Encyclopedia of Leadership

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The democratic promise of equity, inclusion, and accountability requires an organized citizenry with the power to articulate and assert its interests effectively. In the United States, the concerns of many citizens remain muted because of unequal and declining citizen participation. Elsewhere in the world, many new democracies struggle to create institutions to make effective citizen participation possible. Organizing confronts these challenges by revitalizing old democratic institutions and creating new ones; it involves learning how to mobilize people for effective collective action.

For people to turn shared values into action, they must learn how to identify, recruit, and develop leadership; they must learn to build community around that leadership; and they must learn to draw power from that community. Organizers challenge people to act on behalf of shared values and interests. They draw people together into new relationships that enable people to gain new understanding of their interests, and they help people develop new resources and new capacity to use these resources for the collective benefit. These relationship-building activities lead to new networks of relationship wide and deep enough to provide a foundation for a new community in action. A second result is a new story about who this community is, where it has been, where it is going, and how it will get there. A third result is action, as the community mobilizes and deploys its resources on behalf of its interests.

THE WORK OF ORGANIZERS

Organizers are people developers in every possible way. They help people come to see why they should act to change their world—that is, they help people find motivation for change—and they also help people figure out how they can change their world (they help people formulate their strategy). To arrive at motivation, organizers help people get a deeper understanding of who they are, what they want, and why; they mobilize people’s feelings of anger, hope, self-worth, solidarity, and urgency while challenging feelings of fear, apathy, self-doubt, isolation, and inertia. People’s motivation, once developed, is articulated as a shared story of the challenges they face, why they must face them, and why others should help them.

When it comes to understanding how people can act, organizers help by creating opportunities for people to deliberate about their circumstances, reinterpret them in ways that open up new opportunities, and strategize to make creative use of their resources. They challenge people to take the responsibility to act. For an individual, empowerment begins with taking responsibility; for an organization, empowerment begins with its members’ commitment to it, that is, with the responsibility its members take for it. Responsibility, in turn, begins with choosing to act. Organizers challenge people not only to understand, but also to commit, and to act.

The primary vehicle for action is the campaign, a highly energized, intensely focused, concentrated stream of activity with specific goals and deadlines. People are recruited, programs launched, battles fought, and organizations built through campaigns. One dilemma inherent in campaigning is how to depolarize campaigns when inevitable conflicts rear their heads. Another dilemma is how to balance campaigns with the ongoing work of organizational growth and development.

Then there is the connection between organizing and leadership. Organizers build community by developing leadership. They help leaders enhance their skills, articulate their values, and formulate their commitments, and then they work to develop a relationship of mutual responsibility and accountability between a constituency and its leaders.

LEARNING TO ORGANIZE

Part of organizing is a practice, and therefore can only be learned from the experience of taking action. Taking action means accepting risks—risks of failure, of making mistakes, of losing face, of rejection,
and so on. Because organizing is relational (done in interaction with others), the more one can distinguish between one’s own goals and the goals of others and can understand the interaction between the two, the easier it becomes to take the risks that learning requires. The more deeply committed one is to one’s cause, the more one will learn, because the motivation to take the risks that result in learning will be very strong.

There is also a theoretical side to organizing, but unlike in some academic disciplines, one does not learn the theory first and then apply it. The theory is no more than a way to simplify reality for specific purposes, such as predicting a likely outcome.

Learning to organize means learning about the two notions of time that the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould described as time as a cycle and time as an arrow. Thinking of time as a cycle helps us to maintain our routines, our normal procedures, our annual budget, and so forth, while thinking of time as an arrow focuses us on making change, on achieving specific outcomes, on narrowing our efforts. While conducting a campaign, time is experienced as an arrow. There is an intense stream of activity that begins with a foundational period, which builds to a kick-off that is followed by periodic peaks and culminates in a final peak, followed by a resolution. As the campaign gains momentum, it gathers more and more resources, much as a snowball pushed through the snow collects more and more snow. Campaigners’ motivation increases in the same fashion, with early successes making later successes more achievable.

When it comes to organizing, interaction with others is not an extra; rather, it is at the core of the learning process. Learning how to challenge, support, and motivate those with whom one works—and learning to be challenged, supported, and motivated by them—can be one of the most useful lessons in organizing.

