

Reflections on
Community
Organizing and
Resident
Engagement
in the Rebuilding
Communities Initiative

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“If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are those that want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightening. They want the ocean without the terrible roar of its many waters.”

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Preface

In 1993, I was asked to serve as a technical assistance provider to the newly formed Rebuilding Communities Initiative (RCI), a comprehensive community initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Initially, my role was to assist the five RCI grantee communities as they integrated resident engagement and community organizing strategies into their community-building work. Later, I served as the technical assistance coordinator for the Initiative, working with the Foundation and the communities to develop and manage what would be described as the “learning strategy” for RCI. Through those years, we tried many things; some worked, some did not. Throughout the process, we all participated in a collective struggle to understand and master the challenge of effective resident engagement in a complex, multi-faceted comprehensive community initiative.

Did the RCI communities master resident engagement? Hardly. This work is always humbling and endlessly complex. But they did emerge with some insights and lessons that may have some value for the community development field. This monograph is a reflection on their struggle. Its focus is on understanding the role and practice of community organizing and resident engagement in the context of a comprehensive community change initiative. It is based on my own reflections on their work as well as the thoughts and experiences of dozens of residents, activists, and professionals who have been involved in RCI.

— **BILL TRAYNOR**

Introduction to the Rebuilding Communities Initiative

The Annie E. Casey Foundation established the Rebuilding Communities Initiative (RCI) in 1994 to provide the necessary supports needed to transform troubled, economically disenfranchised neighborhoods into safe, supportive and productive environments for children, youth and their families. Established community-based organizations were selected in five major cities to participate in the seven-year Initiative:

- **Dudley St. Neighborhood Initiative** (Boston, MA) for the Dudley Street neighborhood in Roxbury/North Dorchester;
- **Germantown Settlement** (Philadelphia, PA) for the Wister, Southwest Germantown, and Chew-Chelton neighborhoods;
- **Marshall Heights Community Development Organization** (Washington, D.C.) for neighborhoods in Ward 7;
- **NEWSED Community Development Corporation** (Denver, CO) for the La Alma/Lincoln Park neighborhood in West Denver; and
- **Warren/Conner Development Coalition** (Detroit, MI) for neighborhoods in Eastside Detroit.

Each of the RCI groups came to the Initiative with some history of activism and resident engagement.

Each of the RCI groups came to the Initiative with some history of activism and resident engagement. The key personnel at Germantown Settlement and Marshall Heights Community Development Organization (MHCDO), for example, came out of the civil rights movement. Many at NEWSED Community Development Corporation have a rich history of organizing for Latino and Native American rights. Warren/Conner Development Coalition (WCDC) and the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) both had developed hybrid organizing strategies that began as interesting variations on the power-building approach first popularized by Chicago's Saul Alinsky, a founding father of the community-organizing movement. By making resident engagement central to the change agenda, and putting enormous resources on the table, RCI significantly raised the ante for these groups. Moreover, it challenged these groups to re-define their resident engagement work in the context of community building and family support. On the surface, the demands made by RCI on participating

communities took the form of specific requirements:

- The communities needed to develop resident-driven plans for the content of their work under RCI and for the use of RCI funds.
- The communities were required to create resident-controlled community governance structures as the principal decision-making bodies for the RCI efforts.
- The communities were challenged to identify, reach out to, and involve traditionally disenfranchised constituents within their target areas.
- The communities were asked to demonstrate that their RCI change agenda address systemic changes at the community level.

Below the surface, however, were more complicated demands, raised by the Foundation as it tried to articulate its vision for this work. Often, these demands were difficult to fully communicate to the grantees. As anyone who has been involved with resident engagement will attest, it is difficult to establish strong and reliable measures of success. To complicate matters further, the rhetoric of resident engagement and community building is now so banal as to render much of it meaningless. Measurable outcomes are elusive and the language is insufficient — factors that make effective communication between the funders and the local groups difficult. The truth is this work is difficult to do well, especially over a long period of time. Moreover, even successful community-based organizations (CBOs), such as those selected to participate in RCI, face significant challenges as they try to build capacity to do this work.

RCI's Community-Building Lessons

Since its beginning, RCI has put forth the belief that well-organized neighborhood residents and key stakeholders are a critical force in the success of any comprehensive community revitalization effort. The CBOs involved with RCI are successful in their own right; several have long and rich histories of local activism. Nonetheless, through RCI, all have struggled to build their own brand of resident outreach and engagement to fit their own environment and circumstances.

