

CO-POWERING TO BATTLE EL NO

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A remarkable statement from Marianne Williamson begins, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." While inadequacy may not be our deepest fear, it is often a deep wound, and the truth is that too many of us carry feelings of inadequacy that limit us. To advance a healthier society we must understand what undermines our power and how we become empowered. Toward this end, this chapter elaborates on the concept of EL NO, the negativity that limits our power, and co-powering, the process of empowering others and our relationships.

The Great Turning, the shifting of our world to the positive, requires all caring people to accept and develop their power to make good happen for themselves, their families, and our society. Key to this goal is developing our skills to empower each other. We can do this by engaging in co-powering communication, and consciously confronting the negativity that undermines our personal, family, and community power.

There are multiple reasons why we are not advancing the positive change we desire in the world. One central reason is that as individuals, families, or communities we are not fully owning and developing our power. Many of us have been socialized or brainwashed to accept an image of ourselves that limits our ability to fully tap our knowledge, talents, and energy to achieve what is important to us. A vast majority of our society struggles with varying degrees of a nagging self-doubt that says, I am not good, smart, or worthy

enough to achieve my personal goals, let alone the larger goals for community change. Therefore, a critical task of all activists is to be the friend and coach who aids family, friends, and others to love themselves and accept their power.

Every day we have numerous occasions to interact with family, friends, or associates. Whether it is extending a "good morning," a casual conversation, or a significant communication, we have the choice of making it ordinary or inspiring. For me, quality communication occurs when we consciously choose to lift the confidence of the other, as well as of oneself. Co-powering occurs when our actions develop the power of the other, our relationship, and ourselves, toward advancing a greater good for all.

Our society bombards us with such negativity that large numbers of people struggle with depression and powerlessness. They feel they are not worthy to be loved or intelligent enough to succeed. We can turn this around and nurture a culture of self-confidence and a "can do" attitude by actively engaging in co-powering. We start with families and friends, and continue with our co-workers and neighbors. Ultimately, the Great Turning requires a movement in which everyone actively participates in raising each other's personal and collective power.

Our Worst Enemy: EL NO

It is amazing how a simple idea can have a tremendous impact on the way we view ourselves and upon our ability to reclaim our power. This is the case with *EL NO*, a concept we invented within the Latino community to explain the dynamics of disenfranchisement we experienced as working class, nonwhite people. Yet, understanding its dynamics among Latinos provides invaluable insights for all caring people into why *all of us* are not fully utilizing our power, and what needs to be done to liberate each other and our greater society from the negativity that undermines our personal and community power. Because I believe that understanding *EL NO* is fundamental to effective family activism, I ask that you apply both your mind and heart to the following discussion. I believe it will make you a far more sensitive person and effective activist.

Have you ever experienced a feeling of self-doubt or panic coupled with an internal voice screaming, "You can't do it"? This is the voice of *EL NO*. Within our minds, we all have a voice that affirms our power, saying, "Hey, you can do it!" and another that negates our power, usually loudly saying, "You're too dumb and stupid, so forget even trying." When we established *El Centro de Salud Mental* (the Mental Health Center) in 1973, its explicit mission was to empower Latino individuals and families. The following presents what we learned about the disenfranchising process of *EL NO* and consequently the process of empowerment. Because we worked on this issue in Spanish, I use key Spanish words to explain how we came to unravel this phenomenon that actually affects all people.

During the early years of *El Centro de Salud Mental*, our staff dedicated a meeting each month to dialogue about strategies for people empowerment. At one such meeting, Francisco M. Hernandez shared about the challenges he was encountering in recruiting Chicano youth to learn the skill of silk-screening.² His objective was to build self-esteem by providing youth a means for self-expression by designing messages for posters or T-shirts. However, as he approached young people, he continually heard the same response, "*No puedo*" (I can't do it). Immediately several of our counselors responded that his experience resonated with what they were hearing from clients when challenged to create change for themselves: "*No puedo*." With hesitancy, many of us recalled experiencing that horrifying feeling of self-doubt ourselves, when we too had either felt or said, *no puedo*. Aided with this insight, we then proceeded to explore the origins of the feeling behind the words *no puedo*, which figuratively means "I have no power."

