in detail this in his chapter on “dividing” starting on page 152 of the PDF, here:

<https://epdf.pub/queue/roots-to-power-a-manual-for-grassroots-organizing.html>

To avoid your citizen’s effort being co-opted by other citizen efforts, nonprofits, or “aligned” individuals, write and obtain signatures on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) defining the relationship and agreements

MOUs can define and create "lateral" AKA "horizontal" power structures that allow for 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, the use of your group's name, participants' names, group successes, and accomplishments are not allowed unless authorized by your group on a case-by-case basis.

Is another group offering you assistance or some form of partnership? Ask for a MOU that defines the relationship. Groups who co-opt other groups like to claim credit for successes of other groups – they like to broadcast their association with other groups without specific consent to do so. An MOU can forbid this practice.

If your citizen’s organization wants to partner with other organizations, written agreements among the participants can provide informed consent, negotiations with opposition, media disclosure, and who will take credit in public statements. Specifying clear roles can prevent one group from publicly or privately representing another group without it’s express consent.

Sample MOU to Avoid Co-option

(date)

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between (group name one) and (group name two)

This MOU is between _____ (henceforth known as (group name one)) and all of their employees and volunteers their employees and volunteers, and _____ (henceforth known as (group name two)) and all of their employees and volunteers their employees and volunteers, and (individual name one) and (individual name two). (Individual name one) will not discuss or mention (group name two), their volunteers, programs or achievements, publicly or privately, without the express written permission of (group name two).

The aim of (group name one) is to assist (group name two) for free, without compensation and for nothing in return. (group name one) will not receive public recognition via appearance of association or endorsement. In essence, only (individual name one) and (individual name two) will be aware that any cooperation is taking place unless there is written agreement from (group name two) to do otherwise, on a case-by-case basis.

The aim of this MOU is to prevent co-option. Here we define co-option as one group assimilating or appropriating another group's name, achievements or participants without express consent. All assistance from (group name one) has no strings attached and (group name one) seeks no benefit from this cooperation.

(group name one) are not seeking to assist or recruit from (group name two) as a way to expand its board composition, employees, or volunteers.

The primary objective of this relationship/partnership is to share information on local development, industry activities and projects with environmental impact that are of interest to (group name two) to raise awareness.

A representative of (group name two) will be invited to appropriate (group name one) activities, actions and/or meetings. Attendance at such will be at the discretion of designated (group name two) representative/s.

This MOU will be in effect upon signed signatures below of all parties. This MOU can be terminated by either party by written notification.

_____ Date _____ Date _____
(President), (group name two) President (Chair), (group name two) Chair

_____ Date _____ Date _____
(individual name two), (group name one) (individual name one), (group name one)

This sample MOU is meant as general information, not as legal advice. This MOU may not work for your situation. We are not lawyers. If you need legal advice on this subject, it is best to consult a lawyer.

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