In many ways, these struggles mirror those seen in the field at large. A wide range of CBOs have moved, or been compelled to move, toward a more comprehensive community-building approach. Much of this work has been funded through comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs): broad-based, multi-year efforts to transform whole communities. Essential to these initiatives is an effort to place community development — and any specific strategies — into the context of the physical environment and a myriad of complex social, economic, and political systems.

This is challenging and difficult work. At its core is the challenge of engaging residents and other stakeholders to shape new thinking, new policies, new actions, and new visions. Of course, this requires a new approach to how CBOs identify, educate, activate, and mobilize their constituencies. Through RCI, we have learned the following:

- **Community building efforts can only be successful if they are concerned both with building social capital and implementing an agenda for change.**

We define social capital as strengthened personal relationships and networks. Most community-building efforts are designed to build social capital at the neighborhood level, which is clearly essential to the development of a functional community. Yet, social capital development does not necessarily lead to structural change. It has been RCI's collective experience that social capital development alone will not generate the kinds of outcomes that most CCIs are looking for. Effective community building requires both a mechanism for social capital development and a clear, collective agenda for change that challenges existing service and resource delivery systems. All the various actors involved in the CCI must understand that everything must change in some way if the effort is to succeed. And these changes—local or national, programmatic or policy, structural or situational—must contribute to the strengthening of communities and families.

- **For many groups, the shift to a community-building approach represents a wholesale shift in organizational culture and operations.**

Most CCIs rely on existing CBOs to implement plans at the local level. These organizations are typically sophisticated and successful in their own right. This was certainly true of the organizations involved with RCI. The rhetoric that surrounds community-building work is such that, at the onset, almost everyone will agree it is the right thing to do. Rhetorical commitment, however, is a far cry from operational competence. As RCI participants met and addressed the challenges of participatory planning, shared decision-making, and grass-roots programming, they discovered layers of resistance within their own organizations and communities. The dynamics of community-building work, when done well, can quickly create tensions around decision making, power sharing, and risk taking. For individuals within the CBOs, these dynamics can pose serious challenges to long-held personal attitudes, instincts, and behaviors.

- **An investment in developing professional community-organizing capacity is necessary to get results from community-building work.**

The most significant lesson from RCI is that CBOs responsible for community-building work must embrace the thinking and practice of community organizing: its disciplines, skills, strategies, and approaches. Community building is difficult work, with the challenges almost always underestimated by CBOs and funders alike. As a recognized field of endeavor, community building is relatively new and it has not yet been the subject of extensive research and evaluation. Nonetheless, there is a body of experience and information available in the field of community organizing that identifies proven methods and best practices. Still, this information is overlooked or disregarded by many in the community-building field. There is tremendous need to bring rigor, discipline, and professionalism to this work.

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Fortunately, many in the field are coming to understand that community organizing, which focuses on mobilizing a constituency around a reform agenda, is essential to the success of CCIs. Increasing or enhancing the local capacity for community organizing and resident engagement is emerging as an essential focus of funding and technical assistance in the field.

Through RCI, we have found that both the thinking and the practice of community organizing have much to offer CCIs. Community organizing is concerned with the building of collective power in order to create homegrown, locally owned, action-oriented solutions to a neighborhood's problems. This is done through building networks of personal relationships and shaping those networks into a constituency for change.

Emergence of the CCI in Community Development

Over the past 10 years, the landscape of local community development and, in some cases, community advocacy and service delivery has changed dramatically. Prominent in this changing landscape has been the emergence of comprehensive community development as a central strategy in efforts to fight persistent poverty and revitalize troubled neighborhoods. Much of this work is being done under the auspices of CCIs that are publicly and/or privately funded. While the idea of broad-based, comprehensive community revitalization is not new, its prominence in the community development field is.

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According to Anne Kubisch of the Aspen Roundtable, there are as many as 50 multi-site, foundation-funded CCIs currently at work across the country. Kubisch's *ShelterForce* article, "Comprehensive Community Initiatives: Lessons in Neighborhood Transformation", describes CCIs this way:

Today's CCIs are both a reaction against recent practices... and a reformulation of earlier approaches. CCIs seek to replace the piecemeal approaches with broader efforts to strengthen the connections between economic, social, and physical needs, and opportunities. At the same time, they build on the foundations of community development theory and practice...not so much as a "model" for action, but as a set of basic guiding concepts, including comprehensiveness, coordination, collaboration, and community participation.