Here I am going to use my childhood experience to illustrate the origins of what we began to call *EL NO*, both the internal voice that denies our power and a disenfranchising concept of self. Child psychologists inform us that children develop their essential understanding about themselves and life by the time they are five to seven years old. Now, using myself as an example, I will explain how many children of color grow up denying their power and are drawn into a dynamic of internalized oppression.

All the professional people I encountered as a young child—chiefly doctors, teachers, and other people of authority—were members of the dominant white culture. Unconsciously this led me to believe that only white people were successful. The message that I internalized was *no pueden*, or, “You brown people can’t.” During my first days of school, my name, Roberto, was changed to Bobbie, and Spanish became a forbidden language. The core message I was receiving was *no vales* (You have no value)—your language, culture, and people are not worthy of respect. This message of *no vales* continued during those early years, when nothing in my school experience validated anything positive about my culture. Like every other child, I also received my daily dose of television images, devoid of anyone who looked like me except for the occasional Latino janitor or gang members. Again, seeing only images of white people succeeding, the message I received was, “You people are not good or capable enough.” Before I turned eight years old, a relatively self-confident child had been assaulted by so many messages of invalidation that the internal messenger that said “No, you can’t” became considerably louder and stronger. I had unconsciously adopted the attitude of *no puedo*. Part of my mind had been coerced to deny my value.

As a result, for many years I became my own worst enemy, as I would deny my ability to engage in new or challenging activities. That internalized voice would repeatedly undermine my inquisitiveness by yanking me back saying, “Hey, you can’t succeed at that, you’re not smart or white enough.” Fortunately, I had also received strong validating messages from family, particularly my grandmother, that boosted my self-esteem and cultivated a voice of self-affirmation. Like many in my community, I consequently grew up with two voices in my head, one saying, “You’re bright, you can do it!” and the other declaring, “Who are you to think you can?” Are you familiar with these two voices? As a child, did you experience messages that invalidated your self-esteem and power? Because of the nurturing quality of the family affirmations I received, in time the positive voice became stronger than the voice of *EL NO*. Yet, many other Latinos were not so fortunate; the messages of *EL NO* were so pervasive and the validations so rare that *EL NO* became

more than just a strong negating voice. It became a chronic mind-set that thwarts their positive potential.

The greater tragedy is that this not only happens to Latinos, but to blacks, Asians, women, gays, lesbians, and even white males. All children today are subjected to a steady stream of messages flowing from family, church, school, and media that undermine our power. These messages are continually reminding us that we are not good, smart, or attractive enough to be successful (that is, unless you purchase a certain advertised product). Additionally, depending on our culture or gender, we must contend with powerful disempowering stereotypes perpetuated by our society: Minorities are not intelligent, women are too emotional, gays are not normal, men can’t change. Consequently, for many people the negative assaults upon their psyches are so persistent, while uplifting messages are so infrequent, that *EL NO* becomes the prominent voice within their minds. These people become handicapped in their pursuit of personal success, and our society loses precious energy and creativity that could potentially be applied to bettering our world.

Despite loving their children, many parents do not know how to foster their self-esteem. We tend to criticize rather than praise. From our church and religion we often receive the message that we are inherently sinful rather than possessing divine potential. Most of our schools deny our intelligence by treating us as empty receptacles only capable of receiving information.

These influences of *EL NO* are not only debilitating to individuals, we must also contend with the patterns of negativity that further undermine our self-esteem among each other and our communities. Many who struggle with *EL NO* tend to invalidate not only self, but also those around them. The dynamic is unconscious, yet one who has been socialized to believe oneself is unworthy often demeans others to lift their own self-esteem. We criticize others to feel better about ourselves. We make comments like, “Why are you applying to college, you know you’re not smart enough,” or “I don’t know why John is being promoted; he really isn’t that competent.” Our unconscious practice becomes putting others down to lift ourselves up.

While our initial tendency may be to demean those closest to us, too often we move to project our negativity upon other people, and

then upon our entire society. We make comments like, "You can't trust Jews, they're just for themselves." "Forget the youth, they are totally apathetic." "Men are insensitive." "You can't trust politicians." "People are too apathetic to create change." "Humans are inherently selfish." The result is that we become a society so steeped in negativity that we refuse to believe in our human potential and ability to advance positive change—the negation of our personal power becomes a negation of our community and social power.

