

Alinsky Based Organizing Principles That Are Useful Across Political Spectrum

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A recent 13-page paper in the Fall 2014 issue of *Social Forces* magazine, edited by Arron Schutz and Mike Miller, was titled “People Power: The Saul Alinsky Community Organizing Tradition.” They say it is excerpted from their forthcoming book “*People Power* [that] provides a window into the Alinsky tradition’s organizers and organizations, including primary texts by key actors.” Blurbs within and after the article indicate both author’s affinity with Saul Alinsky, his followers, and community organizing.

My interest with the article was not the causes and politics of the organizers but the empirical findings and approaches described. Too often the useful experience learned and reported by others are discarded because their source is from another belief system or its major proponents.

For example, in his prize winning book, *Leadership*, George MacGregor Burns, labeled Hitler a tyrant and did not credit anything tyrants did as leadership. He did not consider that Hitler transformed Germany before his actions led to the debacle of World War II. The Autobahn and Volkswagen are cases in point.

The point is, it is worthwhile to consider behavior and methods—regardless of the personality and objectives of operators—to see if their approaches can be useful in other, possibly even contrary, situations. Whether Left or Right, tyrant or saint, effective organizers organize groups of people to accomplish *their* objectives, whether good or bad, moral or immoral, liberal or conservative, for profit or nonprofit, religious or secular, benevolent or selfish.

Limits of Protocols (or Bureaucrat’s Lament)

Nicholas von Hoffman “noted that many organizations”... are not very imaginative. They “get a formula” and they just hold onto it. [And] of course, as time goes on they get bigger and bigger vested in doing it that way. This is how we build Fords. And you just have to recognize that.

Codified methods can be necessary to keep from aimless wandering and haphazard treatment. But all methods have boundary conditions within which they work and beyond which they falter or fail. We need to consider the limitations of each particular protocol.

Leaders are Artists, not Artisans

Hoffman is joined by Saul Alinsky and Lester Hunt in answering a question about who can and should lead:

... the people who have been most successful at this sort of work are unanimous in their contention that the ability to organize cannot be transferred from one person to another by any known academic curriculum, even with the superficial accessory of “field work”

[A key] distinction...is the ancient one between art and science. Science is frigidly analytic and impartial... The reasoning in art is illogical, paradoxical, and impartial... The reasoning in art...is grounded in acute observation, in an

understanding and a memory of all experience which culminates in a method of approach that is not analytic, but rather synthetic. The kind of person we look for must be able to deal rationally with the irrationalities of life.

This may not set well with the many universities selling leadership development programs, but with the majority of leaders found [incompetent](#), the above is worth considering.

Leadership is more than just the attraction of charisma, however. Leaders need knowledge and ability. Fred Ross, Sr., connected learned abilities to art by saying “As Picasso said to a young artist” ... “learn how to render then you can experiment.” (The actual quote is “Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist.”) Leaders do not just “wing it,” they are competent plus being creative.

Development of Leaders

Hoffman, maintaining his focus on leadership, said elsewhere, “Leaders are found by organizing, and leaders are developed through organization.” Another extended quote of his reads to me like something [Peter Drucker](#) might have written:

A good organizer cannot afford to vent his anger, any more than he can use his position to push miscellaneously irrelevant social beliefs.

The ego works in other ways to deform the organizer’s powers of judgment. Promising young organizers are prone to come up with clever ideas—and in their pride of invention, or in the egotism of mischief-making, to attempt to carry them out in circumstances that are neither propitious nor even apropos.

The calculating organizer is forever suspicious of himself, forever mistrusting his analysis of the situation and his plan of action. He is always asking himself questions like, “What am I doing? Why am I doing it? If I succeed in doing what I am trying to do, will we really have gained anything worth gaining?” However, the organizer with a calculating mentality shall assuredly fail if he is trying to do the undoable.

This advice is commonly rejected by business, professional, social, and religious organizations. Many groups have diverted their focus from helping its membership to taking on overreaching social work. Professional societies have diverted from enhancing and understanding their members’ practice to externalities. Traditional churches have moved from a focus on saving its communicants’ individual souls to focusing on community issues. Albeit, it is sometimes hard to tell the difference; as religious charities have promoted many great hospitals and schools. This is not to evaluate the broader undertakings but to wonder if synod officials considered the [three questions posed](#) by Hoffman.

It may seem ironic to mention churches deviating from their primary mission when so many were absorbed into and used by the community organizing movement. But consider, Saul Alinsky is quoted as saying ““There is only one rule in organizing, and that is there are no rules.”” One might say: “Gather ye support where ye may” (apologies to the poet [Robert Herrick](#)). Nevertheless, an organizer must be careful to assure the parts of an assembly are congruent.

