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People Learning To Help Themselves

by

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When the preparation of a final report of the Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation was first envisaged, it was assumed that it would deal primarily with education for citizenship and, hence, would be primarily of interest to civic educators. However, because so much of its grant program involved efforts to form community organizations or to use other kinds of groups (e.g. 4-H club groups or boys clubs) as vehicles within which certain behaviors might be changed, it became evident that other kinds of professionals such as social workers or community health educators might find the experiences of its grantees to be useful.

A review of materials dealing with these stories suggests that successes or failures were affected by choices made with respect to certain elements of the organizing effort such as whether to

¹The Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation began its work upon the death of its founder in 1950. Its goal was "to promote...the upbuilding and betterment of American citizenship...." Because this charge was so broad, the Trustees decided to narrow its focus to the encouragement of participation of citizens in efforts to deal with problems of common public concern, especially but not exclusively, in a community context. During a period of about twenty-five years, a total of something under four million dollars was expended. The work of its grantees is reported in its final report entitled "Education for Citizenship: A Foundation's Experience." Inquiries concerning the report may be addressed to the Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation, 425 Miramar Drive, Santa Cruz, CA 95060.

recruit individuals or organizations or whether conciliation or confrontation should be the preferred tactic.

Those projects deemed successful are those in which there was evidence of the achievement of goals and objectives; where the organization had an impact; and where participants changed so as to become more effective as citizens or as problem solvers. Another criterion was whether or not activities initiated in one place had sufficient vitality to be replicated elsewhere.

This paper examines some of the factors which affected grantee results -- with one further caveat. The elements are discussed separately but several may have been involved in a given success or a failure.

1. Initiating activity: Who decides?

The question is sometimes raised concerning the right of outsiders to come into a community proposing to change it.

Alinsky maintained that the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) did not try to organize a community except by invitation. With respect to those grant projects for which the IAF was responsible, invitations were forthcoming. In the Community Service Organization (CSO) program, the starting point was the house meeting, convened at the request of the staff person. In the Woodlawn Organization (TWO) in Chicago, staff met with organizations to explain and request support. While all elements in these communities did not join in the invitation, a group representative of a legitimate "cluster of interests" was involved. The time spent articulating problems and goals and how an organization might help certainly contributed to the success of the IAF projects.

Although the Highlander grant had perhaps the greatest impact of any the foundation supported, not all of its activity was successful. To test a concept Miles Horton, the Director, did not believe in, he sent a small staff, without any preliminary contact, into two communities to start a "community leadership training program." The effort failed miserably.

Having decided, however, to emphasize community leadership, Horton was alert in residential workshops offered at Highlander

for expressions of interest he might follow up. For example, when Septima Clark asked how 68 children on Johns Island could have died of diphtheria and nothing was done and when Esau Jenkins asked if Highlander could help him to get his neighbors on the Island registered to vote, Horton said he would go to the Island to explore what could be done. It took perhaps a year of talking but the effort produced the Citizenship School which was replicated and had an enormous impact across the South. The basis for cooperation was sound.

On the other hand, a grant to the National Conference of Catholic Charities was made for an organizing project in St. Louis which, because of local difficulties, was suddenly shifted to Lackawanna, New York. An organizer was sent in before the local sponsor could even begin to understand what was happening. Given the lack of preparation, together with the conflicting interests and the cynical political climate, failure was inevitable.

2. Compatibility of purpose and practice

The projects sponsored by the Industrial Areas Foundation were among the most successful that the Foundation supported. Community Service Organization chapters were formed in 35 communities or counties in California. Because of the interest in voter registration, citizenship classes were a major program. In each local chapter, a Citizenship Committee organized the classes, recruited teachers, arranged for materials, and provided a committee member to serve as an aide for each class. At the peak, 108 classes were meeting, averaging about 25 students in each. This was only one of several major on-going programs over the length and breadth of Central and Southern California. Yet this activity was supported by only two staff persons -- Fred Ross and Cesar Chavez. The work was being done by the members. The purpose of helping people learn to help themselves was consistent with the methods employed. People learned to do things by doing them, with the guidance of staff who understood their role to be that of teacher and not merely that of provider of services.

