Equity change-making for transit (and other government) agency insiders
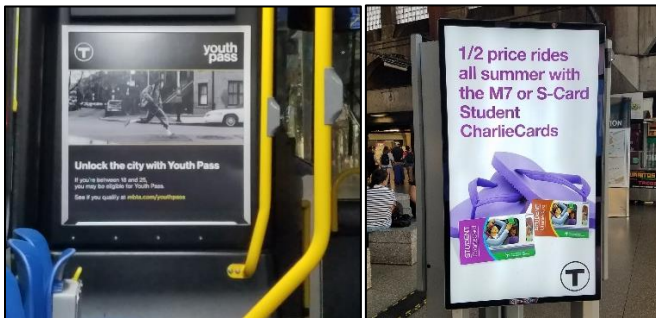
Thoughts, frameworks, and stories from my six years trying to make change from inside the bureaucracy and many years from the outside

By Laurel Paget-Seekins

From:

To:

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2025 Prologue

This zine was originally released in August 2022 in print only with a limited number of copies. After the 2024 presidential election I decided to release it digitally for a wider audience. It feels even more relevant with the escalating attacks on the concept of equity and government's role in providing remedies.

I am not working in the public sector right now, but I can imagine how much harder it is going to be to do equity work at all levels of government. And it was hard before! I know public sector employees need more support and tools to do change-making work. And the tools are rarely taught in college/training programs and support can be hard to find.

This zine is geared toward folks working in transit agencies, but I think most of the concepts apply to the public agencies broadly. I have more thoughts and stories that hopefully I will get down in a Part 2 someday. Please reach out if you want to collaborate, corroborate, or contest.

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Introduction

Are you old enough to remember zines? Before blogs and social media, we had zines to share random bits of information, put out our hot-takes, and provide support to our communities. This is my zine on equity change-making in transit agencies. It is a collection of frameworks, stories, and support all mushed together with limited graphic design.

After 6 years of trying to make equity change inside a transit agency, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, I was privileged to receive a 2021 Leadership in Government fellowship from Open Society Foundation. This gave me the opportunity to reflect on my time in government, talk to transit equity organizers and agency staff from around the country, and process why I was so exhausted and angry.

This zine is one of the outputs from my fellowship. I wrote it with an audience of fellow change-makers and organizers inside government in mind, but hope it also provides insights to external organizers and researchers. One of my goals is to provide some 'fellowship' for others doing similar work, so that we can learn with, and support, each other[1].

I am assuming that my readers have started the work of understanding structural racism (and other sources of inequity) in the US, and in transportation specifically[2]. I believe it to be a lifelong learning journey and this piece is probably at an intermediate level.

There are many frameworks for how to understand and address equity and justice. In this zine I use a three-level framework of Personal, Institutional, and Societal levels. I am focusing on the intersection of the Personal and Institutional to examine the question: how can individuals

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[1] This is a longer version of my article For Justice in Transportation, We Cannot Just be Planners, in *State of Transportation Planning 2022.*

[2] Dr. Robert Bullard's work was foundational for my understanding of transportation justice. Here is a list of transportation, race, and equity articles.

with roles in large government agencies be agents of organizational change that addresses the larger social structures?

Figure 1. Three-level Framework
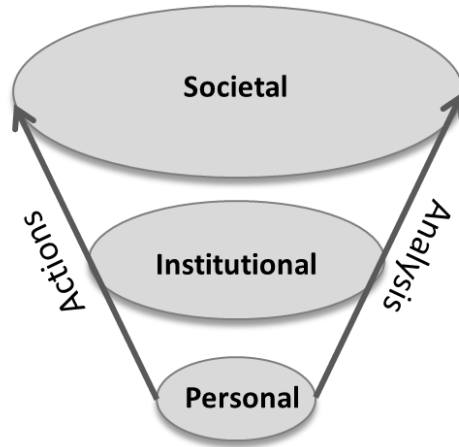
I am going to talk about frameworks to understand power, external and internal equity organizing, strategies for internal work, relationship building, and the emotional component of the work. I am sharing observations and strategies that worked for me, and I recognize these strategies, might not work in other situations or for other people.

Since the work starts with the personal, here is a bit about me. I am a white, genderqueer, (mostly) able bodied person in my 40s. I started my journey to being an anti-racist change-maker in my 20s while an activist in the global justice (international trade policy) and anti-war movements. I realized the importance of public transit when I moved to Atlanta, Georgia without a car and wanted to form roots in the local community. I supported grassroots transit organizing while I was in grad school using participatory action research methods. After I graduated, I worked in Santiago, Chile for two years studying transit regulatory frameworks in the Global South and what makes transportation 'public'. Then I spent six years working in intersection of data, policy, and community engagement at the MBTA and MassDOT in Boston. Now I work at a civil right law and policy advocacy organization in California.

This zine is the product of my experiences inside and outside of government, things I have read over the years, conversations with colleagues, interviews with change-makers, and conversations and editing from my life partner. I provide citations for specific ideas where I have a direct source. I promised confidentially to the folks that I interviewed to allow them to be candid, and I can't thank them enough for sharing their experience and insights. When I used a specific idea from a transit organizer, I gave them the opportunity to be cited or not.

This document is filtered through my experience of the world and I take full responsibility for where I haven't yet done enough work. These are my thoughts at this particular point in time (summer 2022 with a refresh in December 2024). I believe in constant growth; no doubt, my thinking and change-making strategies will continue to evolve.

Part 1: Background
My starting points for this work

We don't need permission. We may work in hierarchical organizations, but no one needs to give us permission to do equity work. It doesn't have to be in our job description. (Ideally, equity work should be integrated into all job descriptions and not the responsibility of one team.) We do this work because we believe in freedom and justice for everyone. We draw our power from our principles, not our position.

We have to understand power. Equity changes are hard. The systems work the way they do because people in power benefit from them and don't want them to change. Change won't happen without risk-taking and the hard work of building power outside of existing power-over structures. The work, even when done by people in positions of power, means changing the systems that gives them that power. Part of the work of an insider is finding leverage points for change in the power-over structure.

We can make incremental change and build toward transformative change at the same time. Change at transit agencies and other complex,

underfunded government entities is complicated. The jumble of digital and paper systems patchworked together can make the implementation of change hard, even after the decision is made. There are usually unintended consequences and complications, but we have to keep focusing on the transformative. Our expertise of knowing how things work inside is needed, but isn't more important than the expertise of the people experiencing the harms of current systems. We need to work together on both short-term and long-term change.

Some definitions

For meaningful change, we need a shared understanding of the problems. And that requires shared understanding of the words we are using to talk about them.

Equity
Equity is often used as a catch-all word and there are many types of equity. I have seen definitions for procedural, distributional, structural, transgenerational, and restorative equity[3].

Equity includes redistributing the costs and benefits (distributional), addressing past and future harms (restorative and transgenerational), and changing the processes and power in decision-making (procedural and structural). It isn't enough to improve transit service if who gets to decide what constitutes those improvements remains the same. Equity is both the process and the outcome, and can't be understood outside of the context of history.

