We might be able to learn more from the community than it can from us…

What can community organizers teach us?

Michael J. Brown — Organizational Leadership Associates

Many business experts are recommending that business managers leave the traditional models of command and control management and embrace new attitudes to empower workers.

As companies downsize and try to compete in the global marketplace, managers must see that workers at all levels take on greater responsibility — the company's survival may depend on it. With changes in organizational structure, with the increased use of cross–functional and project–based teams, it is also becoming important for managers to have the skill to move people to take responsibility and ownership for organizational goals when the manager may have no direct authority over those with whom she or he is working.

Offering a new goal of worker empowerment is important. But how do you get there? The goal may be clear, but managers need more specific information to make the journey. The question many managers find themselves asking is: *"Where can I find specific, usable methods and frameworks to accomplish this goal?"*

Try looking in the voluntary sector for clues — Voluntary community organizations, and the community organizers that staff them, have developed members with a deep, long–lasting sense of ownership and personal responsibility for the organization. Business managers committed to tapping the human potential in the workplace could well benefit by understanding some of the specific methods and frameworks of community organizers who recruit, train, and develop the members of voluntary, membership–based community organizations.

There are powerful lessons and rewards for those managers who can understand and translate these methods and frameworks to business settings.

If you are not convinced that this might be the case, then read on and I will draw learnings from the voluntary sector and make the case that these lessons are important and relevant for the business sector. I will try to show you how one relevant part of the voluntary sector (the community–based membership organization) works and makes its practices clear, so that managers can see how this would apply in the business sector.

Why is taking responsibility so important?
Many management consultants have written about the need for workers to take on greater responsibility.

Peter Block… Peter Block, in *The Empowered Manager,* describes "a quiet revolution taking place in many organizations… Attention is shifting to the need for employees to personally take responsibility for the success of our businesses if we hope to survive and prosper."

Block emphasizes the need for managers to encourage *authority within.* His advice to managers focuses on taking responsibility for their own unit or activity. He defines *self interest* as doing the things that will advance the person within the company, and advocates that managers *serve* the organization, and "make our personal accession the second priority."

Another take on Block's self interest concept... The orientation that I suggest here, looks at self interest in a different way.

- The organizer (read: manager) recognizes the self interest of the *whole person.*

Such an orientation understands that a person's self interest lies beyond his role or task within the company, and includes the broad range of human interests and needs:

- Power...
- Interpersonal affiliation...
- Friendship...
- Achievement...
- Fun...
- The exercise of personal interests...
- Skills or new competencies...
- Adventure...
- Personal recognition, etc.

The manager who wants to tap into that rich potential needs to recognize a much wider range of self interest than Block describes.

Although Block mentions that a manager's attention should be "aimed downward: toward developing the newer members of the organization, helping them develop their leadership skills," he writes primarily about empowering *oneself* as a manager. The role for the manager/organizer I suggest involves primarily the empowering of *others*, not oneself. Block also does not describe specific methods or techniques of *developing* others, as I do here.

Bennis and Goldsmith... Warren Bennis and Joan Goldsmith, in *Learning to Lead,* advocate "the empowerment of others," and that leaders "tap into the endless sources of potential from the people they lead."

They write, "You get the best out of people by empowering them, by supporting them, by getting out of their way."

Hammer and Champy... Michael Hammer and James Champy, in *Reengineering the Corporation,* also advise that "people's roles change — from controlled to empowered." They write, "Empowerment is an unavoidable consequence of reengineered processes; processes can't be reengineered without empowering process workers." However, *the process of change* is not specified.

They don't describe what I focus on here: specific methods and frameworks useful to move from the current state to what they, and others, recommend.

Bennis and Townsend... Warren Bennis and Robert Townsend, in *Reinventing Leadership,* recommend "growing other leaders." They recommend that companies reward "leader growers." They also recommend that managers *listen* well. Their *listening* recommendation however, focuses primarily on information about the job and the tasks the worker performs.

I suggest that, to truly tap the potential of the worker, a manager needs to listen to a much wider range of personal self interest. They emphasize improving the *quality of the product or service,* as a means to motivate workers. I focus here on the self interest of the person him or herself, broadly defined, as the means of motivation.

The "quiet revolution" that Block describes already exists... in the community — The habits of managers and workers will be hard to change. The levels of *ownership and responsibility* envisioned and advanced by Block, Bennis, Goldsmith, Townsend, Hammer, Champy as well as others is already a reality in some voluntary community organizations, where community organizers have developed volunteers to take on significant responsibility for the success of the organization and its community mission.