Other grantees failed because staff did not involve people in the right way. For example, on the Pine Ridge reservation, AFSC staff sent to do community organization work appointed Indians to

a committee to advise the staff instead of the other way around. In Boston, neighborhood house staff expressed regret that it was necessary to use lay persons to help form block organizations because staff could not do it all. In Chicago, a project was sponsored by the Welfare Council to provide staff to strengthen citizen organizations. The staff criticized one group for choosing as its goal the improvement of physical facilities rather than the expansion of welfare services. The staff was trying to impose its priorities on the community group. The project failed and unexpended funds were returned.

Several factors may have been involved in the failure of these projects, but certainly the failure to place responsibility on the people who were supposed to be the focus of the enterprise was a principal one.

3. Who should be included in the organizing effort?

Many would say that not to invite everyone to join an organization being formed would be wrong, even immoral. This is sometimes referred to as the "whole community" approach. Others would try to limit membership to those who share a "cluster of compatible interests" which are seen to be consistent with program goals.

The United Community Fund Project in San Francisco became an extreme version of the former. The stated purpose in the application was to help citizens learn to solve problems. The staff person hired, however, imposed his own goal, which was to develop a "sense of community." At an early meeting, he congratulated those present for being there as individuals and not as representatives of "interests." The organization for him was anyone who came.

When the organization's housing committee in Haight-Ashbury (encouraged by the young editor of a neighborhood newspaper) announced after several weeks study that it would recommend at the next meeting that the city designate the area for urban renewal, that meeting was packed by landlord interests who feared higher taxes. Given the lack of any membership structure, nothing could be done by the committee to impose any control of the process. The group died in a sea of acrimony.

By contrast, the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference, a membership organization in Chicago, set as its goal, establishing "an inter-racial community of high standards." It concluded that this goal could be served only if it sought to enlist those who would support it. Therefore, membership among realtor groups was not encouraged. In its most active period, it was highly successful. It then had over 2500 dues-paying members, but as many as 7,000 volunteers were working at one time or another on one or more aspects of its program. It succeeded, in part, because its membership reflected a cluster of compatible interests.

The Community Dynamics Program at Earlham College espoused a "whole community" approach, partly on moral grounds. Its project in a Kentucky mountain community worked there because there were problems on which the community could readily unite, including flood control, cooperation in repairing their churches, and working for more equitable allocation of road funds. But, in Indianapolis, racial tension prevented cooperation except at a very nominal level. It was possible to do a survey but not form a block club. "Success" was possible only by drastically limiting goals.

The CSO movement represented a different version of the principle. The initial cluster-of-compatible-interests was built on the concerns of less-advantaged Mexican-Americans, such as discrimination with respect to naturalization, police protection, employment, voter registration, and social welfare. With this program, CSO's enrolled thousands of members. Their political power grew and middle class-oriented Mexican-Americans began to join.

Being more articulate, they tended to win election to office in the CSO. But if a social worker, lawyer, or teacher became president, pressure would no longer be applied, for example, to gain a hearing for a member having difficulty with a governmental agency. In one San Joaquin community, a proposal to create an industrial area through urban renewal would have wiped out much of the barrio. The CSO chairman, who was a school teacher, said the CSO must remain neutral and stated at the city council hearing that the CSO took no position on the proposal. But the people of the barrio made so persuasive a statement that the proposal was defeated. The credibility of the CSO having been destroyed,

however, by the pusillanimous behavior of the chairman, the membership fell away, leaving only the chairman and a few of his friends. A field trip to a dozen CSO's showed those headed by professionals or semi-professionals were dead; those headed by artisans or farm workers were alive.

The middle-class members were not only ashamed of the disadvantaged members, they opposed raising dues to provide staff to help them with the services they needed, for example, with naturalization procedures. Unable to maintain a compatible "cluster of interests," the CSO's withered and Cesar Chavez resigned to form the United Farm Workers Union. As he said, the "success of CSO tends to destroy it."

4. What should be the basis of membership?

The question of the basis of membership was usually seen as a choice between individual or group membership. In most cases, the choice appeared to reflect local circumstance rather than principle.

However, to Alinsky, who referred to his work as mass organization, it was a matter of principle. For him, the purpose of organization was to gain power for the members. And this was most quickly done by recruiting existing organizations which would have more ready channels into the community as well as more financial power. One possible weakness, of course, might be that organization members would include too many individuals opposed to the overall goals.