The concept, and need for equity, applies across a multitude of ways that people are considered 'other' (gender, ability, sexuality, class). I center racial equity because white supremacy is foundational to the institutions and systems in the US, and because as a white person I find racial equity work to be the most difficult. Within my centering of racial equity, I understand the Black feminist concept of *intersectionality*

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[3] Transit Center provides some definitions on page 11 of their Equity in Practice report.

means that impacts and experiences are created by multiple forms of systemic injustice and othering simultaneously.

What is the difference between Racial Equity and Racial Justice?

Racial Justice is a vision and transformation of society to eliminate racial hierarchies and advance collective liberation, where Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, in particular, have the dignity, resources, power, and self-determination to fully thrive.

Racial equity is a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone. It is the intentional and continual practice of changing policies, practices, systems, and structures by prioritizing measurable change in the lives of people of color.

Distinction between Racial Equity and Racial Justice: Racial equity is the process for moving towards the vision of racial justice. Racial equity seeks measurable milestones and outcomes that can be achieved on the road to racial justice. Racial equity is necessary, but not sufficient, for racial justice.

Source: Race Forward

In this zine I use the term 'equity work' as a shorthand for all of the types of equity changes that are needed to get justice.

Transportation equity and justice

Transportation equity applies the definitions of equity to transportation decisions and resources. It is necessary to consider equity across all transportation decisions and modes; however, transit being treated inequitably can't be an excuse for transit agencies to not be equitable in the decisions they control.

The concepts of *mobility injustice* and *mobility justice* encompass all of the ways that people move in public spaces and in the work that creates those spaces. This includes how public spaces and movement are policed. The Untokening Collective created a living document for Principles for Mobility Justice; please read it!

As this zine considers both the external and internal equity of transit agencies, it is important to acknowledge that a component of justice is workplaces "where professionals can contribute their full knowledge and experience without fear of retribution[4]."

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[4] See Dr. Sarah Rebolloso McCullough and C. Sequoia Erasmus article on performative and authentic equity work.

Community

Communities can be defined by shared culture, values, experience, place, or government structures. The word community (or communities) is used a lot, and without clarification it implies that all communities are treated equally when they aren't. When I use the word community, I am prioritizing the communities (however they are defined) that have been marginalized and harmed by decisions of an agency/government.

Power

I use the term power often. We have to be explicit about power in order to understand what keeps the status quo in place and how we can make changes.

> **"Power, properly understood, is the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, or economic changes. In this sense power is not only desirable but necessary in order to implement the demands of love and justice."** Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here* (1967)

In *The Purpose of Power*, Alicia Garza, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, defines organizing as building relationships so that together you can build power to change the conditions hurting your community. Garza makes sure to point out that a condition of success is changing the relationship to power so that it is held by *many* instead of *few*.

In this zine I call power held by *many* 'power-with' and power held by *few* 'power-over'. (These are terms I picked up in a women's studies class as an undergraduate.) I found this distinction very useful while working in government.

Power-with: builds the power of the many, led by people marginalized by existing systems, using inclusive anti-racism and intersectional feminist practices. (Often called Distributed Power.)

Power-over: preserves the power of the few over the many by using or maintaining systems of oppression. (Also called Centralized Power.)

When thinking about power it is useful to differentiate between your personal power based on your identities, the power of your position within an organization, and the institutional power of the organization.

Theory of change

Understanding power is needed to have a clear *theory of change*. A theory of change is a framework or generalized concept of what you think drives change for a given institution or problem.

There are many ways that people make change. The most common is use of force or the implied use of force (the embodiment of power-over). One theory of a democracy is that change comes from electing representatives (we know this isn't particularly true). My theory of change for transit equity is that inside-outside (government/community) coalitions of change-makers build power-with each other to change complex systems and reshape power structures.

Complexity

I use the word *complexity* to describe the many interconnected systems (physical, digital, business process, etc.) and relationships (between people, departments, agencies, etc.) that are required for government or institutions to function. One of the reasons my theory of change includes people inside government agencies working with people organizing outside is because of the complexity of government agencies. Some of the complexity is self-created by bureaucrats because information is a form of power and the more confusing a process is the more power they can retain (see Part 3). But a lot of complexity is due to technical systems, physical assets, and business processes that are tenuously connected through years of patchwork and under-investment. To make government work for everyone, we need change-makers rebuilding the foundation from the inside.

Accountability

Accountability, for those of us in the public sector, is the obligation to be transparent, take responsibility for our decisions, listen to the people we serve, and center the people most impacted by decisions**.** Accountability

is needed to make sure we are learning from, and are responsible for, the results of our decisions as individuals and organizations.

Accountability rarely just happens; people and organizations need to put systems in place to get this feedback and to make change using it. In a truly functioning democracy, elections are a form of accountability for elected officials. Since elections rarely work this way, we need other forms of accountability for the public sector (more on this in Part 3).

Part 2: Big Picture Frameworks

Understanding the external ecosystem

What specific transit equity changes are needed, and how best to achieve those changes, varies by region. I found that to effectively work for transit equity I had to understand the community I was serving, the ecosystem of community and advocate organizations, and their sources of power. (This is a short summary for a transit context; for more details, read up on social movements and community organizing.)

The world is complicated and it is useful to have some frameworks for sorting information. Three external forces on a transit agency to understand are the elected/appointed officials, the media and narratives makers, and community-based organizations (CBOs). CBOs often push on elected officials or try to use the media/narrative makers to influence transit agencies, and it is useful to figure out the landscapes of all three.

In many regions there is an ecosystem of community organizations with different roles and goals. This creates different possible relationships (formal and informal) with the agency, and varying levels of organizational accountability to transit riders (from transit-rider led to none). It is also useful to learn the history of transportation justice organizing in your community (and nationally). It is likely there are organizations, campaigns, and leaders that are no longer active that shaped the current ecosystem.

To understand an ecosystem, I sort CBOs using three criteria: (1) issues they work on, (2) relationship to transit riders and how the organization builds power, (3) relationship to transit agency. Some organizations fit in multiple categories, and some have roles/relationships that change over time. (See Figure 2.)

This analysis of CBOs can help you find collaborators for inside/outside change-making and for personal accountability. Understanding the relationship to riders helps identify if an organization is itself accountable and working for racial and economic justice by building power-with its members (also called base-building). Looking at the demographics of the leadership isn't enough; you have to understand the relationship between an organization's leadership and their members/community. Base-building organizations often focus on multiple issues impacting their communities or come to transit advocacy through their work on another issue. So, it is important to look for organizations outside of the 'usual suspects' that are focused explicitly on transit or transportation.

As agency insiders, we need to be aware that power dynamics and forms of oppression also play out within the CBO ecosystem. These dynamics impact who gets funding, roles in coalitions, goals and strategies, and how organizations are pressured to practice "respectability politics." These dynamics also impact the relationship each organization has with the transit agency.

Understanding organizations' relationships to the agency is important to know the political constraints organizations operate within and to create space for organizations holding the agency accountable. (More on this in Part 5.)

