

Building Better Relationships for Better Organizing

by Michael Gecan

Several years ago, I received a call from Studs Terkel, the great radio personality, political activist, and interviewer who produced such memorable books as *Working* by sticking a tape recorder in front of people and listening as they described their lives. He was in his early 90s at the time and would pass away just a few years later. But he had not even begun to slow down and said, over the phone, that he was working on another book, *Hope Dies Last*, and wanted to interview me. Studs had known just about everyone in Chicago, including Saul Alinsky, the founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation, the organization I now co-direct, as well as one of the great priests of all time, the late Monsignor Jack Egan, a mentor of mine.

I arrived at his home on the north side of Chicago, near the lake, on a blistering August afternoon. Because of his circulation problems, Studs liked it hot and had shut all the windows in his home. As we sat down for the interview, I burst into a sweat. Studs, hard of hearing but sharp-eyed, asked me if I wanted something to drink. I did. He returned with a very large stein of ice-cold German beer. Down it went. He asked if I wanted another. I nodded. The second stein disappeared. In a few minutes, I was telling him things I had never told anyone, and I could plainly see why so many people confessed so many things to this sly and humane guy.

Toward the end of the interview, he zeroed in on his theme—hope. I said that hope was more like a muscle than a concept or an abstraction. It was physical and

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visceral—like a muscle. You couldn't talk yourself into it. You had to act your way into it. Hope was something you did.

Wherever I go in higher education circles, I hear a great deal of anxiety and concern about the pressures that faculty and other staff members are facing. Budget cuts keep coming, particularly for community colleges, but across the board for public institutions. The reduction of full-time positions in favor of adjunct, part-time, and contracted-out services continues. The latest “new-new thing,” Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), is being pushed and promoted by elite universities on both coasts and is funded by the Silicon Valley crowd. And

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the transformation of higher education from its former role as an engine of new opportunity and prosperity for people into a sinkhole of unbearable debt seems relentless and perhaps irreversible to many.

Yet, as real as these pressures are and as overwhelming as they can seem, they can be faced—and reduced or reversed—by well-organized people who know how to play a better brand of defense in the public arena, but who also develop a creative and productive offense. I say this not to diminish the reality and the difficulty of the issues in higher education, but to put that reality and those difficulties into some perspective. And I say this because I have seen many other leaders, in many other places, at times and in circumstances that seemed at least as dire, demonstrate that it could be done.

As the co-director of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a network founded by Saul Alinsky in 1940 that partners with faith and community-based organizations to improve local leadership and citizen-led action, I have witnessed how this type of organizing can work.¹ In the first few months of this year, I have been privileged to be part of a number of actions that would have seemed almost unimaginable 10 or 20 or 30 years ago. Here are a few:

In New York City, our citizens power organizations in Brooklyn, Queens, the South Bronx and Manhattan co-hosted, with the *New York Daily News*, three mayoral forum assemblies: one in January on the topic of housing, one in February on education and the third in March on public safety. In a Baptist church in January, in a Manhattan synagogue in February, and in a Presbyterian church in March, nearly 3,000 New Yorkers of all races, faiths, classes, and ages engaged all of the major candidates of both parties on topics central to their lives. Thirty-five years ago, none of these organizations existed. Twenty-five years ago, New York City was burning and emptying, and national magazines were running obituaries

about the city. Fifteen years ago, the homicide rate was through the roof. For three decades, at least, hopelessness was in the air. The elites on both ends of the political spectrum were promoting defeatist responses with fancy names—“planned shrinkage” and “benign neglect” (neglect is only benign when it’s not happening to you)—as appropriate stances. Today, in part due to the relentless work of our organizations, allies like the *New York Daily News*, and many other partners, the city is now physically rebuilt, with 200,000 units of housing, mostly affordable, either built new or rehabbed. Population is at record highs. Public transit carries more riders than ever. And crime has fallen twice as far for twice as long as in any

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American city. Each of these advances was the result of tough, extended, sometimes bitter struggles to tackle problems once thought to be intractable. In 2013, New York City still has serious challenges. But the people who packed those mayoral events, having acted their way into hope, are not deterred.

In Maryland, the legislature recently passed a bond issue of one billion dollars to improve existing schools and build new ones. This is the first time in 40 years that such a bill has passed, and it’s long overdue. In many Baltimore schools, none of the water fountains are safe because the pipes are so old and lead-filled that the water is contaminated. Bottled water must be shipped in. In the neighborhoods made infamous by the HBO series *The Wire*, beautiful children attend classes in decaying structures that reek of indifference and neglect toward those who try to teach and learn. The IAF organizations in that state mounted a successful campaign to reverse this trend of neglect and disrespect.

In East Brooklyn, in Baltimore, in Washington DC, in Milwaukee, neighborhood after neighborhood that used to be considered beyond the pale is being rebuilt with affordable homes constructed or rehabbed by our organizations and their allies. In New York City, two of the most remarkable new campuses of schools—state of the art, one costing \$270 million, the other \$93 million—have been built in the poorest corners of the South Bronx and East Brooklyn.

