



Case Study: Indivisible + WA

How we turned a group of white women into an intersectional, progressive organization



Indivisible + WA

Industry: Activism
Location: Washington State
Size: 25,000

Organization Bio

Indivisible + WA began as a Pantsuit Nation group days before the 2016 Presidential election, then converted to an Indivisible group in February 2017 to better claim an action-based mindset (with the "+" intended to retain a sense of discourse and education).

Overview

The national Indivisible organization intentionally provided very little organizational structure - they wanted local groups to develop locally appropriate guidelines. Despite being a group of predominantly white women, Indivisible + WA needed to overtly claim and confront the racism prevalent in 'progressive' spaces. Collaborating with the leadership team of Indivisible + WA, HoZ Consulting's Sandi Olson developed the group guidelines for Indivisible + WA.

Your group may be pursuing the Indivisible strategy as your main goal or as part of a broader mission. Whatever works! This is for anyone who agrees with these three principles:

- 1. Resist Trump's agenda. We believe Trump's agenda is racist, authoritarian, and corrupt, and it must be stopped.**
- 2. Focus on local, defensive congressional advocacy. We demand that our own local Members of Congress serve as our voice in Washington, DC.**
- 3. Embrace progressive values. We model inclusion, respect, and fairness in all of our actions.**

"Indi+ has paid an unusual amount of attention to how to conduct intersectionally inclusive discussions, and the community guidelines reflect that. I've used them as a basis for guidelines with groups I've helped lead, with extremely good results."

- Jon Pincus
Strategy DIVA
(Diversity, Inclusion, and Values Adviser)
Shahid Buttar for Congress

The Challenge

Indivisible began in January of 2017 as a reaction to the election of Donald Trump as President. The concept was to gather like-minded people together to influence our elected officials against the onslaught of legislation guaranteed to follow this administration. Indivisible + WA was a Facebook group of roughly 25,000 Washington State Hillary Clinton fans still reeling over the loss.

Sandi Olson, the founder and CEO of HoZ Consulting, founded Indivisible + WA and curated the leadership team from a range of volunteers and contributors. The Indi+ Leadership Team took the basic premise of Indivisible and developed a unique set of community guidelines. While Washington State is often considered rather 'progressive' and politically 'liberal', it suffers from a striking lack of diversity - even in the urban core of Seattle. If this movement were going to have any substance or longevity, it would need to confront the casual racism prevalent in "progressive" circles. As a white woman, Sandi saw this as an opportunity to build a new coalition.

The original set of guidelines from Indivisible National were incredibly simple:

1. Resist Trump's Agenda
2. Focus on local, defensive congressional advocacy
3. Embrace progressive values

How these guidelines played out in practice turned out to be far more complicated. Well-intentioned but ultimately harmful conversations flourished as members pushed to gather around what needed to be done first. Which room do we tend to when the whole house is on fire? And how do we describe the urgency of any individual issue? Also, because the group lived within Facebook, we were restricted by the character count allowed in a Facebook About page.

The Approach

After working to develop a coalition of members who represented a wide range of communities throughout Washington state, we built a draft set of guidelines and then put them to test in the group - each time we would see a repeated problem, we would discuss whether or not it would merit a line (or edit) in the guidelines, and whether there could be a general guide that sufficiently resolved the problem. A few of us also joined as many of the regional groups as we could so we could see how the groups within Washington were resolving some of the issues that we were facing.

We met in person whenever possible, but thanks to geography and the busy schedules of most of our leadership teams, we conducted most of these conversations via Facebook Messenger. Sandi's role in these conversations was often to amplify the voices of those who often weren't given prominence, or to model what it looked like to sit back and listen.

"4. Racism, ableism* (including mental health shaming and stigmatization), sexism, microaggressions*, gaslighting*, sea-lioning*, and other abusive behaviors are prohibited. Engaging in trolling, bullying, name-calling of any person inside or outside the group, personal attack, harassment, and/or sharing group posts without documented permission of the post author(s) is also prohibited.

* Terms defined in Glossary, available in Group Files"

- Indivisible + WA Guidelines

The Solution

The full list of guidelines can be viewed [here](#), but for this case study, I'd like to focus on just one line item - #4. - the '-isms'. Most companies and organizations have some kind of official rule to discourage the various '-isms' and biases, but many companies struggle with how to put their statements into action. Every member of this group had some personal investment in progressive social change, but the mandate of this specific group was action. What can be said within the group that is most likely to generate action?

With post after post lambasting the next terrible thing coming out of the White House, there was a tendency to throw shade at anyone who had ever uttered the word 'Republican' before, but we decided that there were lots of other places available to people to simply vent about the current administration. We didn't want to stifle conversation about why one topic might be more urgent than the next, but we also didn't want to turn into a spinning wheel of (useless) negativity, either. The best way we discovered to curb the purely emotional posts was to rule that there would be no name-calling of people inside or outside the group. Someone could post about the bone-headed thing that a public official did, but couldn't call the "person" bone-headed (or worse).

We still regularly have to jump in and mention the rule here and there, but for the most part the membership sees the caliber of the posts and commentary in the group and simply goes along with it. We've had some mistakenly assume that we have a no swearing policy (we don't), but we've found that the hard line on name-calling has shifted the conversation toward what people have done (not who they are) and that shift also pushes the conversation toward what we as members can do in response.

The Results

We were recognized nationally for our ability to invest in diversity, equity, and inclusion - so much so that the national leader of Indivisible sought us out for input when they concluded that they would need to overtly discuss race in their membership information. Also, despite having a membership of over 24,000 people, we've consistently seen engagement over 40%. The current Indivisible + WA group is now known nationally as one of the more successful groups at integrating difficult conversations about race and culture with the daily work of activism. The leadership team of Indi+WA is still predominantly comprised of members of marginalized groups who have direct experience working with the predominantly-white group membership on the difficult conversations around race and politics.