

The Gonzales Alliance:

Empowering a Community
Against Gang Violence

By Jason Gordon & Vince Ventimiglia

Case Study →

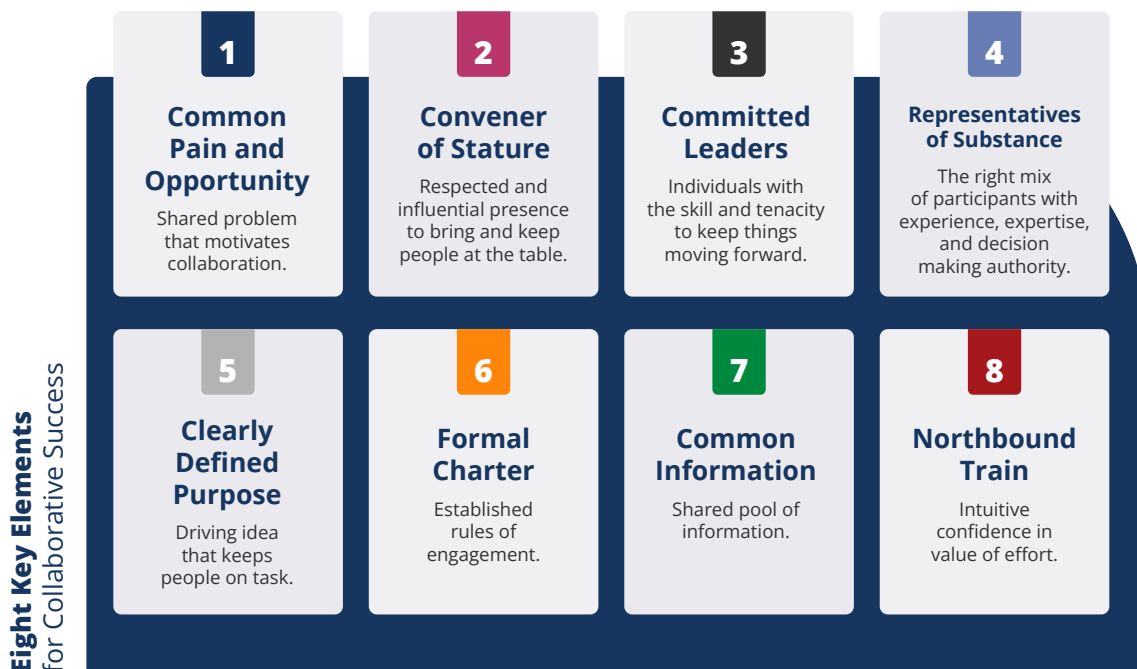


Introduction

Each alliance is unique—if you’ve seen one alliance, then you’ve only seen one alliance. There is a certain logic to this uniqueness given that each alliance’s objective is distinct, and that each human member of each alliance is unique. Moreover, each alliance involves distinct alignments of “elements” and “principles” upon which rests each alliance’s success. Nevertheless, each successful alliance fits within our overall framework and can be described by at least one “type,” just as every person can be classified at the very least of the species of homo sapiens.

We began laying out our alliance framework in our book *Finding Allies, Building Alliances*, and rely on that thinking in the text that follows. Our forthcoming book, *Pathways Through Polarization by Finding Allies and Building Alliances*, elaborates on that first text, with insights drawn from almost 15 years in following the Finding Allies framework.

This case study presents a very unique alliance driven by Jason Gordon and its thrilling success. The alliance’s several initiatives addressed human health and diverse social determinants of health, just as our work at Leavitt Partners, an HMA Company, is grounded in improving lives by making health care more accessible, effective, and affordable.





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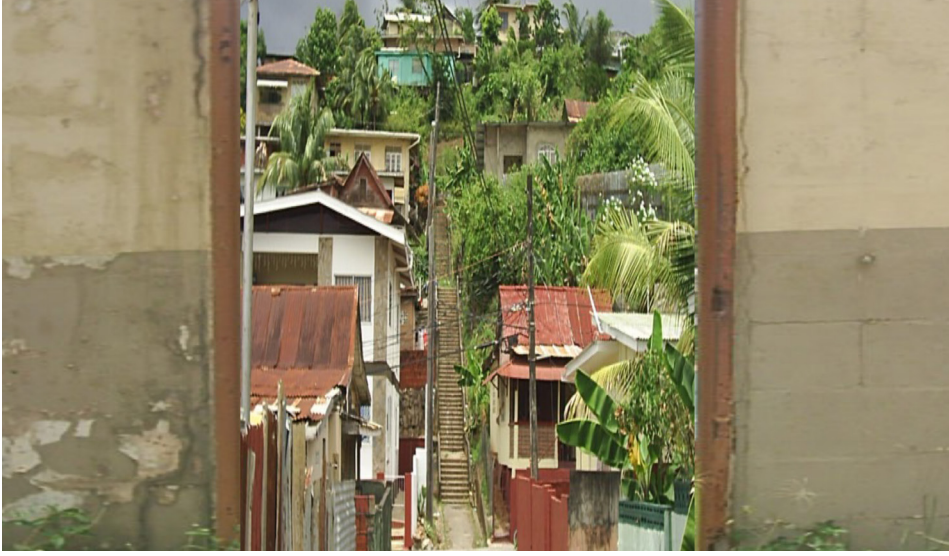
In full disclosure, Leavitt Partners had no role in conceiving of or running the following alliance. In fact, the alliance's work took place outside the U.S., in the vibrant, mountainous communities above Port of Spain, on the Caribbean Island of Trinidad.

