

## Organizational Diagnosis of ASL19 - Executive Summary

### Context

The resignation of a key executive from ASL19 following public allegations of sexual assault and forcible confinement revealed existing vulnerabilities in ASL19's operating culture<sup>1</sup>. Tightly coupled with these allegations was the revelation that multiple former employees of ASL19 had alleged negative experiences directly tied to their tenure in the organization. The realization that the experiences of past and present colleagues were in direct conflict with ASL19's values triggered emotional shockwaves throughout the entire team and led to the immediate and unavoidable recognition that operating processes that were once considered adequate were clearly insufficient.

As a human rights organization, ASL19's operations are intimately bound up with its organizational culture and identity such that when one suffers, the other is bound to fail.<sup>2</sup> As such, the conduct and experiences of ASL19's team members are directly reflective of ASL19's capacity to meet its mission. For this reason, the recognition of the alleged negative experiences of ASL19's employees was as much of a trigger for the organization to shift into a crisis state as the allegations against one of its founders.

An organization confronted with crisis could easily continue its customary operations in the expectation that when things settle down, normalcy will be restored. This type of band-aid approach does nothing to address the root causes of the crisis. More common is a top-down crisis management strategy which may lead to the introduction of new practices, but is unlikely to comprehensively address the root causes of a crisis from all points of view within the organization. This often leads to a wave of departures many months after the precipitating event, and little assurance that a similar crisis won't occur in the future.

---

<sup>1</sup> Coda Societies does not express any opinions nor make any conclusions, legal or otherwise, regarding the allegations and charges which resulted in the resignation of ASL19 key executive and nothing herein should be interpreted as such. This report documents comments and observations from employees and management of ASL19 strictly within the context of an assessment of its organizational culture with the goal being the creation of improved internal governance mechanisms.

<sup>2</sup> It is helpful to understand ASL19's operations as a "repertoire of collective action," as defined by sociologist Charles Tilly, that expresses a values-based strategy that in turn defines its organizational structure.

## An Opportunity for Transformation

A crisis has true transformational power. After a crisis, an organization can emerge stronger or weaker, but one outcome is assured: it will not be the same organization it was before the crisis. Coda Societies takes the position that organizations can most effectively respond to a crisis moment by engaging in a process of deliberate reflection that leads to systemic transformation. In a crisis situation, Coda Societies also takes into consideration the nature of the transgression and ensures that the management and team going forward are not directly responsible for the transgression, nor do they align with any aspect of the transgression. **The goal of this process is for an organization to hold itself accountable as an institution, and to ask the hard questions that can lead to a transformed culture in which the organization won't be able to reproduce such a crisis in the future.**

Coda Societies selects its partner organizations based on their potential to promote whole systems change. **To do this, we conduct an organizational diagnosis in which we analyze the interplay between an organization's team, culture and processes, engage the complete team in envisioning a re-invigorated and values-based organizational culture, and lay the foundation for a set of deliverables and outcomes that can positively influence the larger ecosystem for systemic impact.** By carrying out this organizational diagnosis, we are able to gauge an organization's capacity for transformative change and systems impact. The results of this diagnosis determine whether Coda Societies engages in a next phase of work with the organization.

During our first meeting in December of 2017, Anna May and Fereidoon Bashar expressed to Coda Societies their intent to learn from this crisis, implement necessary changes, and strive for ASL19 to become a leader in promoting and sustaining a culture of inclusivity and safety for all. They also expressed a desire to know whether their own conduct had ever been identified as problematic by their team members. Over the last three months since that initial conversation, Coda Societies has conducted an organizational diagnosis of ASL19 to 1) assess the level of emotional and psychological distress experienced by the ASL19 team due to the sudden revelation and resignation of a key executive, as well as the current state of the organization's culture, and 2) to gauge ASL19's potential to evolve and, through its transformation, have systemic impact. The initial assessment was completed through hour-long confidential interviews with each member of ASL19's 23-person team and a comprehensive review

of their existing processes. Based on the results of our assessment, we designed and facilitated a two-day long exploratory workshop to engage the team in articulating the ethical principles and aligning on specific terms including gender, race, discrimination, sexism and others necessary to draft an organizational code of conduct.

We applied the following assessment framework to understand cultural and operational integrity among individual team members and throughout the organization. The assessment criteria are based on the stages of psychological crisis intervention as applied to individual and organizational dynamics. An organization and its team members are required to meet the following criteria as a baseline for Coda Societies to continue to engage with them.

### **Organizational Capacity for Reflection & Change**

- Provision of any and all records of all daily operations throughout the diagnosis process without exception or expression of reluctance.
- Full and equal access to all team members regardless of role, hierarchy, or responsibilities.
- If there was recognition of issues in the past, evidence of a timely attempt, even if failed, at addressing the root causes of the crisis.
- No evidence of any coercive attempt to control the narrative of the crisis at any point before, during, or following the precipitating event.

### **Individual Team Member Capacity for Reflection & Change**

- Expressed recognition of unhealthy social dynamics within the organization with specific examples, regardless of personal role in them.
- Expression and ownership of any personal contributions to unhealthy social dynamics.
- Expressed willingness to help develop and adopt new mindsets and behaviors that uphold organizational standards.
- Expressed willingness to forgive other individuals for past unhealthy mindsets and behaviors.
- Demonstrated willingness to support other individuals in experimenting with and adopting new mindsets and behaviors in group setting.

