

# POLITICS



## Community Organizing is Different Than Electoral Politics

### General Assumption!

Relationships are the building blocks for all community organizing activities. Whether you want to organize a volleyball game or get rid of unfair housing practices in your town, you will need lots of good relationships.

People don't work in isolation: we need to be working together! It is our relationships all added together that are the foundation of an organized effort for change. We need lots of people to contribute their ideas, take a stand, and get the work done.

Community building occurs one-to-one. You need to build relationships with people one-to-one if you want them to become involved in your group or organization. Some people become involved in organizations because they believe in the cause. However, many people become involved in a community group or organization, just because they have a relationship with another person who is already involved.

Relationships are need at the organizational level and personal) one-to-one level.

We need relationships in order to win allies to our cause. In order to get support from people outside our organizations, we need to build relationships in which people know and trust us. Every relationship is different, but they all matter. I

The more relationships you have, the better. More, stronger, relationships increase your chances of winning at electoral politics.

### Barack Obama Definition

To understand community organizing, a good starting place is an article **Barack Obama** wrote in the August/September 1988 Illinois Issues when he was an organizer (to which I've added a couple of bracketed comments):

...community organizing provides a way to merge various strategies for neighborhood empowerment. Organizing begins with the premise that:

- (1) the problems facing inner-city communities do not result from a lack of effective solutions, but from a lack of power to implement these solutions.
- (2) that the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and the money [they raise] around a common vision; and
- (3) that a viable organization can only be achieved if a broadly based indigenous leadership—and not one or two charismatic leaders—can knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions [and “grassroots” people].

### What Is the Difference?

<b>Strategies &amp; Definitions</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Example</b>
<p><b>Community organizing</b> is characterized by the mobilizing of volunteers and <b>different levels of intensity</b> and/or results. Action often results in some sort of benefit for the community. Staff roles are limited to helping volunteers become effective, to guiding the learning of leaders through the process, and to helping create the mechanism for the group to act or advocate on their own behalf. <b>Community organizing always includes some level of change</b> (core concept) or confrontation of some sort. The people who want something get themselves together to ask for it, often the people who could give them what they want get jumpy. Community organizing strategies include meeting with corporate or government decision makers to hold them accountable for their actions, designing programs</p>	<p>Characterized by two-way relationships that are sustained over an extended period of time. Power is greater at the end of a process. Meets a tangible local need in the short or long-term. Not connected to politics, but needs such as hunger, healthcare. More analysis of root problems. Money is raised to meet a local need. Focus is on changing, improving, communities.</p>	<p>Local Food Pantries</p>
<p><b>Advocacy or Lobbying</b> are both characterized by an organization by doing something FOR people. Often volunteers or professionals like lawyers or social workers will attack a problem on behalf of those perceived as unable to speak for themselves. Policy or law changes, Job referral services, social work, training for job readiness L</p>	<p>Activities are confused between lobbying and politics. Usually, more time is given to politics. Usually ignores community organizing and doesn't build power to meet local needs. Focus is on politicians.</p>	<p>ACLU, Fair Maps, One Wisconsin, Act-10 Activities, Legislation to make abortion legal.</p>
<p><b>Development</b> is a strategy that gets the group directly into the business of delivering a physical product or result (change) for individuals or the community in general. Generally, groups select action/development strategy because the normal course of events is not meeting the area's needs. The profit motive either does not bring private developers into the area or topic.</p>	<p>This usually springs from a community organizing effort. Organizations are created to meet community needs. Focus is on changing, improving, communities.</p>	<p>Social Boys Club of Madison; Second Harvest (hunger) Porchlight (Homelessness) Friends of Schumacher Park (conversation)</p>
<p><b>Political campaigns</b> are specific targeted activities that focus exclusively on candidates, campaigns, and election calendars. All activities are top down and determined by paid national level or state level staff with little input from volunteers or local leaders.</p>	<p>Activities almost never include other strategies to strengthen their power. Politics is an emotional, us-vs. them, frame through which to communicate. Activities ramp up 60 days in advance of an election. Little activities when there is no immediate election. Relationships immediately stop with 95% of volunteers in this one-way relationship. Many activities mask as community organizing with little or no follow up. Relationships are usually one-way and lip service paid to two-way relationships. Money is raising for candidates and political parties-not local needs. Focus is not on directly changing, improving, communities.</p>	<p>Joe Biden, Tony Evers Political Campaigns</p>



The community organizing discussed here is rooted in democratic values and the social justice teachings of the world's great religious traditions. Discussing its tactics apart from this value base is like calling a Tupperware party "community organizing" because it makes use of house meetings to sell its wares.