The Gonzales Alliance began with the dynamic Charles Jason Gordon, then a Roman Catholic priest in the Diocese of Trinidad and Tobago. In January 2003, Gordon was assigned to the Gonzales parish of St. Martin de Porres (and, since 2017, has been its Archbishop), and conceived of the alliance in order to calm gang wars which were then raging in the city and to bring relief to communities suffering from violence, poor sanitation and health conditions, rampant drug and gun running, and police and government neglect.

The Gonzales Alliance presents a dramatic example of the intuitive relevance of, if not the imperative need to apply, the essential elements and principles of Finding Allies when convening disparate groups of individuals, including a convener of stature, a common pain, a clearly defined purpose, representatives of substance, and committed leaders.

The Gonzales Alliance also used additional key principles that we begin to describe in this case study, and which will be laid out in full in our forthcoming book, including consensus decision-making, defined organizational structures, government calls to action, common sources of information, optimal use of communications, personal engagement of key members and direct interaction with diverse personalities. It also, importantly, relied on excellent recognition and pursuit of kairos.

Finally, the Gonzales Alliance is an example of a Track Two Diplomacy alliance, in which an intermediary trusted by two or more parties locked in conflict and unable to communicate with each other openly is empowered to develop a mutually agreeable solution to a crisis or challenge.



Gordon as a Convener of Stature

In the city of Gonzales, the rival gangs, the community around them, and the authorities that were supposed to be in control of the situation, were not, we might say, on speaking terms. But, as a young priest, Gordon walked the neighborhoods as a pastoral figure respected by the community. Known by many as “the Mayor,” he served the Track Two Diplomacy model’s role of “diplomat,” capable of shuttling peaceably between a series of essential participants. In this case, that meant between warring gang leaders and their followers, the broader community of young and old, men and women, and key government and cultural leaders.

Where government leaders had demonstrated an inability to retain respect in the course of concentrating power and had failed to deliver on their promises to the community, Gordon represented an alternative. Importantly, and counter-intuitively, Gordon rose in stature, credibility, and respect through two apparently contradictory philosophies grounded in independence, fairness, and integrity. The first involved sharing, rather than hoarding, his stature and credibility. He managed this by pointing to others in the community who had the potential to act in a similar “ministry” capacity, to work to serve the community’s social service needs and build the community’s capacity to respond to those needs, and sharing his social standing with them.

The second was knowing when to push back hard on certain players, and to demonstrate boldly, if not brazenly, that he was not afraid of those who threatened violence or authoritarianism against him personally. He felt it was important to show that he felt he was expendable, that the Alliance could go on and be successful without him, that others in the community would step in to fill his role as convener and carry on the work of the alliance. In particular, his role as central convener created great opportunity for progress, but had it gone bad it would have really gone bad.

Gang Killings as the Source of Common Pains

Gonzales is constructed like an old medieval city: walled, with limited points of access. Unfortunately, rather than protect the city, these features were exploited by the gangs. The city's five gangs each held control of one access point into the community and the gangs battled each other for control of Gonzales community life.

Preceding Gordon's arrival at St. Martin de Porres, the larger community had diagnosed their common pain with gangs as rooted in unemployed young men. But the community was traumatized and trust in government and civil institutions, and even in neighbors, had long ago evaporated. The community believed that nothing could change, that they were powerless; the gangs had the power and the rest of the community was held hostage.

However, quickly after Gordon's arrival, the community decided that they had reached their breaking point. Gordon was appointed on January 3, 2003, and, not long after, the cadence of the killings ramped up, escalating significantly over a period of religious holidays which should have been a time of repentance; by Good Friday of that year Gonzales had had five murders in six weeks. In response, in conjunction with the Archdiocesan Social Justice Commission, the priest called a meeting of all the leaders of the community. That meeting would lay the foundation for what would become the Gonzales Alliance.

The fledgling Alliance would come to call for key institutions, including the city government, the police department, and the Catholic Church, to act to address not just the pain of gang killings and violence, but other pains, including their access to public health services, water, employment, education, public safety, and recreation, which had declined or disappeared in Gonzales. Eventually, it became clear that those additional problems were also at the root of gang violence.