EL NO must be halted. We must all become part of the force that transforms *EL NO*. We can do this by choosing to accept our goodness and power, and becoming people who continually seek to validate and affirm the positive potential of others. Again, words from Marianne Williamson can provide us with inspiration and guidance: "We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."³ Our task is to liberate ourselves and others from *EL NO*, and inspire an attitude of positive possibility.

Transform *EL NO*

Understanding the dynamic of *EL NO* is a major step in developing our ability to be a greater force for healing and change. Knowing what disempowers us, we can be a more conscious influence to prevent and transform *EL NO* by countering the attitudes and social forces that demean our power, and strengthening our internal concept of self so we can more fully own our power for positive change. We can aid ourselves and others by using co-powering communication to foster positive self-concepts and the attitude of *EL SI*, "Yes, I've got the power!"

Over the years, dozens of people have communicated to me the liberation that resulted for them by coming to understand the dynamic of *EL NO*. They came to realize that they were not inherently stupid, but had been socialized to believe so by negative messages. Awareness of *EL NO* was empowering because they now recognized that their self-doubt did not reflect inherent deficits, but was induced by external influences. Many could trace the origins of

EL NO to early life experiences, or recognized that it was still being reinforced by family or friends knowing no better than to demean others. Regardless, they were now able to discern the internal negative chatter as *EL NO*, and redirect their minds to find ways to support their success.

When I reflect on the transformative power of self-awareness, I recall Lorenzo García, because for him it resulted in dramatic changes in his life. We had an informal conversation at a house party when Lorenzo was in his late twenties. He parted and drank too much, in part from discouragement that he wasn't being the person he wanted to be. In response to the frustration that he confided, I described the dynamics of *EL NO*. He became enthused because it explained why he had been sabotaging his life and also offered him clear choices about his future. In the weeks and months that followed, his new clarity energized him to redirect his life. Lorenzo recalls, "All those years, I felt that it was me who was screwed up. But it wasn't me. It was all those messages of *EL NO* that I swallowed. In retrospect, it seems like common sense, but when you're stuck telling yourself that you're not good enough, you're stuck. You can't recognize your value or see your potential."

Bolstered by new ownership of his power, Lorenzo launched into a new life. He stabilized his financial situation by purchasing and repairing several properties. After a period, this enabled him to pursue what he really wanted to do. He took time to study radio journalism and to commit to several organizing projects. Thirty years later, he admits to periodic struggles with *EL NO*, but the insight that he gained has allowed him to lead a purposeful and successful life. Perhaps his greatest accomplishment has been raising a self-confident and loving daughter who continues the family activist tradition as a fund development consultant for activist organizations.

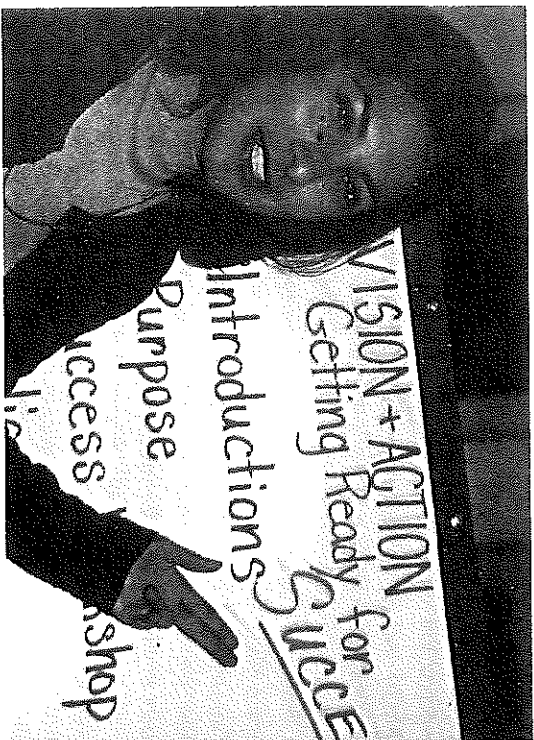
Lorenzo's story reminds us that we can counter *EL NO* by making our communication with others a source of validation that connects them with their power. Every time we engage in co-powering communication we are advancing cultural transformation by helping develop our collective power to create good for ourselves, our families, and our communities.