CCIs are both a *place-based* and a *people-based* strategy. They focus on a fixed population in a fixed geographic area. And while every CCI has its own distinctions, the common goal of every CCI is nothing short of a fundamental transformation of the physical and economic conditions, social relationships, and institutional capacities of the local neighborhood. Central to this universal goal is a keen interest in building the capacity of local residents, stakeholders, and institutions to envision, plan, and implement a comprehensive agenda for change.

Community-Building Objectives Within the CCI

Like many of the terms used in community development work, community building means many things to many people. For this paper, I prefer to use Lisbeth B. Schorr's description from *Common Purposes: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America* (1997):

Community building is more an orientation than a technique, more a mission than a program, more an outlook than an activity. It catalyzes a process of change grounded in local life and priorities. It addresses the development needs of individuals, families, and organizations within the neighborhood. It changes the nature of the relationship between the neighborhood and the systems outside its boundaries. Community building is based on the belief that inner-city residents and institutions can and must be primary actors in efforts to solve the problems of their neighborhoods.

Practically speaking, community-building work takes many forms, from outreach, education, and advocacy to issues-organizing and leadership development. In most neighborhoods, a wide range of community groups can be found performing these tasks: neighborhood

groups, tenant organizations, community development coalitions, advocacy organizations, churches, social service groups, and informal clubs and associations. In the best case, the collective actions of these groups constitute an infrastructure of formal and informal supports for — and enhancements to — community life and its progress. In the usual case, however, these groups represent a collection of disconnected programs and services that are largely defined by agencies and funders.

One of the most profound shifts in the field has been the acceptance of 'social capital' as a legitimate and even critical element in the economic and physical health of communities and families. While there is less agreement on how to build social capital, it is generally viewed as essential to a functional community. As such, efforts to build social capital are integrated into many community-building strategies.

In most CCIs, including RCI, a conscious effort has been made to encourage the coordination of both grass-roots institution building and social capital development, and to link these strategies to larger objectives such as 'family support' or 'systems change'. This is a daunting task.

Through RCI, we have learned that, in many cases, community-building efforts

suffer from a dangerous combination of high expectations and meager resources. Over the course of RCI, participants were able to bring some clarity and definition to the role that community-building work needs to play in a comprehensive community initiative:

- The first objective of community-building work should be ***building and sustaining a vibrant, active, and representative grassroots infrastructure in places where it has been historically weak***. Most communities have achieved some level of community-based organization, and this is certainly true of the RCI sites. But it usually does not add up to an infrastructure. There usually are gaps in the constituencies that are represented. The trick for the RCI sites was to identify those “hard to reach” constituencies and identify ways to help them build their capacity to participate.
- The second objective should be ***transforming the range of community-building activities in a given community into some form of collective agenda and action for change***. A community-building effort that lacks an ambitious agenda to

change conditions is a pilgrimage to nowhere. Without an agenda there can be no strategy. The community-building efforts that do take place without an agenda are episodic and disconnected, and the community-based groups remain isolated and fragmented. On the other hand, a change agenda can help bring critical issues into focus for a wide range of stakeholders both inside and outside the neighborhood. Community-building efforts that are connected to issues of concern to residents will have more resonance and will yield more impressive results.

- The third objective should be to ***place residents at the center of the community-building effort; residents must define and drive the agenda for change***. Resident involvement is the only reliable indication that the change agenda will indeed be connected to the genuine needs of the community, and that the community-building solutions will have an impact. While organizations and neighborhood leaders are critical stakeholders, any effort will fail if there is not a genuine and vocal resident base.

Understanding the Field of Community Organizing

Community organizing is based on the premise that residents of poor neighborhoods are disenfranchised from the political process and disconnected from economic opportunity, and they need an organized voice to secure more equitable distribution of resources and power. To put it plainly, the organizers' role is to identify community leaders, bring those people together around a common cause, and help the group identify its issues and objectives, plan a campaign, and then win.

Community organizing is considered by many who practice and teach it as a way of thinking, as a set of attitudes about people and power.

Community organizing is considered by many who practice and teach it as a way of thinking, as a set of attitudes about people and power. First and foremost, the organizer believes that every person has the ability to play a role in solving his own problem. By taking action, individuals and communities will understand their own power and be more equipped to represent their interests. Community organizing emphasizes mutuality in the relationship between and among people, an interdependence

that calls on all parties to lend their skills and capacities to overcoming collective challenges. While a service provider is concerned with delivering help to a client in order to solve the client's problem, a community organizer is concerned with encouraging that same person to play a role in developing a collective solution, one that challenges the power structure, builds social capital, and develops residents' skills and capacities over time. While a community advocate works to develop his or her own skills in order to better represent others, a community organizer works to develop the skills of others. And while community developers see themselves as savvy and technically proficient entrepreneurs acting as an agent of the community, the organizer stresses the development of collective savvy and the building of power.