LEADERSHIP IN ORGANIZING

Although we associate leaders with certain attributes (such as power), another way to look at leadership is as a relationship. The historian James MacGregor Burns argues that one sort of leadership can be understood as a relationship that emerges from repeated exchanges or transactions between leaders and followers or constituents. Leaders provide resources constituents need to address their interests, and constituents provide resources leaders need to address theirs. Constituents may get help solving a problem, a sense of empowerment, access to resources, and so forth. Leaders may get the same things, but they also get something that makes them willing to accept the responsibilities that go with leadership. The key factor in understanding leadership as a relationship is the notion that one cannot be a leader without followers. No matter how fine one’s speeches or how numerous one’s awards, without a constituency, one is not a leader.

Because relationship building is central to the craft of organizing, it is central to the exercise of leadership in organizing. If the interaction between leader and followers yields a deeper understanding of values and how to translate them into action, it becomes what Burns calls moral leadership. And although identifying, recruiting, and developing leadership is critical to the capacity of most organizations, it is the particular focus of organizers, whose work is to be leaders of leaders. The primary responsibility of an organizer is to develop the leadership capacities of others and, in this way, of the organizations through which their constituents act on their common interests.

How Does Leadership Work?

The voluntary associations that are developed in the course of organizing only work when people are willing to accept both roles of leadership and followership. Leading and following are not expressions of who members are but of what they do in a specific meeting, committee, project, organization, or institution. A person may play a leadership role in one project and a followership role in another.

What are the differences in those roles? Leaders accept responsibility for very specific pieces of work a group must do to work together successfully. As the feminist scholar Jo Freeman argues, organization (or collaboration of any kind) simply doesn’t work if people don’t have ways to assign clear responsibili-
ties and hold members accountable for fulfilling them. A most important responsibility is that of seeing to the needs of the group as a whole: This is the responsibility of the leader. Although leadership can be exercised by individuals working in a team (and indeed, a leadership team can bring complementary strengths to bear on solving a problem) the responsibility of seeing to the team itself still has to rest somewhere.

One should also distinguish authority from leadership. Authority is a legitimacy of command usually attached to specific social positions, offices, or roles—legitimacy supported by cultural beliefs as well as coercive resources. An organization is a way to formalize authority relations among the participants. Bureaucracies structure authority as a set of rules according to which managers direct subordinates. Markets structure authority as a set of rules according to which entrepreneurs can design incentives for persons to make enforceable choices based on their individual economic resources. Civic associations—the type of structure developed by organizers—usually structure authority democratically: Leaders are accountable to the constituents whom they serve. Exercising leadership in a civic context can require more skill than it does in the other settings because it depends more on persuasion than on command.

Cultures' institutionalized beliefs about who is authorized to lead and who is not can bar certain people from the opportunity to earn the title of leader. Leaders who develop under these conditions constitute a challenge to conventional ideas of authority. Authority can also be a resource a person draws upon to earn their leadership, and conversely, leaders sometimes find authority has been conferred upon them as a result of their having earned their leadership. But leadership and authority are not the same thing.

Finally, leaders should be distinguished from activists. Hard-working activists show up every day to staff the phone bank, pass out leaflets, and put up posters; they make critical contributions to the work of any volunteer organization. This is not the same, however, as engaging others in doing the work of the organization. Leadership is exercised through relational work.

What Do Leaders Do?

Perhaps one way to understand what leaders do in the context of organizing is to compare successful civic associations with unsuccessful ones. The unsuccessful ones might well be called "disorganizations." They are:

- Divided. Fractions and divisions fragment the organization and sap its resources.
- Confused. Each person has a different understanding of what's going on. There is a lot of gossip, but not very much information.
- Passive. Most "members" do very little; one or two people do most of the work.
- Reactive. They are always trying to respond to some unanticipated new development.
- Inactive. No one comes to meetings. No one shows up for activities.
- Prone to drifting. There is little purposefulness to meetings, actions, or decisions, and things drift from one meeting to the next.

Successful organizations, on the other hand, really work. In successful organizations, people are united. They have learned to manage their differences well enough that they can unite to accomplish the purposes for which the organization formed. Differences are openly debated, discussed, and resolved.

- share understanding. There is a widely shared understanding of what's going on, what the challenges are, what the program is, and why the current course of action was adopted.