Figure 2. External ecosystem
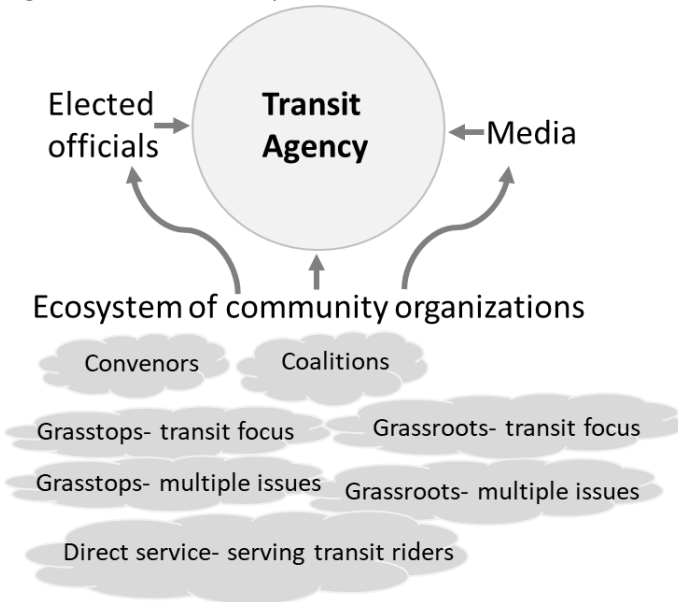
Types	Relationship to riders & marginalized communities
Coalitions	Group of organizations, so depends on the members and leadership model
Grasstops	Professional staff, can have members, but direction set by staff and board
Grassroots/ base-building	Membership based, organized to build power together to achieve members' goals
Direct service	Provide assistance or support to people (some of whom are transit riders)

Types	Relationship to agency
Convenor	Create space for community and agency dialogue and collaboration
Partner	Assist agency in programs or with outreach efforts (might be paid by agency for this work)
Hold accountable	Hold agency accountable publicly, risk relationships and access to push for greater change
Advocate	Support agency efforts with other decision-makers

Talking to agency staff and transit organizers around the US, I realized that there were different coalition models to organize for changes (e.g. more equitable service, more funding, equity of capital investment, decriminalization and free fares). In some cases, agency staff and community organizations were working together to push for change and other cases community organizations were working with elected officials to push for change and pulling the agency along. See Figure 3, the most effective is all three working together (bottom right corner), but sometimes community organizations are alone.

Figure 3. Equity coalition models
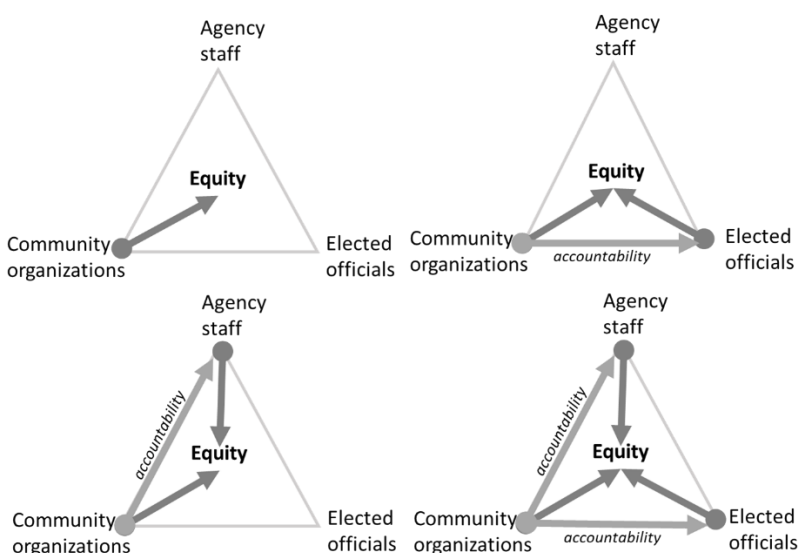
The governance and funding of a transit agency impacts change-making coalitions. Governance shapes to what extent, and in what ways, an agency can advocate for itself. Governance structures determines who the decision-makers are for different types of decisions (e.g. funding levels, transit policies and service levels, capital projects). Transit boards can be directly elected, local elected officials, members appointed by a

single elected official/body, to members appointed by multiple elected officials/bodies[5]. This impacts the leverage points for change.

The internal work

Many public (external) conversations about transit equity focus on fares, service levels, capital investments, and policing. The role of agency staff is to push these conversations inside and to figure out how to implement the changes (see Part 4).

Importantly, transit equity also needs to include equity inside the agency. Transit employees deserve a just workplace, and agencies won't achieve external transit equity without changing the power structures internally and who is at the decision-making tables. Due to the opaque nature of most government agencies, often the internal equity issues are hard to see externally. This means staff must lead on internal issues and build coalitions with external equity advocates (see Part 5).

There are many ways that equity issues come up inside an agency. They include hiring and promotion practices, toxic (racist/sexist/homophobic/ableist) workplace cultures, and demographic (and power) differences between frontline and management, and operations and executives. As at all workplaces, agency leaders choose whether to focus on compliance with anti-discrimination laws or embrace a culture change and accountability approach to internal equity.

The focus can be determined by examining whether the legal and compliance apparatuses are used to protect the organization from liability (often by denying employee complaints), or whether the organization works to transform its culture using compliance as a lever of change. As in their relationships with communities, equity for employees means the organization takes responsibility for past/current inequitable practices, including the liability and remedy, and changes practices to prevent the harm from taking place again.

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[5] See Transit Center report on transit boards

Similar to the experience of individuals working on a personal anti-racism practice, organizations also go through stages of learning and change. The process isn't linear and sometimes organizations (individuals) regress. Figure 4 is based on my agency experience and consulting with folks around the US who are working for equity inside and outside transit agencies.

Figure 4. Internal Equity Process
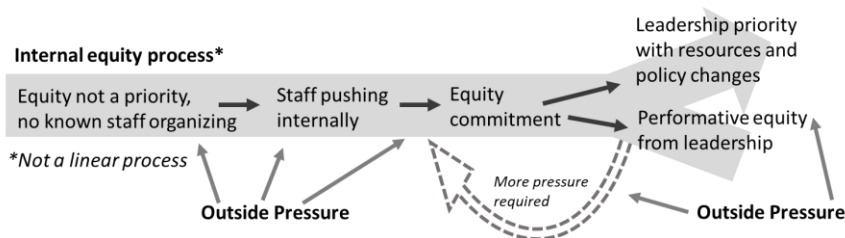
Sometimes equitable change begins with leadership, but usually it is led first by employees. Employees at all levels of the organization are fighting for equity changes, but often only those in middle-management are recognized for this work. Some agencies have address this by formalizing internal equity working groups that span all levels[6].

Organizational leadership commitment is important, but leaders need to be pushed internally and externally to make sure equity is meaningful, not performative. Performative equity is evident when an organization's actions and decisions do not match their statements[7]. Often, internal staff are well-positioned to assess when an agency's actions don't match their public statements. Agencies can make changes to improve equity in fares and service without changing who has decision-making power. Changing who has power is harder than changing resource allocation!

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[6] Discussion of Metro Transit (Madison, WI) on page 49, Metro Transit (Twin Cities) on page 52, and Seattle DOT on page 55 in this Transit Center report.
[7] For more on performative equity, see the McCullough and Erasmus's study.

Coming to understand the connections between internal and external facing equity and the complexity of internally implementing change reinforced my theory of change as inside/outside collaboration.

