"Power concedes nothing without a demand."
--Frederick Douglass

Local Power:
A Manual

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DRAFT

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The Myth of Apathy

1. **Communities are *never* apathetic.**

2. **Hopelessness,** not a lack of caring, causes inaction.

3. **Hope** only comes with evidence that action can make a difference.

4. **Leaders** emerge amidst action when hope returns.

5. **Skills in social action** grow with experience and reflection.

As long as you feel powerless and unable to do anything about [your problems], all you have is a bad scene. The people resign themselves to a rationalization: it's that kind of world; it's a crumby world; we didn't ask to come into it but we are stuck with it and all we can do is hope that something happens somewhere, somehow, sometime.

This is what is usually taken as apathy,
    —Saul Alinsky

Cutting an Issue

A Good "Issue" *Always* Includes a Solution

Your issue is the specific change you are fighting for during a campaign.

An "issue" always includes a *solution* to the challenge you have identified.

Ed Chambers says, "Go to power *with* a solution, not *for* a decision." When you don't know what you want, you give your opposition the power to define the solution. And it is hard to demand a change when even you don't know how (or sometimes even *if*) it can be made to happen.

A Good Issue:

- Builds the power of your organization
- Has a clear target.
- Is winnable
- Is deeply felt (a "gut" issue)
- Resonates widely
- Is tangible
- Unifies your constituency

Building the power of your organization is central. You want to fight battles over issues that will draw in more participants, make the community feel empowered, and create "public" fear of your organization more broadly.

The other criteria are fairly straightforward: If there is no clear "target" who can make the change you want, it's difficult to strategize action. If the issue isn't "deeply felt," people won't take time out of their lives to work on it. If it doesn't "resonate widely," you won't draw in many new participants. If it isn't "tangible," people won't know if they have won anything. (Things like "good teaching" are so amorphous that they don't make good issues. Smaller class sizes also improve education and are easy to understand.) If it splits your constituency, you are reducing your power, not increasing it.

These different criteria are often in conflict with each other (e.g., something that is "deeply felt" may also be difficult to win; something that is winnable may not really build the power of your organization). There are few if any "perfect" issues. Cutting a good issue is very challenging.

Characteristics of a Powerful Organization

A **Powerful Organization** in America, today:

- Is **DISCIPLINED** and demands **SOLIDARITY**

- Has a **DEEPLY CONNECTED, DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP**

- Has a **COMMON LANGUAGE**

- Does its **HOMEWORK** and uses **STRATEGIC** action

- Pressures *specific* **TARGETS**

- Is **NONVIOLENT**

- Generates *PUBLIC* **FEAR** and **RESPECT**

- Has a **REPUTATION** for success and has **ONGOING RELATIONSHIPS** with the power structure.

I am not interested in power for power's sake. . . . I'm interested in power that is moral, that is right, and that is good.
     —Martin Luther King, Jr.

DISCIPLINE

> 80% of success is showing up.
> —Woody Allen

Discipline is not exciting. Disciplined leaders of an organization show up even when nothing seems to be going on. It's steady work over time that builds success.

Through history, small organizations with disciplined leaderships that hold together and keep working while others dissolve in despair have ended up guiding large social movements.

SOLIDARITY

Those without privilege only have their bodies to put on the line. Their power comes from solidarity and nothing else.

Members of power organizations cannot afford to disagree in public.

This doesn't mean power organizations suppress diversity. On the contrary, a diversity of ideas is what keeps these organizations vibrant. But debate happens inside organizations, not outside in the world of action.

How many people do you need to win?

In general, Saul Alinsky argued that,

> As a practical matter, the organizing of **two percent of the population** is more than sufficient for the purpose of power. . . . With two percent of a district's population closely organized, the organization should have an unbreakable control over things.

This doesn't make the job easy, however. Even organizing two percent of the people in any area is an enormous task.

DEEP CONNECTIONS

I can't trust you until I know you.

I can't understand you until I know your story.

I can't hold you accountable for your actions until we have a relationship.

In community-based power organizations, leaders usually cannot simply tell other people what to do even if they wanted to. At the same time, there often isn't time to submit a decision to a vote, or to talk everything out. And even if you hold a vote or a discussion, only those who are *already* connected to your organization participate. You won't hear from those you hope to recruit in the future.

To succeed, leaders need strong relationships among themselves and deep connections to the needs and desires—the stories and experiences—of people in the wider community.

