



# Building Powerful Community Organizations

A Personal Guide to  
Creating Groups that  
Can Solve Problems  
and Change the World

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**Building Powerful Community Organizations**  
by Michael Jacoby Brown

Chapter 11  
Taking Action, Solving Problems, Getting Results

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SECTION



## MAKING CHANGE

*“You can’t organize in an office.”*

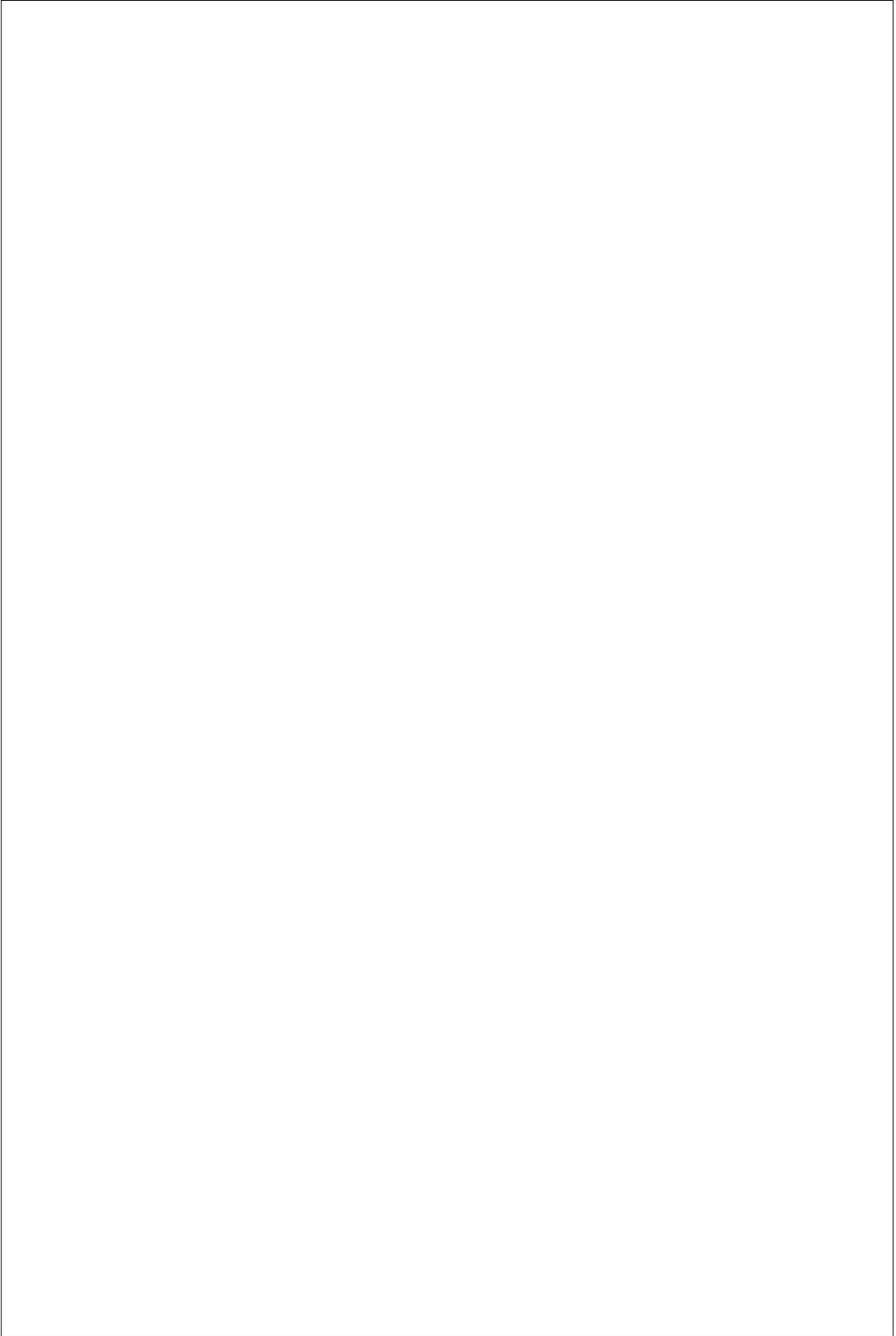
—Michael Jacoby Brown

If you have read this far, congratulations! You have the skills and resources you need. Now you are ready to solve problems and change the world.

Buckle your seat belt: Now you are ready to make a difference and win some improvements in your world or stop something bad from happening. In this section you’ll see how to use the skills and tips covered in earlier chapters to push for change in the world.

Yes, it helps to plan and organize before you act. But you don’t want to develop a “paralysis of analysis.” All action is premature. But if you wait until you have everything perfectly worked out, you are likely never to act to get what you need. And if you never act you will never learn how to do it better the next time.

So let’s go!



# Taking Action, Solving Problems, Getting Results

*If architects want to strengthen a decrepit arch, they increase the load which is laid upon it, for thereby the parts are joined more firmly together.*

—Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

## ► Actions: Setting Change In Motion

### What Are Actions?

Every organization has a program, often referred to in the organizing world as an “action.” Common types of actions include:

**1. Forums or panels.** These are educational. Experts discuss a topic. The goal is to educate those who attend.

**2. Public hearings.** These are opportunities for the public to testify about an issue. Hearings can be convened by public officials or by a community organization. Who runs the hearing is critical, as this group shapes both the process and the outcomes of the hearing. Time limits and decisions about who testifies matter, as do the location of the meeting and the selection of the person who will serve as the meeting's chair.

