



# Prerequisites to Power:

*Six Principles for  
Building Community*





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## The Pressures on Neighborhoods

The neighborhood movement faces at least three types of pressures. There are the pressures of *macro-economics change*: retrenchment in domestic spending, shifts from an industrial to a service economy and from the Snow Belt to the Sun Belt. Local economic and public policy decisions also apply pressure: gentrification, disinvestment, tax supported downtown development.

A second set of pressures which people working in neighborhoods increasingly are recognizing result from well-intentioned *social policies* which end up pitting one constituency against another. Examples include over-concentration of residential treatment facilities in reaction to deinstitutionalization of people with mental handicaps; attempts to encourage property owners which appear to penalize renters; and loss of control of schools.

A third category or pressure on the neighborhood movement results from the *changes in people's lives* reflected in the afternoon silence in many neighborhoods. The women who years ago were the mainstay of people's organizations are working out of their home or are preparing to work out of their home. Children are on school buses or waiting behind bolted doors for an adult to return. When one hears the sound of young children during the day now, it more than likely is coming from the backyard of a day care mother. At least one out of five families is headed by a single parent. Except for the really-well off, families need two incomes and earning those incomes puts stress on personal lives. People have less personal time, less community time.

To operate successfully in this context of pressured communities and stretched personal capacities, neighborhood organizations must face a fourth, internal pressure which has begun to emerge after 20 years of citizen organizing: The tendency to focus on technical competency, structural order and managerial professionalism at the expense of fundamental community-building tasks. It is unnerving but valid to ask: Have neighborhood organizations become too sophisticated for people?

## **Experiencing the Connection**

This paper suggests that a successful organization depends on people experiencing a connection to the organization and to the idea behind the organization. People's expectations for an organization, and their understandings of it, may be codified in constitutions and by-laws. But in the long haul, it is the quality of how they experience connection to the organization that keeps them in action.

People experience connection at the points where they and the idea of the organization meet. Leaders and organizers of community organizations, present at those points, can build and nurture that experience of connection by tending to six principles:

1. Define the organization as a vehicle for political education.
2. Secure the organization's invitation in the neighborhood.
3. Identify and cultivate successive generations of leadership.
4. Instill the expectation of financial self-sufficiency.
5. Create confidence in pluralism.
6. Create the organization's story through action.

These principles involve activities which leaders and organizers must repeat over and over. There are no shortcuts. They are the heart of what a people's organization is about. This paper will discuss these principles, and their attendant activities.

## **1. Define the Organization as a Vehicle for Political Education**

In working to build an organization, leaders and organizers need to keep in mind that they are helping people learn lessons which will live long after a particular organization may be gone. The task is to help people create an organizational vehicle which will provide them access to the arena where decisions which affect their lives are made — but it's more than that, too. The task is also to build the people's experience.

The long range reality is that organizations don't last. If they do last, they change. The lessons learned by the people are frequently the most durable evidence of substantial change wrought through a practitioner's efforts. Organizers often ask themselves of an action: "Will it build the organization?" The more important question is: "Will it build the people's experience?"

Note that we're talking "education," not "indoctrination." The task is not to impose an ideology. People are sharp and they don't like to be used to prove a theory. But, lessons can be learned in the actions of an organization which will stand people in good stead even if that particular organization is someday gone.

The following checklist can be used to judge organizational decisions. These are some of the political lessons people should be learning through their experience of an organization:

- Even the most well-intentioned power structures can't be ignored. You might leave it alone, but it won't leave you alone, because the energy in power demands to be asserted; if it's not asserting itself, it's not powerful.
- The power to negotiate for the interests of the neighborhood has to be earned over and over again.
- Earned power is real; bestowed power is not.
- Real power is always group power.
- A victory is only as real as the organization's power to cement it.
- Compromise is victory.
- Compromise is possible only from a position of earned power.