> The secret of Malcom X's leadership was that he was able to give back to people in a highly refined and clarified form ideas and insights that were rooted in their *own* experiences. Malcom X was not a man on a pedestal who bedazzled people with oratorical brilliance and held the status of a remote deity. Malcom X was most of all a man of the people, a man who deeply and profoundly loved his people.
> --Rod Bush, *We are not What We Seem*

The Relational Interview

The single most important element…is the interviewer's capacity to listen. Listening is an art, requiring discipline and training: the art of asking the right questions: about children, about the neighborhood, about work. [This encourages] the person interviewed to speak about what he feels is important.
    –Organizing for Family and Congregation

The "one-on-one" relational meeting is a core strategy for building solidarity. In a one-on-one, an interviewer seeks to elicit the stories and experiences that underlie another person's interests and motivations.

A good one-on-one interview:
1. Uncovers self-interests and motivations,
2. Develops a relationship, and
3. Evaluates leadership potential.

Good interviewers probe for the deep stories behind people's motivation. "When probing, the most radical thing you can do is ask the person 'Why?' 'Why teach?' 'Why do you do social justice work?'... You must be prepared to interrupt with brief, tight questions."

Even in a fairly short interview you can develop a real understanding of where someone is coming from and a real relationship.

Within an organization, relational interviews may take place more briefly in pairs at meetings and workshops, or at more formal appointments.

Within-organization one-on-ones create "glue" to hold leaders together through disagreements and disappointments. After relational meetings, leaders collaborate more effectively. They understand the personalities and capacities around them and there is more humor and tolerance for quirks.

Outside the organization, leaders use formal one-on-ones to check out potential recruits and key community members. Leaders learn about the concerns of community members and identity those who are interested in different issues. This knowledge allows them to draw new members into activities that fit their interests and motivations, and to develop campaigns that respond to community needs and desires.

DEMOCRACY

Successful organizations focus on capacity, not popularity. We are not here to become best friends (although we may). We are here to win. We want leaders who can lead, who we believe understand us, not leaders we like.

Those who disagree should feel heard. Their different ideas strengthen us. As we move forward and learn through action, the rejected ideas of yesterday may become the policies of tomorrow.

To authentically represent a community, organizational leaders must be rooted in that community. Without such connections, one is really an advocate *for* a community, not a representative *of* the community.

LEADERSHIP

We need many leaders not just a few.

All leaders have connections to other people. Every new leader we recruit also gives us potential access to everyone that leader has relationships with.

We must have a clear leadership hierarchy that members respect and trust (even if they do not always agree completely). Decisions do have to be made, and sometimes they need to be made quickly. Organizations that sit around and chat but don't do anything are destined for dissolution.

The faces that publicly represent our organization must change over time. When top leaders don't make room for new top leaders, organizations become autocratic and exclusive.

Most organizations allow a great deal of independence for action teams and work-groups. This allows leadership to emerge on many levels.

Leaders that are easy to get are usually not great leaders. You want leaders that have to be convinced that you are serious.

The Iron Rule: *Do not do for others what they can do for themselves.*

Excerpts From: "Finding and Making Leaders"
Nicholas von Hoffman

Leaders are found by organizing, and leaders are developed through organization….

The Best Leaders Often Hang Back
The leaders in the third month of an organization's life are seldom the leaders in the third year…. [Those] with the most to give in talent, money and experience are often not the first to join ….

Why should some of the most talented people hang back? One reason, of course, is that they want to check you and the incipient organization out. If they are worth having, they won't be the kind who must be on a guaranteed winner, but also…they don't want any part of a born loser….

[So,] at the beginning keep the organization very loose, spread the responsibilities and the conspicuous places around. This…keeps things sufficiently porous so that new talent isn't blocked off….

The Importance of a Broad-Based Leadership
A big organization demands a variety of leadership talents. Money raising leadership, oratorical leadership, tactical leadership, leadership for routine, leadership that can measure community sentiment, that knows when to move and when to stay put. You need them all, and …it is just unrealistic to expect a big organization to produce more than a few all-purpose leaders.

When you do find the all-purpose leader, you would do well to beware of him. More often than not his domination leads to organizational despotism.

Local Leadership Usually Has Limited Skills
Most…indigenous leadership will only be practiced in the arts of the small organization….It is a narrow leadership mostly interested in what concerns the small group.