Principles for Co-powering Communications

Co-powering is consciously seeking to uplift the confidence and power of others for the mutual good that can result.

When my daughters were young, I would get down on one knee to be at an equal eye level before asking for their thoughts. This was a subtle gesture, yet they received the message—I was validating their worth. As they grew older and their friends would visit, I made time to interact with them, asking about their lives and thoughts. I listened closely and found ways to indicate my respect for their observations and judgments. I was affirming their power, just like my grandmother and several aunts and uncles did for me. As the children became adults, I continued actively listening to understand and demonstrate my respect for them and their ideas. When appropriate, I asked questions to acknowledge their experience and help them discover their own answers. My constant thought was to show them love and validate their power.

For many activists, this may be a radically new way of viewing our responsibility, yet it's necessary. We must counter and transform EL NO by continually seeking to lift the confidence and power of



Andrea teaching about success.

everyone around us, particularly our supporters and potential allies. Because we want our children and youth to believe in their intelligence and inner goodness, we also build their self-esteem by validating their experience and judgment. We help reground them to their power by reminding them of their abilities and by reconnecting them to their caring purpose and vision for change.

The ways of co-powering communication are many and only require that you develop your common sense. Begin by asking yourself what type of communications have made you feel more in your power. What did someone do to help boost your EL SI or "can do" attitude? Was it the way a person listened to you? Was it what they said and how they said it? Was it the questions they asked or their genuine and kindly feedback?

A survey I conducted among high-achieving Latino university students engaged in community service revealed an interesting insight. When queried about how they developed their self-confidence, almost a third could recall a specific incident when an adult family member, teacher, or coach made eye contact, typically touched them on the shoulder, and said, "I know you can do it." For these young people, this experience either liberated them from EL NO or boosted their self-confidence with a heightened awareness that they indeed have the power to achieve their goals.

Reviewing the following list of co-powering principles, and noting those that you currently use and those you can strengthen, can help make you more mindful of the capacity you have for empowering others.

1. **Express love.** Love nurtures self-confidence. Allow yourself to feel that you care about the other person as you communicate. Your intent is to inspire others to love themselves: "I know you're a good person, and you've got my love regardless of the outcome. So, just do it!"
2. **Boost their self-confidence.** Your intent is to assist others to believe in themselves, so be present in a way that communicates your belief in them. Listen closely and share reflections that give them an affirmation of who they are: "That's a great idea. Thanks!"

3. **Support their voice of *EL SI*.** Cultivate within the other a positive attitude of doability, so they know that by applying dedicated effort they can achieve their goals: "I know you have the talent to make it happen, so let's review what you need to do."
4. **Facilitate their connection with purpose.** The greatest gift you can extend to another is assisting them to discover their purpose. Ask questions or provide reflections that aid others to connect with their purpose and thus increase their self-confidence: "I see you interact well with young people. How does this relate to your purpose?"
5. **Recognize their positive attitudes and values.** Provide reflections or ask questions of others that uphold the value of their perspectives and approaches: "I see you as a caring person. You believe in others and this will make you a great teacher."
6. **Remind them of their connection with others.** We have more power when we know we are not alone, so remind others of the support that is available to them: "Remember, just like you have supported us, we are here for you."

Patience and Perseverance

As we practice co-powering communication we can't always expect quick results. With some people our efforts may involve a lifetime of trying and learning. Still, along the way we may save a life or enable someone to become a teacher for the many. I share the story of one of my godchildren.

Rene was not yet two years old, and I was thrilled that his parents trusted me to take him on an outing to the park. As I was walking along the path with Rene on my back, I was already wondering how I could begin teaching this youngster important values and developing his sense of *EL SI*. An idea came to mind, and I began saying hello to every person who passed. I figured that if Rene saw me being friendly and extending hellos, he would learn to trust and extend love to others. When he became a little older, I took him and his brother on neighborhood and country hikes, seeking to make the trips an adventure while developing our relationship and building their self-esteem.