- Sustained recognition comes from the ability to make offers that the opposition cannot afford to ignore.
- There's a difference between an ideologue and a leader.
- Know the work required for a fair and well-run meeting.
- To achieve change often requires identifying and confronting enemies: at the same time, realize that today's enemies may be tomorrow's allies and vice-versa.
- Respect the limits of what you can accomplish even while comprehending the enormity of the problem.
- There are problems, and there are pieces of problems that you can do something about at a given time. Problems are taken apart one piece at a time. After you've brought that piece to resolution, the whole problem will shake down into a new shape, and you can cut another piece from the problem.

## **2. Secure the Organization's Invitation in the Neighborhood**

Whether you are building a new organization or reaching out from an established organizational base to new people and/or groups, the organization needs to be perceived as having a right to operate in the neighborhood and the issue area. The general idea of achieving that legitimacy is that the neighborhood has to sponsor the organization.

An effective way to secure the initial invitation to the neighborhood is to organize a neighborhood committee to sponsor the organization. This committee would consist of people who represent recognized elements of the community. Key neighborhood people and groups should feel that they were informed and had the opportunity to participate.

To avoid the trap of tokenism and to insure well-rounded issue coverage from a constituency, it helps to seek out people who represent existing organizations for the sponsoring committee. For example, in addition to recruiting individual seniors, invite a local senior group to join by sending one or two representatives.

Where there isn't a group, organize one. Instead of recruiting individuals alone, organize informal ad hoc groups which an individual who shares their issues would be willing to represent.

A word of caution: do not rely too heavily on representatives from part of existing power structures, official or unofficial. Serious empowerment of neighborhood people will not be achieved if only the foxes are organized to guard the henhouse.

Why would people participate, and organizations agree to be represented, in a sponsoring committee? They will join for the same reason others will join later — because it seems in their interest and in their organization's interest to join. If adequate numbers of groups with local influence cannot recognize their self-interest in the endeavor, there is probably something off-target about the organizing effort. An organizing effort does not need everyone to agree. However, if there is substantial argument or resistance, there should be serious self-examination. The more carefully the preliminary work is done, the less chance there will be of a failure which embarrasses the people who have seen fit to join the effort.

### ***No's Aren't all Bad***

As the organizing effort contacts people, it should be able to absorb some "No's" without having an identity crisis. "No's" aren't all bad. Sometimes community leaders who would be a lot of trouble later do the organization a favor by saying "No" the first time around. By the time they get around to being interested, the organization has had a chance to build something in which newly developed leadership has an investment.

Neither do organizations need the kind of "Yeses" that will cripple the work with either too many restrictions or unrealistic demands. Remember, neighborhood organizations are not social service agencies.

### ***Balancing Openness and Purposefulness***

Structures in the early phases of the organizing effort, such as the sponsoring committee should be considered temporary. Organizing communities means organizing leaders, present and potential, formal and informal; it means offering present and potential leaders new leadership opportunities. If good potential leaders or member organizations perceive that leadership opportunities are already spoken for, they will decline participation.

Later on, an organization will need to strike a balance between openness and clarity of purpose. Openness is vital in attracting participation, but the rhetoric of openness can be a trap: the power structure would like peoples' organizations to be so open that they are ineffective.

Organizations will feel this tension over openness throughout their existence. In the end, an organization cannot be all things to all interests. Some discipline is required to make things happen. But, most organizations can be more things than they attempt.

### ***Expanding the Invitation***

An established organization wanting to expand its base in the community would operate in a similar fashion to a new organization. Some functional equivalent of a temporary sponsoring committee is needed, with spokespeople from the previously under-represented groups or organizations.

In expanding the invitation, remember who's doing the inviting: it's not the organization as it existed. It is the new expanded group of interests. As that invitation expands, the organization will change. Any expansion means expanding the issue and action base. Sound expansion of an organization involves a willingness to expand the issue base in response to the willingness of new constituencies to take responsibility in the organization for the neighborhood.

### **3. Identify and Cultivate Successive Generations of Leaders**

Given access by the sponsoring committee's invitation, the real validation of the organization begins with the search for leaders. The activities described in this section are the transactions on which all others depend. Before the organization is built, it lives in the will and imagination of a few people from within the community. Kitchen tables and front steps typify the settings where leaders are found and where they begin to develop as leaders of the organization.