Community organizers believe that:

- Organizing is about building personal relationships and changing the ways in which people interact;
- Organizing is essentially a two-step process: understanding individuals' self-interests (broadly defined) and then helping them find connections so they can act collectively with others who share their same interests;

- A good organizer possesses strong feelings of love and outrage: love for people and outrage at the circumstances in which some people live;
- Good organizing is about doing a few things extremely well; and
- Every activity is an opportunity to learn and to grow and to build skills.

The field of community organizing encompasses a wide range of strategies and activities that have emerged from dozens of fields of practice and historic traditions.

The field of community organizing encompasses a wide range of strategies and activities that have emerged from dozens of fields of practice and historic traditions. The civil rights movement, the labor movement, welfare rights, environmental organizing, faith-based movements, even community-centered social work have all had influence on the current practice of community organizing. Our purpose here is not to provide a detailed analysis of community organizing strategy, but to portray community organizing as it is perceived by those in the field.

A good way to develop a functional definition of community organizing is to compare it to other community-based activities and interventions. In fact, community organizing, as a practice, differs substantially from other types of approaches used by community-based organizations. Myriad forms of community organizing are being practiced today. In the context of neighborhood transformation, it is important to distinguish among a number of most prevalent forms. These are summarized below:

Faith-Based/Church-Based Organizing

Practiced by many of the major organizing networks - such as Industrial Areas Foundation, Pacific Institute for Community Organization, and the Gamaliel Foundation — this type of organizing seeks to build an “organization of organizations” to address issues of social and economic justice. These organizations are typically regionally based or based in large urban areas. The organizing strategy begins with months — and sometimes years — of relationship building among clergy and lay leaders in a range of denominations, usually beginning with Catholic and Mainline Protestant churches. One-on-one interviews are used to get to know potential leaders and to identify the kinds of issues that have the potential to unify congregants across denominations. Only after establishing the organizing vehicle is an issue selected. Massive mobilizing and direct action are then used to pressure decision-makers

into concessions. Some faith-based organizations are beginning to involve secular organizations and neighborhood-based organizations in these organizing coalitions.

Neighborhood-based Organizing

This is place-based organizing focused on building an organization of individuals and grassroots groups at the neighborhood level to mobilize for local changes. Individual and house meetings are the principal organizing techniques used to identify leaders and issues. Typical issues range from crime and safety concerns to housing to city services and open spaces. While neighborhood-based organizing is usually practiced by larger organizing networks — principally the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now — there are many groups, such as community development coalitions, human services organizations, and small CBOs that try to do this work with mixed results.

Consumer/Citizen Issues Organizing

Largely practiced by regional coalitions and some statewide citizen action organizations, this type of organizing focuses on consumer issues such as health care, utility rates, insurance issues, and other issues that impact the pocketbook. These types of issues tend

to transcend some class boundaries and, therefore, middle class and suburban constituencies can be connected to low-income and urban areas. This style of organizing is research and advocacy oriented, relying on massive mobilization and affiliation strategies such as petitions, mass mailing, periodic mobilization, and lobbying.

Identity Organizing

This approach is rooted in issues of economic and social justice and is connected with race, gender, sexual orientation, or other group identity. Issues of discrimination, equality, civil rights, access, and hate crimes are the focus of these groups.

Consensus Organizing

This style of organizing, principally practiced by the Consensus Organizing Institute of San Diego, uses many of the traditional organizing techniques, such as one-on-one and home meetings, in order to identify and build leadership for change. The major distinguishing factor of consensus organizing is that it sees conflict and confrontation tactics as destructive in communities that need to be building connections and bridges. Consensus organizing simultaneously organizes low-income neighborhoods, businesses, and the political elite, and finds ways to build strategic connections among these groups so that mutual benefits are realized.

Community Organizing in the Context of the CBO

Through RCI, we recognized that it is not enough to understand organizing as practiced by groups that specialize in it; we must also understand organizing within the community-building context. Unlike the existing “organizing only” groups like IAF, ACORN, and other community organizing networks, CBOs face unique challenges as they try to develop community organizing and resident engagement capacity. These include the following.