In Rockford, Illinois, a city that time forgot, the local teachers union, the NEA-affiliated Rockford Education Association, has taken a constructive and active role in an effort to invest \$200 million into the physical improvement of school buildings there. In every Rockford school, teachers and other staff are meeting, consulting architects, designing improvements and putting together presentations so that the money raised to improve their facilities is wisely and prudently spent.

I could go on and on, but will stop here.

It's important to note that none of these advances was easy. None of them was accomplished quickly. None of them would have worked if there hadn't been years of in-depth organizing—finding and training leaders, assessing and collecting dues, testing issues and themes that were owned by local leaders and members—that preceded the tackling of larger issues. All of them involved building relationships with other institutions and power figures across the ideological spectrum. And all of them meant that scores of millions, hundreds of millions, and, in East Brooklyn and Maryland, billions of dollars flowed toward initiatives that had long been ignored or forsaken.

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INVITING OURSELVES TO THE PARTY

Each effort involved what the IAF calls “inviting ourselves to the party.” The establishment, the elites, the insiders all had tickets. All mingled easily. All knew what to wear and what to say. The last people they wanted or expected at their party was ‘us’: public housing residents from the South Bronx, teachers and coaches from Rockford, ministers and community workers from Baltimore, struggling homeowners from Milwaukee's Sherman Park.

It takes chutzpah to invite yourself to someone else's party. It takes irreverence, not only to the insiders, but first and most importantly, toward yourself and toward a range of familiar responses that have simply ceased to work. It means rejecting:

- Doing what you used to do—simply repeating the same activities, patterns, even slogans that once had meaning and impact, but now have lost both. For instance, many issues generate two common responses. One is to rail at the department chair for his or her indifference. Another is to add this issue to a long list of other issues that will be discussed at the Faculty Senate, which often delays engagement and only increases frustration. The notion of dealing directly with the source of the issue, while the issue is fresh and those affected are most concerned, is outside of the experience of many.
- Denial. “This too shall pass.”
- Wishful Thinking. Someday my prince or princess will come—in the form of the new department chair, dean, provost, or meeker chancellor who will arrive someday and make the misery go away.
- Isolation (based on the illusion of exceptionalism). “We have Ph.D.s, for goodness sake! We have merit!” By now, it is obvious to most in the public arena that merit matters a lot less than power—the real power and different

interests of bureaucrats of all kinds, of market forces, of ideologues on both extremes. But it may not be obvious to many college and university faculty members, who, as individuals, find that merit may well still matter when applying for grants and seeking promotion or doing research work. Remaining in isolation and waiting for the day that power recedes as an operating principle and merit reemerges may be comforting to some, but it will guarantee irrelevance.

- Gimmicks. Social media is just the latest example. It's the technological version of the prince who will ride to the rescue

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- Blaming Others. Your opponents, your deans and provosts and department chairs, some of your colleagues, your reluctant potential allies.
- Playing the Victim. As besieged as you may be, others are in worse—and many in much worse—shape in this country in the year 2013.

FOUR CORE HABITS OF POWER ORGANIZING

The time spent on these responses is time not spent on the four core habits of power organizing that I describe in my book, *Going Public: An Organizer's Guide to Citizen Action*, and that are practiced by effective leaders in communities all across the country: (1) the habit of relating, (2) the habit of organization, (3) the habit of action, and (4) the habit of reflection.

The Habit of Relating: The Individual Meeting.

When the IAF began describing the individual meeting as organizing's most important and most radical tool, more than 30 years ago, we were very much in the minority. In those days, the prevailing theory was that organizing was defined by movements that mobilized, by ideological polarization, and by attention-getting tactics, not by the art of doing face-to-face, one-to-one individual meetings by the hundreds and thousands. Today, almost every major institution that does some form of organizing promotes the individual meeting. And major universities such as Harvard devote courses and conferences to themes like "narrative" or "story" or other facets of an effective individual meeting. And yet, I contend that, for all this talk and attention, the individual meeting remains one of the least used tools to this day. Why the increased talk, but limited action? That gets us to our second habit.



The Habit of Organization.

All effective organizing involves both dis-organizing and re-organizing. Almost every major institution practices some form of re-organizing. Very few institutions do the harder work of dis-organizing. In the political life of educational associations and organizations, two other major habits prevail. One is the habit of providing service to members. The other is the habit of mobilizing members around issues or campaigns. I am not arguing for the end of these habits or their lack of importance. I am saying that if these two habits remain dominant then the habit of relational organizing will never have the time and space to emerge and

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flourish. So the question that has to be asked is this: are we willing to reduce the amount of time and resources dedicated to service and mobilizing and increase the amount committed to longer-term organizing based on public relationships?