**3. Research actions.** You can organize an action around getting information. This is often a useful step. Members of the group go in an organized fashion to retrieve information about their problem. This might be a group visit to the Department of Public Health to find out what division controls the drinking water in the town or what acceptable lead levels are, or a meeting with the Housing Authority Director to find out how maintenance budgeting decisions are made and who will be present at the next budgeting meeting. These types of programs are useful because they supply the group with the information it needs to take a more confrontational action later on. In addition, these actions are themselves steps in the mobilization of the group, as they are the interim steps that educate, inspire, and motivate the members of the group. Members can learn a lot about the problem, about the institutions they are fighting, and about conducting actions from participating in research actions.

**4. Accountability sessions.** These are carefully orchestrated public negotiation sessions. They generally include specific questions directed to individuals who have the authority to effect some improvement in the lives of those who attend the session. The action may be a public session asking a mayor to agree to fund school supplies and textbooks. It may be a session where 1,000 people ask a bank president to fund low-interest loans for first-time home buyers. Whatever the topic, the essential ingredient is a clear agenda to ask an individual who has the authority (power) to deliver to make a specific improvement in the public arena.

Such face-to-face negotiations with public or corporate authority are based on the assumption that power is not absolute. Accountability sessions assume that those in authority can be influenced and can change their behavior

or decisions when personally confronted by people who make a specific request of them. Accountability sessions further assume that those in authority are more likely to agree to such requests when the requests are made by large numbers of organized, disciplined people. This approach relies on the propositions—which experience bears out—that the public presence of many people influences the person in authority and that the power of the group is directly proportional to the number of people it turns out for the meeting. Such sessions also provide those who attend with a sense of increased power to influence the decisions that affect their lives and an increased sense of confidence in their ability to act in public. This strengthens the group, an important goal of any action.



### **Story: Ask For What You Want**

*For years, students in Boston's public schools complained about dirty, smelly bathrooms. The stalls lacked doors. There was no toilet paper. They were rarely cleaned.*

*Then the Boston Youth Organizing Project started organizing high school students. Number One on the students' list of concerns was still the smelly bathrooms. After weeks and months of planning and recruiting, they invited the Superintendent of Schools to a meeting at a church, where they turned out over 50 students.*

*The Superintendent came with two of his assistants. The students were orderly and organized. They went through an agenda that included testimony from students about their experience in the bathrooms, with dates, times, and details. They had a very specific request of the Superintendent: to fix the bathrooms in one specific school by a certain date. He agreed.*

The students' research, orderliness, and attention to details, along with their specific request and the presence of a large number of students, plus clergy and other community members, got them what they wanted.



### **Story: Accountability Sessions Can Also Help Hold Members Accountable**

*I recently attended a meeting of 1,000 people, convened by a group working to pass state legislation to set up health insurance for hundreds of thousands of uninsured people. The plan was to put on a statewide ballot a question authorizing such a health insurance plan. To get the question on the ballot would require 40,000 signatures. At the rally, leaders on stage asked for 200 people to sign pledge cards promising to each get 200 signatures. Such a big meeting, where the power of 1,000 people all in one room is palpable and inspiring, can lead to more accountability. It inspired me: I signed the card.*

*And again, accountability means counting. Since it would take 40,000 signatures—not 20,000 or 2,000 or even 38,000—to get the question on the ballot, I knew that I needed to stick to my word and get my 200, in order for the entire effort to work.*

### **It's the Goal**

Whatever the program or action, it's the goal of the action that matters. The first rule of any action is to ask: What is its goal? Make the goal crystal-clear and put it in writing. Too many groups conduct a certain kind of action because that is what they have always done. It may not be working, but habits die hard, even when they are no longer effective.



### **Story: Winning is Different from Being Right—or Righteous**

*A group of affordable housing advocates was angry over rising rents. They went to some sympathetic city councilors **and** wrote a rent control regulation. Four of eleven councilors supported them. They pressed for a vote, and when the vote came, they lost. They screamed, “Shame, shame!” But they had never lined up the votes to win. They thought that they were right and that those who voted against them were wrong. They did not take the time to try to negotiate a compromise.*

Being “right” did not mean that they would win. Winning is different from being right. In this case, winning required a majority of the Council, which they did not have. Some people may want to be right more than they want to be effective. Unfortunately, their action did nothing to affect rising rents in the city.

### **► Actions Cause Tension; Tension Leads to Change**

Any social change or improvement project requires action. Action brings increased tension. Without increased tension, nothing changes.

An action may be a meeting with a person in authority, an election, a boycott, a press conference, a rally, a teach-in, or some other activity to affect social change. The organizer’s job includes not only teaching leaders how to plan and conduct actions, but also how to evaluate and learn from the action.

## **Action Requires Confrontation, Face-to-Face**

*Repressive social structures are maintained in part because authorities masquerade as benevolent, define inequalities as too complex for resolution, and hide real conflicts of interest in a fairy tale of paternal benevolence. An organizer, therefore, seeks out confrontations and conflict; for the organizer understands that only in conflict situations do issues become clear, with real interests no longer camouflaged; only in conflict situations does the rhetoric of the powerful lie exposed and the mobilization of a movement become possible. Yet the organizer is also aware that all conflict is partially premature; that in the polarization that ensues some members and potential members will be frightened, choosing the side of authority against their “true” interests. And in the need for instant decisions in crises, participation in decision-making is narrowed. Yet here new leadership is also tested.*

—Richard Rothstein, “What is an Organizer?”