Multi-Sector, Community-Wide Participation

Having achieved the initial meeting of community leaders, Gordon set out to convene follow-up meetings with multiple community and government participants. In a way that parallels Leavitt Partners' experience with an unusual set of multi-sector bedfellows in the federal health policy environment, Gordon assembled a complex and diverse set of community organizations, government officials, and academics, many of whom had failed to achieve momentum or results when they'd attempted to act on their own.

The follow-up meetings included:

- Leaders of four of the five dominant gangs (one initially refused to participate).
 - Fresh (from Chaffered Court, he was in conflict with Snake Eye).
 - Prophet (from Snake Valley, he was in conflict with Chris Bulls).
 - Chris Bulls (from Upper Gonzales, he was in conflict with Prophet to the North and Snake Eye to the South).
 - Snake Eye (from Lower Gonzales, he was the regional leader of the Muslims Gang and was in conflict with Fresh).
- Various Gonzales community representatives, including culture and sports leaders, who had become marginalized or inactive as crime gripped the community.
- Religious representatives, including from the Roman Catholic Diocese in Trinidad and the Hindu, Moslem, and Spiritual Baptist communities, many of whom had respect from the broader community but lacked the ability to act in the gang-dominated environment.
- Government officials, including from the City of Port of Spain, Social Government counselors, and Town and Country planners, most of whom were from agencies that community surveys suggested were ineffective.
- Representatives from the Canadian Institute of Planners, who were led by Michel Frojmovic (who was an obvious outsider). The group had funding for an urban revitalization plan but could not get any traction on the ground.

A Clearly Defined Purpose and Early Momentum

After working to assemble the more comprehensive group of 60 representatives from the Gonzales community, the Canadian Institute of Planners, the City of Port of Spain, the police department, and the Town and Country Planning Division, the newly formed Alliance worked to identify the key challenges facing the community and began to move the community towards dialogue on that was most important.

Using a facilitation process, the participants identified eight key challenges and common pains in the community, most of which were closely associated with the initial concerns with gang violence.

These were:

1. **High levels of crime and killings** (mostly gang-driven).
2. **High unemployment** (especially among teens, which contributed to increased gang membership).
3. **Lack of community facilities** (necessary to gather while staying safe from gangs and engage teens and their families).
4. **Inadequate social activities** (again driving members to turn to gangs for social activity).
5. **Inadequate street lighting** (lights having been shot out by gangs who favored operating in the dark).
6. **Inadequate water supply** (caused by gangs who each controlled standpipe access).
7. **Poor roads and infrastructure** (damaged by gangs, who also interfered with repair efforts).
8. **Inadequate disposal of garbage** (which accumulated as public services avoided the gang violence and poor infrastructure).

The residents of the community then developed a plan expressing their aspirations for how each of the eight key challenges would be addressed. It was determined that each key challenge would have a team dedicated to addressing its portion of the plan, and a small group of volunteers agreed to lead the teams. This process empowered the community to dream of a different future. It also engaged residents to work for the transformation of their community; each area had a vision, a team, and a leader.

Progress having been made on the initial items, the Alliance became more ambitious in its aims and began to dream boldly, more willing than ever to work for solutions to their challenges. The different teams put forward their most urgent needs, and in this way the list of pains was translated into goals. These were:

1. Expand community policing to address violence.
2. Increase employment opportunities to engage the young people productively, apart from gangs.
3. Create safe locations to host community events including the Pan Theatre, Community Centre, and a sports field and Pan Square.
4. Create recreation and sporting opportunities/activities to build community spirit and social activities apart from gangs.

5. Increase lighting to deter crime and to create a safer community.
6. Increase healthy, running water supply to the community—and eliminate the single standpipe which created an opportunity for gang “foolishness.”
7. Remove derelict vehicles and clean up vacant buildings, to eliminate areas for gangs to congregate and improve public health and safety.
8. Improve garbage disposal to reduce the health risks associated with decaying trash in the streets.

While the parties involved did not create a formal charter, the emerging work plan and the vision for the community and the eight areas became an informal agreement that was tested in the next meeting. As the second meeting concluded, one vocal member asked, “Who do we hold accountable if nothing happens?” Gordon replied, “Hold me responsible and hold the leaders of the teams responsible.” There was great applause and thus agreement.

Progress was a whole/parts/whole process. Having early on had “Pride in Gonzales” painted in key places as you entered the community to function as a reminder of the vision the community was working towards, the Alliance then broke that goal down into parts and developed the vision for the eight areas. This led to something that again felt “whole”—a simple work plan of what they would achieve. This process took the community up to an entirely new operational level.

In his planning, Gordon was alert to objectives that were achievable, especially given the way the gangs perceived one another; as one gang leader noted, each felt that “we bad, but they evil us.” That each gang felt the other more despicable fed their mindset of violence-as-protection.

