

The Year of “Yes, and...”

One of the most important and popular concepts we teach in our innovation workshops is “Yes, and...” Borrowed from improv comedy, it is an approach that builds upon what others suggest rather than blocking the flow of possibilities. So, when an opportunity or idea is suggested, rather than responding with ways the idea wouldn’t work - which often feels like the responsible thing to do, the protocol – no matter what the suggestion – is to respond with an enthusiastic “Yes, and...”, then build on the idea in wonderful and unexpected directions.

2017 has been a catalytic year for CoreAlign and “Yes, and....”

Yes, the Presidential election was a crisis, **and** we were willing to see it as an opportunity to redesign our work to meet the urgent demand for innovation and multiracial collaboration. The subsequent [programmatic and organizational pivot](#) felt powerful and purposeful.

Yes, in the middle of the pivot, I was recruited to apply for a faculty position at [The New School](#)¹ in New York. **And** – rather than dismissing the invitation as scary and improbable – along with the CoreAlign staff, I opened up to the possibilities this opportunity could bring.

In August, I was offered a full professorship at The New School in the [Milano School of Management and Urban Policy](#); teaching organizational management, leadership, social movements and innovation. As of September 1st, I will spend half my time at The New School and half as Executive Director of CoreAlign – all the while exploring the possibilities that this intersection creates for the organization and the work.

Throughout the application and negotiation process, I made sure that staff was kept informed and had multiple opportunities to reflect on the implications of this move for themselves personally and for their positions, and for them to think about what they could be saying “Yes, and...” to.

The new role will let us collectively build on CoreAlign’s learnings around leadership, movement-building, innovation and race; and explore new platforms for achieving CoreAlign’s vision. While it could have felt irresponsible to consider this job opening during our pivot, responding with “Yes, and...” instead has led to amazing new relationships, learnings, colleagues, resources and possibilities.

I will work in both positions through December of 2018, giving the organization and staff time to explore possibilities at The New School and with our friends and allies in the movement; to both find the best ways to build on CoreAlign’s significant body of work, and to leverage opportunities for moving forward.

¹ Founded in 1919, The New School was born out of principles of academic freedom, tolerance and experimentation. Committed to social engagement, The New School today remains in the vanguard of innovation in higher education, with more than 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students challenging the status quo in design and the social sciences, liberal arts, management, the arts and media. The New School welcomes thousands of adult learners annually for continuing education courses and a calendar of lectures, screenings, readings and concerts. Through its online learning portals, research institutes and international partnerships, The New School maintains a global presence. Learn more at www.newschool.edu.

Background

Since its inception, CoreAlign has tackled system-level challenges in the reproductive health, rights and justice movement. Rather than focusing on specific policies, strategies or services, CoreAlign was designed to address *how* leaders and organizations operated, by building their skills and capacities and creating opportunities for long-term strategizing for the whole movement, all while being responsive to the specific political and social challenges of the moment.

The first iteration of CoreAlign in 2012, **CoreAlign 1.0**, was rooted in the legislative landscape of 2010-2011, when anti-choice advocates introduced 1,100 pieces of legislation. While they only had a 9% success rate, they successfully passed more than 100 bills restricting access to abortion and contraception and institutionalizing a restrictive culture for women. And this was just the beginning of the tidal wave of legislation that had been building for more than 20 years. In that same time period, pro-choice groups had only introduced two pieces of legislation, with most of the movement leadership and resources concentrated on the east and west coasts, far away from the south and central parts of the country where most of the restrictive legislation was getting passed. Envisioned as a “think and do tank”, CoreAlign programming was designed to increase the number of innovative ideas in the movement, increase the capacity of leaders to work collaboratively and bring key leaders together to craft a 30-year strategy.

CoreAlign 2.0 was launched in the fall of 2014, based on the hard-won wisdom that systems-level transformation required change at scale. CoreAlign began operating out of a *tipping point* theory of change where the focus shifted from a few innovative ideas and leaders, to leaders as innovators, to building a shared culture and practice of innovation, collaboration and impact across the whole movement. The operating hypothesis was that if we could increase the capacity for 100-200 leaders a year in innovation, speaking race to power and collaboration, we could collectively reach a tipping point where the culture and norms within the movement would shift towards innovative and collaborative strategizing among leaders, in organizations and in networks for movement-level change.

A combination of the 2016 presidential elections and a five-year impact assessment ushered in **CoreAlign 3.0**. From [Learning for Action's](#) (LFA) 5-year evaluative impact report of CoreAlign's programs, we learned that we were more effective at creating change at the individual leader level, but less effective at the organizational and movement level:

“CoreAlign enables *individual* RHRJ leaders to be more innovative and collaborative, and to address longstanding racial and power dynamics. These efforts, however, have not yet yielded broader *organizational-and movement-level* changes: These will require greater scale across leaders.” (emphasis added)

Following the 2016 elections, CoreAlign, like many, did significant soul searching about how to best meet the current challenges. Based on the hypothesis that the long-term success of resistance and rebellion in this political moment depends on the ability of leaders *to think and do their work differently*, and to work in effective *multiracial collaborations*, CoreAlign shifted its work to meet these two needs, while streamlining and scaling up. We set our goal as training and supporting 300 – 500 leaders a year in innovation and speaking race to power. We sprinted through a significant redesign of our programs and staff – away from organizing in the south and central parts of the country and 6-

month fellowships in innovation and speaking race, to weekly 1 -2 day workshops and practice spaces around the country; building on our network of 200 fellows.