Among the Foundation's grantees, the organization basis worked especially effectively in the Woodlawn Organization. To illustrate, an individual requesting help (e.g., with a problem in an apartment building), might be asked, as a condition of receiving help, to organize the building residents into a group which would then become an organization member of TWO. Program and organization developed reciprocally.

It is ironic, therefore, that the CSO's should have been organized on the basis of individual memberships. But in the barrios of the 1950s and 1960s in California, there were virtually no significant Mexican-American organizations to be organized. Although individual membership was the only practicable alternative,

the weakness was that the structure lacked the strength to support a staff (although in retrospect Fred Ross thought this difficulty could have been surmounted).

Organizing by groups did not ensure success, however. In Butte, Montana and in Chelsea in New York City, large associations were formed on the basis of organization members. But, in each case, the interests and goals of these organizations were so divergent that both projects failed. The "cluster of interests" could not hold.

In sum, the membership basis chosen made a significant difference in given situations.

5. Reaching those to be helped.

Not all grantees were sufficiently successful in involving on a timely basis the people with whom they were ostensibly to work. The Migrant Ministry requested a grant to try to form organizations among migrant workers in Texas, Illinois, and Michigan, recognizing that its traditional approach of providing services through local committees of clergy, church members, social workers, and growers was not adequate. The Migrant Ministry said it hoped to use IAF methods to bring migrants to a level where they could hold their own with the Establishment.

A survey in a fruit-growing area in Michigan showed that about a thousand black workers came each season but that about a hundred black migrant families had settled on a more or less permanent basis.

After much time spent on the survey and discussions with local agency personnel, the local Council and project staff, as the first organizing step, appointed several black "leaders." When nothing further happened, they discovered that these "leaders" had a following consisting of a small group of descendants of Civil War-era blacks plus gardeners, household help, etc., who feared contact with migrants would be too controversial. No recent migrants had been included.

The staff finally found a person among the recent migrants who saw that people who had similar problems should work together. In

a three-week period, 22 house meetings were held. Finally, there was progress, but by then, the project funds were virtually gone.

The point is that several months had gone by in making a survey and researching services before any serious effort was made to reach the migrants for whom the project was set up in the first place.

6. Cooperation versus Confrontation

Perhaps the liveliest issue on the list is whether conflict or cooperation will characterize the relationship of the organization and its milieu. For one group, the answer involves goodwill and rational discussion to resolve differences. Others are convinced such a course will often be ineffectual, especially if there are differences in status among the interests involved.

Alinsky, for example, did not believe that those who enjoy privileges or discriminate against others would change their practices unless pressure was brought to bear. The organization's goal, then, must be to gain sufficient strength to enable it to negotiate effectively.

Instances of discrimination were easy to find. For example, in California, naturalization examiners refused, contrary to law, to give examinations in Spanish or asked much more difficult questions of Mexican-Americans than were asked of Anglos. Black schools in Woodlawn were grossly overcrowded while classrooms in white schools stood empty.

Appeal to moral principle was necessary but not sufficient as was the appeal to statute or regulation. In the end, it was the boycott against certain Woodlawn merchants that cured the cheating problem. It was the sight of 45 busloads of Woodlawn residents arriving at City Hall to register that helped to get Mayor Daley's support on the redevelopment issue. It was the Citizenship Schools on Johns Island that produced enough black voter registration to swing the election to one of the white candidates for the position of judge, who was then willing to be fair. The highly successful English and citizenship classes and voter registration drives in Mexican-American communities began to turn their situation around.

But confrontation was not the only acceptable approach. The Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference worked adjacent to the University of Chicago. The leadership of the Conference believed that there was a sufficient constituency supportive of cooperation and negotiation, of seeking facts and marshalling sound arguments, and of taking steps to promote an interracial community of high standards, that success was possible. The Conference did not limit itself to dialogue, however. It worked out effective arrangements for ensuring code compliance by combining the efforts of its volunteers working with the staff of the building department. It worked hard to inform its constituency with respect to its goals and evidence of progress. But it was not hesitant about pressing the city government to enforce the laws. In Hyde Park-Kenwood, cooperation as a tactic had significant impact.