Gordon also sought to identify real concerns by getting to the facts, not just working with the perceptions each side held on an issue. And, as with any legitimate assessment of common pain, he sought to identify shared losses. He did not operate in a zero-sum environment nor in an “I-win-you-lose” modality.

The community had initially put forth to Gordon the common pain of gang killings. But he looked deeper, identifying the underlying causes and effects of gang violence. These eight associated concerns allowed Gordon to identify potential solutions, and set the same measured, near-term milestones (which we define as being able to be achieved within the year) that Leavitt Partners pursues in our health care alliances.

And just as important as identifying what was achievable was identifying what wasn't. As Gordon noted, early in the battle to reclaim Gonzales, there could be no false near-term objective of "Peace in Gonzales." Instead, the community objective was a ceasefire. As Gordon pointed out, among the gangs, peace often meant the community was divided among the gangs, where each gang ruled the community in its territory by force and to the gang's benefit; a homeostasis. Therefore, Gordon set the objective as an "amber" ceasefire, where gangs were not at war, nor were they interacting with each other. This milestone had the advantage of being more achievable in the short term, thus providing important motivation to Alliance members to remain vigilant and engaged. And it worked; the city achieved and remained under a yellow alert (down from the red alert they had lived under for four years).

By engaging and empowering the community, social capital was taken from the gangs and handed back to the community. This allowed the gang mediation to gain momentum and ultimately to tip towards peace.

A Complex Strategy

To Alliance trajectories often present as linear: identify a shared pain point or opportunity, assemble members, identify a solution, pursue the solution with the support of the key player (often a regulator), and, finally, implement the solution. Though many of the alliances that Leavitt Partners operates follow this substantially linear path to an objective when seen from afar, progress is rarely as unobstructed as it may seem. The Gonzales Alliance is a good example of how non-linear the process may need to be.

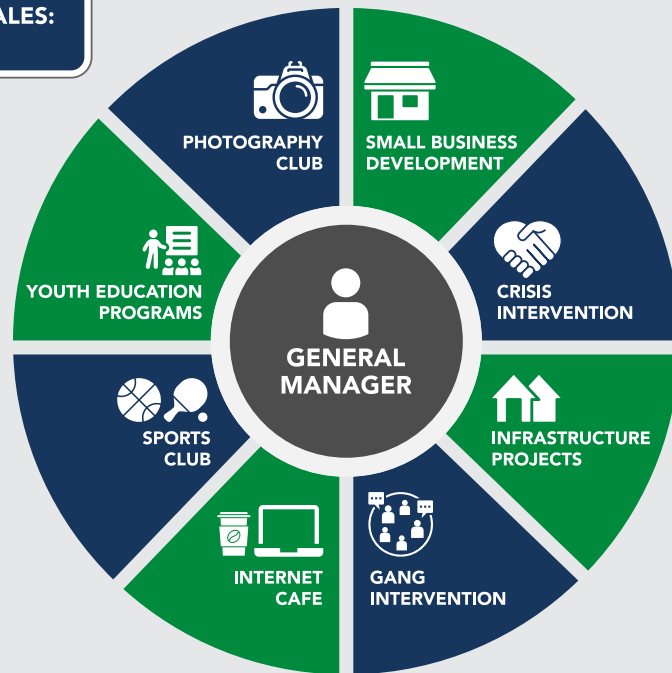
While the community initially conceived of eight solutions, each with proposed linear lines of approach, the strategy for building the support and capacity to achieve the results proceeded in a more complex arrangement, with three mutually supporting, contemporaneous tracks of engagement.

Track 1 focused on a community call to the vision and developed a highly visual communications effort to help galvanize community cohesion and engagement. The visual reminders of "Pride in Gonzales" framed the positive appearance of Gonzales as a source of community pride, and functioned indirectly as a call to community pursuit of a common vision—restoration.

Track 2 engaged gangs, particularly their leaders, even though none of the first objective—reduce crime—required a focus on addressing gang activity. Given that the gangs were the source of the criminal activity, and the need for their participation in the Alliance, this was an essential strategic move. But, as a prime pain point for the community, and an obvious barrier to addressing most of the eight areas, Gordon ultimately had to focus on gangs and the challenges they presented to each other and to the community. Gordon's gang mediation, which started in 2004, not only addressed that pain point, but lent crucial credibility to his ability to solve other challenges. As you might expect, given his orientation toward conciliation and collaboration, he pursued the initiative with a good bit of introspection, study, and partnership with other organizations.

Eventually, the gang mediation required a shift to higher levels of mediation/conflict management skills throughout the community as a whole. Gordon quickly engaged social workers to train 12 leaders from the community in mediation. Once trained, Gordon publicly anointed them as leaders by walking with them in the community. Once the community saw them as leaders, they were empowered to lead some of the Alliance's key initiatives. Their skills, energy, community connections, and independence from the gangs allowed them to act as representatives of substance, with strong repositories of credibility and the ability to carry the engagement forward at scale. This was one example of how Gordon shared his credibility with motivated community members.