Tangent on complexity

The opacity of government agencies obscures some of the barriers to implementing equity changes after the work of getting decisions made. The lack of transparency can make transit agency staff appear to be intransigent or against equity changes when they are trying to make implementation of a decision feasible for their team. For example, imagine there is a new funding source for more frequent bus service and the agency's board wants it done as soon as possible. The agency staff are likely puzzling through a cascade of questions that need answers before moving ahead.

Do we have enough buses? If we need to buy more buses, do we have space in our garages to park and maintain them? Do we have enough operators? And staff to do the maintenance, cleaning, and fueling? How long will it take us to hire and train the additional operators? Do we have enough instructors to do the training and HR professionals to hire the additional people? Do we have enough schedulers to make the new crew and bus schedules? Is the scheduling software system up to date or do we really need to replace it too? Do we have layover space on city streets for the additional buses so operators have a place to take a bathroom break at the end of their routes? Will the neighbors complain about the additional buses? How can we convince city governments to back us up? If we prioritize this work, what other projects will fall behind? And so on.

Agency staff need to be empowered to share all of the realistic barriers, time constraints, and costs related to implementing a change, so that the change can be resourced at a level that will not overburden the existing employees.

Part 3: Navigating Power-over

I found (and heard from peers) in government agencies there is a general culture or feeling of disempowered, even among staff at senior levels. There is often a sense that someone else has the *power* (the legislature, the unions, the governor, the mayor, the Board, etc.) while we have the *responsibility*. I think this is partially a reflection of the complicated nature of the pluralistic and diffuse decision-making in public policy. There are many goals, sometimes competing, and rarely does a single agency or elected body control all of the factors or manage all the decisions needed to achieve any goal. (Another reason for exercising power-with, and creating collaborative rather than competitive decision-making structures.) But the culture of disempowerment is part of the power-over structure and is used to conceal how power is used, including the power of inaction (the pocket veto).

The power-over structure

Information is power

The first book I checked out of the library after I quit my job was Max Weber's *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*[8]. I wanted to revisit theories on how bureaucracies function and their relationship to power. Weber postulates that bureaucratic administrations get their power from technical knowledge and increase their power by acquiring additional knowledge specific to the functioning of their office. There is real complexity inside transit agencies, but it can be exaggerated and used to obscure decision-making in order to keep power in the hands of (some) agency staff.

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[8] My thinking here on government and bureaucracy was also influenced reading *The Utopia of Rules* and *Bullshit Jobs* by David Graeber.

Agencies exercising power-over keep information from the public, and the media, in order to maintain the status quo and/or protect people in power. Given a myriad of valid explanations for how a problem came to be, agencies may claim the one that that best fits their narrative and maintains their desired image. And agencies can be strategic about sharing (and concealing) information. This means that what information is shared, how and with whom it is shared, impacts the power of various external groups.

Information is power internally because transit agencies are complex and no one person can know and understand all of the details. Not sharing information freely is one way power is maintained in a power-over hierarchical organization. Management may withhold information from workers to keep people from subverting decisions, or out of fear that workers may share the information externally. I found workers and departments would keep information from others as a way to retain some control in a disempowering workplace. (More on why in Part 4.)

Information is used as a form of currency by agency staff with external partners, the media, and with each other (essentially an information economy.) We can trade what we know for other information, use information sharing to build relationships or gain trust, or to advance our own goals. So, it is critical to consider the equity implications and power dynamics related to how we gather and share information internally and externally. (More on this in Part 5.)

Power-over your career

The power-over government culture encourages self-censorship as a means of information control. The tacit tradition of what can and can't be said publicly often gets passed down without leadership saying anything. In my experience the culture of self-censorship includes joking about potential leaks and FOIA requests as a way to signal discontent to peers without risk. Because the 'power' in power-over is the implication of force; power-over is commonly maintained through fear. Staff don't push back out of fear of losing jobs or never getting promoted, of not being able to get another job due to the damage to reputation, of no

longer having access to information or proximity to power, or of losing another battle and the emotional costs of fighting and losing. It is often hard to know what the exact ramifications would be and how much fear is justified, and that is the design of power-over systems.

We have to remember cost of power-over systems is not the same for everyone. Staffers who are racialized as Black or brown have more historical (and individual) reasons to fear reputational retaliation. It took time for me to realize that my Black and brown colleagues often couldn't be under the radar or take over projects and meetings in the ways that I did. Minoritized workers, who do not also have access to structural power, are rarely offered the benefit of the doubt when they push back or attempt organizational changes. How people's behavior at work is monitored and controlled is part of the system that needs to change. This often shows up as what is considered 'professional' and whose behavior is deemed 'unprofessional'[9].

This difference also shows up in who is given access, who gets invited to important meetings, and who is rewarded 'for showing initiative' by taking on bigger projects. It took me years to fully realize this because the system benefited me personally and I built my reputation by 'taking initiative'. Often 'white savior' behavior is rewarded, because it doesn't threaten the foundation of white supremacy.

(Note to white people: We have to make sure we are building power-with our Black and brown colleagues and getting out of the way, not just building our personal power. When we don't feel any reputational risk, we are probably doing "equity work" for our benefit and not the benefit of all.)

Surviving and Thriving Inside

As someone who has held positions of power in organizations and who personally benefits from structures upholding white supremacy, I have found that using the framework of power-with helps to mediate the

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[9] A discussion of [professionalism from the legal field](#).

tempting influence of the power-over mentality. Power-over mentality is premised on individualism; and this mentality tells us not to rock the boat now in order to obtain the next position where we will have more power. Even if our motivation to strive for more power is to be able to do 'more good', the question *what is enough power* is rarely asked, let alone answered or achieved. Instead, we need to shift to thinking collectively, and ask how to use the power we have now to build power-with others.

To make equity changes, we must draw our power from our principles, not our position. Our principles should be based on our core values and crafted through conversation with our communities and colleagues. This is where the practice of accountability comes in.

Accountability in practice

Organizations should have accountability systems, but establishing these policies and practices might not be in our immediate control. However, as individuals we can set up personal accountability systems and practices. I did this by building a trusted group of people outside the agency who I could regularly check-in with. This group included organizers with groups that were accountable to, and building power-with, Black, brown, disabled, and low-income transit riders (the people most directly impacted by the decisions I was making). My accountability circle also included friends who would push back on me if they felt I was straying from my principles. These conversations helped me think through what work I should prioritize, let me collect some initial feedback on ideas, and better understand the calculus of risk-taking and compromise. (More on compromise in Part 5.)

I interviewed other transit agency staff who had similar practices. A key commonality was using relationships we developed before we worked in government. This speaks to a need for a revolving door between government and community organizations (instead of the proverbial revolving door between government jobs and the private sector work). Experience in both sectors builds the organizing skills, perspectives, and relationships needed to do this work.

Staying true to yourself

Because of my personal experience in the world as a gender-queer person, I often think about the concept of 'passing'. It can be a privilege to fit in and not have people question whether you belong there, and not to suffer the feeling of not 'belonging' in a space or role. At first, my race and credentials allowed me to 'pass' with colleagues I disagreed with politically, and they sometimes said things that I found shocking. Fitting in made me uncomfortable. Was I not being true to myself? Or was my 'passing' allowing me to build trust I could use to make change?

