

On Organizing -- From The Kitchen of
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A Simple Recipe For Social Change

Ingredients:

credibility
assumptions
commitment
power
hope
courage
goals
strategy

Directions:

be there
be informed
be able to count
don't be intimidated
don't take "no" for an answer
follow through

A Definition:

"Organize" as defined by Webster means: to provide with an organic structure;
systematize; to arrange; establish; institute; bring into being; to unify into a

coordinated functioning whole."

This booklet seeks to expand this definition to a more practical level giving down-to-earth suggestions to individuals who want to become involved and who want to learn and practice the simple skills which are involved in organizing any group to achieve specific goals.

Two Popular Myths

You need large numbers to be effective: False.

Most groups revolve around a small core of individuals who have the trust of the larger group. The core group must learn how to build coalitions and be able to draw on larger numbers at the appropriate time. Don't be discouraged if only a small group shows up to key meetings. The important thing is not to exclude anyone from the core group and to learn when and how to involve the less committed allies. For those people who miss meetings, keep them involved and up-to-date with phone calls and mailings. The smallness of a group becomes a liability only if it remains small and/or is unable to develop coalitions.

You must have special training to be able to organize a group: False.

Some of the most savvy and effective organizers are grassroots people who know the wishes of the community and can articulate them. The key to leadership is gaining and keeping the trust of the group, and this is accomplished by working with the group -- not for them.

The Bottom Line: Your Credibility

To organize, you must identify and bring together a core group of individuals. The core group has basically two initial tasks: (1) To clearly develop a focus or set of goals; and (2) To decide how to expand the group to represent as many viewpoints as possible so that the group's legitimacy and credibility cannot be challenged. The makeup of your group will, of course, help shape your goals: a group's membership and its goals usually shift somewhat over time.

Assumptions

Before the group can develop a focus or a set of goals, it is important to state the assumptions the group might share.

First, when dealing with institutions (government agencies, etc.), it is helpful to keep in mind the Peter Principle: Large organizations develop bureaucratic hierarchies or "pyramids of power." People are often promoted to positions of power beyond their level of competence. In other words, just because they have impressive-sounding titles, don't assume they know what they are talking about! (The Peter Principle, by Lawrence J. Peter, W. Morrow Publishers, 1969)

Second, our society is organized into institutions which are initially set up to achieve some special social goals. It is always a smart strategy to accept at face value the stated goal of each institution as a legitimate ideal you can embrace, if that goal is consistent with the social change your group wants to achieve.

The key to your success in changing the real policies and practices of that institution depends on how effectively you can demonstrate the institution's failure to meet its own stated goal, thereby destroying its legitimacy. You then can demonstrate how your group can do the job more effectively and, hopefully, at a lower cost.

Legitimacy and Those Who Have It Are the Keys to Change

Once you have effectively exposed the institution for its inability to achieve its own stated goals, the institution has basically two alternatives: (1) To make changes to achieve the goal, or (2) To become defensive and attack your group. Most institutions will initially change, especially if it is initiated from within. If they do begin to change, be on guard. Your group could be co-opted or sandbagged when a policymaker gives a superficial lip service to your suggestion but has no intention of implementing the policy or change. Your group, thinking they have won, will become diffused and apathetic -- losing interest even though the critical work of implementing the change will require continued oversight and pressure. Quick success is almost always fatal to a community group!

If the institution reacts defensively and begins to attack your group, it means you have hit a sensitive point and are on the right track. You can be sure you have become a threat when the institution begins to challenge your group's credibility. You must expect this kind of attack and not become defensive. You can judge the merit of your recommended change by the intensity of the institutional attack. The more defensive and hostile their response to you and your group, the more on target you are. You should move ahead aggressively.

Two Kinds of Commitment

It is always important to remember that there are two levels of involvement and commitment to any movement for change. On one level is the emotional commitment -- the feeling that something is wrong and the willingness to do something to change it. There is also the intellectual level personified by a well-read, knowledgeable, thoughtful individual. A group needs both levels of commitment to be effective.

(a) Those with the emotional commitment are the traditional activists. They are highly motivated and are anxious "to get involved" to try to change conditions. They normally have little historical perspective and are unable to articulate the group goals. They are often, but not always, hot heads and can be an embarrassment to your group. They are important to your group, but must learn to subordinate their own interests to those of the larger group.

(b) The intellectual level requires individuals who understand the historical significance of the change being advocated. These people have a sophisticated understanding of the interrelationships, the nuances and the subtleties of the situation. Unfortunately, many intellectuals are unable to translate the thought into action and, therefore, are not helpful to a group.