Track 3 engaged community youth via an overarching initiative named Community Intervention Transforming Youth (CITY). The initiative involved creating a safe space for youth in the community to engage together in constructive activities (football, cricket, drama, dance, video club, photography club, singing, table tennis, etc.). At a time when Gonzales had no internet access, CITY opened an internet café. They also ran after-school programs for school children of all ages, including a homework clinic, which was staffed by qualified remedial education teachers, as many of the children had fallen behind in school. Parents could also benefit from CITY training and adult education while their children participated in the youth-oriented activities.



Structure and Decision-Making

To recap, the Gonzales Alliance, with more than 60 initial representatives of almost a dozen key organizations (including state and city government, the police, the community, the gangs, and the churches) had established a working group-type structure. Each working group focused on one of the eight challenge areas and the corresponding solution set, and submitted its recommendations to the larger Alliance. As the number of participants grew, the larger Gonzales Alliance, the establishment of working groups, and the associated focused working group expertise created the opportunity for prompt, high quality results.

As Leavitt Partners often sees in our health care alliances, a broad membership or extensive working group structure benefits from a nimble, strategic Steering or Governance body. Leveraging his authority as the convener of stature, and also as a committed leader, Gordon created something similar: a three-entity Steering Group, comprised of the Canadian Institute of Planners (which contributed money and data and had a dedicated project team assigned to the Alliance), the City of Port of Spain officials, and the community.

In meetings, decisions were made by the general participants in a town hall style, which used a consensus model of decision making. After open brainstorming and discussion, the participants verbally cast votes on identified issues and Gordon declared the consensus. Our discussion of this crucial component of alliance work identifies points that distinguish the approach from Leavitt Partners', but Gordon's use of similar mechanisms is worth noting.

The continued participation of certain Alliance members was of course not guaranteed. Most obvious: even those gang leaders who were committed leaders in the Alliance were at risk of discontinuing due to the violence within and between the gangs. Gordon recognized that gang leaders could play a key role in bringing their members to the table, bringing the temperature down in conflicts, persuading others in the community to join the table, and, of course, committing the Alliance to action. These committed leaders often had the confidence and trust of their gang members, and other gang leaders, so they could bring their perspective on a problem, develop solutions, and then bind their colleagues to the approach. While the gang leaders acknowledged that their preferred mode of communicating their position or solving a problem was with weapons, they were open to Gordon's persuasion toward other modes. Ultimately, they understood that they had political capital and community involvement which could be leveraged as an alternative to violence.

As the convener of stature, Gordon also needed to ensure that each of his encounters with gang leaders, and each action by a member of the Alliance, functioned to the benefit of the community as a whole and its ability to drive change, and not just to the benefit of the gangs or government leaders. So, just as his engagement with one or more gang leaders would begin to increase the leaders' stature, Gordon ensured that the resulting action by the gang or its leader delivered an equally incrementally great shift of space, power, or impact for the community. He understood that each action shifted the pH of the environment; ultimately, he wanted the Alliance to be neutral, and so was ever in the business of balancing acids and alkalis.

Though he never wanted things to tip in the favor of the gangs, Gordon maximized his influence with them and ensured full buy-in from their broader memberships. Initially, Gordon engaged gangs through their obvious, mostly-committed leaders, to ensure the continuity of the work. He eventually also engaged the second level leadership (or, gang "lieutenants") in the effort. Gordon wanted to make sure that, were something unfortunate to happen to any of the gang leaders, the gang as a whole would maintain its participation in the Alliance and continue to work towards its causes. Importantly for the Alliance, the active participation of key gang lieutenants also provided the "spark off" to expand the Alliance's impact far beyond the reach of Gordon, the government, and the gang leaders.

The structure of the Alliance also accounted for members who did not feel as immediately a part of the community. For example, the CEO of the City of Port of Spain, Ms. Winefred David, was a member of the steering committee. But the outsiders in the Alliance were valuable. The partnership with the City of Port of Spain resulted in access to all the state departments and services and allowed the eight teams direct

access to government service providers. The Canadian Institute of Planners brought people with the technical skills to help with planning for safety and environment, ultimately providing the model for cleaning up the community, increasing street lighting, and creating a safety map of the community. They also brought a Geographical Information System to the community, which allowed for active mapping and predictions of key needs in the community.

Later, Ed McGuire would also become a partner in the Alliance. Arriving from George Mason University in Virginia, McGuire was part of a larger team of criminologists who were hired to reduce crime and gangs and restore peace to Trinidad and Tobago. McGuire arrived as Minister of National Security and a strategic advisor on gang control. Once on the ground, McGuire had sought out a church-based gang intervention; he believed that religious community leaders were particularly well-positioned to convene. It was his taxi driver who brought him to meet Gordon.