To be candid, fear of losing access by making powerful people too uncomfortable limited how far I pushed things. At the same time, I didn't want fear of discomfort to prevent me from speaking up. The untenable balancing act is learning how to build relationships with everyone so you can get things done, without allowing yourself, colleagues, and decision-makers to accept and increase injustice. (I suspect that this is a struggle people of color experience all the time that I, as a white person, stumbled into while trying to make change from inside an agency.) To find balance, I used the principle that if we build political capital in order to make future changes, we have to actually spend that capital in pursuit of making those changes. We have to resist the tendency to hoard capital; whether the capital is good-will, relationships, or information.

Of course, the approach will depend on the situation. Sometimes we have to be more undercover and spend energy building our relationships and base of support. This can mean trying to get other people to believe an idea is theirs so that they champion it. It can mean choosing not to take risks when you can't afford to either professionally or emotionally. We have to consider the political, professional, and personal ramifications of our actions. Not to discourage ourselves, but to be savvy, strategic, and have support networks in place (see Part 6).

The line between selling out and making change

One of the major projects I took on was fare policy. This put me in the position of presenting on proposed fare increases. In this position, I was able to analyze policy changes to increase student and youth access to reduced or free fares advocated for by community groups. And I made sure these changes were in the final proposal. On the day of the Board vote, I was at the podium when the audience started protesting. Security cleared the Board members out of the room, and they wanted me to go with them. I froze for a moment not knowing what to do. I supported the protesters, but I also wanted to influence what leadership was going to do. So, I went into the backroom with the Board. I pushed back against negative characterizations of the protesters and opposed calling the police. In the end, no one was arrested and the fare increase passed with the youth benefits. I feel I remained true to my values by pushing for the changes that were within reach and trying to limit the negative impacts; others can disagree or find other lines for themselves.

Part 4: Internal Organizing

For institutions to change, people have to act outside the accepted norms. Simply put, but hard in practice. It takes intentionality to reject the structures of power and group-think and instead build alternative models. This requires creating space for self-reflection and personal growth which is often not the hallmark of government agencies. As the Government Alliance for Race and Equity (GARE) puts it, we have to be "normalizers, organizers, and operationalizers for racial equity"[10].

The fortress mentality

In a government agency that is public facing, such as a transit agency, it is easy to fall into the *fortress mentality*. The fortress mentality is caused by your agency getting publicly attacked all the time, and often with criticism that doesn't include a nuanced understanding of the complex

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[10] From a GARE report on organizing for racial equity within federal agencies.

challenges employees face on a daily basis. Statements like 'why doesn't the [agency] *just* do X' are common. You and your colleagues either laugh or cry at the overly simplistic idea of being able to change anything without accounting for the domino effect that one change has on intertwined systems, teams, and services. A common response is a group defense mechanism that pulls up the proverbial draw-bridge to the fortress, which also has the effect of filtering out the reasonable and justified criticism the agency should consider.

I knew that most of my colleagues were incredibly hard-working and dedicated to providing transit service with the resources at hand every day. So I could understand our collective defensiveness. At the same time, I knew that the service wasn't serving the community needs, especially for riders of low-income, Black and brown communities, and riders with disabilities. I could understand the criticism that called out the inequities. I could only get out of the defensive posture by evaluating the situation at an institutional level, not a personal level.

The employees' daily frustrations with trying to run the transit service are the result of a series of decisions about resources; the same decisions also create our riders' daily frustration with that service. And these decisions don't just happen by accident. The decisions are made by people in our existing power-over structures.

It was a continuous process to remind myself to think systemically and to hear rider and employee voices, even when it made me feel defensive. My personal practice of accountability, and being a transit system rider myself, helped me to expand the voices I was hearing. I also researched, read, and talked to friends to grow my understanding of the historical decisions that created the current conditions experienced by riders.

I worked to infuse this thinking into my interactions with colleagues. I would reframe conversations about community organizations and public feedback to include historical context. I tried to normalize talking about racism and its persistent impacts. As insiders, we have to push back on the internal narratives about which community organizations are or

aren't 'doing it right,' especially when the negative narratives target base-building organizations within Black and brown communities. For example, I would suggest that if organizations are making 'attacks' the agency believes to be unfair, then the agency needs to provide more clear and accessible information.

I learned to be intentional about self-reflection because the pace of work and the ethos of the agency didn't create space or time for reflection. (I call this culture a *crisis treadmill* since we couldn't stop operating and all that changed was the speed and intensity of the crises.) One of the ramifications of the fortress mentality is that it is hard to grow when you feel constantly under attack. I worked to create opportunities for self- and group reflection for my team, and I shared this practice with agency management in a strategic planning process I helped lead.

Small tangent on performance metrics
An internal debate is whether an agency's performance metrics should measure how well the agency provides the service they have the resources to provide or whether the agency is providing 'good' service. Operations staff make a fair argument that they should not be judged against a standard they can never meet without more resources. But in order to know what resources are needed to provide 'good' service there has to be a clear definition and measure. The best answer is to have both types of standards, but this tension is useful to illustrate the conflict between judging an agency on what they can do, and judging them on what they should do.

Internal coalition building

Information as power also plays out internally. Inside a large bureaucracy, departments often hoard information or enforce the rules in their domain on other departments as a reaction to their general disempowerment. In a situation where leadership doesn't give you resources or ask for your input on decisions that impact your work, it is

a human response to want to use the tools you have to retain some power over your situation. (It is possible, and common, for people without large amounts of power to use power-over tactics.)

I learned that getting things done inside the agency was pretty similar to community organizing. I need to build diverse coalitions inside that took into account the different cultures and experiences of various departments. One of my main tools was creating internal decision-making processes that were empowering for my colleagues. We still worked in a hierarchical organization, but, similar to community engagement, I could share information and create conditions to encourage collaboration. I attempted to make explicit which decisions would be made at what level, how people's input would be used, and then I reported back. I also did a lot of listening and helped my colleagues strategize how to get what they needed to address barriers. One transit staffer I spoke to shared that they have their own internal communication tools with other departments to build support and share analysis. (If an organization is run as a 'favor economy', it helps to be helpful!)

Engrained bureaucracies are incredibly frustrating to try to change. One common response I have seen from some newcomers to the public sector, particularly those coming in with a tech mindset, is 'disrupting' or breaking things. This approach lacks an institutional level analysis of power or the historical context of why things are the way they are now. So the approach comes across as personal, 'we (newcomers) know better how to fix the problems than you (people who generally have devoted their careers to public service) do'. This type of approach fails to build coalitions and build power. And disrupting isn't a permanent solution because it does not change the systems that created the problems. While this can be used to create some shiny new things, the solutions usually aren't sustainable.

Change takes a long time. The strategic question of the balance between incremental and transformative institutional change is a constant. For my first four years, I essentially used bugs I found in the governance

system to strategically push forward incremental changes that improved equity externally. Examples include lower fares for youth and students, and more early morning bus service. These changes made a material impact for communities, but I realized they weren't fixing the structural problems with the institution.