#### ***Kitchen Table Conversations***

The "kitchen table" in question can mean the living room, the kitchen, even a person's office. What's important is that the conversation take place on their turf, in the place where they are most comfortable.

Keep the agenda for the kitchen table conversation clear. Your conversation is sponsored by the committee; the person was recommended as an important person to contact because he or she would be able to help the organization with advice, information and perhaps activity.

The conversation is active listening. Questions and answers are guided by the organizational task, but primarily you are there to listen to them. The reason for this is that as you listen, you hear possibilities. The cultivation of leadership begins as people are able somehow to rehearse the possibility of being effective and getting something done.

They are able to appreciate the possibilities not because you talk about organizational structure but because you ask them about their issues. They begin to see that they don't have to worry alone. In return for their help, others will help them.

In this conversation, people begin picturing themselves taking responsibility. One of the most important things that happens in the conversation is that they come to see the organization as a welcome addition to their busy lives rather than as a burden to be avoided.

A kitchen table conversation which goes well provides an organizational high that is hard to match. Several things can happen when listening for the person's individual issues or the issues of the groups in which they are active. One, you can point out how similar that problem is to others' problems. Second, you begin to show how people gathered in an organization can get support for their issues in return for giving support of others.

Third, and perhaps most significant, when people see that it is possible to advance their own interest by advancing others, they begin to see themselves as part of an organization. Then, it is a small step to including them in the structure of the organization.

It often happens that the person one is interviewing either has not had leadership responsibility before, or has had responsibility and is looking for a new challenge. With people like these, rehearsing the possibilities of the organization can trigger a sense of "personal" opportunity — the opportunity to try their wings, to be effective, to receive recognition, whatever.

For such hitherto unrecognized or informal leadership talent, the organization itself can become the issue. They realize that advocating for the neighborhood involves more than any one or several issues, they become not only loyal but invaluable.

### ***Front Steps Conversations***

If an organization's validation begins at the kitchen tables, it is renewed on front steps throughout the neighborhood.

Some organizations insist that all staff and key leadership regularly put in a set time each month to knock on doors. The dangers in evening's darkness and the demands of supertime in households can make this difficult. But the goals of door knocking are pertinent for all organizations.

Door knocking provides an excellent training ground for leadership and staff. Leaders not only meet and listen to the neighborhood. They also get to practice, on a one-to-one basis, verbalizing what the organization is and what it stands for. This clarifies their own understanding, and equips them to be advocates in other settings.

Door knocking drives can be modified for different situations. The door knocking can be accompanied by an invitation to attend an event, by asking the persons at home if the organization can get back to them or by asking what groups of individuals they know who are also interested in working for the neighborhood. Not all door knocking need involve solicitation for funds, but asking for small contributions which is followed up with a “thank you,” an invitation to participate and regular information about the organization’s activities works very well for many organizations.

The activity surrounding a door knocking drive is an occasion for other skill building and organizational camaraderie as well. People can go out singly or in pairs, taking opposite sides of the street or opposite landings in an apartment house. They should carry easily noted identification. They should be carefully prepared even to the extent of role playing beforehand. Each person should have a manageable quota of “listening,” and, as with all actions, there should be a group debriefing where experiences can be shared and the analyzing process begun. Door knocking campaigns provide an excellent excuse for partying with a purpose.

### **3. Instill the Expectation of Financial Self-Sufficiency**

From the organizing of a temporary sponsoring committee onward commitment to financial responsibility is part of the package. An assessment of at least the short-term financial needs and income sources of the emerging organization is part of the early task of the sponsoring group. Reaching agreement that members of the sponsoring group will contribute resources on a pro-rated basis sets a good precedent.

It helps to have raised a respectable starter contribution. Somehow people think a thing is more worthwhile if someone was willing to help pay for it. Also, discussion of finances should be held after the discussion of issues and the possibilities of effectiveness. Having the cushion of some starter money allows time for new leadership to experience the organization and to incorporate it into their lives. At that point, raising money does not seem so onerous.