- CBOs are place-locked. Their reason for existing is tied to their hegemony in a particular geographic area. This affects the type of organizing and engagement work the group is likely to pursue.
- CBOs must perform multiple functions. They are not “organizing only” groups. They are service providers, community developers, and advocates. Community organizing is an additional activity. The operations and culture of the CBO affects how easily community-organizing and resident-engagement work can be integrated into the organization’s mission.
- CBOs may or may not have a history that allows the organizations to easily adapt to serious organizing or engagement work.
- CBOs often do not have the supervisory personnel capable of mentoring organizers and outreach workers and directing their work.
- CBOs whose main business is community development or service delivery usually are dependent on local, state, and federal government funds for survival. This arrangement can limit the organization’s ability to listen and respond to the needs of an organized constituency.

From the beginning, RCI has assumed that community development approaches and effective organizing and engagement work are not mutually exclusive, and that they can be integrated and should be integrated for the greatest impact. However, community-organizing skills are among the most difficult capacities for CBOs to acquire and maintain. In community organizing and resident engagement, talk is cheap. Most actors in the field know and use the lexicon of empowerment, but there is a great distance between “talking the talk” and “walking the walk.” The discrepancy between saying and doing is not necessarily intentional or malicious. The fact is that the difference between poor organizing efforts and good organizing efforts is in the details. For this reason it has been critical within RCI to

understand what it really takes for a CBO to become a successful community organizer. It has been equally critical that both the Foundation and the RCI communities have been willing to challenge each other to cut through the rhetoric and lack of clarity regarding the practice and the impact of this work.

Another factor is the lack of cross-fertilization between community-organizing groups and community-building groups. Many community-building and neighborhood-improvement efforts are valiant struggles against great odds, led by committed, self-taught local leaders. For the most part, training and technical assistance to support such efforts have been minimal or non-existent. The strategies and tactics practiced are derived from personal experience. If the field of community building is influenced by any particular discipline, it is the field of social work. But where do people learn about power? How do people learn to build democratic organizations? How are leaders to learn the skills of conflict management and strategic thinking? Where do they find out how local markets and systems work? These organizations and these leaders have not been well served by community-organizing groups.

For the most part, established community organizing training centers and intermediaries have been unwilling to see CBOs as valuable to the social and economic justice agendas they promote. Rather, they have seen them as a distraction, taking resources and attention

away from the “real” organizing work that must be done. In addition, the major organizing groups have been too consumed with establishing and maintaining a narrow niche within a small field to think about expanding the realm of constituent groups for which community-organizing skills might be useful.

...many community builders are skeptical and more than a little wary of working with established community-organizing groups.

For their part, many community builders are skeptical and more than a little wary of working with established community-organizing groups. Prepackaged approaches, an emphasis on confrontation tactics, and the perception of organizers as arrogant and ideological has turned off many a neighborhood leader and CBO executive director. In some cases, community leaders and CBOs will describe experiences with community organizing groups that “have come in, stirred up a lot of trouble, and left town.”

...the dialogue in the field between community-organizing groups and community development groups has been stifling and static.

For years, the dialogue in the field between community-organizing groups and community development groups has been stifling and static. In fact, organizations on both sides have much to gain from the cross-fertilization of thinking, strategies, tactics, and projects. The perception of differences on both sides is far greater than the reality. These perceptions have led to a hard-

ening of the ideological and methodological lines that separate both the organizers from the community builders and the organizing groups from each other. One major factor is the preoccupation with conflict and confrontation tactics that dominates most discussions about organizing. Yet real differences do exist, which need to be better articulated and understood on both sides.

Barriers to Effective Community Organizing and Resident Engagement

Through RCI, we have seen that while a community organizing approach can yield important results for CBOs, it is by no means an easy adjustment. In fact, it is nothing short of a wholesale culture shift and a re-tooling of critical internal operations. For the CBO, taking on community organizing forces changes in how decisions are made, power is shared, and risks are taken. For individuals in the organization, this work can raise serious challenges to personal attitudes, instincts, and behaviors.

In order to shift to a community organizing approach, a CBO first needs to understand some of the key challenges or barriers:

CBOs must overcome the “caretaker” culture that dominates most agencies.

Community-building groups can learn from the tradition of community-organizing groups. At the core of community organizing theory is the notion of the “reciprocal relationship” between the “organizer” and those being “organized.” The “organized” are always expected to take some measure of ownership over their plight. This is best captured in Alinsky’s iron rule of organizing: “never do for others what they can do for themselves.” This view is vastly different from that found in service and advocacy organizations. As some of them have

found, it is this “caretaker” culture that dictates behavior on the part of agency workers. Instead of behavior that tries to create the ‘reciprocal relationship,’ agency workers tend to create a relationship of dependence. This is a powerful barrier to building community and social capital.