I made a decision to switch to working for more transformative change in how the agency made decisions internally. I, along with others, tried to get more communication and collaborative decision-making processes embedded into how the agency operates and we pushed for the agency to address problems raised by Black and brown employees (and women). I found this internal work to be much harder and changing the agency culture required a much bigger coalition than I had.

The people I had pushed to make decisions to allocate some resources more equitably were not interested in changing how decisions were made or addressing toxic workplace culture. I had to use more political capital and faced more personal risk pushing for equity changes for employees than for riders.

I have heard people say "*don't try to change an institution unless you have the power to do so*." I suspect people usually mean you are in a position of power to do so. I am not convinced one has to be in a position of power to change institutions, but I know we have to build the power together. The external equity work I did was in collaboration with community organizations pushing from the outside. For internal equity work we need to find ways for more external support.

Strategic implementation

Equity requires policy changes, and it requires implementation of those changes. Implementation means people and systems must change. In this case, I don't mean systems in a theoretical sense, I am referring to the functional systems inside an agency. For example, the business processes used in hiring, and discipline, or complaints; the technical systems that schedule the vehicles and drivers; or the physical infrastructure to maintain and charge electric buses.

Implementation requires process people who think about how the organization works and how to change interconnected systems. Often this means creating the space and process for coordination between planners and implementers within the organization. There are many theories on change management in complex organizations. I won't pretend to be an expert on them, but I found that having community organizing skills will take you a long way.

One of the best things someone said about me when I left the T was that I am tactfully relentless. A major part of making change inside is knowing what you are trying to achieve and not giving up. This means being reliable and having follow-through. It means being strategic and being ready when you see an opening.

In my personal experience, and in the experiences of other agency staff I talked to, often we did a lot of work on a project below the radar (below the leadership level) and waited for an opening to present it. And the more people we already had in our coalition, the better.

All of this groundwork was useful in the summer of 2020 when the Black Lives Matter protests created external pressure on agencies to take visible steps on equity. One transit staffer told me they were able to go to their leadership and essentially say 'we happen to have all this work on how we can incorporate equity into our performance metrics and all of these other departments have already seen the work and think they can do it.' Another tip was the importance of sharing peer examples with leadership so they didn't feel like they were going to make waves.

I realized that the ability to be effective at implementation was often related to where people were in the organizational structure. Unfortunately, many implementation problems are created by the specifics of the organizational structure. If you want to do implementation work, think about a career pathway to departments or positions that work across silos and are sheltered from daily operational crisis.

Part 5: Building Inside-Outside Relationships

Change-makers internally and externally need to build relationships using power-with strategies within the overall power-over hierarchical system that we work in. Relationships should be grounded in the creative tension between support and accountability. The tension part is how agency staff and community organizers can support and hold each other accountable at the same time; the creative part is using that tension to drive change.

In general, individuals working inside agencies need to be held accountable for the decisions they make within the existing power structures and be supported to take risks and push to change those power structures. While we are working for change inside, we need the work that community organizers do to hold our agency accountable and we can't take that personally (unless of course we made the decision in question, and then we should accept feedback graciously). We will be uncomfortable at times, and hopefully we can use the discomfort to grow and widen our vision of what is possible.

Figuring out our role in a community led effort
As insiders working for transit justice, we should see our role as supporting community led efforts. This requires having a nuanced understanding of the ecosystem of CBOs and different organizations' accountability to marginalized and under-resourced communities.

When I started at the MBTA, there was a community campaign for lower fares for youth and improvements to the student pass program that was led by Black and brown students. Because of their leadership, I trusted their solution and I focused my efforts on designing a pilot program that could be implemented in a way that gathered the necessary data to get permanent policy changes adopted. Later in my tenure, a transit advocacy group that wasn't rooted in or accountable to marginalized

communities made a proposal for overnight bus service. I appreciated the political momentum they brought to the issue, but I wasn't sure their proposed solution would address the service needs of overnight riders. I focused my efforts on working with the advocates, partners who worked with overnight riders, and our internal experts to gather and analyze data to design service proposals that would benefit early morning and late-night riders.

Change-making frameworks

A significant barrier to successful inside-outside collaboration is the scope of the vision for change. Inside agency work is usually making incremental change. Working inside, it is easy to get bogged down and overwhelmed by the amount of work needed and then dismiss transformative ideas as impossible. ***We need both the transformational vision that a just world is possible, and the incremental work to make changes starting in the world we have right now.*** We can make incremental change while we build towards transformation change!

With a framework of both/and for incremental and transformative change, we can see all of the roles in the internal and external change-making ecosystems. This allows us to support different types of change-making work and try to minimize the conflicts between them.

One of the transit equity organizers I interviewed shared another useful framework called "build/burn". In this framework, we identify what systems, institutions, and policies can be built upon or reformed and what systems, institutions, and policies need to be scrapped and reimagined. This framework helps us understand where incremental change can work and where only transformative change will do. These frameworks are applicable to both inside and outside organizers.

These frameworks can help us think about compromise in our work. It is difficult to know when to keep pushing for a harder won, more just outcome and when to compromise and use your energy elsewhere. Single issue decisions should take place within the context of our larger strategy of change-making. We should ask questions like, will this

compromise help us gain another victory or prevent one, and what are the benefits or risks of continuing to wait for an opportunity for a better outcome. We aren't giving up; we are compromising because it makes sense right now and in our long game.

Now I view compromise through the lenses of incremental and transformative change and build/burn. I ask whether a compromise on a particular issue, even if it makes incremental process, will damage the transformative work? We need the incremental changes to build a bridge to

Tactics can differ inside and outside

Tactics	Inside	Outside
Build		
Burn		

Ideally agreement on what goes in each category here

transformative change, not jeopardize it. Will a compromise allow an institution/policy/system that needs to be scrapped to continue to cause harm? It is likely you will only find the answers to these questions by talking to partners who are working on transformative change.

My accountability practice helped me learn when to compromise. I would check with my community partners on decisions impacting riders. For internal decisions, I had friends from outside the agency help me stay in touch with my values.

Informal relationships

It is worth noting that power-over systems use informal relationships (generally transactional ones) to influence decisions by giving an advantage to people and organizations who already have power and access. This is why a key equity demand is changing decision-making processes to be transparent and inclusive. We need to use our informal relationships to try to counter the structural lack of access and to change the nature of relationships from transactional to power building.

Relationships, in general, need to be built on shared goals and trust. They take time to develop, especially if they didn't exist before one works in an agency. One equity organizer I interviewed stressed that there can be differences in approach, but you must have a shared goal

of liberation and freedom for all people. Liberatory work is hard work and there will be growing pains and missteps along the way; so clear communication and a willingness to grow from feedback are needed. An agency staff member stressed that relationships need to be mutually beneficial and allow the exchange of talent, skills, and information in ways that don't add burden or harm.

The transit organizers and staff that I spoke with said that they often found each other at meetings hosted by third parties (like cities or MPOs) and where their interests were aligned. I also made an effort to attend community events to listen to and get to know people outside of formal meetings. It is good practice at first to check beforehand to know which spaces you are welcome in. Organizers stressed that agency staff should be proactive and reach out. As in all relationships, we need to be reliable and transparent.