At every turn, the leadership is unsuited for your purposes. And so it will remain, changing only as the big organization emerges. The character of leadership, to put it in other words, is determined by the character of the organization that trains it and which it leads. The making of an organization and the making of leadership are inseparable.

COMMON LANGUAGE

To act together, we must speak the same language. This means that we need understand our core terms, ideas, and symbols in the same way.

Key terms, discussed later on, include "target," "social service," "public fear" and "power." Within our group, terms and ideas take on meanings that they do not have in the rest of the world.

Shared Language/Shared Rules. A shared language represents a kind of implicit rule book helping us understand what we do, why we do it, and the kinds of actions that are and are not acceptable. This manual represents one effort to lay out this language for learning and criticism.

A common language can even help us disagree. I can only really understand what you mean when you say we need to start doing more "service" if we both agree on what "service" entails. (More *what?*) Otherwise we may find ourselves talking past each other.

The rules imbedded in our common language are not simple "truths" to be followed. Effective power organizations are flexible enough to break and evolve new rules and new language. Instead of clinging to static dogma, we change as we learn new things about how the world works.

HOMEWORK

Those who just *act* without knowing the lay of the land almost always fail. Too many groups just "get on the bus." They go to the next protest without thinking about how an action will gain the organization power or achieve a specific goal.

We need extensive research before we act. We need to understand:
- What motivates our opposition and our allies,
- What laws and rules constrain us and them, and
- What can relevant institutions do and not do to support or hinder us.

If you don't understand the players, you can't play to win.

STRATEGY

Good strategy requires good homework.

Strategic actions target *specific* motivations and weaknesses of the opposition. "Protests" or "pickets" or "marches" are not likely to have much effect unless you have a clear sense of why the opposition should be threatened by them.

TARGETS

Your target is the person or group that you are trying to pressure. No matter how complex a problem is, there is always someone, or some group, that has the power to make decisions about it. We will talk about this more later.

Unless you know what your target cares about and what powers he or she has, you cannot act strategically.

Having a clear target is not enough, however. You must also have a clear strategy for putting pressure on your target. If your organization is in a single mostly democratic city, for example, it will be hard to pressure a Republican governor who doesn't expect many votes your city anyway.

If you have no target or if there is no way to pressure a target, you need to find another issue to work on. Someday, when you have more power, or when the person(s) in control changes, you can come back to that issue.

> If your group has no real power, there is little reason why anyone would want to negotiate with you. . . .
>
> Real negotiating comes *[after]* . . . you have demonstrated your power and **a target** hopes to change your behavior by giving you what you want.
>> —Lee Staples, *Roots to Power*

NONVIOLENCE

Effective social action in America is pragmatic, but moral. Violence crosses the line to the immoral.

Violent action also invites a violent response. In the past, the U.S. government destroyed and killed many leaders of groups that engaged in violence (like the Black Panthers).

Violence destroys your public reputation.

Violence requires absolute certainty. But only God is *absolutely* certain.

Violence eliminates the ability to negotiate. Many people won't negotiate with violent groups.

(The situation with violence is clearly different in other countries and different times—it is not our place to judge—but in the U.S., today, it is a losing strategy.)

In the past those promoting violence in organizations have often turned out to be agents planted by the opposition. They were trying to give the government or others an excuse to destroy the organization. Be careful if a participant starts recommending violence

HOWEVER,

Nonviolence can be aggressive.

Creative nonviolent action can threaten the interests of the powerful.

And when other groups are violent, the powerful often turn to nonviolent groups for help. Nonviolent groups suddenly seem much more reasonable in comparison. Martin Luther King often used the (very real) threat that others he didn't control might become violent if officials didn't compromise with him. And, in fact, the many urban riots during the 1960s put pressure on people in power to support nonviolent leaders like King.

> In some cases non-violence requires more militancy than violence.
> —Cesar Chavez

PUBLIC FEAR and RESPECT

> It's unfortunate that fear is the only way to get some politicians to respect your power. They refuse to give you respect. They don't recognize your dignity. So we have to act in ways to get their attention. We don't *always* choose fear. . . [But mostly] what we have going for us is the amount of fear we can generate.
> —Ernesto Cortes from *Cold Anger*

***Public* Fear.**   When we talk about fear, we are referring only to "public" fear. This is fear that relates to people's public positions: as politicians, business owners, leaders of organizations . . . . We do not seek to create private fear—fear for their individual safety, or for their family, or the like.