Ed McGuire and his team from the University brought technical knowledge about gang intervention and helped push for the cleanup of the community to enhance the confidence of residents and the safety and security of the community. In fact, nothing would have ever gotten off the ground without them—they had provided the technical information which allowed for the first gang mediation meeting between Fresh, Prophet, Chris Bulls, and Snake Eye.

Gordon's strategy was critical not just for the perception of all parties involved, but to create a real shift in power from the gangs who held it through violence and intimidation back to the community, who would eventually use the power to establish a cease-fire and create space within which to rebuild. In our lower-stakes environment, Leavitt Partners similarly emphasizes the value of our convener's independence and balanced approach to alliance members.

Take the Risk of Direct, Off-Line Communication

Not all outcomes of the community meetings were positive and conclusive. Snake Eye, for example, resented that the meeting surfaced community policing as a solution, as it threatened the gang's authority in the community. As a consequence, Gordon recognized he needed to directly address Snake Eye's concerns, even if "off-line" and at his own personal risk.

Gordon will speak extensively to the power of off-line engagement with those participants unhappy with a development in an alliance. Gordon observed that gang leaders required personal, at-times-perilous, engagement, inside and outside “the room.” Operating on a currency of respect and disrespect, in some ways, declining to meet with a gang leader would have been more dangerous than meeting with them on their turf over contentious challenges. He believes that direct communication helps drop suspicions about motives and controverted facts. He will also note that engagement must be done on participant’s terms.

When the participant at hand is a vigilante gang leader, the convener needs abundant courage. Following the Snake Eye’s complaints, Gordon knew he had to meet with him one on one if the gang leader was going to be convinced to continue with the effort beyond the initial meeting.

The morning after the meeting in which community policing surfaced as a solution, Gordon was summoned to Snake Eye’s territory in Upper David Street. Alarmingly, Snake Eye advised the priest to come alone. Gordon arrived and, scarcely out of his car, Snake Eye began to argue with him aggressively. But Gordon pushed back in equal measure and after a few minutes they were sitting on the street corner speaking more calmly.

However, a car came up the narrow lane with two of Snake Eye’s shooters—essentially hitmen—assigned to protect Snake Eye. This concerned Gordon as he knew Snake Eye only had two shooters travel together if they were on a job...and of this job he was the target. The two men got out of the car. Addressing Snake Eye, they asked, “Do you want the thing?” He answered, “No, cool scene.” One of the shooters then pulled a 9mm from his waistband and asked, “Where to put it?” “In the house,” said Snake Eye. With that threat to the meeting removed, Gordon and Snake Eye continued their conversation about bringing peace to Gonzales.

Though it worked for Gordon, it is important to note that full engagement with extended transparency has risks. For example, in less dangerous circumstances, saboteurs may use the transparency inherent within an alliance to pick at every minor flaw in strategy and at the same time use confidential information known to the group that is unfavorable to the group’s ultimate objectives and disclose it outside Alliance in an effort to undermine the initiative.

The Importance of Mapping the Environment

Navigating the gang environment is not for the faint of heart. Indeed, gangs in Trinidad are incredibly violent and even operate as domestic terrorists. As evidence: only one of the five gang leaders Gordon worked with is still alive at the time of publication), Gordon succeeded in engaging the gangs in 2003 and integrating the four gang leaders into key roles in the Alliance in 2006 (and, much later, the fifth).

A part of this success was that Gordon followed three approaches to ongoing engagement, all grounded in transparency:

- Contain influence in the meeting.
- Contain ramifications outside the meeting.
- Don't leave anybody out of a meeting.

However, in early 2006, three years after Gordon's arrival and early meetings in the community, with gang violence rising again in Gonzales, a crucial meeting was facilitated for the four gang leaders involved in the Alliance: Fresh, Prophet, Chris Bulls, and Snake Eye. That meeting would come to illuminate what turned out to be a disastrous oversight.

This engagement, the first held alone with the four willing gang leaders, situated in a church, had only occurred after consulting with criminologists, with police controlling access to the area, and with the widely-respected police inspectors in attendance. No unauthorized attendees were permitted to enter the compound, including gang members associated with the admitted leaders.

The goal of the highly controlled and tightly structured convening was to allow the four leaders to meet, air their grievances, reconcile their differences, and agree to terms for a truce. During the meeting, Chris Bulls and Prophet began to speak, and it went really bad. Fresh stood up and told them to wait. He then turned to Snake Eye and modeled bringing a conflict to resolution by bringing their conflict to resolution. Then Fresh invited Chris Bulls and Prophet to continue; they were able to resolve their conflict within the new model.