If the topic is avoided in order to get people involved, there is a serious risk of false promises and unfounded expectations. Making the role of fund raising clear is perhaps the earliest act of leadership training in the organization.

Making it clear that building a broad income base will be part of the responsibility of participation in the organization also functions as a sort of screening of membership. Only the serious need apply.

Sound financial principles on which a neighborhood organization needs to agree would include:

- Be wary of the strings attached to different sources of funding.
- Keep as wide a funding base as possible without turning the whole operation into a fund raising machine.
- Insist that a solid percentage of each year's budget be raised internally from dues and fund raisers.
- Have contingency plans so that the organization can cut back to the internal base in hard times.
- Be sure that the money serves the programs rather than the programs serving the sources of money.
- Establish a tradition of staff/leadership collaboration that makes it possible for leadership to step in if money runs low.

## **5. Develop Confidence in Pluralism**

A pluralistic neighborhood organization is one in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain their distinct identity while actually participating in the organization. The task is one of building the kind of safe zone where people can describe their differences, rehearse how they might not be overcome but put to advantage, and keep in mind that big power interests will steam-roll everyone unless they figure out how to work together.

Cultural and economic pluralism offers a richness of human experience. Helping disparate constituencies identify where their interests coincide can unleash new solutions and give birth to new power coalitions.

Some caveats apply for organizations working in a context of multiple cultures:

Different cultures have different social and political experiences. Traditions of New England-style town meetings, rough and tumble ward politics, or civic volunteerism which are prominent in many United States voluntary organizations are not shared by all. In some settings, Roberts Rules of Order may be quite beside the point. Some cultures abhor open conflict, and the avenues to influence within them, while very real, may not be visible to the untrained eye.

Other cultures often have a helping ethic which, if anything, goes beyond Yankee expectations for civic responsibility or frontier expectations of barn raising cooperation. In some cultures, a person can bring shame on a whole extended family by failing to help another. Many people in our city neighborhoods are so busy helping their extended family that they haven't time or energy to volunteer.

There is clearly no simple action recipe for developing confidence in pluralism. But, most organizations can include more people than they exempt. In building a pluralistic organization, the guidelines discussed above for securing and extending the invitation in the neighborhood and for identifying and cultivating leadership apply.

## **6. Create the Organization's Story Through Action**

Action builds organization. Action also builds the people's story, what they tell themselves and others about their organization. The story is made up of the variety of experiences told over and over at meetings and gatherings of the organization.

The heart of identity is having one's own story. What happens in life is not as important as how it is interpreted. This is true for organizations and for peoples as well as for individuals. When groups possess their own stories, they are able to act from a center. Those who would oppress, do so mainly by controlling others' stories. Organizing gives a neighborhood the power to interpret its own story.

In creating the story, perhaps the most critical task for an organization is the debriefing after an action, when the group interprets what happened. A good story-building rule is: "Never accept a defeat without reinterpreting it and never win a victory without celebrating it." Defeat is only defeat to the extent that it is interpreted as defeat. And, celebration is the first step in cementing any victory.

For an organization committed to creating its own story, no "no" is final. People's reflections on an action and the organization's ability to act again mean that the people have the power to rescue their issue from defeat. A victory is only as good as the members' belief that they chose it, planned it, implemented it and are entitled to celebrate it. It has been said that the worst single error an organization's leadership can make is to send their people home without a debriefing.

To build a story that will carry the organization, there must be broad participation in the planning of the actions, and issues should be clearly defined so that members, the general neighborhood and the opposition recognize exactly what is happening.

All “actions” of an organization, including its structure and its stylistic nuances, are grit for the story. Leadership can nurture that story by encouraging the following relationships between interests, issues, action and organizational structures:

Issues are defined so that they reflect people’s interest. Members and affected neighbors understand the significance of the issues — they understand what the issue means to the interests in their lives.

Actions addressing the issues include and require wide member participation. Tactics and style are compatible with the people’s experience. The best actions are those that can be brought to closure within a reasonable time — people can more easily recognize them and understand how to fit them into the story.