Sidebar for community organizers
Relationships are not a one-way street. Some tips for organizers:

- Allow people to correct mistakes before putting them on blast publicly
- Understand there are internal risks and protect confidences
- Push back, but believe some of the complexity is real
- Understand how governance shapes what agency partners can say and do publicly
- Consider not just **what** you want the agency to do, but **how** to make it an agency that can accomplish those goals
- Ask how you can support internal equity work led by employees

Sharing information
Within informal relationships, I shared background information that helped organizers assess the difficulties of achieving their goals and shape their strategy. Agencies can use many reasons why they aren't doing something and it is helpful for organizers to have an internal assessment of the difficulty of overcoming the existing barriers or know when there is an unspoken reason they need to understand. Agencies

sometimes use technical complexity to obscure the relative challenges. From the outside, it can be difficult to keep track of all the agendas of meetings or even to parse the exact meaning of agenda items. So, I gave people a heads up when an issue that impacted them was on the agenda for a board or public meeting, so they could comment.

Sharing information with community organizations might feel 'not allowed', but we have to remember that people in powerful external organizations have access to insider information. They have people who call to tip them off when their interests might be at risk. Also, controlling access to information and meetings with executives is a way that some agencies' leaders try to keep community organizations from holding them accountable.

Pushing for more transparency and open data is another way to counter the imbalance of power. At the MBTA, we released quantitative data through our performance dashboard and open data website. But I realized that releasing raw data wasn't enough. Data often requires context to be meaningfully understood and useful. This is why we also [created a datablog](#), and why I also created a [transit data primer](#).

Strategy and governance

One's role in an organization determines exactly how one can advance community campaigns from the inside. The relationships will guide the strategy on a personal level. On an institutional level, the inside-outside strategy is influenced by the governance of the transit agency.

When I was a transit organizer in Atlanta, I was able to work directly with agency (MARTA) leadership to support transit in the Georgia legislature. Because MARTA was governed and funded by local governments, they could advocate for themselves with the state government. (This advocacy was needed because of the racist history of Georgia controlling MARTA's own funding.) In contrast, the MBTA is part of Massachusetts state government meaning the Governor decides which legislation and policy positions agency leadership are permitted to publicly support. To make change effectively, the MBTA needs outside

organizers to push for most changes with the state legislature, while MARTA's governance structure at the time meant they could work alongside organizers to advocate for legislation the Governor opposed.

The Red X campaign

In 2010, MARTA needed a Georgia law changed to prevent service cuts. Then GM, Dr. Bev Scott, worked with the leadership of the workers' union (ATU) and transit organizers (including me) to develop a strategy. On a predetermined day, agency workers painted large red Xs on the side of one-third of the fleet of buses and rail cars, creating a visual aid to illustrate the impact of service cuts. My group organized two rallies and a march to the State House asking riders to get involved and call for the law to be changed. The effort was successful at changing the law to minimize service impacts.

Formal relationships

There are a number of great resources and trainings on how to bring equity principles into public engagement[11]; I will just make some general comments. It is important to be aware of how power works in any formal process between communities and government agencies. Often agencies try to create public engagement processes where they keep the power, which means disempowering community members.

Azhar Chougle, former executive director of Transit Alliance Miami, shared with me that for trust to exist in a relationship both sides have to have power. Community organizations have to come to the table knowing they can take an outside route to push back, if needed. Even if it makes agency staff uncomfortable, we need to understand that community organizations get their power in part by going around the agency to the media or elected officials. As staff we should to actively reduce our personal, and the agency's, use of power-over in formal relationships and create processes that increase the power of community members.

Often people with power think trust implies safety, but it is important to ask ourselves what we mean by safety, and whose safety we are assuming. As agency staff, we are often asking people who have been harmed by our agency's past decisions to trust us. Earning their trust likely means we have to take risks, feel uncomfortable, or change in ways that might not feel totally 'safe' for us.

Purpose of formal relationships

How much you can shape formal agency relationships with community organizations depends on your position in an organization. More formal relationships can include public engagement for planning projects or policy changes, ongoing advisory committees, specific equity efforts, or general customer/rider experience. Ideally, agencies should not focus on

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[11] As one example, the Thrivance Group offers Dignity Institute and trainings on Ethics of Community Engagement.

the form of engagement, and instead emphasize long-term relationship building. (This type of relationship building can require changing how public engagement gets funded and staffed.)

Depending on the state of relationships and the strategy, different types of formal interactions are appropriate. One is creating spaces that allow people to build trust, understand each other's challenges, and work together collaboratively to find solutions. Many types of knowledge are needed to solve complex problems, including lived experience and the technocratic knowledge of how internal systems work. Usually agency staff prefers to do what will be simplest for them, and most community organizations don't know what will be complicated. An interesting example of agency and community collaboration is the Miami bus network redesign[12].

Given the inertia of government agencies, we will only get transformational change when agencies are pushed past what staff think is doable.

Another type of interaction is creating space for healthy conflict. Sometimes, conflict is needed to publicly push issues forward and create political urgency that applies pressure on leadership or elected decision-makers. If agency staff see their role as defusing conflict, then the concerns of the community might never reach decision-makers. Agency staff can informally advise on how to make potential conflict effective or, if governance allows, they may collaborate on the conflict with another decision-maker (e.g. the MARTA Red Xs example).

It is important for agency staff to be transparent with community partners when creating space for conflict; we shouldn't try to create community pushback for our own purposes. Releasing proposals to generate community pushback as part of an internal strategy undermines trust with community organizations and riders.

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[12] Check out this [podcast about the Miami Redesign process](#).

Who is included

Another role for change-making staff is to make sure that when agencies have formal engagement processes (advisory committees, stakeholder briefings, etc.) the organizations that regularly hold the agency accountable are included. (One agency staffer called these the "organizations that will speak the truth".) Going back to information/access being a form of power, sometimes agencies exclude community organizations known to speak up, and organizations that hold what agencies may consider to be the most 'extreme or disruptive' positions. These types of exclusions are highly correlated with Black and brown led organizations. Internally agency staff must push against this tendency.

Both organizers and agency staff I spoke to acknowledged this exclusion happens or is feared. Organizers talked about different roles in the ecosystem and being aware that if they pushed too hard they risked losing a convener or a partner relationship with the agency. Some organizers said they wouldn't accept a partner role with their agency so they could maintain their role of holding the agency accountable. Staff members said they tried to make sure that organizations that held the agency accountable were still invited to participate in agency meetings and to counter the internal narratives about which organizations were 'good'.

Another common challenge is that some grasstop or convener organizations claim to represent riders, when they do not. In this case, it is important to make sure that grassroots base-building organizations or even direct service organizations are included in formal relationships. Direct service organizations aren't always building power-with their members, but they can help agencies reach riders directly.

The trade-offs conversations

Often transit agencies' public engagement processes are about trade-offs. An agency usually frames trade-offs between things they can directly control. For example, this is how much money the agency has for service, so the question is where should the service go. This agency

framing requires that the public accept the stated amount of money as a non-negotiable and prohibits discussion of getting more funding. But the riders live in the real world where all of the decisions are interconnected and accepting this frame limits the vision and possible outcomes. See Figure 5 for an illustration of how different frames work.