It should be noted that although Woodlawn and Hyde Park were adjacent, they were quite different. The residents of Woodlawn were largely black, poorer and less well-educated (hence, of lower status) than the residents of Hyde Park. For Woodlawn, confrontation was more acceptable, especially as it was directed largely against outsiders. The interests needing to be influenced in Hyde Park were largely resident there and, in any case, found cooperation more commensurate with their educational level and lifestyle.

In connection with the confrontation-cooperation issue, the project conducted by the South East Chicago Center (SECC) and its director, Everett S. Cope, is also germane. The SECC was located by the great South Works of U.S. Steel in South Deering. Residents were mostly Yugoslavs or Italians. Several years before the project began, public housing, called Trumbull Park Homes, was built. Instead of preference for local residents, people from elsewhere in Chicago, including welfare clients, mostly single parents, were moved in. South Deering felt betrayed. About the time the project began, it became known that blacks were also to move in. The community exploded, literally and figuratively, as cherry bomb detonations became a nightly occurrence. At one, 300 police were detailed to Trumbull Park Homes each 24 hours, the largest police detail in the history of the city to the time.

Cope's rationale emphasized several points: 1) Proper conduct by tenants would earn respect in the surrounding community; 2) Concrete activities would help bind hostility and develop a sense

of belongingness; 3) The program would have to be based on actions; not talk about it. Merely to talk about how to work together interracially would leave the focus on differences; 4) The agency had to be clear and firm about its policies; board of staff must be integrated; 5) The Center must serve all, including offenders; 6) The attention of the community must focus from the first on a common need reflecting a warm, human impulse (in this case, pre-school children); 7) Something constructive must be done at once; 8) There must be continuous citizen participation in planning, conducting and supporting the program; and 9) The work should begin with basic existing groups without trying to force integration.

He proposed to begin with a half-day nursery school program emphasizing the participation, training, and counselling of parents, to be followed by a club program for small, natural groups of school children and teenagers. At the same time, work would begin with adult clubs, looking forward to the development of relationships on a community organization level.

After five years, there were 50 nursery schoolers with half from outside the project. There were 20 clubs for children with 200 members of which 25 were from South Deering and 35 were black. Teenagers had become assistant leaders. There were 350 adults in the club program of whom 15 percent were from outside. Trumbull Center had achieved its own independent, interracial board. The South Deering Improvement Association, a center of opposition to the SECC, asked cooperation in promoting a senior citizens program through the Center, to include project residents. Given the nature and virulence of attitudes prevailing in South Deering at the time, these achievements were remarkable.

Was this project an example of confrontation or cooperation? Perhaps neither. Cope would not cooperate by giving in to South Deering. On the other hand, he did not throw down the gauntlet of battle. He finessed the opposition by choosing ground the latter could not readily violate. He compelled the enemy, in time, to cooperate instead.

7. Role of Staff

A review of our projects shows that project staff help was usually considered essential, especially where situations were complex and/or conflict was involved.

The primary staff role in successful projects was that of educator so that members could learn to do for themselves. A needed staff contribution was to keep alert to opportunities to combine solving a problem and building the organization.

In general, those projects seemed to flourish (in the absence of other strong negative elements) in which staff did not see themselves as doing things for people but stressed the importance of the people taking responsibility for their own problems, who used on-going activities as opportunities for leader training, who were alert to questions to tactics and strategy and who could advise organization leaders of opportunities as well as dangers. Devolving responsibility on members as much as possible was not how project staff functioned in Pine Ridge, the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago, or Upper Roxbury in Boston. These projects failed.

8. Financing the Organization

Alinsky argued that a community organization should become self-supporting in three years. The number of organizations reaching this goal was very small. Community Service Organizations were not successful in this regard. But this was so, in part, because when more members from the middle class joined, they voted against dues to finance the services needed by the poor members. Fred Ross believes, however, that the financial problem might have been solved, had a reasonable dues structure been adopted early enough and been combined with a Service Center Program.

TWO did achieve an adequate financial base through organization member dues and earnings from a community newspaper. As for neighborhood house grantees, raising funds from members did not seem to concern them. They expected gifts and grants to produce what was needed. Dues and fees were set only to the extent needed to impose some feeling of responsibility on the part of users of services.

One fund-raising technique which led to controversy might be mentioned. A popular device among a few grantees was the raffle.

Catholic members usually saw little objection; Protestant members were opposed, seeing it as merely a redistribution of resources through gambling. In some cases, this became a sharp issue.