## **Actions Bring Contradictions to Light**

Organizers, often in dramatic ways, bring to light the contradictions between generally accepted assumptions about how people should be treated and the reality of their living conditions. That’s why tenants have brought rats from their apartments to City Hall. That’s why people with disabilities have camped out in the State House when politicians have cut needed services. That’s why citizens brought samples of polluted drinking water from across the country to Congress. They know it is not socially acceptable in our country for people to live with rats in their homes, with no access to basic services, or with polluted drinking water pouring out of their faucets. Yet these conditions exist.

Most people just don't see them. Action makes them visible and makes the contradictions apparent.

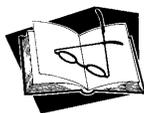
### **Actions are Experiences for Learning**

People learn through action. Without action and the inevitable reaction, no situation improves. No person changes. There is no learning. With organizing, the learning and personal growth happen within a group. The individual member learns and hopefully teaches others in the group. Then the group itself learns, and this learning becomes part of the group's norms and culture.

Organizers facilitate experiences for learning, for people to see the hidden reality. This often happens most effectively with face-to-face interaction.

*People change what they do less because they are given analysis that shifts their thinking than because they are shown a truth that influences their feelings.*

—John P. Kotter, *The Heart of Change*



#### **Story: Learning the Truth— Even When It Hurts**

*I was training a new VISTA organizer at an anti-poverty agency working with low-income people at the Franklin Street public housing development in Malden, a small city just outside Boston. The city government failed to deliver basic services to this neighborhood. Most people in this public housing development were not registered to vote. At that time, to register to vote, one either had to go to City Hall or else get twenty people to sign a special form requesting that a voter registrar come to their location. It took a trip to City Hall to get the form.*



*Because of federal restrictions, the VISTA volunteer could not directly help anyone register to vote. She could, however, inform the public housing residents of the law and tell them where to get the voter registration petition. She did this, and so the resident leader from the public housing development took the bus downtown and went to see the voter registrar at City Hall. The VISTA organizer and I waited for her in a coffee shop across the street.*

*As the woman from the residents' group told us later in the coffee shop, the conversation with the registrar went like this:*

*“Good morning” she said. “I am from Franklin Street and I would like a voter registration petition so we can have someone come down to register voters.”*

*“Oh,” the clerk replied, “those people on Franklin Street, they never vote. You are wasting your time. They will never vote. They are all so lazy. All they do is sit around all day, drink, get into trouble, and collect welfare. They are all no good.”*

*The woman from Franklin Street was stunned. She barely knew what to say. She managed to pick up the petition and walk out of City Hall, a bit dazed.*

*I knew the registrar was likely to say something like this. That was why we had stationed ourselves at the doughnut shop across from City Hall—to go over what happened.*

*The woman walked into the doughnut shop. She was frustrated and depressed. She had never been talked to like that. It took us over an hour to review what had happened and why. We pointed out that the clerk worked for the public, which included her, and that, in fact, she paid the taxes that paid the clerk's salary. We said that no one had a right to talk to her, or anyone, like that. Gradually, the tenant leader became more angry than depressed. She was*



*getting annoyed and wanted to do something. She was determined to get all twenty signatures on that petition and show the registrar that people on Franklin Street did care, did want to vote, and did count for something.*

Organizers seek out such confrontations. From experience, I had a good idea of how the registrar might treat the woman from public housing. I *wanted* her to be treated that way—not because that is the way she should be treated, but because that is the reality behind the image the public officials display. That is what the registrar really thought of her, although it is not publicly declared. The tenant leader would not learn it if I simply told her, “People in City Hall don’t respect you.” Even if she believed me, my telling her would not have the impact of the registrar telling her to her face.

## ► Tips for Making Actions Work

### Action/Reaction

This action allowed the public housing leader from Franklin Street to uncover the masquerade of City Hall benevolence and then gave her a chance to test her leadership. How would she react to being called those names? How would she feel? What would she do?

She went back to her development and got the required signatures to bring the voter registrar out to her street.

We need personal experiences to learn and develop in ways that differ from how we habitually act. Bodies at rest tend to remain at rest. Sir Isaac Newton discovered that. Bodies in motion tend to remain in motion. He also discovered that. Use Newton’s Laws of Inertia and Motion to get peo-

ple moving and keep them moving. We need experiences outside of our normal routine to make change and learn. Then we need to take the time to evaluate, learn from the experience, and move on to further action, more improvements in our lives and communities, and greater learning.

### **Ask for What You Want**

Action often involves negotiation. Just like in fundraising, if you don't ask, you don't get. The asking creates a tension and reaction from the person you ask. The tension and reaction will be forces for change. Even if the reaction is no action, the tension alone will lead to some sort of change. The change might be in your organization (re-grouping for another action that does lead to change), or in the person or institution whom you are confronting, or in the surrounding community where you are doing the organizing.

This is where Newton's Third Law comes in. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. You have to initiate an action if you want a reaction. If you ask for what you want, you can be sure that something will happen. It may take time to understand exactly what the reaction is, but I guarantee there will be an effect if you take action.