- participate. Lots of people in the organization are active; they not only go to meetings but also get the work of the organization done.

- take initiative. Rather than reacting to whatever happens in their environment, they are proactive, and act upon their environment.

- act. People do the work they must to make things happen.

- share a sense of purpose. There is purposefulness about meetings, actions, and decisions and sense of forward momentum as work gets done.

It is the quality of the work leaders do within them that makes groups work. A good leader steers
the group away from the bad characteristics of the “disorganization” and toward the characteristics of a good organization. Leaders turn division into solidarity by building, maintaining, and developing relationships among those who form the organization. Leaders turn confusion into understanding by facilitating interpretation of what is going on with the work of the organization. They turn passivity into participation by inspiring people to commit to the action required if the group’s goals are to be accomplished, and they turn reaction into initiative by strategizing—thinking through how the organization can use its resources to achieve its goals. Inaction becomes action when leaders mobilize people to turn their resources into the specific actions that will lead to the achievement of their goals, and drift becomes shared purpose when leaders accept responsibility for overseeing the group and challenge others to accept their responsibility as well.

ORGANIZERS AND THE ART OF INTERPRETATION

In the context of organizing, the art of interpretation is the art of figuring out what the group should do and why it should do it. We reinterpret our world and our roles within it even as we change it. Our understanding of ourselves and the world around us is based not on raw data but on interpretation of the data. In examining the data, we ask, Is this good for us? Is it bad for us? Is it irrelevant for us? We interpret data by contextualizing it within schemata, or frames, that we have learned. Frames are patterns of understanding that influence what we remember, what we pay attention to, and what we expect that give meaning to the discrete pieces of information we encounter. Frames are emotionally anchored, derive from our direct experience, and give us our grip on the world.

Two Ways of Knowing: Why and How

We can distinguish between two ways in which we interpret the world: narrative and analytic. We construct a narrative understanding of who we are, where we are going, and how we hope to get there that is rooted more in how we feel about things (affection) than in what we think about them (cognition). A narrative understanding is inductive; it is “true” insofar as it moves us, and it dominates the fields of religion, literature, poetry, and politics. The psychologist Jerome Bruner argues that the power of narrative understanding to engage comes from the wisdom it promises to reveal to us about coping with uncertainty. Its power to move us grows out of the extent to which we can identify with the protagonists.

Analytic understanding is based on our application of critical reason to data about the world. It is rooted more in what we think about things than in how we feel about them. It is deductive, governed by rules of logic, and often constructed in the form of syllogism. It dominates in the fields of economics, policy analysis, and much scientific research. Although its persuasive power ultimately rests on evidence (experience) that supports or fails to support its hypotheses, it is based on our acceptance of the assumptions on which the logic is based or the authority of those who invoke this logic.

Mobilizing Motivation: Storytelling

As indicated above, leaders motivate followers to transform a passive “disorganization” into an active “organization.” Strategy turns reaction into initiative by mobilizing thinking, but motivation turns passivity into participation by mobilizing feelings.

Organizers mobilize people’s feelings in ways that help people overcome their inhibitions about taking action. Many people have conflicting feelings on various subjects; mobilizing one set of feelings to challenge another produces an emotional dissonance, a tension that can only be resolved through action. This process is sometimes called “agitation.” Anger can be mobilized to challenge fear; hope can challenge apathy; belief in one’s ability to make a difference can challenge self-doubt; solidarity can challenge isolation, and urgency can challenge inertia.

One useful tool is the motivational conversation, a form of storytelling. Henry V (1387–1422) motivated the English troops in France before the battle of Agincourt by telling them a story—not a story about what once was, but a story about what could
be. Stories of what could be, stories of hope, are one of the main ways organizers translate values into action.

In listening—or in telling—a story, we experience the tale’s events as events in our own lives. We become part of the story; we respond, call up our own stories, and tell one in response. Stories engage because they teach us how to deal with the unexpected. Although we often tell stories set “once upon a time,” what moves us to tell stories is concern not with the past but with the future. Through stories we can draw on the past to meet a current challenge, to shape a desired future. That is what Henry V did: He drew on his men’s understanding of their past, their identities, to face a current challenge in a way that would make a new, better future possible for them.