However, in the days and weeks after the meeting, members from two of the participant gangs worked to marginalize Black Shawn's gang, which was not yet participating in the Alliance. Then, Black Shawn's child was killed. Gordon immediately recognized the flaw in failing to completely map the full set of participants, and account for the impact of not everyone being at the table. The collaboration in the meeting had created out-of-meeting problems.

Part of the reason that the fifth gang was absent from the table was that Black Shawn was in prison at the time, and so not able to participate in the Alliance. However, prison did not stop him from directing the actions of his gang members; after the meeting that led to the truce among the other gangs he got anxious about the Alliance and ordered Prophet to be killed. As in public policy alliances that we run, this development demonstrated the risk of neglecting any crucial component of a community and led to a key foundational concept for this work—mapping the players. In short, the success of such an initiative requires a complete map of the players, and an imperative to know and engage all leaders. As the case with Black Shawn showed, the cost of neglecting a leader can be very high.

The Importance of Common Information

Where Leavitt Partners has only in rare circumstances engaged with the media, Gordon is no stranger to media and publicity and was not afraid to be proactive in involving the media in working towards alliance goals, especially when the community shared a common base of information not recognized by the government, but the government would obstinately refuse to respond to the community requests.

One of the Alliance's eight community initiatives focused on access to clean water, which was primarily delivered through public-access standpipes found throughout the community. One of the great hurdles to ensuring access to water was that, for up to four weeks at a time, these standpipes would be dry and so the community left without access to water. That the standpipes were dry was a fact the government and water authorities wouldn't recognize, and therefore, had refused to resolve.

After one such two-week "drought," the community held a protest. Roads were blocked and lots of noise made. Gordon heard the commotion and went to the protest to ask protesters about the problem. He also asked how the community expected to get a solution. While there, Gordon learned that one of the protesters was a participant in the CITY youth engagement video club and had used his newly developed video camera and filming skills to record the protest. Gordon took him to a national TV station that aired the piece on the 7:00 pm news.



Gordon proceeded on two tracks. One involved taking the community's case to the media, when the local government and the Water and Sewerage Authorities (WASA) declined to respond to the plight of the residents. Gordon leveraged media connections and interest in the church in a dramatic move to get a few moments on live television, capturing the public's attention...and the WASA's attention as well.

The live media appearance allowed Gordon to pursue a second track: a small convening in the local church meeting hall. The meeting was attended by the community team working on better water as well as the CEO, the regional manager, and a well-informed technician of WASA. One of the community's team, Judy, who was a KFC worker, confronted the CEO with community information. After the CEO spoke about all that WASA had done for the community she simply said to him, "Sir, excuse my French, but you talking shit." She went on to explain the problem. Afterward, the CEO turned to the regional manager, who had been unaware of the facts on the ground. The regional manager then turned to his technician for corroboration, who confirmed the community's experiences, saying, "Sir, I've been trying to tell you this for two years." WASA had in fact permanently diverted one of the community's two water sources to serve the Hilton Hotel (which served foreigners and tourists). Because of this, when its other source was compromised, which was often, the community suffered from water woes.

Based on the now-common ground of knowledge, the city conducted an assessment of the community's access to fresh water. This led to structural changes so that water flow could be maintained for both the hotel and the community.

Ultimately, Gordon demonstrated the value of using media to call attention to an alliance's objectives when progress is stymied. Though the overuse of publicity can undermine its power, where publicity is well-timed and oriented to sharing well-founded facts and information across stakeholders, it has the power to serve the alliance effectively.

The Power of Kairos

During our interviews with Gordon, he often commented how the elements and principles of our work at Leavitt Partners, including the notion of a northbound train, resonated with him. What came to him through intuition benefited in many cases from our language describing the elements and underlying concepts.

We similarly noted his ability to define components of our work that had remained undefined or had not yet been expressly identified, including a concept we feel is essential to alliance success: the ability for a leader to effectively identify and use kairos moments.

Originally drawn from Greek notions of time, *chronos* refers to the chronological passage of time and *kairos* to a propitious moment for decision or action. *Chronos* is how most of us engage with time and, when it comes to alliances, relates to the endurance and diligence needed to slog away at a task day in and day out. As *kairos* has also developed a religious sense, it might variably be described as in God's time (God existing outside of chronological time), and is the essential, brief moment in time where action will be the most effective. It is the moment when all the usual rules don't apply, and options appear that were not before on the table. Indeed, if handled well, moments of *kairos* permit far more gain to be accomplished in a small, open moment than in a stretch of *chronos* consistency, and can accelerate "knock-on" or "follow-on" results that would not otherwise be possible.

Both kinds of time have their role to play in an alliance. But a Convener plays a unique role in recognizing *kairos* and "shooting the gap" that presents itself to reach consensus; or to make extraordinary progress in an alliance's work, far beyond that possible in the ordinary day to day efforts (which are nevertheless essential to an alliance's eventual success). *Kairos* opens up both through extraordinary positive or negative events and the Convener must continually see possibility in either turn of fortune. Gordon was able to see such moments.