### **Evaluate the Experience**

Do not let the experience of an action fall on one person alone. Make sure that it is a group experience, even if only a few representatives from your group actually sit face-to-face with the person you are confronting. Before the action, agree to a time and place when you will meet to evaluate the experience. We had arranged the meeting in the doughnut shop ahead of time because we knew that the Franklin Street leader's experience would likely be difficult and that it would be important to evaluate the experience

together. We first asked her how she felt. Then we led her through a process to see that she had a right to be angry rather than depressed. Then, hopefully, she would act. In this case, she did.

## ► Information Is a Cornerstone of Action

### Information + People Create Power

*“Knowledge is power.”*

—Francis Bacon

What was good for Sir Francis Bacon is good for community organizing efforts, too. If you look carefully at the stories throughout this book, you’ll see that organizers often use information in combination with other strategies when they want to build their power. For example, as you’ll read later in this chapter, a neighborhood group in East Boston went down to the State Office Building to get a copy of a grant that was supposed to benefit their neighborhood. They found out the amount of the money that was supposed to be used to benefit their neighborhood, the specifications of the grant, and its term. This information, combined with a strong community organization that successfully mobilized people, provided them with a source of power that they otherwise would not have had.

### The Right Information Can Guide Your Action(s)

Although information is a source of power, simply having the right information is not enough. You need to do something with the information in order to leverage power. Otherwise, you could be right and still be powerless.



### Story: Paying Attention to the Top Dog

*Some of my neighbors have recently come together to oppose a proposed dog park down the block from our house. They started making all kinds of arguments—that a dog park could create a health hazard, that the neighbors don't want it, that it was a threat to young children, that the noise and traffic would disturb the peace, that the dogs could damage the nearby soccer field. Their arguments were interesting, and they certainly fanned the flames of self-righteousness, but no one stopped to find out who in the town had the authority to make the decision for or against the park and what kind of information would be important or persuasive to that decision-maker. Just having a lot of information about dog parks wasn't enough.*

*So I called the Town Hall and asked who has the decision-making power about building the dog park. The answer: Our Town Manager, who operates under the direction of our town's Board of Selectmen.*

*So now we're talking. Now we have a target for our efforts. We may have a lot of interesting arguments, but the only ones that matter if we want to make change are the ones that will influence the Town Manager or the Board of Selectmen. So our next step is to find out what the Town Manager and the Board of Selectmen are worried about. Public health issues? Public opinion? The expense? Once we get this information, we'll be ready to roll out an action plan.*

## Which Information Is the “Right” Information?

The information you need may be more than the simple facts of the case. One of the first questions you usually ask in organizing is: Who has the legal authority to make the decision? That leads you directly to the second question: Who (or what) would likely have influence on that person? You then need to find out what process that person will use for making the decision.



### Story: Getting the Right Information

*A number of years back there was a campaign to raise the minimum wage in California. Organizers found out that the Board with legal decision-making authority over the minimum wage had three members. One member was in favor of the increase, one was opposed, and one was undecided.*

*Now it was clear what information the organizers needed to guide their actions: The campaign needed to know what kinds of arguments would be most likely to sway the one swing voter on the Board. They found out that economic arguments carried the most weight with him, so they recruited a number of academic economists to help them make their case.*

It is possible to collect all kinds of information, possibly even too much. With the Internet, massive amounts of information are readily available. Whatever issue you are fighting, you may want to start by collecting just the informational basics, to give yourself some general background. Then stop and assess where you're at. Ask the questions about legal authority and how to influence the

decision-makers. Now's the time to start thinking strategically about what additional information you'll need and how you're going to use the information to shape your actions. Once you have the information, you can link it with some of the other sources of power to shape an action that will have impact.

**EXERCISE:****Information as a Source of Power**

There are all kinds of information that can be useful as sources of power. One very common type is about who has the authority to make the change. We sometimes call this "Decision-maker Research."

**Think of one problem your group is facing right now:**


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1. What do you want to accomplish? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Who has the legal authority to make the decision?

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3. What is the decision-making process? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. Who could influence that person? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What kinds of arguments would influence that person?

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6. What are the relevant laws that might restrict or support the change you want?

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7. What are the “accepted practices”? \_\_\_\_\_

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8. Is there any particular history behind this? \_\_\_\_\_

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9. Write down three next steps you could take right now to get you closer to answering those questions:

a. \_\_\_\_\_

b. \_\_\_\_\_

c. \_\_\_\_\_



## ► Action and Learning

### Organizers Evaluate the Action

*The plight is worsened by a network of “citizen committees,” “health and welfare councils,” and other blue ribbon citizen packages claiming to represent people who have given them no mandate, and, as often as not, are ignorant of the fact that others are speaking in their name.*

—Saul Alinsky



### Story: Action, Reaction, and Evaluation

#### Sometimes When You Take Action, the Reaction Is Nothing

In this story, just having the information didn’t mean we got our way.