When we start a new organization, we not only build new relationships and mobilize new resources, but we begin a new story—a story that, if it is successful, will weave together many individual tales in an encompassing story of the community within which we live. Organizers learn to tell a story of hope that answers the questions Why now? Why us? and, for those whom one hopes to mobilize, Why you?

If deliberative work occurs in meetings, story-telling occurs in celebrations. Meetings are about thinking; celebrations are about feeling. But a celebration is not a party; it is a way members of a community come together to honor who they are, what they have done, and where they are going—often symbolically. Celebrations can be formal or informal; they include rallies, fiestas, victory parties, shared meals, mass meetings, and religious services. Small celebratory acts can be introduced into many aspects of an organization’s life. Amnesty International, for example, ends its meetings with a short letter-writing session on behalf of one of the prisoners for whom it is advocating. More important than the number of letters written is the affirmation of what the organization is all about.

STRATEGY AND POWER

Strategy is how we turn what we have into what we need to get what we want; that is, strategy is how we turn resources into power. If we think of power as the influence one actor can have upon another because of an imbalance in interests and resources, one way to correct the imbalance is to find more resources. But more resources aren’t always available. So another way to correct the imbalance is to move the fulcrum on which the balance rests to get more leverage out of the same resources. This is what good strategists learn to do: They learn to get more leverage from the resources that are available. Power, then, is not only a matter of material resources, but also of imagination.

What Is Power?

Power works in at least two different ways. Traditionally we think of it as “power over,” or dependency and domination. I gain power over others by making them dependent on me for resources they need. That power then gives me access to their resources on terms that meet my interests at their expense. An employer, for example, who controls most of the opportunities for income in a company town can exercise power over individual workers who need the income, thus gaining access to their labor at low wages. The employer can exploit the worker because the worker depends on the employer. The employer’s interests get addressed, but at the expense of workers’ interests, which do not.

But there is a second way to look at power—as “power to,” or interdependency. When I have resources you need and you have resources I need, an opportunity exists for an exchange that can enhance our combined power. In this setting, mobilizing power is not a zero-sum game. New immigrants, for example, may pool their savings in a credit union to make low-interest loans available to members, increasing their financial power. “Power to” is a result of social cooperation and our capacity to accomplish together what we cannot accomplish alone.

Organizing based on collaboration requires finding ways to generate power to achieve common interests. On the other hand, organizing based on claims making requires finding ways to generate enough power to alter relations of dependency and domination that are due to preexisting conflicts of interest. If workers combine their resources in a
Advice for Activists

Randy Battle, musician and activist, was involved in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Below, he offers advice for community organizers and activists.

I have found that it's better to go into a community if you are planning on staying for a while, and first getting to know people and letting people get to know you. Now you can become known and get to know people in many ways. You can first start by going to the churches, cafes, school dances, community club meetings, if there are such. And at all of these, whatever you go to, you should talk to people, and try to get them to either let you come around to their homes or you ask them to yours.

If you are young, like most of us are, then you must be careful about how you go about talking to older people. The best way to get to the older people is to have something to offer. If you have ever been in the field, often it is found that older people like to talk about jobs, bad streets, no street lights, bad housing, and how the white school is so much better than their own. People talk about these because most of the time they don't know enough about any of the other things that affect them to talk about them. So the thing you do is to kind of ask questions and answer them at the same time. To do this will, or would, give people other things to think about.

After you have made yourself known you are then able to ask things of the people. You can ask them why they are living in such a bad house and get an answer without offending the person whom you are talking to. But without being known you just can't talk truthfully with a man or woman who only makes $10 a week in Miss Ann's kitchen, or who toms for Mr. Charles for $25 or $30 a week, and look for an answer. I have found that now they will tell why they don't do anything or go along with the things The Movement does. I find mostly people will say that M. L. King won't give me a job when I lost the one I have, nor will he give me any food for my hungry children. So I am going to keep away from them Movement people like my boss told me, because she is the one who is going to help me.

What I will say is that the first thing you do when you go into a community is to get to know as many people as you can, not as a leader or anything of that kind, but as a person tired of living in bad houses on bad streets without lights, no place for your child to go after school, and not a very good school.

I don't think you should worry about making contact when you go into a community, because if you do the things I have stated heretofore then you have made your contacts. Also, by this time you should know who the key people are, whatever that means. Maybe I should ask what kind of people are considered as key people. Then maybe I could speak to that. I don't know how to get people into a leadership position. But there are ways, I know. Sometimes you just kind of force them one way or another by asking them to do little things, whatever may be the situation where you are or maybe where he's working. All people are not the same; it takes more to get some people going than others.