However, even through this transition we were aware of internal limitations of knowledge and expertise on a small team and the limits of scale given our organizational size and resources.

Now, with this 4.0 iteration of CoreAlign we hope to explore new possibilities and synergies – including leveraging new colleagues and knowledge at The New School in terms of innovation and leadership and a potentially bigger platform and infrastructure for scaling our programs and impact.

Alignment between CoreAlign and the New School

With its historic commitment to social justice, its new commitment to train the “innovative leaders of the future”, and a goal of bringing the world better “designed” systems, products and strategies, The New School is an exciting new home for CoreAlign’s prime directive of system-level breakthroughs in the reproductive (and other social justice) movements.

The New School’s commitment to public engagement and its mission to prepare students to “understand, contribute to, and succeed in a rapidly changing society, thus making the world a better and more just place” aligns with CoreAlign’s work in supporting people to fight for their sexual and reproductive rights.

While operating at different scales, both The New School and CoreAlign share core commitments to creativity, innovation, design, challenging the status quo, collaboration, co-creation and community engagement while remaining responsive and agile to the current political moment and conditions.

The Organizational Management and Leadership program offers a unique opportunity to scale up CoreAlign’s leadership and more recent organizational development work in innovation and multiracial collaboration, learn from the many new programs in innovative leadership that The New School has already implemented, and explore new opportunities to integrate theory and action and activism and academia more robustly.

Status of CoreAlign activities in 2017 and beyond

In 2017 CoreAlign shifted its focus from 6-month fellowships to a more efficient, cost-effective and accessible one-day workshop format, increasing our ability to offer more opportunities for leaders and activists to learn and practice innovation and speaking race in new formats

We set an ambitious target of training 300 – 500 leaders through workshops and in applied practice spaces. As of August 15, 2017, we are proud to report that we are ahead of our internal targets – more than 300 people have participated in innovation and multiracial collaboration trainings through one-day workshops, and over 75 leaders have been able to apply these practices within their teams and organizations with CoreAlign’s consulting and tailored support. With over 385 leaders trained so far, CoreAlign is confident that by the end of this year we will reach, if not exceed, our target of 500 leaders.



After experimenting with new workshop curriculum and design through the spring and summer of 2017, we have landed on a formula that 60% of our work will continue to be these foundational trainings and practice spaces and the remaining 40% of our time and resources will be used for new experiments and explorations at The New School.

The opportunities and challenges ahead for CoreAlign 4.0

Staff

Once The New School made its offer, staff consulted with the Advisory Group, funders and key allies and stakeholders to explore several scenarios for the future of CoreAlign and the work. These included:

- Searching for and hiring a new executive director
- Promoting a new ED from within
- Merging with or transitioning core programs to allied leadership development organizations
- Housing all current programs at The New School
- Shuttering the organization

As each of these scenarios would require significant time to explore, could entail substantial disruptions to the work, organization and staff, and funders were signaling a priority shift away from intermediary organizations and toward frontline ones, I negotiated with The New School for an initial 50% appointment and a 16-month runway to explore and test multiple scenarios.

In the meantime, our current roster of eight full-time people is expected to stay through the first year of this transition.

Sandra Criswell, the current Senior Manager of Programs, and Rohan Shamapant, Senior Manager of Operations will step up to lead the Oakland-based staff.

As new programs are designed, all staff will have the right of first refusal for any staff positions that could move to New York and The New School. The New School has a policy of free tuition for all employees, so some staff are excited about the option of a free graduate education or classes.

Programs

By the end of 2018, CoreAlign could have saturated the movement with individual-level change in innovation and multiracial collaboration. Based on the 2017 and 2018 program projections, CoreAlign will have trained between 900 – 1200 individuals by then; a significant achievement and necessary capacity building step. Even without The New School possibilities, this would be another moment of reinvention for the organization.

Scenarios that will be explored and tested in the coming months include:

- Moving foundational training programs to The New School
- Shifting to a consulting and revenue generating model so that the organization is less grant and foundation dependent
- Exploring the possibilities and cost/benefit of a more sustainable funding model and an executive director search
- Leveraging the students and classes at The New School to train, consult and resource organizations in the reproductive movement
- Hosting design sprints, convenings and workshops at The New School for the reproductive movement, bringing in potentially new leaders, resources and ideas
- Designing a more robust leadership development program at The New School for movement leaders through their Executive Education cohort-based platform in Organizational Change Management
- Integrating some of CoreAlign's vision into a possible new Master's Degree program in Race and Gender Justice Strategies at The New School

These experiments and prototypes harness the lessons CoreAlign has learned about turning individual- and organizational-level change into movement- and systems-level change. CoreAlign itself will need to transform, not merely try to sustain itself as an ongoing entity in its existing form.

In saying "Yes, and..." to The New School, CoreAlign is poised to explore and realize many exciting and unimagined possibilities that could lead to smarter, more effective work; more resources and more influence. If the staff had not been practicing this improvisational stance for a while, we could not have leaned into this potentially transformative, disruptive and exciting moment. We are collectively thrilled with this new direction and are madly dreaming about the new possibilities. **Yes**, CoreAlign is going to change again in a BIG way, **and** we hope you will continue to partner with us on this journey.