*The neighbors around Maverick Square in East Boston had worked hard to get a walking beat patrolman assigned to their neighborhood. The patrolman got to know the neighbors and was able to recognize the drug dealers. He worked with Pastor Don Nanstad of Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church and some elderly residents in a nearby public housing development to get rid of much of the drug-dealing in the neighborhood. Then the walking patrolman was pulled off the job. The neighbors were not happy.*

#### Getting the Information Helps

*A special grant had paid for the patrolman. The neighbors wanted to know why the officer was taken away. If a special grant was paying for the patrolman, why would he be taken off this assignment? We decided to do a “research action”—to go downtown to visit the agency that admin-*



*istered the grant, to read it for ourselves and find out what the grant required.*

*(Don was smart: Before we went downtown, he called the agency responsible for monitoring the grant's progress to see if anyone there knew how the grant was going. The woman on the phone said, "I would like to know myself!" Don thought she sounded a little annoyed. He figured he might have found an ally.)*

*So we gathered at Don's church and took the subway downtown to the state office building. We rode the elevator to the office that had given out the grant. The woman from that agency was glad to see the neighbors once she realized what they were doing. She was frustrated, too, because the District Attorney had not made progress reports as required by the grant.*

*As we crowded around the counter, the clerk found the grant application. There it was in black and white: The grant included "\$21,000 toward a walking beat patrolman in Maverick Square." The clerk made a copy of the grant application for us.*

*Armed with the information we needed about what the grant required as regards the walking beat patrolman, we took the subway back to East Boston.*

If one state agency is not giving you what you want, don't assume that all the other state agencies are on their side. Each agency has a different bureaucratic responsibility. In this case, one state agency could help citizens to get what they wanted from another state agency. There may well be some internal competition or inter-agency dispute that can work to your advantage—as it did here.



### **Go to the Person Who Can Give You What You Want**

*The District Attorney's office had received the grant, so our next step, we decided, would be to ask the District Attorney why the money was not being spent on what the grant specified. We tried to set up an appointment with the D.A. We could not get one. The group debated what to do next. Most wanted to go downtown to confront the D.A. about losing the patrolman. One woman in the group refused. She didn't want to upset the District Attorney. The group talked things out and made decisions on the basis of the informal influence of the individual members. They decided to keep this woman happy and not go downtown, at least for the time being. In retrospect, trying to keep one person happy led to a bad decision, because the group lost momentum. In organizing for change, it is important to keep members' energy levels high to empower and propel them to take action that otherwise might feel frightening or overwhelming.*

*In the meantime, the local Assistant District Attorney had set up a new "Neighborhood Advisory Group." The neighbors thought that this allowed the D.A. to look like he was involving the neighborhood when, in fact, he was not. He chose the members of the group, but Don was the only member out of the fifteen who was a neighborhood resident. The meetings were public. The neighbors often showed up at these meetings. The chair would not recognize them to speak. Sometimes the meetings were held in non-wheelchair accessible sites, a problem for the elderly residents and also a violation of the law. The residents complained. Nothing was done. They were getting pretty discouraged.*

*When Don complained, they kicked him off and posted a security guard at the door to stop him from coming to the*



*meetings. (That did not stop him. The security guard played basketball with Don and just waved him in.)*

*After months of attending the local meetings with no results and getting no response to their requests for a meeting with the D.A., the members of the neighborhood association decided to go downtown again to try to meet with the District Attorney.*

### **Sometimes You Come Up Empty**

*They still could not get an appointment with the D.A., so they trooped down to his office in the musty old courthouse. They knocked on the door and were told, "The District Attorney is busy. Do you have an appointment?" They said they had tried to get one. They asked to speak to the public relations officer who often responded to them. They were told that the public relations officer was out of the office. They took seats on a bench and waited. One or two would occasionally go out to go to the bathroom or the water fountain. They asked again if the public relations officer was there and again were told she was not in the office. Then, as they looked out the door into the hallway, they saw her walk down the hall and disappear into the elevator. She had been there all the time and had taken another door to avoid meeting them. When they saw this, they realized that they were not going to get a meeting. They had been there for over an hour, sitting on a hard wooden bench. They decided to leave.*

*I had asked the neighbors to reserve time after the meeting to get coffee and talk about what had happened. I knew that, whatever happened, we needed time to talk about it. We found a lunch place near the courthouse and ordered coffee and sandwiches.*



### **The Evaluation: What Do You Do With Nothing?**

*“How did you feel?” I asked. “Disrespected,” they said. Some were feeling pretty down. They had tried to meet someone who could help them and did not succeed. I asked them, “Why do you feel that way?” “Whose fault was it that the meeting did not happen?” “Who does the District Attorney work for?” “Who pays his salary?” (Answer: Their taxes. He works, at least theoretically, for them.) Slowly, they started getting a little angry, rather than depressed, about what had happened. I looked for any sparks of anger I could fan. Isn’t this supposed to be a “government of the people, by the people, for the people”? Has it “perished from the earth”? Isn’t that what we learn in school? But what happened here? Slowly, instead of seeing their own inadequacies as the problem, they recognized that the District Attorney was not doing his job—at least not in the way they thought he should be doing it. He was not even adhering to the grant he himself had written, which they had seen with their own eyes. The knowledge of the grant and having seen it gave them a little more confidence that they were right. Having done their homework helped tremendously.*

*It took over an hour to evaluate what happened. If we had just gotten on the subway and gone back home, we would have left with a sour taste in our mouths, like we had failed. Instead, after evaluating what had happened, the group saw that there was nothing wrong with them. There was something wrong with a system that could not provide the walking beat patrolman, especially when a grant specifically required it. Even though they did not immediately win back the walking beat patrolman, they stayed energized and ready for more action.*

## How to Evaluate an Action

Start by asking how people felt. After an action, some people are likely to feel good about the action, others not so good. Some may feel bad. Explore how everyone felt and why. Make sure everyone gets a chance to talk. Start with the feelings, and then move to what people are thinking and why. Your job is to help them examine their feelings and, if necessary, help them move beyond them. You want them to leave the evaluation with an understanding of what they think about the experience and with motivation to take further action.



### QUICK TIPS

#### Checklist for Evaluating an Action

*Get together after the action to debrief and evaluate. Let everyone speak. Go around in a circle to make sure everyone gets a chance. Suggested questions:*

How did you feel?