But to me there is something in your letter of which I have read, that has some real meaning to me. And that is how do you overcome fear, apathy, and suspicion—not only in the hard-core areas, but everywhere there is a movement under way. I don't believe anyone knows how to overcome these. One can only say what he or she feels is the best way to overcome fear, apathy, suspicion.

Before I say what I feel, I would like to go back to what Sherrod would say when he asked people to go down in a march or sit-in. He would look at you a while, then slowly he would say, "If you can free a person's mind, then he or she is able to think." In so many words he would say if you can give a blind man 20-20 vision, then he will be able to see when he comes to a corner. How do you free one mind? In my own mind I would say somewhat in the same way you overcome apathy, fear, and suspicion.

But there is just one thing that I worry about most; and that is fear; I believe if you can overcome fear then all of the others you can easily overcome. There are many ways to overcome fear, and for some people a few or one of the ways will help them to overcome fear. And for others it may take all of them. The ways to overcome fear could be for some people registering to vote, or going downtown in a march or sit-in, or going to the police station to go someone's bond.


union, they may be able to balance their individual dependency on their employer with his dependency on their labor as a whole. This way a dependent "power over" relationship can be turned into an interdependent "power to" relationship.

A key to successful organizing is understanding
that getting the power to challenge relations of dependency and domination ("power over") may require creating lots of interdependency ("power to") first. Many unions, for example, began with death benefit societies, sickness funds, credit unions—in other words, by creating "power to" based on interdependency among members of the constituency.

We can distinguish three faces of power. The first is the visible face, which can be detected by observing who wins among decision makers faced with choices as to how to allocate resources. But who decides what gets on the agenda in the first place? And who decides who sits at the table making decisions? Deciding what gets on the agenda and who sits at the table is the second face of power—the gatekeeper face. In the years of apparent "racial harmony" before the civil-rights movement, African-Americans ran up against that face of power as they saw their issues repeatedly left off the national agenda.

The third face of power is harder to detect. Some power relations that shape our world are so deeply embedded that we take them for granted. Before the women's movement, for example, many people claimed that job discrimination against women was not an issue. Women's interests were not being voted down in Congress (there were almost no women in Congress) and women's groups were not picketing outside, unable to place their issue on the agenda. Yet women occupied subordinate positions in most spheres of public life. Was that because they were content with their lot? Perhaps. But sometimes people would like things to be different but simply can't imagine how they could be—not clearly enough, at least, to take the risks to make them so. To detect the power relations at work in a situation like this, one has to look beyond the question of who decides or who puts issues on the agenda and focus on identifying who benefits and who loses in the allocation of valued resources. If one then asks why the losers generally lose and the winners generally win, one may discover a power disparity at work. (This can be tricky because the winners always claim they deserve to win and that the losers deserve to lose, and sometimes they convince the losers).

Strategy and Tactics

Strategic action is a way of acting, not an alternative to action. It is acting with intentionality, with mindfulness of one's goals, as opposed to acting out of habit or emotional reaction. So devising strategy is an ongoing activity, not simply a matter of making a strategic plan at the beginning of a campaign and then sticking to it. Planning helps organizers arrive at a common vision of where they want to go and how they hope to get there, but the real action in strategy is, as the organizer Saul Alinsky put it, in the reaction of other actors, of the opposition, of chance events.

Although strategic action is taken with reference to the future, it occurs in the present. When we strategize, we give a voice to the future in the present. When we don't strategize it is often not because we don't know how, but because strategizing can be
very difficult. When we must make choices about how to invest scarce resources, voices of present constituencies speak most loudly; the voice of future constituencies is silent. Strategy is a leadership task in part because it requires real courage: leaders must be willing to say no to current demands and find the faith to commit to an uncertain future. Our choices may result in the hoped-for outcome, but then again, they may not. Trying to shape the future may require choices that involve substantial risk in the present.

We can understand strategy by breaking it down into three elements: targeting, timing, and tactics. Targeting is figuring out how to focus limited resources on doing what is likely to yield the greatest result, especially in terms of constituency, issues, and opposition.