The advantage that those involved in education have is that they often work in a dense web of potential relationships: with fellow professors, with other staff, with students, with parents, with business and corporate communities. Unfortunately, these relationships are often either very thin or rigidly hierarchical. In one university, I was doing a workshop for staff involved in the work of civic engagement. I asked the staff why they didn't use a bustling local coffee shop as a venue for informal individual meetings with others. One staff member said that she wouldn't dare talk to a university employee above her pay grade; it just wasn't done, and the person with the higher status would be offended. The hierarchical culture of higher education, reminiscent of the strictly segmented layers of some of the most rigid religious and corporate cultures, means that the faculty at research universities may see themselves as above the faculty at community colleges. And those faculty members may not see adjuncts as natural partners and allies. And all faculty may overlook the fact that college bus drivers and kitchen workers and secretarial staff may well be much more connected to their local communities, and, therefore, much more powerful in the public arena than the faculty themselves. In a battle to resist budget cuts or even increase funding, the very best leaders and spokespeople may well be the non-faculty members of the college or university community. When they speak up, they take away the charge that money is being wasted on highly-paid faculty with soft workloads and lots of free time who are not really of the community. When they speak up, they say to their elected officials and power brokers: "No, when you talk about cutting budgets, you are talking about cutting our pay and our benefits: we who are your neighbors, we who



spend our lives in these communities, we who vote for you.” The kind of solidarity and power needed to defend higher education and to improve it in the next decade depends on the resolution of the status issues that the staff member in my workshop described. In organizing, all of the hardest challenges are internal. We need to change ourselves and hold one another accountable before we earn the right to hold others accountable.

The Habit of Action.

By action, I don’t just mean campaign mobilizations, generally around election or legislative budget cycles, which are the most common form of action. I mean the kind of action that emerges out of local issues and opportunities and that is led by local leaders, supported by skilled and experienced organizers or fellow leaders. The lack of local action, the reliance on one or two tried-and-true-types of mobilization or demonstration mean that there can be no new leadership development, no new facets to the public relationships among different factions in an institution, and no real fun or joy in this important public work.

The Habit of Reflection (and Evaluation).

It may be a strange thing to say about professional educators, but I have observed very little reflection about the way public issues are addressed, public relationships are built, and public actions are designed and implemented. For instance, I often talk about how the nation is essentially moderate or even moderate-to-conservative. The Gallup Poll has tracked this for 25 years, with 40 percent of respondents identifying themselves as conservative, 35 percent moderate, and 21 percent liberal.² That means, to me, that organizing is not about just rounding up all the liberal suspects, not just about building what people keep calling a progressive movement or progressive coalition, but in understanding the interests and the values of the moderates and conservatives in our communities and building pragmatic working relationships with many of them.

FITNESS FOR CHANGE

None of the obstacles to new and effective organizing is insurmountable by people who practice these habits and remain focused. In fact, one of my organizing colleagues, Tom Mosgaller, refers to people who maintain a regimen of relating and organizing, acting and reflecting, as becoming fit. In the unlikeliest of places, we see this fitness beginning to develop. Fifteen months ago, on a lovely late-March weekend in Madison, Wisconsin, Tom and I conducted a training session for 60 leaders in Wisconsin who were members of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, a NEA affiliate, as well as community and religious leaders. At the time, they were in the middle of a desperate struggle with their governor, which ended in defeat, as everyone knows. At the end of the Saturday session, we were asked if we would conduct similar sessions in local settings. We agreed, but with two conditions. The first was that a minimum of 50 people be recruited for

each session. The second was that at least one-third of the participants be community, business, and religious leaders. We believed that we might get four or five invites. Instead, to our great surprise, we conducted our 25th session in June. More than 1,300 participants have attended, including many members connected to the state's wonderful technical colleges. A broad range of individuals, from those who are very progressive, to those who are staunch conservatives, to those who could care less about partisanship, has attended. They are not debating, or refighting, the recent battles in the Capitol. They are building new relationships. They are leaving their normal comfort zones. They are asking themselves what kind of state do we want and what kind of public life do we seek to create. They are reflecting on their own habits and instincts and hearing about the interests and drives and visions of people with very differing views.

It is too soon to tell how all this will develop. But, as someone with 38 years of organizing behind me and a few more years ahead, I can see and sense all the early signs of a new and innovative power center emerging: non-partisan, pragmatic, open to all reasonable people across the political spectrum, focused on solutions, acting responsibly and creatively. If the good people of Wisconsin can patiently and systematically re-start a process of effective organizing, can improve their fitness day by day and week to week, in the context of extraordinary pressures and counterforces, then faculty anywhere can. [nea](#)

ENDNOTES

1. Learn more about the Industrial Areas Foundation by visiting www.industrialareasfoundation.org.
2. These findings are from Gallup's annual Values and Beliefs poll, conducted in 2011, through telephone interviews with nearly 20,000 adults, evenly split among Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. For more information, visit www.gallup.com/poll/152021/conservatives-remain-largest-ideological-group.aspx.

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