What happened? (Get the story straight. People often hear or see things differently. Get an accurate recording of the facts and who said what. If someone misheard something, the group can set him or her straight.)

Did we have a plan of action?

Did we follow *that plan*?

Yes. If yes, great!     No. If no, why not?

What was our goal?

What was the reaction?

Did we achieve our goal?

Did we get the reaction we expected?

Did anything surprise us?



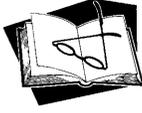
What did we learn?  
Would we do anything differently next time?  
Did we need any more information?  
Would more information help now?  
What is our next step?  
What might help us take this next step?  
How do you feel now?

### **Learning From Action**

When we take a public action (going to see the District Attorney), we get a reaction (no one will see us). How we understand that reaction is essential to our learning.

Do we learn that we are not worthy of the District Attorney's attention? Do we have a right to ask the government to do what it says it will do—in this case, to spend the \$21,000 on the walking beat patrolman in the neighborhood as the grant specified?

Action makes it possible to win improvements in peoples' lives. It also helps people to move away from hopelessness, to step outside of their feeling that they are unable to change their living conditions. It is often people's *feeling* that they can't act, rather than any innate inability or objective conditions, that stops them from acting. So doing your job often means encouraging people to act. Just as you might do when you are developing individual leaders, think about what the next step might be for the group to develop more capacity and confidence in exercising its power.



### **Story: When No One Listens, Why Talk?**

David Trietsch, who worked as a planner for the city, tells this story:

*It was the first meeting between the newly-formed public housing Tenants' Association and the surrounding community to discuss the future development of a "super" block that was to contain the housing development, a community church, and the surrounding residential neighborhood. When the agenda turned to better integrating the public housing community into the larger neighborhood, local neighborhood residents stood up one after another and talked about "those people." The neighborhood residents stated that the housing development residents "don't care about the same things we do." They went on to say that the people who lived in public housing were responsible for the garbage on the streets and for the run-down state of their housing.*

*To my dismay, not one tenant responded. Not one member of the Tenants' Association demanded to be heard. The public housing tenants looked at their feet and remained silent throughout the meeting.*

*Later that night, I sat with the tenants in their association office and asked, "How could you hear what they were saying and not respond?"*

*Their answer: "Who would have listened to us? What right did we have to talk?"*

*That night began our real work together.*

You have to constantly take the time to ask, "What have we learned from this action?" The evaluation of the action is as important as the action itself. Without the evaluation and the learning that comes from it, the group will lack a com-

mon understanding and the basis to plan what to do next. The evaluation provides not only individual learning but also group learning. The group then can learn how the world works and plan accordingly. Action, evaluation, and learning lead to more effective action.

People experience action in different ways. Your job is to help people see any action they take—and the reaction they get—as confirmation that they have the potential to make a difference in the world. You want people to leave actions prepared to continue to act in the future in even more effective or powerful ways.

### **Action Means Face-to-Face Negotiation**

Sometimes you have no time to build an organization. The wolf is at the door and you have to act fast. Knowing how to do this helps. This story illustrates the importance of face-to-face communication with those who have the authority to give you what you want.



#### **Story: Asking Face-to-Face**

*Cheri Andes, an organizer with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, lives in Framingham, Massachusetts. Her son had benefited from the “Reading Recovery” program in the schools. The town was planning to cut the program.*

*The teachers planned to attend the meeting where the School Committee would make the decision about cutting the Reading Recovery program. But the teachers couldn’t get on the agenda.*

*Cheri offered her advice to the teachers for how to advocate to save the program. Cheri told the teachers to speak*



*directly to the School Committee members. If they wanted to affect the decision, it wouldn't be enough simply to be present in the room. Cheri told them to go up to the School Committee members, introduce themselves, and ask them to keep the Reading Recovery program. At a break in the meeting, the teachers walked up to the School Committee members, shook their hands, introduced themselves, and asked them to keep the program. The School Committee voted to keep the program.*

The personal approach kept the program. The results may not always be so successful, but your chances of success improve with a face-to-face meeting.

Social scientists recognize the power of personal communication in negotiations:

*Minorities received the highest level of positive attention and the greatest influence on the private opinions of members of the majority and on the final group decision when they communicated face-to-face.*

—Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*



## **A Positive Reaction: Another Kind of Surprise**

Sometimes the reaction you receive in an action will surprise you.



### **Story: “I love Italians!” or Don’t Underestimate the Power of Your Presence**

*In the early 1980s the leaders of Revere Fair Share were frustrated by the increasing costs of utility bills. There seemed to be no end in sight. They wanted to get a hearing in their own city, several miles outside of Boston, from the state agency that regulated the utilities, the Department of Public Utilities (the DPU, as it was commonly known). They had tried all the conventional channels of communication to request a local hearing, all to no avail. They were annoyed and feeling powerless.*

*The Chairman of the DPU was a man named Jon Bon-sall. They had never met him, but he began to assume mythic proportions of power in their eyes. After several months of no response to all their entreaties, a few leaders—a carpenter, a retired saleswoman married to a retired postal worker, and a woman who was the mother of five grown children and the wife of a retired steel-worker—and I decided to pay the DPU a visit. We figured we had little to lose.*

*We took the subway into downtown Boston and then rode the elevator up to the DPU offices in the high-rise State Office Building. When we got there we asked for Jon Bon-sall. We had tried to get an appointment, we explained, but had been turned down. The receptionist asked who we*



