

The Importance of Convening Leaders Across the Americas Annually: Fostering Unity, Celebrating Shared History, and Empowering Underestimated Communities

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Abstract

Annually, the [Festival of the Diaspora](#) (FOTD), originally an initiative of the Aspen Institute’s Project on Belonging and now merged with [Casa Innovation](#), convenes leaders from across the Americas to foster unity, celebrate shared history, and empower underestimated communities. This article not only highlights FOTD’s unique approach to community organizing but also distills universal principles that can guide similar efforts worldwide, emphasizing the importance of “the other AI” (Ancestral Intelligence) and creating inclusive spaces.

Introduction

In our interconnected era, the Festival of the Diaspora (FOTD), emanating from the Aspen Institute’s Project on Belonging and now integrated with Casa Innovation, stands as a cornerstone event for community organizing. This annual convening of leaders across North, Central, and South America, as well as the Caribbean, offers an unparalleled opportunity to connect, celebrate, collaborate, and cultivate—practices essential for any effective community organizing effort.

Connecting Across Borders: Building a Unified Vision

Universal Principle: Collaborative Visioning

The success of FOTD in fostering unity and collaboration among diverse leaders offers a model for other organizations. By facilitating dialogues that allow for sharing visions, strategies, and best practices, FOTD demonstrates how collaborative visioning (*involves taking into account many voices/perspectives of stakeholders in the design process of the festival. We wanted them to feel a sense of ownership*) can overcome geographic and cultural barriers, a method applicable in any community organizing context.

FOTD represents an amalgamation of themes, interests, cultural expressions, and future-oriented public policy. Tying these disparate yet connected interests together was the objective of our collaborative visioning session. As a group, we agreed upon the following themes:

- **Fostering Diplomatic Relations and Peace:** Through regular and structured engagements, similar forums can enhance international diplomacy and community cohesion. For example, FOTD believes in the power of proximity, so we invite political and development leaders from the USA and host countries to speak together about foreign policy in panels and roundtables. These informal gatherings help these leaders forge relationships that could lead to better diplomatic relations.
- **Economic Collaboration:** Sharing insights on creating economic opportunities can help other organizations foster cross-border economic initiatives. For example, via our collaborative visioning approach, FOTD identifies issues for which public private partnerships are part of the solution. We then invite the solution team (e.g. philanthropy, impact fund, non-profit, etc.) to the same stage to talk through each part they played in getting to the solution to show the power of cross-sector collaboration.
- **Cultural Exchange and Understanding:** Emphasizing cultural exchange can enhance mutual respect and understanding across diverse groups, a critical element for any organizing effort. FOTD moves to a different city each year as we view ourselves as a learning organization. Each country we visit requires immersion by our stakeholders in order to curate a gathering that will result in 300+ leaders leaving our annual events with greater knowledge of our host countries. We emphasize exploration of each country's founding, explanation of its current diversity, and in-person displays of cultural expressions (e.g., music, dance, and art) during the festival.

Celebrating Shared History: A Foundation for Unity

At the heart of the FOTD's mission lies a dual commitment to the Universal Principle: Historical Consciousness and Collaborating for Positive Impact, Empowering Underestimated Communities. FOTD's dedication to celebrating shared histories and elevating indigenous contributions highlights the critical role of historical consciousness in community building. By prioritizing Ancestral Intelligence and inclusive principles like Connect, Celebrate, Collaborate, and Cultivate, FOTD exemplifies empowerment through inclusion. This approach ensures that all voices are not only heard but actively shape a collective future of unity and resilience.

Universal Principle: Historical Consciousness

FOTD's emphasis on celebrating shared histories and recognizing Indigenous contributions underscores the importance of historical consciousness in community organizing. Emphasizing "the other AI," Ancestral Intelligence informs current efforts and strengthens communal ties, offering a powerful lesson for other organizations.

Collaborating for Positive Impact: Empowering Underestimated Communities

Universal Principle: Empowerment through Inclusion

The core principles of Connect, Celebrate, Collaborate, and Cultivate at FOTD serve as a blueprint for empowering communities. These principles ensure that every community member feels included and valued, which is essential for the success of any organizing effort. The festival's approach of being "for us, by us, and with us" emphasizes the necessity of creating our own tables rather than being on the menu, ensuring that all voices are heard and contributing to shaping the future.

- **Connect:** Building networks that support knowledge exchange and partnership.
- **Celebrate:** Using cultural heritage and achievements to inspire and educate.
- **Collaborate:** Pooling resources and expertise to address communal challenges.
- **Cultivate:** Supporting sustainable growth through education, healthcare, and economic empowerment.

Discussion

Universal Principle: Navigating Challenges

The challenges faced by FOTD, such as political differences and resource allocation, are not unique. As a relatively new organization with a global team of volunteers, several questions have presented themselves as challenging opportunities:

- In what ways can sustainable funding models be integrated into organizational strategies to ensure long-term viability and resilience, as discussed in the context of FOTD's challenges?
- How important is inclusivity in resolving internal and external challenges faced by organizations? Discuss specific examples or strategies mentioned that foster inclusivity in diverse contexts.
- Why is impact measurement crucial for organizations facing challenges similar to those of FOTD? How can organizations implement effective impact measurement practices to enhance their outcomes and sustainability?

As a team, we will continue to iterate on approaches to answer the aforementioned and many other questions as they present themselves.

Conclusion

The annual convening of leaders at FOTD not only catalyzes substantial social change across the Americas but also serves as a model for similar efforts globally. By adopting FOTD's proven strategies of convening, celebrating, collaborating, and cultivating, other organizations can enhance their impact and foster a more inclusive and prosperous global community.