CBOs must learn to share power and decision-making authority with the community.

The organizer is committed to sharing power with the organized — this is the payoff for taking ownership of the struggle. In a power-sharing relationship, all members have a say in the budget; the tenant’s organization becomes a legitimate partner; the block associations and neighborhood organizations become power centers themselves. Power sharing is especially difficult for CBOs, which have fought hard over the years to win their own institutional power. In RCI, CBO participants were encouraged to be honest and direct about this ambivalence. It is not easy to shed the need to be in control, particularly when that need has been developed over years of struggling to wrest some measure of control from the established power structure. As a team from Detroit’s Warren/Conner Development Corporation put it: “We need to take on our own fear of power. This includes a fear of making mistakes or not being in control.”

But even if the group can overcome this internal ambivalence, the path to power sharing is not necessarily smooth. This dynamic is especially difficult in inner city neighborhoods, where there is often a deep distrust of any large agency. Despite reputations as activist organizations, all the RCI CBOs came into the Initiative as large and well-established community organizations. From the outside, these are community-based groups that represent a wide grassroots base. From inside the community, they can be perceived as just another version of the power structure. Recasting these groups as organizations that are willing to share power, build the capacity of other groups, and engage in collaborative decision-making can be a tough sell. Leroy Lemos of NEWSED in Denver said: “As an agency, we have fought for what we needed and we have become a power. Now we need to be more reflective and inclusive. We try to engage everyone. Power is money, information, influence, love, inclusion, and history. But power is taken not given. So our job is to provide opportunities for people to empower themselves.”

Collaborative governance can be difficult, tiresome, labor intensive, and time consuming.

Most CBOs have developed superb entrepreneurial instincts and skills. Without exception, the leaders of the RCI CBOs have national reputations in the field for their creativity, energy, and ability to capitalize on opportunities and make things happen. They are smart,

strategic “deal makers” who have earned respect both within and outside their communities. But, community organizing requires a more deliberative, planned approach that can prove a difficult adjustment for an organization’s leaders. Collaborative decision-making is painstaking, detailed work that can test the patience of the best organizations.

In Philadelphia, this work took the form of the Germantown Community Collaborative Board (GCCB), a new neighborhood-wide leadership and governance structure. In the midst of the organizing process, a team from Germantown explained: “We needed to find ways to get residents to see their power and apply it. Now our principal task is to develop and empower the GCCB. We need to understand the various elements of power, authority, influence, coercion, and facilitation, as well as the strategic uses of these elements.”

CBOs must learn to please two masters.

Community organizing requires CBOs to listen closely to the voice of the community. Yet, CBOs are dependent on public funds for survival. In short, CBOs have two masters: their grass roots constituency and their funding base, and the two do not speak with the same voice. This dynamic produces a complex range of power dynamics that require a high level of strategic thinking and a high tolerance for conflict by the CBO leadership.

Borrowing from Community Organizing to Improve Community-Building Efforts

Many involved in RCI have come to understand there are important aspects of the community organizing approach that can be applied to comprehensive community-building efforts. First, we can learn some of the fundamental ways of “thinking like an organizer” and try to incorporate that approach into the organizational culture. The key aspect of this thinking is the “reciprocal relationship” perspective mentioned earlier. This perspective represents a radical departure from the way most CBOs think and can lead to profound operational shifts. Second, we can learn to perform the basic tasks of outreach and mobilization very well. At its core, the practice of community organizing is doing a few things very well. The following are some of the important basic activities that need to be done well.

Community organizing emphasizes “reading” people and identifying those people who have something to offer to the group.

Identifying Potential Community Leaders

Community organizing emphasizes “reading” people and identifying those people who have something to offer to the group. An important skill is separating these people from those that may appear to be leaders but will not benefit the group. Understanding what makes a productive group leader, and learning how to test for those qualities in the outreach process is essential.

Conducting One-on-One Interviews

For a community organizer, every conversation is a valuable building block. In every conversation — positive or negative — there is information that can help shape what should happen next. Every conversation also is an opportunity to deepen the personal and professional relationship between the organized and the organizer. Learning how to prepare for and conduct productive one-on-one interviews is a baseline skill for most community organizers.

Small Group Facilitation Skills

Most decision-making at the community level takes place in small group meetings. Learning how to assemble these small groups and facilitate a productive and positive deliberation is an essential organizing skill.

