

What is a Community Organizer?: A Commentary Analysis

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30 October 2008 (draft release)

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In August, the Republican convention raised the question of what is a community organizer. They were attempting to question the experience of Democratic nominee Barack Obama as a “community organizer”. So the question remained, never was quite answered, and has been raised again a few times. The simple answer is that a community organizer is someone who spends time organizing the community. Yet this is not a simple answer. Let us first take a couple examples of “community organizers”.

On the national level, we have numerous examples including: Gail McGovern is the President and CEO of the American Red Cross; Pat Robertson founded the Christian Coalition; and William G. Parrett is the Chair of the United Way of America. On a local level we have examples of Charles Hurley as president of the Iowa Family Policy Center, Carolyn Jenison as executive director of One Iowa, Vern Naffier of the Progressive Coalition of Central Iowa, or Hugh Espey of the Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement. Community organizing happens at various levels beyond political interests as well. Neighborhood associations, local YMCA, soccer clubs, little leagues, church extensions (alter societies), chambers of commerce, and alumni associations are all additional examples of community organizations that, in order to be successful, participate in some grassroots level of community organization.

Each of these examples of “community organizer” provides a group where their task is to bring people together under some common interest/passion and provide a coordinated effort for humane relief, political action, community support, faith support, or economic association just to name a few. The organizations have to work with people from differing political ideologies or interests as well as differing social or diversity backgrounds.

There are many challenges that people face when working such organizing efforts. The top of these involve: 1) finding people with some mutual interests that will actively help with the cause(s), 2) coordinating the efforts and delegating tasks among the people, 3) raising funds to maintain operations of those causes, and 4) developing strategic organization development. These are not much different than running for-profit businesses. We see issues of human resources, operations, finance, and strategic development that are typical of basic business operations.

These are especially challenging for people working on building “coalition”-type organizations where many people have various interests and needs. In these group settings, you have to attempt to focus numerous agendas into more centralized agendas.

The deal-making and the efforts that go into coordinating something like a simple protest or rally has to involve ground-work, communications, money, and people. The leaders of community organizations gain serious experience with coordinating multiple interests, trading actions for actions, strategy and tactics involved with their particular interests. A good coordinator will gain in depth knowledge of the community, the issues and effective strategy.

From my own experience, I have been on the boards of organizations and served as chair for two years for the Pride festival committee in Iowa City. The business to business relationships, networks, marketing, financing, dealing and the event organizing experience gained provided solid understanding of how to make an organization work effectively. There was always a limitless amount of work for a limited amount of time and people (otherwise known as the economic principle of scarcity). The challenge was to bring those together and make the events and organization appear to run flawlessly despite the various issues that would arise.

Overcoming these obstacles is the key to a good leader in any organization (for profit or not). Learning to collaborate, communicate, trustworthiness, and delegate are essential elements for good commerce, non profits organizations and the country's leaders. The key to a great leader is one who will transcend beyond the local level, beyond the generation, and beyond political ideology and tap into the goodness and passion of people to bring about positive change in their community. They will not simply use people but work with good people to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. They will be ones that have grand visions even while people mock those visions. While some people are grumbling about how things could be better in life or quip the proverbial "they should do this" or "they should do that", these organizers are the people that are out there trying to make a difference and perhaps helping a life or two get better.

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