In the best of these community organizations significant, measurable goals are met... Money is raised and services are delivered. Concrete improvements in people's lives are made through public negotiations. Learning goes on at all levels of the organizations. The volunteer *members* develop a personal sense of *ownership* of the organization.

The language, culture and context of such community organizations may seem foreign to the *for profit* sector: *dress down day* may be every day. The style of speech may seem foreign and make translation to other organizations difficult. But there are powerful lessons in the work of community–based, voluntary–membership organizations for managers that want to reap the rewards of truly empowered workers.

"The key is that the organizer is constantly thinking about their members, and what their next step might be to develop their leadership."

James Autry in Love and Profit... Several management experts have recognized that voluntary organizations hold some important lessons for business. James A. Autry, in *Love and Profit*, writes, "There is no better place to learn the subtle points of management than as an officer of a voluntary organization." But what are those *subtle points* that a manager can learn in a voluntary organization?

- Voluntary community organizations and the community organizers that work for them have managed to enable — *empower* — their members to participate fully in the organization for years.

- Community organizers, the professional staff who recruit and develop the volunteer *leaders* in community organizations, have *had* to manage to move these *workers* to feel a sense of ownership to get the organization's work done.

The successful methods of community organizing have received too little attention... Management consultants have not focused on such organizations or learned much about them or from them. Although there are studies of community organizations, few of these have put the work of community organizers in a context that would allow business managers to see the relevance of the organizer's methods.

The organizing methods of community–based organizations

Managers who want to motivate employees to take on greater responsibility, believe this will help:

- Improve the organization's efficiency and competitiveness...

- Improve the quality of worklife for the employees: the job itself will become more meaningful and personally fulfilling...

- Build a sense of community, organizational loyalty and pride in the organization.

Community organizers have had to motivate volunteers to take on greater responsibility and organizational loyalty — without the ability to pay people or withhold pay. How have they done this? Several relevant concepts and methods may be useful for managers generally.

The role of the organizer — The role of the organizer is a crucial concept. The role of the organizers is primarily to *develop leaders*.

Community organizations are only as strong as their voluntary leadership... The organizer is a different kind of leader — she/he does not try to develop a vision or plan for the organization then attempt to rally others to follow it. Her/his primary job is to develop the leadership of others.

The organizer's job is to enhance the skills of the members... One way the organizer does this is to develop a leadership plan for members whom the organizer views as potential leaders — it includes some small next steps that a member can take to increase her responsibility.

Working on 'next steps' in leadership development... The organizer thinks about that person's strengths and weaknesses and comes up with some suggested action that will test the person's capacity and ability for greater leadership:

- The *next step* may be chairing a meeting...

- It may be bringing two friends to the next meeting. (In a business setting, an employee's *next step* may be training a new employee in a new or different procedure.)

The key is that the organizer is constantly *thinking about* their members, and what their *next step* might be to *develop their leadership*.

This is the organizer's work. It develops the strengths of the individual and strengthens the organization.

Self–interest — To develop others, the organizer *(manager)* needs to fully understand the concept of self–interest. Self–interest is important both in motivating volunteers and in understanding other organizations and power–holders in negotiations.

Self–interest, as organizers understand it, is normal, natural and *good* — all people have a self–interest (although some are better than others at disguising it). Self–interest here is not narrowly defined, as is by traditional economists as being that: people calculate the financial costs and benefits of all their actions. Community organizers assume that people's self–interest is complex, and includes a variety of motivations. Most people will not do what will hurt them financially, but they are also motivated by other deeply held personal belief and attitudes.

Ross Perot's rescue mission... To illustrate this with a dramatic example from the business world, narrow financial self–interest did not lead Ross Perot to spend millions of dollars and risk his business on the rescue of two of his employees held hostage in Iran in 1978. It was something much deeper than that — his deeply held belief learned from his mother, that an employer took care of his employees, NO MATTER WHAT. One can not understand Perot's behavior or his self–interest without understanding these deeply held beliefs — learned, as many are, from his family.

People's self–interest may vary with their attraction to power, achievement or affiliation, as David McClelland has observed:

- Some people do have a strong need to affiliate, to make friends, and be with others.

- Others may want to achieve a particular skill or get a college degree.

- Still others may be attracted to the power they can attain in the organization.

There may well be other more complex combinations of these motivations, as well as others.