Timing is about sequencing activities to take the initiative and keep it, build momentum, and take advantage of opportunities as they arise. You are wise to use initial tactics that yield resources that can give you a greater capacity to succeed at your next steps. Another timing question is when to confront the opposition, or, if the campaign is collaborative, when to face the most difficult challenge. Alinsky wrote that it was important never to seek a confrontation you could not win.

Tactics are specific activities with which you implement your strategy. They are consistent with your resources, but expose your opposition’s lack of resources. They build on your strength and your opposition’s weakness. They fall within the experience of your constituency, but outside the experience of your opposition. They unify your constituency, but divide the opposition. They are consistent with your goals. Violent tactics in pursuit of peaceful goals are dissonant, as are goals of empowering people that rely on mobilizing money.

Good strategy is a creative process that involves learning how to achieve one’s goals by behaving adaptively in the face of constantly changing circumstances. It relies on inputs from people with diverse experiences, people who know the nitty-gritty detail of the situation, but who also have learned that there is more than one way to look at things. Good strategists have learned what there is to know about the trees, but can also picture the whole forest. In civic associations a key element in developing good strategy is the deliberative process by which it is devised. The more people are involved in making strategy, the more committed they will be to making it work. Although good strategy can be the fruit of a strategic genius, it is more often the result of a good strategy team.

Action, Planning, and Strategy

One explanation of the way things get accomplished is that we evaluate our environment, we make a plan, we take action, we evaluate our action, we modify our plan, and so forth. In reality, the process is far less methodical than this. Sometimes it is only by taking action that we gain the understanding we need to develop a meaningful plan. The students who conducted the first sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960 in protest of segregation had no elaborate strategic plan about how their action would give rise to a whole student movement. By taking action they focused the issue, inspired others to act, and sparked a movement that made all sorts of plans possible that would have been inconceivable had they not acted. The nineteenth-century social reformer Jane Addams warned against being caught in the “snare of preparation”—a common academic affliction—in which one believes that with just one more survey, just one more data point, or just one more regression, the course of action will be clear. Sometimes it is only by doing that we come to know what is possible, especially in the work of making change.

A complete organizing strategy answers three questions: How do we build relationships, how do we interpret what we are doing, and how do we do it? The account of one of the labor organizer César Chávez’s first house meetings offers a glimpse of an action program in the making. Chávez clearly brought with him a vision of where the organization could go. The conversation unfolded, however, in terms of the interests of those who came to the meeting—burial and credit. Chávez led them into a reflection on how establishing a death benefit and a credit union would help them. And how could these goals be achieved? Each person could begin that very
evening by filling out a census card or agreeing to host a meeting of his or her friends. In this way, the goals of an action program evolve from the interests of a constituency, and the steps to be taken are based on the resources available to it. What went on at that house meeting also shows how narrow individual interests can be translated into the basis for broader community action.

Whether an organization pursues a collaborative or a claims-making strategy, its action program usually begins with collaborative tactics, which can help build a broad base of support to develop as much organizational capacity, or “power to,” as possible. These tactics can be used to achieve collaborative goals such as a credit union, a health benefit, or cooperative day care. On the other hand, if the organization has a claims-making intent, a foundation built in this way can be the first step in challenging someone else’s “power over” the community. It might, for example, eventually lead to getting the city to allocate funds, an employer to raise wages, or Congress to pass a law, though those goals may also require direct action, political action, or economic mobilization. In any case, collaborative work lays the foundation by creating enough “power to” to begin to challenge “power over.” Social service programs are usually collaborative, whereas social action programs usually involve claims making. Mobilizing community resources for an after-school tutoring program is an example of collaborative action or “power to.” Mobilizing to require a university to establish an ethnic studies program is an example of claims-making action that challenges “power over.”

RESOURCE MOBILIZATION AND EFFECTIVE ACTION

If you draw all your resources from within your constituency, then you are accountable for how you deploy those resources only to the constituency. Resources gained from outside the constituency, on the other hand, often entail accountability to those who contribute them, which places limits on how they can be used.

Similarly, devising tactics that require lots of money, if what you have is lots of people, can impose severe constraints on what you do. Basing your action program on tactics that require mobilizing people, on the other hand, can most directly empower your constituency, but it can constrain you to find tactics in which your people are willing to take part.