Provide the Fodder and See What Grows

A development principle is that people are not taught, per se, but those with the wherewithal flourish when provided with the organization within which to grow. Shel Trapp said:

All the organization does is build the arena in which the person can participate, in which they discover who they are. There's a gold mine in everybody. The organizer didn't put the gold there, didn't discover the gold, the person's got to discover that gold for themselves. Because the only way that people change is when they discover [it] in themselves and they change themselves. See I tried changing people for seven years as a minister. Nobody ever fucking changed from one of my sermons, I can guarantee you that.

For many endeavors, it is better to provide the means to accomplish group goals and let the person use those resources to do the job as they see fit. Of course, it depends upon the job how much control is desirable. The purpose here is to call attention to the need to consider the degree of freedom or direction desirable in each specific case.

(As an aside, clergy has adopted fucking profanity to communicate, a form of speech that I became quite proficient in as a 17 year-old co-op student in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, in the late-1950s. Even though at ease with the language, I wonder if it enhances their position as ministers. As a clinical psychologist, I need to be aware of how and what I say, both in session and in social gatherings.)

Providing Structure, Development, and Ideology

On the other hand, others learned the need for a more structured approach. Leadership and organizing are not done using a “cookbook,” textbook, or manual. This essay is intended to provide a basis for questions, not to provide universal answers. Ed Chambers empirically learned of the controls needed for a sustainable organization:

In the early years (the 60s) we did “cowboy organizing”—send someone out for two years to see if they made it. ... In the late 70s, we finally matured, and recognized the importance of intentional mentioning in both organizer and leadership development.

... issue organizing did not build a base for the long term. Only relationships did that. It's a nuanced thing; it's not either-or. There was always relationality among the key people, but not intentionality developing people, cultivating specific skills in organizers or leaders. It was mostly instinct

... you can argue that you should not introduce ideology into organizing. But I have to point out that “ideology” is present in any organization, regardless of mission—it's either explicit or implicit.

The two examples of opinions presented above reinforce the precept that one-size-does-not-fit all.

Power

The ever present issue of power was explained by Ernesto Cortes, Jr., specifically focusing on the political arena.

We have to understand power. Power is the ability to act. It requires two or more people with a plan... The question is, how

to teach them to get enough power to do things they think are important. Ten people by themselves may not be able to do much, until they coalesce with a hundred other people—in other words, until they begin to build coalitions with other people and learn the rules of politics. ... we can begin to learn how we can eventually get what is important to us. Not just by grabbing, but by having the subtlety, the nuance, and the sophistication to be able to bargain first with each other, then with other people. I help you on yours and you help me on mine; I can't do mine by myself—I need the both of us—and that means that I have to be disposed to be in an ongoing relationship.

Ernesto's concept of power is based upon coalitions and quid pro quos. He is describing the essence of political power. Politics is the art of developing alliances, making compromises, and mutual back washing, even when honest.

Corrupting Influence of Money

For a movement that was so dependent on public money, Gil Padilla reported on the downside of generous largesse:

The poverty program and its millions of dollars is what ruined [CSO](#). First, there were a bunch of poverty program rip-offs. People who had degrees got hired because they could write proposals, not the people who knew anything about poverty because they lived it, or because they worked with poor people. So CSO people said, “That's awful. Let's take over and make these programs work for people.” But then they got caught up in the money. The CSO people started becoming consultants, paid executive directors, and some other paid positions, starting nonprofits, getting grants. The chapters started dying. Keeping a chapter going was hard work, it took a lot of time. These were mostly men who were the leaders and they had jobs and families. When I asked Fred Ross for an example of how the program money was destroying CSO chapters, he replied, “People want to be paid to go to a board meeting. When I asked them where they got that idea, they say “the poverty program pays people to go to board meetings.”

Obviously, money matters—not always in a positive way.

Cynical Views

A cynical view of human nature was contributed by Costes:

We have what we call the Iron Rule: never do for anybody what he should be able to do for himself. Anything that makes people dependent is negative, because we all have the inclination to be selfish. That's part of our nature.

Ross cynically viewed organizations:

...taught me that we don't want to organize by means of other organizations. You can't count on them when you need them.

Discussion

These quotations with my comments were assembled to provide anecdotal “food for thought.” Organization leaders need to understand both the commonality and uniqueness of their situation. These anecdotes give insight into success and failure. Successful leadership supplements universities and textbooks with real-world examples. He or she looks beyond “cookbooks” and protocols for ideas and guidance.