Self–interest in the success of family or close friends... Organizers recognize that self–interest also includes others who are close to the members, their family and close personal friends. Their self–interest is tied to the success, needs or interests of these significant others.

Self–interest, at a deeper level, often springs from someone's deeply felt sense of anger, grief, or right and wrong... Organizers will want to understand a member's personal and family history, to understand their *story* — the interpretation people give to their personal history and motivations — and the deeply held values that guide him or her. Understanding a person's *story* helps the organizer know how to develop that person's leadership — how to help that person take greater responsibility within the organization. If a manager is going to motivate an employee to take on greater responsibility, (often an uncomfortable task), it will take a deep understanding of "what makes this employee tick."

Tapping into people's deeper self–interest allows an organizer to know what will motivate them and develop their leadership... An organizer will use this understanding, not to manipulate members, but to allow them to grow in areas they wish to develop.

Organizations need deeply motivated people, those who have a personal stake, a self–interest in the work of the organization. Those are the people who will do the work of the organization over the long haul. People will not put in the hours, invest energy, and take on responsibility unless their deeply held interests and needs are being met. These are the people the organizer seeks to develop and work with.

Organizers distinguish self–interest from selfishness and selflessness... Self–interest is a strong motivational force, part of every healthy person, and something we all share. It differs from selfishness. Selfishness is an attitude where the individual is out only for her or himself. It is narrow and does not allow the person to develop in relationship with others — in the organization or elsewhere. People who act in a selfish way are not the kind of people an organizer seeks to work with. Organizing is about building relationships. People who are basically selfish won't build strong relationships with other people — the foundations of any community organization.

The organizer does not seek people who proclaim their selflessness... People who say they are only doing the organization's work for others will not maintain their interest long. They have a self–interest, but may not be aware of it. They may deny it or be ashamed of it. They may claim to be doing the organization's work for other's benefit.

On the surface, such people may look like the kind of people the organizer wants — particularly in understaffed organizations that work to improve community life. But the organizer learns that such people don't remain for long in the organization. They turn off other people.

Business managers who wish to motivate and empower employees would do well to learn their employees' self–interest in this sense. People will do only so much for money.

Understanding the role of the organizer and concept of self–interest is a first step... Practice must flow from this understanding. The practice of developing leaders includes a *methodology* developed in the practice of such voluntary community organizations.

The one–on–one interview — The first step for an organizer to uncover a member's self–interest is the one–on–one interview.

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This is an interview, generally lasting from ten minutes to an hour, designed to better understand the member as a whole person. The organizer asks a number of open ended questions and listens. She/he listens for that person's:

- Self–interest…
- What motivates them…
- What they care about…
- Where they came from…
- What lessons they learned from their families.

By carefully crafting open–ended questions and following up with further questions, the organizer can discover much about that person within a short period of time. But remember, the motivation of the organizer is to develop that person's leadership, not to manipulate them to do what the organizer wants. This is critical. A volunteer will sense if the organizer is trying to manipulate them or seek to understand and meet their self–interest.

Developing leaders begins with this interview to uncover self–interest… Good organizing is done *one–on–one* — it is not a mass business. Large and strong organizations are only built by consistent and patient listening to many people, *one by one by one.*

Good community organizers are always recruiting new members… Volunteers, like employees, may leave and new ones will be needed to build a strong organization. Managers who wish to empower employees will do well to do their *one on one's!*

Commitment to individual action — During the one on one interview, the organizer often will ask the member to take some action on behalf of the organization — this may be a very small step:

- It may be giving the organizer the name of someone else to call.
- It may be making a contribution of money.
- It may be agreeing to come to a meeting.
- It may be going with the organizer to visit someone else.

One of the organizer's critical jobs, during the interview, is to think of some appropriate task for that person that will involve the member further in the work of the group.

Commitment to public action — In time, the organizer encourages the group to take some public action — what are often called research actions:

- This may be going with a small group to City Hall to research the ownership of a vacant lot.
- It may be going to visit the Police Department to find out where a walking patrolman has gone.
- It may be going to the Voter Registrar to get forms to register voters.
- They may go to a local company to find out about their employment policies.

The reaction to their act can empower the individual… All these actions are public. People move from an individual sense of powerlessness to some public action. This action will engender a reaction from those they meet. In these public actions, they will deal with real people whose reactions may differ from what the member anticipated or imagined. The recruit or new member, for example, may request information… this will engender a reaction, which will in turn require a reaction from them. During this process they are taking on *a greater level of organizational responsibility.* They are acting individually and on behalf of the organization of which they are a member.