The ideal group leader has both an emotional and intellectual commitment (i.e., Martin Luther King, Jr. and Caesar Chavez) and can harness the energy of the emotions and the thoughtfulness of the intellect to give direction to a group. Unfortunately, few groups have such unique individuals as leaders. It is, therefore, the leader's task to be sure that both the emotional and intellectual commitment is present in the group. An overreliance on either will lead to a poorly thought out strategy and subsequent clumsy attempts at change or what may be called "paralysis by analysis" -- all thought and no action. Either result can be disastrous and counterproductive because it makes future attempts to organize much more difficult.

Forms of Power

Now that you have identified a core group, goals and others who share your interest, it is time to consider what kinds of power you and your group can bring to the coming struggle.

It is important to recognize that when you advocate change, you take on special interests that will be threatened by any change. Usually the special interest groups have a great deal of influence, often by default, because they possess an abundance of a few types of power: money, knowledge and personal relationships with the policymakers.

Special interest groups are not necessarily sinister in their use of power. They use money to contribute to policymaker's campaigns, to hire lobbyists, to wine-and-dine and to develop detailed materials to document their particular need(s). Special interests can and do play an important role in policymaking. Community groups can learn a great deal from observing how they utilize power to affect public policy.

Community groups do not have the money to compete with special interests; therefore, they must seek to use other kinds of power. A core group of organizers must learn to mobilize other types of power.

(1) Numbers Are Power: Policymakers (city council people, legislators) are very concerned about large numbers of voters, especially if they are upset. It is important that you identify other groups that agree with your goals who will show up to a meeting to demonstrate your large numbers. Numbers give you additional legitimacy and credibility.

Policymakers have radar which continually assesses the impact of what they are doing or plan to do. They are extremely sensitive to organized groups. The larger and more diverse your group, the more likely that it will be taken seriously. Seek ways to expand your group. The group, however, must have well-established goals and strategies or it will become divided and ineffective.

(2) Coalitions Are Power: Although your group might be small, you probably can find others who share your concerns. Expanding the numbers of a group involves building coalitions; coalitions involve bringing together diverse groups to work toward a common goal. It's important to identify the goals because there will be areas where the various coalition members disagree. The group must learn to agree on the goals and agree to disagree on the areas of difference.

(3) Unity Is Power: A large, diverse group presenting a unified position before a city council or a legislative committee has power. Be careful. Choose wisely the person who speaks for your coalition in public meetings. If the spokesperson gets excited, exaggerates a point or gives misinformation, a smart policymaker will seize upon the occasion to destroy the credibility of all of the information and may discredit the entire group as well. Should the group seek to defend the misstatement, it risks its own credibility. However, if the group disassociates itself from the spokesperson or information presented, the group may become divided and ineffective. Do not let this happen! Unity is essential to maintain your legitimacy and credibility.

(4) Positions Are Power: It is important to bring to your group people who hold important, credible positions in your community. Bankers, educators, business people, community leaders and clergy give your group legitimacy. Try to involve them in your group.

(5) Knowledge Is Power: Two kinds of knowledge are essential to effect public policy.

First, you must be knowledgeable about the process of decision-making. Each public body has rules and policies which describe how decisions are made. Get the

rules. Learn them. Remember there are also informal rules. Get to know those, too. Then monitor the meetings and impact the decisions at the appropriate time.

Second, you must be knowledgeable of the issue you represent. Study and know the issue. Do not exaggerate or misrepresent the facts. Develop good information. Policymakers will learn to trust you and eventually will depend on you for facts.

(6) Relationships Are Power: It is always helpful to know the city councilperson or county commissioner personally. Don't be afraid to help on a campaign or volunteer to work in a policymaker's office. You will develop a personal relationship with the policymaker which will give you access and credibility. You should get to know key policymakers to such a degree that you feel comfortable calling them or visiting their offices. You will know that you have power and influence with policymakers when they return your phone calls.

It is helpful to know that each policymaker has a hidden advisor -- some trusted friend or associate who meets regularly with the policymaker who has an inordinate amount of influence on the policymaker's thinking and judgment. You can save yourself and your group a lot of trouble if you get to know that hidden advisor, working to gain this person's trust. This person can do more for your group over a cup of coffee than you and your group can do in months of organizing. The hidden advisor must feel comfortable with you and perceive your group as a broadly based coalition of knowledgeable people who can impact the process if necessary. Hidden advisors can become important allies and key parts of your strategy. Get to know them.

(7) Voting Is Power: Elected policymakers listen to voters. Be sure you are registered and vote. Be sure that all of your coalition members are voters and willing to vote as a block.

(8) Use Of The Media Is Power: Policymakers dislike bad publicity. You must learn how to develop literature, talk to the press, go on radio, and speak before cameras so you can get your message across. Policymakers will go out of their way to avoid bad press if they can, so don't be afraid to use the media.

(9) Money Is Power: Although most citizens' groups are at a monetary disadvantage, they must have some funds to develop materials, pay for mailings and keep other members of the coalition informed. You will not be able to compete financially with special interests, but if you have the other elements of power, you can overcome the power of money. No group, however, can function without some funds!