Finally, action programs that generate resources must be distinguished from action programs that drain resources. In union organizing, for example, the more successful the union, the more members it gets, the larger the dues base, the more leadership it has developed, and the greater its human and financial resources. Similarly, as some community organizations conduct parish renewal work among member churches, their human and financial capacity grows. Grant-based action programs, in contrast, often fail to generate new resources from the work they do, and keep themselves in a state of perpetual dependency.

The beauty of a tactic such as the grape boycott of the 1960s and 1970s is that it was an action in which everyone could play a part, whether by simply boycotting grapes at the supermarket, or, as in the case of one student, by dropping out of school to work full-time for the United Farm Workers. At one point in 1975, pollster Lou Harris found that 12 percent of the American public—at that time some 17 million people—were boycotting grapes. The wider the opportunity to act, the wider the participation and the responsibility.

Action entails cost in the form of time, effort, risk, and hard work. Sacrifice can also be widely shared. The more widely it is shared, the more people have a stake in the outcome. The boycott is a good example of this as well. When one or two people do all the sacrificing, they quickly become burned out, while everyone else blames them for whatever goes wrong.

The flip side of shared sacrifice is shared success. When many people have an opportunity to contribute to the effort, they also share in its success. It is their victory, not someone else’s. This, in turn, creates motivation and a sense of entitlement that facilitates accountability.

There is no right or wrong answer to what an appropriate relationship between resources and action should be. Understanding the relationship is
essential, however, if one is to make conscious choices about how to set up an organization so it has a chance to accomplish its purposes.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Given that leaders are so important to organizing, it helps to develop a “leadership-rich” organization, which means that organizers need to learn to delegate. Letting others take responsibility is easier if one thinks about it in terms of the following seven factors:

1. **Risk**: Risk small failures early in the life of a project in order to avoid big failures later on.

2. **Selection**: We develop good judgment about people by taking risks, making choices, experiencing success and failures, and learning from this experience. The more experience one has in selecting people, the better one’s judgment becomes.

3. **Motivation**: When looking for someone to take responsibility, don’t make the responsibility easier, and easier, and easier . . . until there’s nothing left. The challenge is in learning to motivate people to accept the level of responsibility needed to get the job done.

4. **Responsibility**: Delegation is not about assigning tasks, but offering responsibility.

5. **Support**: Once a person accepts responsibility, it is in the organizer’s interest to offer him or her as much support as is needed to ensure his or her success. The challenge is learning to offer support without taking back the responsibility.

6. **Accountability**: Delegation is real only if the person is clearly accountable for the responsibility he or she accepted. Accountability should be regular, specific, and timely. The point of accountability is not to catch people to punish them, but to learn what kind of results they are getting so everyone can learn from them.

7. **Authority**: You cannot expect a person to take responsibility without authority.

Developing a leadership-rich organization also requires a conscious strategy for identifying leaders (opportunities for leaders to emerge), recruiting leaders (opportunities for leadership to be earned), and developing leaders (opportunities for leaders to grow).

Identifying leaders requires looking for them. Who are people with followers? Who brings others to the meetings? Who encourages others to participate? Who attracts others to working with him or her? Whom do other people tell you to “look for?”

Alinsky writes about community networks knit together by “native” leaders—people who take the responsibility for helping a community do its work out of their homes, small businesses, neighborhood hangouts, and so on. They can be found coaching athletic teams, serving in their churches, and surfacing in other informal schools of leadership.

Recruiting leaders requires giving people an opportunity to earn leadership. Since followers create leaders, they can’t appoint themselves or be appointed. But one can create opportunities for people to accept the responsibilities of leadership and support them in learning how to fulfill these responsibilities.

Developing leaders requires structuring the work of the organization so it affords as many people as possible the opportunity to learn to lead.

LEADERSHIP TEAM OR LONE RANGER

The most successful organizers are those who form a leadership team with whom to work early on in their campaign. Although it can be a mistake to recruit people to act as an organizing committee too early—especially if you are not careful to recruit people whom the constituency views as leaders or at least potential leaders—organizers more often err in delaying too long. The sooner you have a team of people with whom to work, the sooner the “I” of the organizer becomes the “we” of the new organization. One you have formed a leadership team you can more easily establish a rhythm of regular meetings, clear decisions, and visible accountability that will help make things actually happen.

—Marshall Ganz

Further Reading