Debriefing, evaluation and learning… When the *action* is completed, the organizer helps the member debrief or evaluate the action. The organizer asks:

- How did they feel in the situation?
- Why did they say what they said?
- Were they surprised by the reaction of the person they encountered?
- Were they surprised by their own reaction?
- What might they have done differently or better?
- What did they learn from the experience?

Out of the action and the debriefing and evaluation, members better understand themselves and develop stronger relationships to the organization and to the other people in the organization. The relationship between the member's organization and the agency, business and individual the organization encountered is also strengthened. That relationship may be easy or difficult, but it arises out of taking action not listening to training.

Organizers believe that individual and organizational learning comes from action and evaluation of action... The action involves the member taking on some greater degree of responsibility than she or he had taken in the past — this is often challenging, even frightening for they are acting outside their comfort zone.

A key part of the organizer's role (developing new leaders) is to develop actions that will help people develop their sense of responsibility, without pushing them so hard that they feel so uncomfortable that they won't act again.

The purpose of the evaluation is to help the members understand and frame the experience in a way that enhances their interest in taking further responsibility.

Relationships come first — A key element in organizing is the primacy of relationships. People are encouraged to strengthen the relationships they have with other members of the organization — because people's leadership is determined by their relationships:

- One indication of the strength of a leader's relationships with others is his or her ability to *turn out* people to public meetings.
- Another indication is who will complete tasks at the request of the leader — doing the work in a sense for that leader.

Organizers recognize that the ties that bind people to each other and to the organization are personal.

In public life: no permanent friends, no permanent enemies... In developing relationships, within and without the organization, organizers encourage members to only judge others by their behavior and action, not their title, past behavior or statements. Hence, organizers believe that in organizing there are *no permanent friends, and no permanent enemies.* Their public actions are judged for the results they produce in the present.

Organizers distinguish between private and public relationships... Private relationships are those close friendships, with friends and family. Public relationships are those with whom the organization does its business in the public arena.

Organizers teach their members to focus on the behavior not the personal traits of public or business officials... The relationship between the organization and its members and the public figure is based on that person's public role — the policies that person enacts, not the feeling or demeanor the public person displays.

Translating the organizer role to a business manager's new empowerment role

Managers may find this framework helpful in the process of empowering workers... Even the most sincere manager wishing to empower workers will find the change in managerial and organizational style, methods and culture like navigating in the dark through rough uncharted waters. Why? Because workers, like members of any community organizations, have excellent *crap detectors* (to use Ernest Hemingway's phrase). They can tell if the manager is real about his or her interest in *worker participation,* or if this new found interest is just the latest *heavily flavored work harder snowcone of the month.* They will not take on greater responsibility unless managers have a real commitment AND the skills to carry it out.

Looking at workers as if they were volunteers — Managers might benefit from doing *one–on–one interviews.* Managers can try to motivate workers from their more deeply held self–interest, rather than primarily by financial carrots and sticks.

They can encourage workers to take action on behalf of the business — in an area where the interests of the business and the worker intersect. They will not be asking workers to go to City Hall, but they might ask a worker to:

- Take on an extra responsibility on the loading dock or in the office.
- To learn a new skill...
- Obtain new information...
- Take responsibility with a new team on a short term project.

This kind of initiative is not unlike the actions many organizers encourage their members to undertake.

Michael J. Brown has over 20 years experience as an organizer and trainer. Brown has been the program director of the National Jobs with Peace Campaign, director of New England B'nai B'rith, and a trainer and consultant for numerous groups across the US. Brown has a BA from Columbia University and an MA in public administration from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

They can evaluate the results of such actions... They can develop the idea of public relationships, so people's public action, (in this case, their role in the business) is recognized — and rewarded or penalized.

Developing greater understanding the difference between public and private lives may help businesses correct some of the inefficiencies due to favoritism. Those that have developed volunteer leaders may have some valuable insights for the empowering manager.

The road to worker empowerment will require new thinking and practices

In the fast changing world of business, hard and fast rules set down from on high are no longer efficient. Asking workers to take on greater responsibility, after a history where following orders brought the worker rewards, will take a new kind of manager, with a new managerial framework and different methods. That manager may be well advised to operate like a good community organizer. ◆

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THE ROAD TO QUALITY HAS NO MAP. BUT YOU CAN ALWAYS CALL FOR DIRECTIONS.