Despite my efforts and the love from his parents, over time Rene found himself on a different path. He was physically small and got into aggressive fighting in school to protect himself. By middle school, his talent for aggression was recognized by older boys and he was recruited by one of the gangs. He soon became a collaborator in their activities and shortly after began his relationship with juvenile hall.

During this period, as Rene became a regular in juvenile institutions, I wrote and visited. In all my communications, I consistently used a five-point strategy—express my love, ask questions to understand his reality, validate his positive qualities, ask questions to help him formulate goals, and share inspiring stories.

To the dismay of his parents and me, juvenile hall time led to doing prison time. Then, during one of his release periods, Rene met a woman he wanted to be with, and his attitude began shifting. I learned about this when I took him out to a Chinese restaurant. I was expecting another of our awkward meal conversations, but this time he talked. He told me about Alice, and with difficulty asked if I could teach him how to order at a restaurant so he could ask her out for a date.

After all these years, I was delighted to have this opening. We talked about relationships, restaurant etiquette, employment interview strategies, and life planning. His relationship with Alice grew, and before long they had a baby. It was inspiring to see Rene be a responsible father. Yet within the year he made a dumb mistake that landed him back in prison. I wrote to him even more than before because I knew him to be good, and his son needed him. The return letters were rare, but I continued to write. I felt he needed to know that I still believed in him.

Over the next few years, Rene separated from his girlfriend and was in and out of prison, struggling with the probation system that failed to recognize and support former inmates earnestly working to be good parents and providers. Finally, the right person, Irma, entered his life, and more than ever Rene committed himself to being a good partner and a good father to both her son and his.

During the last several years, Rene has become a work supervisor, and he and Irma are purchasing their house and making a good

home. They live some distance away, and we might only visit once a year, yet the relationship we have established endures. It just takes a phone call and we can easily share about present joys and challenges.

During a conversation last year, Rene confided that he needed help. He loves Irma, but they had gotten into a pattern of arguing. "We're both swearing and saying mean things. I don't want us to live this way because I know it's not good for either of us or the kids." I asked questions to draw out his options while sprinkling in validations about his commitment to family. During our conversation he and I became enthused about him taking action to improve their relationship, agreeing that he was going to talk to Irma about seeing a counselor together. Their conversation led to a dialogue between Irma and me in which I learned that Rene actually had more issues to work on than he initially told me about. He had recently begun drinking too much, which was creating other problems. It was time to make a visit.

After juggling schedules, the three of us were able to meet for breakfast. Responding to my questions, they talked about their expectations for their relationship and family, when the slipups with alcohol arise, what causes the stress, what can be done to prevent or change the unhealthy communication patterns, and more. I also asserted my expectations of both of them as a couple, and specifically of Rene. I told him that I want him to succeed, and I see him capable of eventually being a counselor and role model for young people. He survived the gangs and prison, he has wisdom to impart, and I want him to share it with others.

He heard me, and we heard each other. We ended our short visit with several agreements: Rene would work with a counselor, he and Irma would make time for more communication between them, and we would maintain our communication too. Presently, Rene is doing very well as a responsible partner, father, and work supervisor, and we have begun conversations about how he can use his experience to help young people battle EL NO and make decisions to lead healthy lives.

Despite all our positive intentions to develop the self-esteem of our children, some will experience EL NO in a way that gets them

stuck in behavior patterns that undermine their ability to lead successful lives. At times we will be confronted with the choice of maintaining our support or not. Though it sometimes takes tremendous patience and perseverance to remain supportive through the challenges, I believe we must trust that loving and empowering communication will ultimately lead to positive outcomes.



FAMILY ACTIVISM

PRACTICES

The following are examples of some key family activist practices I employed while supporting Rene:

- Modeling positive values to children
- Seeking to establish relationship and empower young people by expressing love, asking questions, validating positive qualities, and sharing stories that inspire
- Believing in the potential of another, and maintaining a supportive relationship despite challenges
- Being available to coach or counsel
- Proactively maintaining communication
- Challenging the other to fulfill their potential
- Enlisting the support of other family when necessary
- Convening family meetings for problem-solving
- When necessary, urging professional counseling support
- Sharing personal stories of struggle to convey the reality that none of us are perfect and that we are all works in progress