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Michael Jacoby Brown
training & coaching

*Helping organizations achieve their goals
through recruiting and motivating others*

Organizer's Edge

Organizing: Power With and Power Within

Lately I have been thinking about how our organizations work internally and how this relates to our campaigns.

Sacred Cows and the Theories We Use

One of the exercises the National Organizers Alliance (NOA) developed was the ["Sacred Cows of Organizing."](#)

NOA encouraged organizers to examine some "sacred cows" - ideas like campaigns should be winnable; no permanent friends or enemies, etc. NOA developed some fun exercises (complete with mooing...) to encourage organizers to question our "sacred cows." These "sacred cows" include our theories of organizing.

Kurt Lewin, the founder of group dynamics said, "There is nothing as practical as a good theory." (His biography is called [The Practical Theorist](#). If the unexamined life is not worth living, then the unexamined organizing theory is not worth using.

This does NOT mean that we don't act and just keep examining our theories. Just the opposite. It means that when we act we then need to reflect on how our action is working in reality. It means we need to clarify our theories in action when we act, question their validity in every situation and re-examine them in light of the results the action achieves.

Too often we act without clarifying the theories underlying the action. And if we fail, instead of re-examining the theory, we blame the opposition for



being evil, out-spending us, etc, and comfort ourselves that we remain the good guys.

Organizing Within?

If we need powerful organizations to advance our values and policies, (full disclosure: this is one theory I do subscribe to) then where does that power come from? Where does the money to run the organization come from? How much does that determine the direction of the organization? If we believe that power comes from people at the grassroots, how much are they making decisions? And from what theories and point of view are they acting? How accountable is the membership and staff to each other? How much is the organization devoting to educating and training leaders across differences of class, race and other differences?

Every organization has its unique history and internal dynamics. Yet, some internal dynamics remain common across organizations and we need to keep asking many questions to keep us honest and the power dynamics transparent. I recently learned that the Boston School Department asks whenever it makes a decision: "How will this decision affect racial equity?" Just asking certain questions brings out important internal power dynamics.

There will always be internal group power dynamics. Power will come from personal influence, position, money and other sources. We need to be aware of these dynamics, and ask ourselves: Are these the dynamics we want and need? The values? The structure? The internal policies? The staff? The budget we want and need to build a powerful and just organization? Even if we don't know the answers, asking these - and other questions --get us moving in the right direction.

What are your sacred cows? Your questions?

Feedback Welcome

We want to hear from you, your reactions, ideas, what is at the edge YOUR "envelope." Just go to...

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Michael Jacoby Brown Story

Who else you will hear from.....

We are just starting, but so far you can expect to hear what the following people are thinking:

Jessica Tang: Boston Teachers Union, AFT

George Luse of the Mass Teachers Assn,

Scott Reed with the PICO Network, ,

Cathy Howell, in Oregon and El Salvador, formerly with the AFL-CIO,

Caesar McDowell of the Interaction Institute for Social Justice,

Diana Bell of Community and Labor United,

David Hernandez of the California Education Assn,

Attica Scott, running for State Rep in in Louisville,

Bob Van Meter with the Local Initiative Support Corporation in Boston,

Walter Davis, of the Tennessee, Health Care Coalition.

Debra Askenase, of Community Organizing 2.0,

Deb Fastino, of the Coalition for Social Justice in New Bedford, MA,

Rebecca Gutman, with SEIU-1199,

Tim Dean, of SEIU-1199,

Mary Ochs, long time organizer in Los Angeles
and others, hopefully, including YOU

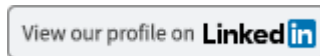
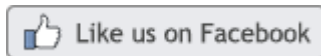
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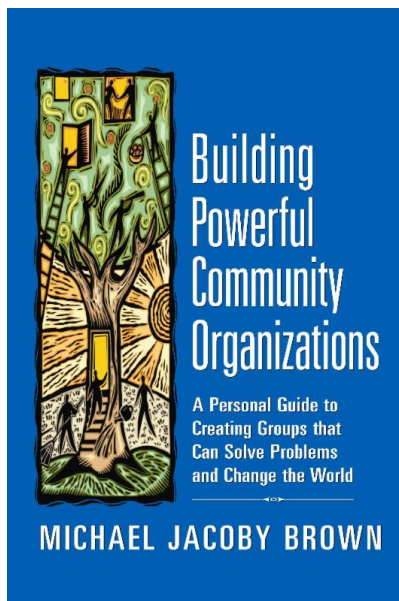
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