In general, self-financing was a difficult problem, usually not productive enough to support necessary staff.

9. Sponsorship

The kinds of sponsorship fell into several categories. The most significant consisted of free-standing organizations, each being an extension more or less of one individual's world-view. This group included Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation, Horton's Highlander Folk School, and McNickle's American Indian Development. A second group consisted of national organizations which included a community focus as only one element in a total range of programs. Examples are the American Friends Service Committee, the Migrant Ministry, and the National Conference of Catholic Charities. A third group included metropolitan groups such as the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago. A fourth category included neighborhood houses. Colleges were included in a fifth category. And a sixth category consisted of a single grantee -- the Hyde Park-Kenwood Community Conference which was a neighborhood organization made up of individual dues-paying members and block clubs.

Reviewing grantee results overall, it is clear that the most successful group was the first. The IAF, Highlander, and American Indian Development shared the following characteristics. Each had a founder with a mission to help deprived persons learn to help themselves. Each found like-minded people to share the task. Each was realistic about what needed to be done and had the courage to persevere. Concentration of effort and understanding of what needed to be done went hand in hand.

Briefly stated, it seems clear that unless grantees understood what needed to be done, had a realistic view of community dynamics, were committed to helping people learn to help themselves, and had the courage to persevere, success was unlikely, regardless of the kind of sponsorship.

10. Education and Evaluation

For Horton, the educational focus must be central. His starting point was a residential workshop in which 25 or so participants were encouraged to discuss the problems of their home communities, each contributing something to the understanding of each other's problems. Beyond this, Horton sought to help each person gain a deeper understanding of his or her potential, to become able to think of oneself not just as one was, but as one might become, not only of the situation as it is but as it ought to be.

The key to the success of the American Indian Center in Chicago lay in its emphasis on the members taking responsibility for what went on in the Center, the Center which provided the framework within which new, more constructive roles could be tried out. This was a central educational value. The more knowledgeable and successful members provided leadership for the less fortunate. As each took more responsibility, he gained identity.

The CSO program also had an educational focus. Fred Ross spent countless hours with chairmen of committees and with officers helping them to think through a task or problem. His technique was to ask questions. What will you do if too many things are suggested to be done? (Set priorities.) How will you get the people of the neighborhood to pitch in to help get sidewalks? (You don't send around a petition. You hold house meetings. That gets you more members, too.) After a meeting, Ross would go over the discussion, helping the leaders to understand what had happened and how they might do better next time. In this framework, the emphasis was directly focused on training leadership for the purpose of making the organization more effective, to increase its power.

For Horton, the emphasis was on broadening and deepening understanding on the part of the individual. It was his or her growth that was primary. The value to the organization would follow.

Alinsky added an overtly educational program to the CSO organizing effort in which officers, committeemen, and members would meet perhaps once a month to discuss some topic of concern to the membership. In several CSOs, these had a major impact. In these

sessions, it became clear to the participants what the basic issues really were. As one CSO leader put it: "Your organization is your gun and you learn in the educational program where to aim it and when to shoot. Another thing you learn which you never thought about is what the shooting is all about."

In general, the strongest programs were those which recognized that action and learning must go together.

Summary

This paper has attempted to identify in the experiences of Schwarzhaupt Foundation grantees elements which, if invoked or ignored, would be likely to lead toward success or toward failure. These elements involve questions of: initiating activity in the community; compatibility of purpose and practice; inclusion or exclusion of community interests; the preferred basis of membership; reaching, in fact, those to be helped; cooperation or confrontation as tactics; role of staff; method of financing; sponsorship; and the role of education and evaluation. Some elements seem to be more decisive in their impact than others, but, in general, the choices made by grantees of these elements did make a difference. An important theme which pervaded each of these projects was that social development and individual development must go hand in hand.

The Foundation's goal was not to promote community organization for its own sake. Rather, it was to promote the "upbuilding and betterment of American citizenship." As it turned out, encouraging people to learn how to help themselves and each other, proved to be a powerful experience for developing the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting which are essential elements of effective citizenship. As just one example, I think of the old field worker in Stockton whom I asked what the CSO had meant to him. He said, "Senor, we have learned not to be afraid." Courage is not the least of the civic virtues nor of the virtues of the organizer.