One moment where Gordon successfully seized a moment of *kairos* was during an attack Black Shawn and his gang made on the community at large.

As you'll remember, of the five area gangs, Black Shawn initially did not participate in the Alliance as he was in prison. Enraged over what was resulting from the Alliance and furious that his childhood friend Chris Bulls would no longer talk with him directly (though, growing up they'd "slept in the same bed and ate from the same pot"), one Sunday, Black Shawn, along with 30 of his gang members, planned to shoot up the community.

Hearing of the plan, Gordon went to talk to Black Shawn. But, after a robust, half-hour conversation, Gordon was told, "Leave now and never come back. You have no free passage."

The carnage against his enemies and the community was one-directional and initially cathartic for Black Shawn. By Thursday, Black Shawn was feeling enormous pressure from the community, was ready for a truce with Chris Bulls. Chris Bulls on the other hand was now feeling provoked, and he rejected Black Shawn's emotional entreaty to talk. As he prepared for revenge, he vowed there would be no safe passage for anyone found in the streets, including Gordon. No duly formed alliance working group could head off the fight. No chronological series of meetings or mediations would be effective. After discounting the possibility of pitching a tent between the two camps to head off conflict, Gordon decided instead to trust that God would use the conflict to open a way to peace.

Mysteriously, even though Black Shawn had disavowed further engagement with the priest and his process, on Thursday, Black Shawn placed a call to Gordon. The call came at a most inopportune time: Gordon was preparing to head out of town for a crucial series of meetings overseas the next morning and had a full day of meetings and engagements. Moreover, Gordon was preparing for a pilgrimage of elderly people through the community that evening. But his attention was called abruptly back to the moment at hand, to the conflicts that he had been managing over the months, and, as the Kairos moment clarified in Gordon's mind, he was determined to do what was necessary to work for peace. He cleared his evening and went to Chris Bulls around 5:00 pm. The two spoke for two hours; it was the moment he had been hoping would present itself.

He left Chris Bulls' and went straight to Black Shawn. Both were surprised, but the door was opened to Gordon. While Gordon was speaking to Black Shawn, Chris Bulls called and Shawn said, "Let me speak to him." On the phone, Shawn said, "Chris, we grow up together, we sleep in the same bed and eat out of the same pot. I would never, never, never set out to kill you. It hurt me that you spreading rumors all over that I want to harm you." That night, peace settled between the two and the community breathed a sigh of relief.

Sometimes, the kairos moment presents itself when it is least expected. Sometimes, because of great success, people see opportunities that were not on the table before. Sometimes, these moments are born out of dismal failure. A key part of leadership is being attentive and alert to possibility however and whenever it presents itself.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Vince Ventimiglia

Vince Ventimiglia founded the D.C. office for Leavitt Partners in 2014. Now a Health Management Associates company, Leavitt Partners is a premier health policy and government affairs firm in Washington, D.C. that has been at the forefront of health policy development for decades and leads the nation in federal affairs work, and developing and running federal policy alliances. After leading the office for ten years, Vince is now a Senior Advisor.

With over four decades of Administration, congressional, and private-sector health policy experience, Vince plays an integral role in facilitating relationships with congressional and executive branch offices and providing in-depth analysis of federal government action. He also advises complex, multi-disciplinary collaborations among multi-sector health care organizations seeking to implement significant health care policy initiatives.

In previous roles, Vince was the assistant secretary for legislation at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). In this capacity he served as the department's liaison to Congress and as the Secretary's chief advisor on all legislative matters affecting the department. Prior to his time at HHS, Vince served on the Senate Health Education Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee as Health Policy Director of the Chairman's Health Policy Team. In 2005, he moved with Chairman Gregg to serve as Policy Director for the Senate Budget Committee, where he also worked on entitlement programs, including Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and welfare.

From 1998 to 2001, Vince served as director of the Government Affairs Office for Medtronic, Inc., one of the world's leading medical technology companies. Before joining Medtronic, Vince held a variety of health policy positions on Capitol Hill, serving as counsel to the United States Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee for Senator Dan Coats of Indiana. He previously worked with the committee on health issues from 1985 to 1988.

Vince graduated magna cum laude from Yale University and holds a juris doctorate from the Georgetown University Law Center.



Jason Gordon

Charles Jason Gordon is a Trinidadian Roman Catholic prelate and the current Metropolitan Archbishop of Port of Spain since his appointment in 2017. Prior, he served as the Bishop of Kingstown in Saint Vincent and Grenadines, and as the Bishop of Bridgetown in Barbados. Before his time as a Bishop, he served as a parish priest outside of Port of Spain for the locality of Gonzales. Gordon is known for his opposition to death sentences and favors peacemaking and bridge building in local and gang disputes.



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