Leaders in actions emerge as leaders for the organization: participation in action is the avenue for leadership recognition in the organization. While a traditional executive committee provides stability, current action committees also participate in executive decision-making. Standing committees are kept to a minimum — the image of organizational action consisting of committee reports is not helpful.

## **Conclusion: Building Community**

In these days, in most city neighborhoods, families, individuals and households are under enormous strain. Present strength and eventual longevity for a neighborhood organization requires it to be considered an asset to people’s lives rather than a burden which cuts further into life.

The key to being an asset lies in recognizing the potential for power which flows out of community. Community is the prerequisite to power.

Though an organization needs to be honestly managed, it will be strong, with active members, only to the extent that it builds community. All kinds of groups can win flash in the pan victories. People's organizations will survive as long-term forces for change only if they harbor within their own actions and structures the life-affirming principles of community.

In nurturing community, neighborhood organizations have advantages over other kinds of community organizations. In a neighborhood organization, the distances for meetings are not great, the resources like meeting places are familiar or at least can become familiar. Members meet each other in the grocery store. Many issues have local, physical presence. Many achievements can be physically tangible also. Perhaps most critical, when neighbors see other neighbors taking responsibility and leadership, the possibility of their doing so also does not seem so remote. The neighborhood provides a readily accessible peer or reference group to emerging leaders. The subtle rewards of recognition for accomplishment are more easily compounded when participants live in physical proximity.

Organizational leaders can build on these natural neighborhood assets. But they must do it intentionally, as seriously as professional managers view "management by objective" or "the bottom line." Building community means more than an occasional potluck and trying to feel good about ourselves.

True community-building means listening, it means approaching people, it means helping people join together to attack the issues confronting their lives, all in a disciplined and purposeful way. The six principles outlined in his paper can guide people who would build and nurture community in this way, so that peoples' organizations grow and live-on as vehicles for change.



**O**ur mission is to help increase the effectiveness and impact of socially concerned organizations in responding to social problems. We work in support of organizations and communities to help them achieve their goals.

**Y**our organization and community can experience these results from participation in Rainbow Research activities – tailored studies, workshops, and partnerships – and use of our tools and publications.

**W**e can help you to:

**Improve your understanding** of key program elements that contribute to program effectiveness.

**Improve program impact** through integrating principles of program effectiveness into day-to-day operations.

**Improve management** of resources to achieve program purposes.

**Improve the fit** between your organization's activities and your community's needs and opportunities.

**Improve commitment** of staff and Board to your organization's mission.

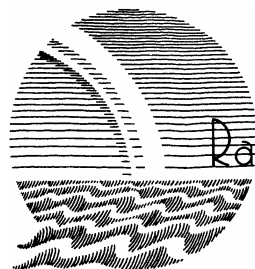
**Improve communication** between your organization and its various stakeholders and publics.

**Improve linkages** between your organization and other like-minded organizations.

**Improve access** to tools and support services that strengthen program performance.

## Related Rainbow Research Publications:

- **Successful Neighborhood Self - Help: Some Lessons Learned;** by Steven E. Mayer and Steve Gray; *1 plus 30 pages (1985); #073a - \$10.00*
- **Including Everyone: Ensuring Neighborhood Organizations Represent the Neighborhood;** by Grace Jordan McGinniss and Steve Gray; *20 pages (1987); #073b - \$7.50*
- **Old Roots and New Beginnings: Problems and Prospects for Revitalization in Historic Springfield;** by Tom Dewar, David Scheie, T. Williams and Candace Campbell; *55 pages plus appendices (1993); #145 - \$7.00*
- **The Community Stabilization Project: Tenant - Directed Housing Preservation;** by Sharon Ramirez and Tom Dewar; *30 pages plus appendices (1992); #306 - \$8.50*
- **Cops and Neighbors: An Evaluation of the Whittier Community - Based Policing Project;** by Sharon Ramirez and David Scheie; *70 pages plus appendices (1991); #124 - \$18.00*



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