The major things that distinguish community organizing from other approaches to social change are its focus on power, the large-scale and continued involvement of people from the base, a continuing focus on leadership development, and the strategic role played by the professional organizer.

### **Lesson Learned From 2008 Campaign**

Obama Organizing for America (OFA) was more political campaign strategy than community organizing because it failed on 4-6 key community organizing characteristics. Organizing around building local power (not lobbying Congress), did not sustain local relationships on non-political topics or needs, they only asked people what they (the Obama Campaign) needed in terms of national level lobbying not building power to do something locally about a need. The OFA morphed into Organizing for Action and was active in 2010 and in the 2012 presidential elections. The sole purpose was to focus on the president's agenda-not local needs.

The election of former Alinsky-tradition community organizer Barack Obama as president put community organizing on the map—and confused a lot of people about what it actually is by calling his electoral mobilization "community organizing." That confusion was ramped up when right-wing opponents of a strong public option in health care reform said they were using "Alinsky tactics" to disrupt town-hall meetings across the country.

Obama offers Organizing for America (OFA) as the vehicle for popular participation. I don't think so. Obama needs Organizing for America to help him with his agenda. Nothing wrong with that, but it's not community organizing.

Community organizing's agenda shouldn't be to push the president's or any other politician agenda. It should build power to meet local needs. If you don't meet local needs, you are a political campaign—here today, gone tomorrow (Day after the election). Notice how campaign staff are fired immediately after the campaign. Volunteer's interest in political party (campaign) meetings "fall off the cliff" in the "non-election season" (4-12 months before an election. County chairpersons wonder why volunteers do attend meets in the non-elections season.

Professional organizers focus on building community and power. Issues are simply tools for the building process. What is won is no doubt important. But the organizer's questions, and increasingly the questions of a growing core of committed leaders, have to do with changing the relations of power: How did our leaders grow in self-confidence? What did they learn? Which new people assumed leadership responsibilities? Are they going to continue in these roles?

Organizing begins with the assumption that small and great injustices are typically the results of power imbalances. Those most hurt by the system are those who are most powerless to act on the

system. The problem is not the absence of good policy ideas—in fact, there are lots of them that demonstrably work. Rather, the problem is the institutional resistance by people in positions of power. Further, this resistance is based on different self-interests, not lack of knowledge by decision-makers or incompetence—though in any given instance one or both of these factors may play a role.

Here's the joker in the deck: the powerless will remain powerless, and therefore exploited, discriminated against, marginalized, and otherwise taken advantage of, as long as they remain isolated and divided. They don't get involved because their past experience proves the adage, "You can't fight city hall." And their socialization in a mass, consumer, media-driven society tells them that they need some hero, advocate, charismatic leader to speak for them.

Below adapted from Mike Miller, Dissent Magazine, 2010

### **Systems**

It is important to understand the system you are working within. A system is a group of interacting or interrelated elements that act according to a set of rules to form a unified whole. A system, surrounded and influenced by its environment and an observable culture, is described by its boundaries, structure and purpose and is expressed in its functioning. (Wikipedia).

Most non-business leaders fail to understand the concept a system and how people behave within its unique system according to defined rules, unwritten rules, cultural norms, and or conventional wisdom. Power is always present in each system and used by an "inside" group. K-12 schools exist in a statewide system as well as a local school district (system). Each community (township, village, and/or city) is a system. The Democratic Party is a part of a system. The local Rotary club operates within a local, statewide, and national system.

### **YOU ARE AT THE CENTER**

Imagine a wheel in which you are at the hub or center and each spoke represents a relationship with another person. Does that sound egotistical? It doesn't need to be. It takes a lot of spokes to hold the wheel together and the wheel is what helps move the initiative along. There is enough room in the group for everyone to create their own wheel of strong relationships.

The point is that you have to take the time to set up and sustain relationships. If you wait for others to establish relationships with you first, you may spend a lot of time waiting.

One reminder: It doesn't make sense to form relationships just to get people to do work for you. That won't work because people will feel used. Community builders approach relationships with integrity. We form relationships because we genuinely like someone, because we have something to offer that person, or because we share some common goal.



## **WHEN DO YOU BUILD AND SUSTAIN RELATIONSHIPS?**

You do it all the time. If you take an extra five minutes to ask the person who is stuffing envelopes how they think the baseball team is doing this year, you will have built a stronger relationship.

Some relationships require more time than others.