Figure 5. Community Reframing

This framing problem comes back to the issue of how we can do incremental and transformative change work at the same time. How can we structure engagement processes to allow for multiple frames simultaneously, so that incremental work can proceed while we build toward the transformative outcomes? We have to be aware of how the agency framing is limiting, and how to best engage with riders' reframing of problems and potential solutions.

Framing is frustrating because it is rare to find a decision-making tables where all level of trade-off conversations can happen. The fragmentation of decisions between levels of government and various agencies makes organizing for change so much harder. We have to be able to map the big picture and contextualize our part of the work within it. And then share that map with the community or even make it with them.

Acknowledging the past harm

A key component of building community trust is acknowledging past harms. Current inequitable outcomes didn't simply happen; they are the result of past and ongoing decisions, big and small.

I set out to find some examples of transit agencies acknowledging past inequitable decisions. And I found very few. The US DOT in the Biden Administration did acknowledging the harmful impacts of highway projects. Hopefully this is an example that staff within state DOTs and transit agencies can use to move leadership to make specific acknowledgements.

Community organizers and transit staff that I spoke with said the challenge is that acknowledgement is only the first step. To be authentic, agencies need to acknowledge, then repair the harm, and redesign policy and infrastructure to ensure that past harms won't be repeated. As one staff member said, "Government culture is liability driven. There is not a culture of atonement and apology."

The centering of legal liability is a huge challenge for making racial justice changes in government. It drives both external policies and how agencies address internal employee complaints and concerns. As an individual, it is difficult to know how to address the reality that the institution was designed to protect itself and not people. We, the inside and outside people, need to continue to work on frameworks for moving from liability to accountability, and create incremental and transformative plans for how to make this change.

Part 6: The Emotional Labor

Organizations require emotional labor to function. Transit agencies are a collection of people that have to work together to accomplish difficult and stressful tasks every day. The emotional labor that allows general functioning is rarely acknowledged and is not evenly distributed. Usually this labor falls on women, in particular Black and brown women. Dealing with the harm caused by racism and sexism creates even more

emotional labor for these same organizational caretakers. And after all that, the work to try to make changes is also emotional labor. Exhausting!

Part of the internal equity work is, first, acknowledging this emotional labor is necessary and, second, creating systems to make sure emotional labor is compensated and valued. The work includes creating and protecting space for the people who are most burdened by the distribution of emotional labor to get the support they want or need. Sometimes this is done through affinity groups.

Doing equity work requires support systems. I learned from experience that there are high emotional costs. We have to celebrate our victories, but also process and mourn our losses. It helps when we have names for the complex range of emotions this work creates. Knowing more than you can say publicly in order to be able to stay in your job and make change in the future is a special kind of exhausting.

Given that it can be risky to publicly share the details of our internal work, we need a support network. For all the pop culture talk of self-care, what we need now is squad-care[13]. I relied on the care of my accountability partners and friends at other agencies. GARE is one support network, but is only available for people whose government agencies commit to joining. For folks in agencies without explicit leadership support, we have to find each other in informal spaces.

Finally, we have to protect ourselves. We might love our work and serving the public. But as I learned from Dr. Tressie McMillan Cottom "the institution will never love you back."[14] It cannot love you because it is an institution, not only without emotions, but designed to protect itself. We have to emotionally, mentally, and sometimes physically separate ourselves from our institutions. This means sometimes we have to leave. Either to join another agency that hopefully will value our work more, or to join the ranks of the outside organizers.

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[13] The term "Squad Care" comes courtesy of Dr. Melissa Harris-Perry.
[14] You can find Dr. McMillan Cottom online and in the NY Times.

Hope and Opportunities

It is hard to have hope in the current backlash against the racial justice awakening of 2020. At the very least the current climate provides a sense of urgency to the work. I do think there are some stirrings of hope and opportunities within the constant crises and violence.

I have noticed that "majority" people (who see themselves in predominately white decision-makers) focus their policy discussions in transportation and transit on the 'what.' EVs or transit, free fares or more frequency, this rail line, or that type of bike treatment. Not only will changing one decision at a time be a long slog, it won't address the underlying problem of 'who' is making the decisions and 'how' decisions are being made. Thinking outside the box of the current power structures requires imagination.

Black and brown communities continue to do the creative labor of imagining different ways that power can operate. This work shows up in the Movement for Black Lives, the Squad in Congress, and on a smaller scale in neighborhood mutual aid that blossomed during the COVID pandemic, and the work shows in Black Joy events. The imagination work is critical[15]. Luckily, there are lots of people and community-centered organizations with transformative visions leading change efforts for how transportation decision-making, and its outcomes, can be dignified, equitable, and just[16].

This work is happening against the backdrop of the (continued) attack in the US on the idea of democracy. There has been a concerted effort throughout US history to prevent the government from protecting and serving the needs of Black and brown people. (The current incarnation is in response to the civil rights gained in the 1960s.) Part of the creative tension between the incremental and transformative work is how we

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[15] Dr. Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* helped me realize this. This article is a powerful summary of the need for imagination work and highlighting of people doing this work.
[16] One example is Equicity's community mobility rituals.

build support for the possibility of functioning government while holding it accountable. We need the incremental changes of the short-term to show that government *can* work for all communities in order to build momentum and support for a truly equitable multi-racial democracy.

One of the largest challenges to transit recovery from the pandemic will be recruiting and retaining enough workers. Even before the pandemic transit agencies were unable to hire enough people, especially in front-line positions, and the pandemic made it worse. There are a multitude of reasons why transit jobs are not attractive to today's workforce, and these reasons include internal toxic cultures, disempowering decision making, and poor working conditions. This workforce 'shortage' clearly links the internal and external equity work together. To have enough safe and reliable transit service for our communities, transit agencies are going to have to change working conditions for employees.

This means inside-outside coalitions are critical. Luckily, the solutions to internal and external equity are similar; we have to change by whom, for whom, and how decisions are made. Transit worker unions should play a central role as the representatives of the majority of the workforce. To center equity, unions, just like agencies and community organizations, have to examine their internal power dynamics to make sure they are working in the interest of all workers, including under-represented, younger, and future workers. We need to find more ways that community organizations can support the efforts to solve the workforce challenges and internal equity work.

It can be challenging for transit workers to speak-up because of fear of reprisals and the history of public employees not being encouraged to have a public voice. Today, social media offer platforms for government workers to talk about their experiences publicly and build community with organizers externally. I see examples of this, especially from younger workers who grew-up in the age of social media. This development is promising for breaking down some of the opaque nature of government.

To be successful we need to find ways to further our relationship building and create support networks for each other that cross the inside-outside boundaries. I write and engage because I want to create opportunities to continue the conversation and grow in community. Please reach out!

Resources

In addition to the footnotes and links, here are a few more resources.

Race Matters: Organizational Self-Assessment is a tool to determine how your organizational is working on racial equity work.

Community Science and Center for Neighborhood Technology released a guide on different types of tools for assessing equity impacts of transportation policy decisions.

This zine draws on related pieces I have written along the way.

Equity and Inclusion are Spatial in the Transit Center zine *Subtext* (page 7)
Addressing climate change and racism requires bureaucrats

Transit recovery requires addressing organizational trauma

For Justice in Transportation, We Cannot Just be Planners, in *State of Transportation Planning 2002*