Focusing on the Health and Well being of the Group

The community organizer understands that a healthy, well-functioning group will make good decisions. Most people in the group are not focused on caring for the group, but someone needs to be. Often this is the role of the organizer. Organizers are concerned with questions such as: What is the dynamic of the group? Who does the group represent? Are minority views being heard? Is the group staying focused on the work? Is the group making good decisions that most members respect?

Thinking Strategically

Organizers know that good leaders, and good groups, are focused on getting things done. They also know that a group can be doing a lot but never achieving real change, such as the neighborhood association that holds neighborhood clean-ups every month, but never asks the public works department for better city services, or the tenant organization that complains of code violations to management, but never goes directly to the city code inspectors. Organizers know that strategies are needed to a) build the group and b) achieve lasting change. Often community leaders and groups are not thinking strategically. The organizer thinks strategically and then tries to teach the group to think strategically.

The Five Essential Capacities for Effective Community Organizing

It is difficult for organizations accustomed to service delivery and a “caretaker” culture to shift toward building resident power and social capital and encouraging broad-based development of skills and capacities. As mentioned previously, some re-thinking and re-tooling is needed. RCI participants identified five essential capacities that CBOs must develop to become effective community organizers.

Community organizing is a method and a practice, but it is based on a way of thinking about people, how the world works, and what success means.

1 Develop a Culture of Organizing Throughout the Organization

Community organizing is a method and a practice, but it is based on a way of thinking about people, how the world works, and what success means. Community organizing sees people as the essential ingredient in effecting change. Central to community organizing is the belief that people have the power, skills, and talents to determine their collective destiny. It starts with the view that all people have something to

contribute to the solution and that no one needs to be a passive recipient. People need CBOs to help them develop their potential and to connect with others. As the professional “helpers” in this process we should never do for others what they are able to do for themselves. We should be challenging people to look for collective, action-oriented solutions to problems.

2 Create an Apparatus for Constituent Development and Social Capital Development

Central to community organizing is the notion that there has been a significant breakdown in community throughout poor urban areas over the last 30 years. This phenomenon has weakened the ability of these communities to fight back against the social, economic, and political forces that have helped cause the decline. An essential organizing idiom is that if people were more connected and mutually dependent, better, more organic, more empowering solutions to a whole range of personal, family, and community challenges would be found. Social capital is essential to the development of community power and development. The CBO must develop an efficient apparatus for outreach, information dissemination, and resident involvement that maximizes the opportunities for residents and others to interact and build interdependent relationships.

2 **Conduct Community Organizing Campaigns**

In addition to the development of social capital, community organizing is concerned with making fundamental changes in the policies and practices of public and private institutions that impact the community. Some solutions require the community to organize, articulate its interests, and collectively advocate for change. This is done through organizing campaigns — strategic, mass action directed at making institutions more accountable to the needs and interests of the community. A CBO needs to develop the capacity to plan and execute community-organizing campaigns that lead to needed changes in community conditions. This may be the most difficult capacity to develop. It requires a high level of strategic thinking, excellent campaign planning and execution skills, and the ability to deal effectively with conflict. Professional community organizers have much to contribute in the way of strategies, skills development, and guidance to groups wishing to build this capacity.

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4 **Create Systems for Leadership Development**

In community organizing, the fundamental building block for change is the ability of ordinary people to develop their skills and ability to work collectively. This requires an aggressive investment in leadership development. This can take the form of formal workshops, mentoring, peer-to-peer activities, and scholarships for key leaders. Leadership development is the most talked about, but least accomplished, activity in most organizations. Few groups place real priority on leadership development. It is difficult for CBOs to raise funds to support ambitious leadership development efforts. Nonetheless, many agree that investing in developing the skills, knowledge, self-esteem, and character of individuals is the foundation for community change. With these attributes come better communication, more understanding, more conflict resolution skills, better business management skills, more understanding of process, and more productive and enlightened constituencies.

5 **Build Strategic Alliances**

One important aspect of community organizing is the ability to build powerful strategic alliances. These are not the same as service collaborative or partnerships. These are opportunistic relationships designed to address systemic issues that are beyond the reach of a single, local organization. Building the capacity to look beyond the traditional physical and political boundaries of the community is critical.

Sustaining Community Organizing Approaches within the CBO

In a large organization, it is not surprising that the least technical activity with the fuzziest performance measures will get the least amount of attention...mistakes or inefficiencies in organizing and resident engagement work can have serious repercussions throughout the organization.