As community organizers with few resources, we are often under enormous pressures that distract us from paying attention to relationships. We feel the urgency of achieving important goals. We mistakenly feel that spending time on relationships is the fluffy stuff that makes a person feel good but doesn't get the job done. Often, however, relationships are the key to solving a problem or getting the job done. Building and sustaining many solid, strong relationships is central to our work as community leaders.

### **RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE GROUNDWORK**

Often building relationships is the groundwork that must be laid before anything else gets done on a project. The bigger the project, the more relationships you will usually need as a foundation.

For example, if you are organizing a coalition of community groups that will work to create a multicultural arts center, it would be a good idea to get to know people in each organization before trying to get them together to work on the project.

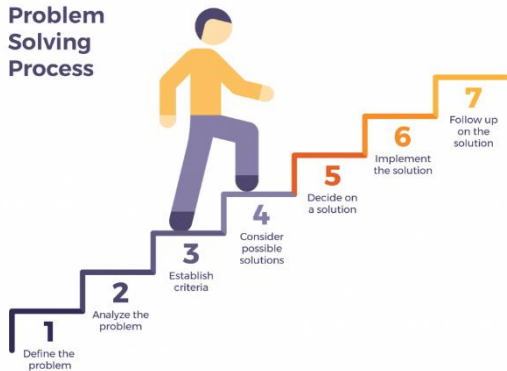
Ask yourself: "Would you be more persuaded by someone you know, or by a complete stranger?" Then be guided by your own answer.

When you plan a project, you need to include the time it takes to build relationships into your plan. People need time to build trust. Whenever people work together, they need to have trusted relationships. When trust is missing, people usually have a difficult time functioning cooperatively. They worry about risking too much. Disagreements seem to erupt over no important reason. Investing time, resources, and one's organizational reputation can be risky. At the least people want some return for their investment. They have to feel like you know them as a person, understand their interests, and will not let them down.

### **ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS BEFORE YOU NEED THEM**

It's always better to build relationships before you need them or before a conflict arises.

## Problem Solving Process



## HOW DO YOU BUILD RELATIONSHIPS? AN 11-STEP PROGRAM

Here are some tips for getting your relationships off the ground. Some of these ideas we learned in the first grade but, as adults, we sometimes forget.

1. *Build relationships one at a time.* Fortunately, or unfortunately, there are no short cuts. Sending out a newsletter helps you keep in touch with lots of folks, but it's no substitute for getting to know a real person.
2. *Be friendly and make a connection.* This may seem self-evident, but a friendly word or smile can make someone's day. Try to find something in common: all of us want to have close connections with our fellow humans.
3. *Ask people questions.* People love to talk about themselves and about what they think. If you ask people about themselves and then take the time to listen attentively, they can become your fast friend.
4. *Tell people about yourself.* People won't trust you unless you are willing to trust them. Tell them what you genuinely care about and what you think.
5. *Go places and do things.* When asked why he robbed banks, the robber replied, "Because that's where the money is." If you want to make friends, you have to go where the people are: picnics, conferences, events, fundraisers, parties, playgrounds, bowling alleys, little league games, bake sales, etc.
6. *Accept people the way they are.* You don't have to agree with them all the time in order to form a relationship with them. No one likes to be judged.
7. *Assume other people want to form relationships, too.* Underneath the crabbiest looking person is often a lonely soul hoping someone will make a crack in their shell.
8. *Overcome your fear of rejection.* Most of us suffer from a fear of rejection, and there's only one thing to do about that: get over it. If you want to form relationships, plan on being rejected some of the time. You will be richly rewarded the rest of the time with the new relationships you have made.
9. *Be persistent.* People are often shy and suspicious. It takes a while to win trust. You can almost always form a relationship if you stick with it.
10. *Invite people to get involved.* People want to become part of something bigger than themselves. Many people are looking for an opportunity to meet other people who share common goals. At the worst, people will be flattered that you invited them to join.
11. *Enjoy people.* If you genuinely enjoy people, others will be attracted to your attitude. People will more likely want to be around you.

## HOW DO YOU SUSTAIN RELATIONSHIPS?

Okay, now you've built some relationships. Relationships, like any other living thing, need care to keep them alive and healthy. So, what do you do with them to keep them going?