These nine elements of power, if used in combination, will more than offset the special interest groups. No smart public officials will disregard the wishes of a large, unified coalition of knowledgeable voters who have expressed a specific interest to them. The power of money usually will dwindle as the organized community group becomes more knowledgeable, assertive and effective.

The Four Key Ingredients

Once your group is formed -- a process that might take weeks or months -- four elements must be present before the group can take any action. If any one of the four is missing, the group will exhibit the classic defense mechanisms (rationalizing, backstabbing, scapegoating, forming more committees) to avoid taking action. The four essential ingredients are:

(1) Hope: The group must believe that all the effort, time and toil will result in some change.

(2) Courage: The group must be willing to "risk" the confrontation.

(3) Goals: The group must clearly understand what it is that is being changed.

(4) Strategy: The group must clearly understand how the goal is to be achieved.

As a group leader, one must be constantly aware of the dynamics of the group. If and when the group begins to backstab, rationalize, scapegoat or turn on itself, it is the leader's task to assess which of the four ingredients is missing and to "plug in" the missing one.

Making It Happen

Once the group has become a group, has identified its goals and has decided to take an action, there are six simple rules to follow to achieve maximum results:

(1) Be There: "Being there" means finding out when and where the real decisions are made and then getting the appropriate people to that meeting. This might mean having one person monitoring a meeting for several weeks just to know what is going on and then, at the appropriate time, bringing in the larger group. "Being there" means making a commitment to understanding the system. There is nothing more frustrating than being at the right place, but at the wrong time, or being at the wrong place and missing the real decision.

(2) Be Informed: It is important that the group be legitimate. This means developing accurate information and presenting it in the most rational way. Even the slightest exaggeration or smallest piece of misinformation can discredit the group and destroy its legitimacy. When developing specific information for policymakers, assume that they are intelligent but uninformed. Remember, they have more than one issue to be concerned about. It is a mistake to assume they know or care about yours.

Be prepared to be challenged on your data. Make sure it is accurate. Develop a network of information-gathering which is quick and responsive. Once you have established your credibility, you will be called upon again and again.

(3) Be Able to Count: This is a democratic society -- the majority rules. The group must know the number needed to pass a resolution, an ordinance or policy. They must know policymakers' stands on issues that concern them and develop arguments that will appeal to the key votes. (This might mean compromise which every group should consider as part of their strategy.) Remember, policymakers can also count. It is, therefore, important to demonstrate that your group is legitimate -- well-informed and broadly based. At some point in the process, you may need to produce large numbers of allies to demonstrate your broad base of support, and to do this you must build coalitions.

(4) Don't Be Intimidated: Intentionally or not, the system is intimidating. To personally visit a key policymaker, you may have to go through two secretaries, and three doors -- and then confront a huge overpowering walnut desk which separates you from the policymaker. During official meetings, the policymakers sit together, usually on a raised platform, surrounding themselves with "experts" from the bureaucracy. If you wish to address the group you must "come down front" to stand before them -- alone -- speaking into a microphone which distorts your voice, giving you a strange sensation. Don't be intimidated by all of this. If you are informed, if you have the votes, and if your support group shows up, you will find your fears will soon disappear.

(5) Don't Take "No" For An Answer: You should never expect a new idea, no matter how logical or reasonable, to be accepted on its face value the first time it is presented. Instead, you should anticipate all of the hostile questions and expect to be turned down the first time. In fact, if your idea is accepted initially without much resistance, there probably will be no real change. It may mean the policymakers are going to sandbag your proposal -- giving lip service to your idea

with no intention of implementing it. In general, the more the resistance, the better the idea. Be prepared to dig in and follow through because it takes a major commitment of time and energy to fully implement a new policy.

As you monitor implementation, it is important to show how your idea fits into the goals articulated by this particular institution (see page 2 on "Assumptions") and how your idea can do the job more effectively or at a lower cost. You can often avoid the "it will cost more" argument by saying, "we don't expect more money but rather hope to 'reorder priorities'."

(6) Follow Through: All of the group efforts can be lost if you fail to follow through. In fact, you can be co-opted by an easy victory because the group tends to dissolve. Within weeks or months, things are back to normal and you will find it difficult, if not impossible, to get the group back together (the group will give up hope -- see page 8 on "Key Ingredients").

Finally

Community change means a commitment to the long haul -- to the process. Don't be confused with winning and losing. Many times, winning is really losing in the long run, and, conversely, losing is often best for the group. After a period of time, a group leader will learn it is the process of continually participating in change and the integrity of the people participating in that process which is important, not winning or losing a few skirmishes.

Finally, never lose your humanity in order to save humanity. One of the most important assets of a change agent is a sense of humor. Learn to laugh at yourself and with others. Strive to make this world a better place to live, work and love. In doing so, remember, the issue -- no matter how important it seems today -- is not as important as your commitment to each other and your commitment to the integrity of the process.