*were and what we wanted. We told her. She asked us to wait. In a little while, Jon Bonsall appeared. He was not, as we had assumed, ten feet tall. He was short and thin. He invited us into a small conference room.*

*We said we were from Revere. Then he fell all over himself telling us how much he liked Italians. (Revere was well known for being a largely Italian community, although the folks I had come with were Irish.) He went on about how much he loved Italians, how his wife was from Revere, and how he would be delighted to come out to Revere to hold a hearing on the gas increases. It was like “The Wizard of Oz”: The supposedly all-powerful man behind the curtain was all-too-human and seemed almost afraid of our little party. We got a date for the hearing in Revere and went back home on the subway. Mission accomplished. Unless you act, you never know the power you have.*

## ► Putting It All Together— From Organizing to Action to Evaluation



### CASE STUDY

## From the Ground Up— Building An Organization to Solve a Shared Problem

### **Introduction: Back to the Basics**

This case study brings together the basic steps of building an organization: the idea, telling your story, listening to others, forming a core group, developing goals, objectives,



and a structure, mobilizing resources, moving to action, evaluating, reflecting, and re-assessing. These events took place in the late 1970s in Brattleboro, Vermont. I was working as an organizer for the Vermont Alliance.

### ***Story: Creating a Powerful Tenants Association***

The tenants in Mountain Home Mobile Home Park had problems. They owned their trailers but rented the land on which the trailers stood. They expected the landlord to maintain the roads and utilities in the park, but rain-water swamped the dips in the roads. Some telephone wires hung so low that they hit pedestrians. The roads were rutted and poorly graded.

#### **The Idea**

Dave lived in the park with his wife Beth.\* He called our office and I went to visit them. Dave offered me coffee and something to eat. Then he explained to me that he was angry at the conditions in the park and that he cared about what was happening to others, especially the many elderly people who lived in the park. He was angry, but not only angry. He had a sense of humor and a sense of right and wrong. It seemed just plain wrong to him that he should be paying rent while the landlord was doing such a poor job of maintaining the park.

### ***Developing a Core Group***

#### **Recognizing the Signs of a Leader**

Dave had lived at Mountain Home a number of years and knew a lot of people. He was likeable and friendly. His house was orderly. I sensed he could keep track of things and do what he said he would do. He seemed honest and direct. He looked me in the eye when we spoke.



Dave brought some other tenants to his home. This told me that he was connected to people and that others would follow him. The ability to bring people together is often a test for any potential leader. The fact that his house was not a mess reassured me that his mind was likely not a mess.

The people he invited seemed reasonable. They wanted what was reasonable: They were willing to pay their rent for a decent place to live, but felt that the landlord had not lived up to his end of the bargain.

### **The Long March Through the Kitchens**

After this first meeting, Dave and I visited other people in the park. Many were concerned about the lack of maintenance. Before long we had formed the core group of the Mountain Home Tenants Association. We held meetings in the various trailers, trying to figure out what to do, and gathered information about what was wrong in various areas of the park.

### **Numbers Mean Clout**

We needed enough tenants to make the landlord listen. This took time. There were several hundred trailers in the park. A few tenants and I went door-to-door in the park, listening to other tenants, hearing their complaints, and encouraging them to join the association. We asked for \$10 for membership. We drank coffee and Kool-Aid in many kitchens.

### **Listen . . . To a Lot of People**

We listened to many people. Some were too afraid to do anything. Some didn't think things were so bad that they had to take action. Some thought nothing could be done. "It has always been this way and I once spoke to the landlord and it didn't do any good," one said. Some left for



Florida in the winter and were not very invested in fixing the problems.

By the time several dozen people had joined we had a sense that at least half the people were willing to try to do something to improve conditions.

### **You Don't Need Everyone**

You don't need everyone. With a supportive minority you can get a lot done. A substantial minority that agrees to pay dues to join and to put their names on the organization's membership list gives the group enough legitimacy. You will never get everyone to join, and not all members will take action. But an organized minority that has done its research, knows its rights, and is willing to negotiate for its beliefs can get a lot done. Even if only six people do the actual negotiating, the landlord knows that they represent others. The organization—along with their personal presence, their knowledge of the public health and building codes, and their willingness to take action—gives the group's representatives their power.

Action also helps in recruiting new people—especially the kind of people who like getting things done more than talking about getting things done. When you act to improve your living conditions, you are likely to get something, although you may not get everything that you wanted. You can let those who have not joined know what you won. This demonstrates to them the power of your organization and encourages them to join and participate.

### **Getting Ready: Figure Out Exactly What You Want Before You Take It On The Road**

After several months of going door-to-door, listening to tenants' problems, getting people to join, and meeting to discuss the specific improvements, the Mountain Home



group felt ready to negotiate with the landlord. They spoke with his secretary many times and finally were able to set up a meeting in his office in the center of the park. Most tenants had been in the reception room only to hand their check to the secretary through a hole in a glass window.

The team included four tenants plus me, the organizer. The tenants' team included men and women from Mountain Home, people of different generations and in different living situations: Dave; a young, single woman; a middle-aged woman who was married; and an older, retired woman.

Everyone was nervous. What would the landlord do? Would he try to kick the leaders out of the park?

### **Make the Goals and Objectives Clear**

The Mountain Home tenants wanted the landlord to fix up the park, but vague demands (such as, "Fix up the park") don't help. The tenants and the landlord could easily differ on what "fix up" meant.