In addition to the five core capacities for effective community organizing that CBOs should develop is a list of activities that CBOs should undertake in order to sustain their newly acquired commitment to community organizing.

Invest in Quality Staff Support and Supervision

Organizing is often viewed as kind of a “pedestrian science” that anyone can practice. This perception, coupled with the lack of experienced organizers in senior management positions, means the supervision and support of organizing work is often poor. As a result, organizers will complain of feeling isolated from the rest of the organization. Turnover among outreach and organizing staff is high and seems to be an acceptable norm in the field.

In a large organization, it is not surprising that the least technical activity with the fuzziest performance measures will get the least amount of attention. It must be understood, however, that mistakes or inefficiencies in organizing and resident engagement work can have seri-

ous repercussions throughout the organization. The executive director ends up putting out political fires in the community every week, or the housing director finds that she must hold endless community meetings and answer the same questions 100 times before the project can move ahead. Through RCI, we have found that organizing work, done well, can make everyone else in the organization more effective.

Integrate the “Organizing Approach” Throughout

In a CBO, organizing and resident engagement work cannot be seen as a separate department, it must be a way of doing business. While community organizers should lead the work, the approach must be integrated throughout the organization or the organizers and the work will be marginalized.

Set Achievable Benchmarks For Involvement

Nothing convinces doubters of the value of a strategy more than success. Preaching resident involvement, whether it comes from the community

organizer or the executive director, will have a negligible impact on the organization. But carefully chosen, achievable targets for involving new people in the organization can have a tremendous positive impact. The goal should be to demonstrate that resident engagement can be achieved with relatively little pain and that it has a positive effect on the organization.

Define your Own Style of Organizing

The field of organizing, like many disciplines, suffers from its own brand of elitism. Because effective organizing has always been difficult to quantify, a lot of the traditional community organizing work has been built on the “cult of personality.” For many years, only those who were direct disciples of Saul Alinsky were considered “real” organizers. Even today, among many of the “organizing-only” networks, there is a strong prejudice regarding who does “real” organizing and who is pretending or just tinkering.

In the community-building context, the question is, what aspects of community organizing can be adapted to the CBO’s culture and work? In the midst of RCI, the Warren/Conner Development Corporation defined its own unique community organizing style. The product, a 6-page document, details the group’s vision, mission, theory of change, principals, and approach. In it, they describe an approach that focuses on a number of community education efforts, which will:

Allow the entire neighborhood to engage and participate in community change... We see community education as the way we prepare and educate our children, parents, workers, businesses, and schools to reclaim their neighborhood. We also see community education shifting the paradigm from the notion that the Eastside is a place where problems are solved by outside experts, but rather it is a place that can solve its own problems with its own knowledge, resources, and assets, with the support of outsiders.

With this foundation, Warren/Conner has advanced two initiatives designed to increase the knowledge base in the Eastside: Reclaiming Our Schools, a campaign for school reforms, and the Neighborhood Toolbox, a set of ongoing training and resource programs for residents.

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Acknowledge and Address the Difficulties of Collaborative Governance

Over the past 30 years, community-based organizations have learned much about how to deliver services, how to build affordable housing, how to provide effective job training, and so on. The experience of these organizations has helped create established frameworks, proven methods, accepted outcomes, performance measures, and a whole range of professional development tools and supports. The work remains difficult and is subject to a high degree of discretion and flexibility — yet it has norms and practices that are viewed as models for such work. Few such norms and best practices are at work in the field of community building — particularly when it comes to the art and science of collaborative governance.

In many ways the practice of collaborative governance is still in a primitive stage. Most of the time, we are trying to build a governance hybrid that is essentially a form of authoritative/hierarchical

management with a nod toward greater inclusion. We are stuck in the middle between needing (and wanting) to make unilateral decisions and pressure to defer to residents or partners. There are psychological, social, political, and economic reasons for this tug-of-war. Unfortunately, in the area of power sharing and collaborative governance, an ounce of ambivalence is worth a ton of chaos, confusion, and mistrust. Halfway measures more often than not backfire.

Some of the challenge of collaborative governance is due to the real risks involved in sharing power. But surely some of it is due to a lack of capacity to do it well. Our task should be to make this collaborative governance workable and as predictable as possible. More codification of methods and practice are needed. More tools and frameworks for teaching and guiding this work are essential. We need an industry-wide exploration of effective and creative strategies for collaborative governance that acknowledges the difficulty of this work.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and communities fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.



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