## Diagnosis Results

ASL19 meets the baseline criteria of our assessment. We believe ASL19 and its team members have the capacity to learn from this crisis and transform the organization's culture and operations to meet its mission and uphold the standards demanded by it. Our key findings and recommendations follow.

## Key Findings

- **ASL19 has a vibrant organizational culture** based on values of openness, collegiality, and a strong commitment to innovation and excellence. These four values were consistently mentioned across team interviews, suggesting that ASL19 has been consistent in establishing and cultivating these principles throughout its existence. Across the team, no indication or evidence was raised to indicate that the current management had engaged in inappropriate behavior or misused their power at any time.
- Across the organization, there is a **strongly rooted common understanding of the organization's mission** to help citizens assert their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and access to information. All team members expressed a shared passion for human rights and for social justice, as well as a respect for ASL19's dedication to **producing high-quality work and abiding by high standards of excellence.**
- The organization's most unique assets include a **multicultural workforce, member-driven development process, sense of purposeful motivation, and productive dialogue with many diverse communities.** Due to an incomplete development and application of formal processes, ASL19's unique assets have evolved into some of the organization's most challenging impediments. With guided reflection and reframing, these assets can grow into their full position as critical strengths for the organization.
- **Diversity is a point of pride at ASL19, but functionally operates as a weakness.** Stark differences exist in perspectives and personal experience within the team in relation to identity, discrimination and sexism. This means that people have different understandings of what concepts like harassment mean in practical

terms in the office. Discussion of these divergences was initially inhibited in a group setting but showed improvement over the course of the diagnosis activities.

- **While processes governing the social conduct of team members have been initiated, they have yet to be robustly institutionalized.** This has led to an environment in which a subset of employees expressed feeling constrained in their ability to freely express their opinions. Historical records show strong evidence that management attempted to address issues and concerns raised by employees in the past with a good faith effort. When interviewed, management recognized the need to improve upon these processes as they were deemed inadequate by past and present employees.
- Interpersonal exchanges both outside and inside ASL19 are highly valued and encouraged and are seen as one of the principal avenues to grow and excel. At the same time, team members agree that **communication, transparency, and accountability systems are weak at ASL19.** This inclination toward expansion and interpersonal exchanges highlights a crucial need to create robust terms of engagement inside and outside of the organization.
- Team members feel that ASL19 is an environment that is intellectually stimulating with opportunity for personal and professional growth. The vast majority of employees remain committed to ASL19. **The team believes they are at the cutting edge of their industry** and are strongly dedicated to keeping that leadership role in this sphere by continually refining their products and offerings. They are also excited to see ASL19 evolve and adapt to new user needs and expand their operations.

## Recommendations

- **Position ASL19's unique assets at the center of any new systems that are introduced** to ensure that what makes the organization unique is preserved while mitigating any potential to undermine operations.
- **Support existing collaboration and communication practices at ASL19** with a robust system of engagement to increase transparency and accountability.
- **Ensure a safe environment for communication of charged topics** by further defining a common vocabulary and set of standards, and reworking existing complaint and conflict resolution channels for comprehensive coverage of potential issues, and introduce training materials for employees to have utmost clarity on procedures.
- **Develop internal support systems for employee safety.** The nature of ASL19's mission demands that employees observe strict security regulations, specifically the need to adopt an alternative identity and maintain high levels of confidentiality regarding the content of their work. In addition the team carries out its work in a context of high political volatility and uncertainty which leads to high levels of stress. This unique context demands that employees be provided with a set of appropriate resources to help mitigate the psychological and emotional stress that they experience daily.
- **Support employee wellbeing** by providing professional development monitoring and counseling to minimize potential for burnout and anticipate potential for future crises.
- **Improve upon HR management system and engage expert assistance** to formalize processes regarding employee recruitment, hiring, and exits and provide ongoing oversight.
- **Convene a formal advisory board** to provide additional accountability for the leadership, strategic direction, assess program effectiveness, and maintain regular communication with representatives of the many communities ASL19 works in and with.

## Next Steps

Coda Societies is now working with the set of re-defined organizational values and terms that emerged from this initial diagnosis phase to draft the basis for a new code of conduct for ASL19's team to workshop and refine in a collaborative setting. The code of conduct and ethical principles it is based on establish the foundation for the design and implementation of new policies and procedures, as well as the standards for evaluating the impact and effectiveness of these strategic interventions over time.

Organizational change programs are only successful if they achieve change at two levels: within individual members and between individual members. To maximize its opportunity to learn, ASL19 is committed to engaging not only its current employees, but past team members as well. Going forward, Coda Societies will be inviting former employees to take part in the codesign process, with level of involvement based on individual preference.

ASL19 is hardly the only organization facing a crisis of this nature. Organizations across a range of industries have been compelled to review their policies and practices after public allegations against powerful men, regardless of whether these are formal accusations or rumors in trusted networks. ASL19 is unique among these organizations in that it has a complex cultural make-up, with programming directed toward the Iranian population in Iran and the MENA region, and employees hailing from the United States, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and Palestine in addition to its nexus of Iranian founders. Because of its multicultural identity, ASL19 must develop policies and procedures that do not default to the preferences of a cultural majority, but instead account for the particularities of each of its members.

The public scrutiny that has followed the resignation of the aforementioned key executive provides an opportunity for ASL19 to share its learnings as it undergoes its evolution toward becoming a safe and inclusive environment for all. Coda Societies is optimistic about the potential for the processes being developed through ASL19's response to its crisis to influence a variety of communities and industries, and lead the way for other organizations to undergo similar reforms -- ideally in advance of similar crises.