- **Pay attention to people.** Check in with people when you need to. This may take only a few minutes a week, but those few minutes can make the difference in helping your friend or co-worker remember the importance of the work you are doing together.
- **Communicate openly.** People need to communicate. It's a good idea to set aside some time just to talk about the way things are going. When people don't have a chance to talk about important issues, misunderstandings can occur, and tensions often build up. Communication is a discipline that has to be practiced regularly; it's like taking vitamins or doing push-ups.
- **Appreciate each other.** Everyone needs to be appreciated in order to keep relationships going. If you notice that someone did a stellar job of collecting the necessary data for the committee, say so. If you enjoy working with someone, let them know. We are all human beings and appreciation helps us thrive.
- **Extend yourself.** Go a little out of your way, at least once in a while. If your co-worker needs to spend some extra time with his daughter, you might tell him go home early and you'll finish up the grant proposal.
- **Volunteer to do some work for their organization** (if they are not already in yours). If you lend them a hand, they are likely to think well of you and give something back in return.
- **Challenge each other to do better.** We all need a buddy to help us stretch ourselves beyond what we think we can do. We can also build stronger relationships by challenging our work partners to take on bigger challenges.
- **Back each other when things get tough.** Loyalty is essential to keeping relationships healthy. We may not agree with a co-worker or friend, but we can stand by him or her when they are in a jam.



#### WHEN RELATIONSHIPS GET MESSY

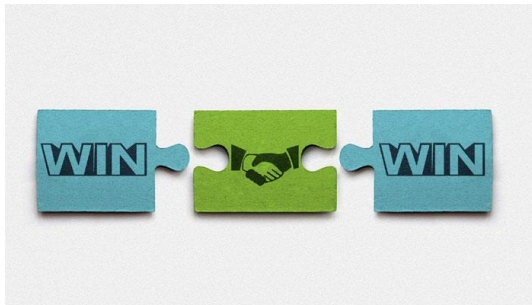
Many relationships get messy sooner or later and that's not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, sometimes people need a good fight or a clearing of the air in order to get a relationship back on track. A conflict doesn't mean the relationship has to come

to an end. Remember: we often fight with the people we care about the most and with whom we share our greatest hopes.

Here are some ideas that might come in handy when things get hard:

- **Take time to listen to each other.** This is not always easy. Each person should take time some time to listen without interrupting, while the other person talks.
- **Put yourself in the other person's shoes.** Everyone in a conflict has distinctly different views of a situation. In the thick of a fight, people are usually convinced they are absolutely right. Try to see why the other person sees things the way they do. Just your attempt to do so will help the other person see that you are trying.
- **Look at what is true about what the other person is saying.** See if you can correct the situation. If you need to apologize, go ahead. It may feel horrible, but an apology can often help a relationship get back on the right track.
- **Separate emotions from reality.** Everyone has emotions that surface intermittently. People often say things they don't mean when they are in the middle of an emotional upset. Allow time and space for people to feel their emotions before you try to work things out.

- **Continue to appreciate and respect each other.** Even though it may be difficult, focus on the positive aspects of the relationship. If you model appreciation, the other person will often follow.
- **Speak from your heart.** As you try to unravel the difficulty, keep focused on what you and the other person care about most: the goals of the project, each other, the community, etc.
- **Don't give up your principles.** Don't sacrifice what you believe in just to make a relationship work. If you give up on your principles, you won't be effective, and the relationship won't work anyway.
- **Hang in there when things get hard.** You can take some breathing room, but try not to give up on the relationship altogether. When things are the toughest, there are important lessons to be learned. It's best to keep a relationship that you've invested your time and caring into?
- **You can act independently to improve any relationship.** Even if the other person or group of people is acting rotten, you can act in a way that is positive, respectful, constructive, and thoughtful. This may surprise people, and they may follow your lead.



Is all this easier said than done? Yes. Managing relationships may be hard, but it is not impossible. Think of yourself as an explorer, charting your course through the mysterious and murky waters of relationships. Treasure lies ahead!

#### **RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADVERSARIES**

Yes, you can even have relationships with the people who disagree with you and who may even be working against you and the goals of your organization. You can use the same guidelines listed in the "When relationships get messy" section above, with these additions:

- You can disagree and still build relationships with individuals who are working against your goals. If you do so, members of the other camp will begin to see you as human rather than viewing you as the enemy. In turn you will get a picture of their humanity as well. You might try [inviting someone from the "other" camp](#) to lunch and find out what you have in common.
- You can set up a dialogue group to hear why adversaries view the issues the way they do. You can hire a neutral facilitator to come in and lead a discussion about the areas of disagreement. With a skilled facilitator, people may start to understand the values and caring that others bring to their opinions and find areas of common interest.

*Adapted from Community Toolbox, Kansas University, <https://ctb.ku.edu/en>.*