The tenants would also likely differ among themselves about what such a vague demand meant. In setting out what an organization wants, you must *combat all vagueness*. It may seem unnecessarily picky, especially when any improvement would be welcomed, *but vague goals breed future disagreements* among the group. There may be improvements, but not necessarily the *specific improvements that some wanted*.

Then, although you have the improvements, your organization may still fall apart. The improvements might help some people and not others. If you do not write down your specific requests with agonizing specificity you might not get the solution you need. If you know you need a culvert on the Hill Road, specify a steel twelve-



inch culvert set at the low point of the road, encased with number three gravel. You have to be as specific as necessary if you are not going to argue with the result. If you ask for “a culvert” and get a six-inch culvert that allows the water to back up, you still have a problem. If you want the telephone wires raised, don’t just say you want them “raised.” Specify, “Raised to 18 feet and attached so that they will not fall down in an 80-mile-an-hour wind.”

These solutions need to be in writing. Writing keeps a record and avoids misunderstandings. Putting your requests for solutions in writing forces you to take the time to see if that is the solution that everyone wants. In small groups people think they know what others mean. It is easy to be mistaken. Putting the solutions in writing avoids confusion, division, and potential harm to the organization.

You may need to research culverts, road specifications, utility requirements, and other details. Master the technical details. Otherwise you get a useless culvert or a falling phone line.

### **Ultimate Goal: To Build the Organization**

You make the requests so specific because you want to get exactly what you need, but also because you want to *build the organization*. If the improvements you want are not specific enough or if the improvements satisfy some members but antagonize others, the results can divide the group. So, you may win some improvements but divide your organization in the process.

This is no good. You need the organization not only to win the agreement, but also to monitor and follow up on the agreement. You want the organization to be around for a long time, to follow up and insure that the improvements are installed correctly. You need the organization



for the long haul because you also are likely to face other problems in the future.

### **Preparation for the Meeting**

Before the meeting, we went over in detail what everyone would say. Who would start off? Who would say what? What would we do if the landlord said this or that? How would we respond? We sat on the couch in Dave and Beth's trailer and role-played the negotiation session. I played the landlord. We tried to think of everything that could possibly go wrong and planned what to do in each case.

### **Like a School Play**

Preparation is essential. Think of negotiations as if they were a school play. You need as much preparation and rehearsal time. Think of all the possible things that could go wrong and make contingency plans.

I knew that the landlord was not fond of me, calling me an "outside agitator," although it was his tenants who were upset and leading the group. (People in authority often invoke the devil of the "outside agitator." It is supposed to be bad for people without power or money to get outside help. People with power and money, however, routinely employ outside agitators. They are called consultants, lawyers, lobbyists, or advisors. They pay them well and don't see anything wrong when *they* get outside help.)

The landlord had seen me often in the park and had made nasty comments about me to tenants. I thought he might ask me to leave. He might threaten not to talk to them if I stayed in the room. It would be one way to divide us. The tenants had to decide how to handle that. We agreed that I would leave if the landlord requested it.



Then we role-played how they would handle that and other requests.

## **The Results**

### **The Negotiation Session**

The day of the meeting with the landlord, we all gathered at Dave's trailer and walked down the hill and into the office. The secretary asked us if we had an appointment. We said we did. We were ushered into the landlord's office and sat down. Right away the landlord asked me to leave. We did what we had planned. I waited outside in the parking lot. Knowing that this was likely, I had arranged to have a friend meet me in the parking lot. She kept me laughing about being an outside agitator.

Inside, the negotiating team stuck together. They got the landlord to agree in writing to a number of specific improvements. They followed up later with the town's Health and Building Inspector to make sure that he was monitoring the trailer park's compliance with the codes and regulations. In the following years, they met with other trailer park tenant associations and organized a statewide mobile home tenants association.

### **Half a Loaf is Better than No Loaf**

The residents did not get everything they wanted, but some improvements are better than none. And they can always go back for more. Some people refuse to compromise in the name of "principle." But what principle? What is the principle of getting nothing when you can get something? If you are hungry, half a loaf is better than no loaf: At least with half a loaf, you won't starve to death. With an all-or-nothing attitude you may get nothing. How does that help you?



## **Reflection**

### **Do With Others**

They were doing with others what they could not do alone: getting improvements in their trailer park. My role was to help them to think about how to negotiate with the landlord, to encourage them, to go with them to get their neighbors to join the association, to remind them of their legal rights, and to help them to see that if they worked together they could accomplish what they could not do alone. I was not going to do it for them. There was no guarantee they would succeed. The only guarantee I could give them was that if they did nothing they would get nothing.

### **I Needed Help, Too**

I also needed help. With my friend in the parking lot, someone who knew that I'd be worried about how the negotiation session would go without me, I did better than I would have done alone, waiting out the meeting and thinking about possible next steps for the association. If the Iron Rule of Organizing is "Never do for someone else what they can do for themselves," I should add, "Don't be afraid to do with someone else what you can't do so well by yourself." Ask for help when you need it.

### **Don't Forget the Ice Cream**

People also need to have a good time in the organization. If it is all work, problems, and planning meetings, you will have a dull organization that few people will want to call their own. The core group used to go down to Page's Ice Cream at the bottom of the hill after our meetings, especially in the summer. Hanging out with ice cream was helpful. Meeting people and enjoying each other's company is part of the organizing process.

\* Not their real names