> Public: "of or relating to business or community interests as opposed to private affairs"
> --*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

When people ask us "why are you making our lives difficult," we respond, "give up your public role and we won't bother you again." We are interested in people as politicians, not as mothers or fathers. We confront people as bank presidents, not as good church-goers. We are only interested in people in their public roles.

The public person must be held accountable, even as we continue to care for the private person.

Fear and Respect. When you have no power, the powerful rarely respect you. As Michael Gecan notes,

> Without power there's no real recognition. [The powerful] don't even see you. They never learn your name. . . . Without power, you can only be a supplicant, a serf, a victim, or a wishful thinker who soon begins to whine.

Everyone has interests. When you threaten someone's interests (by organizing voters to kick them out of office, or by picketing their businesses

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so they start losing money, or by embarrassing them in public and hurting their reputation . . .) the powerful begin to fear you. Fear creates power.

An argument, alone, rarely carries the day on important issues in the realm of power. Fear generally carries the day. People in power understand this.

Becoming a Power Player. The bank president has influence over the alderperson in part because the bank president can affect the alderperson's public future (just as the alderperson can affect the bank). They both have the power to threaten (or refuse to support) each other's interests. That's why each of them recognizes the other as a legitimate "power player." The goal of a power organization is to become a "power player."

Getting to the Table where Decisions are Made. A central goal is to gain a place at the "power player" tables where real decisions are made. You know you have power when the powerful consult you *before* they make decisions that will affect you. As Alinsky noted,

> When people are organized,...they move into the central decision-making tables downtown…. Just like any other section of society, [groups are admitted] to the decision-making table on the basis of power. [At the table they gain] a place in the debate and the discussion and the compromise.

It's Not Only About Fear. Of course, fear is not the *only* tool we can use to affect people. The following story, from the "suffrage" movement that won women the right to vote in America, is a classic example of the richness of human motivation:

Winning the Vote for Women, 1919

Harry Burn, the youngest member of the Tennessee legislature at twenty-four, had been elected from a district known to be anti-suffrage and was not seen as a likely supporter. But on the morning of the vote he received a letter from his mother. She wrote: "Dear Son: Hurrah, and vote for suffrage! . . . Don't forget to be a good boy and help . . . put the 'rat' in ratification." His vote was the final one needed for national ratification. Later, he responded to attacks by stating, "I know that a mother's advice is always safest for a boy to follow." In an interview "many years later, he said he always believed women had a right to vote." But it was the support of his mother that gave him the strength to vote his convictions.
　　　　—adapted from Eleanor Clift

Even though public fear is not the only way to motivate powerful people, it is almost always a necessary precondition to being recognized as a serious power "player." It is almost always required to win difficult campaigns over important issues.

When the people fear the government, there is tyranny. When the government fears the people, there is liberty.
　　　　—Thomas Jefferson

Even People Who Agree with You Often Won't Help You. "Power players," like politicians, bank presidents, or heads of city agencies, operate in a web of influences pulling them in all different directions at the same time. They constantly make trade-offs between what they want to do, what others want them to do, and what they need to do to survive (or move up).

Powerful people often won't do what you want, even when they agree with you. Action might threaten their own position ("if I did that, I wouldn't get reelected") or take attention and political capital away from something else that is more important to them.

Understanding simply isn't enough. You need to be able to show powerful people that doing what you want will serve their self-interests more effectively that continuing to resist.

Story: Respect and Healthy Fear in Public Relationships
Quotes from *Going Public*, Michael Gecan

East Brooklyn Congregations (EBC) once met with the director of the New York City parks to ask why a pool had not been renovated as promised. The director introduced his staff, talked about how happy he was to meet residents, and explained that the problems …were too complicated to explain to lay people…. EBC leader Alice McCollum just kept asking, quietly, firmly, "but when do you expect to complete the renovations?"

Finally, the director "exploded, 'You people! You people! How dare you?'" utterly incensed that citizens would challenge his authority. "'You people,'" McCollum remembers, "it means 'You nobodies. You uppity minorities." Silently, McCollum led her group out of the director's office. The director followed them into the hall, still yelling even after the elevator doors closed.

Because they had role-played this action many times, everyone played their part perfectly. Their organizer, Michael Gecan, had "warned the leaders that if the director overreacted [they] should watch for two tendencies—the tendency to argue back and the tendency to giggle out of nervousness." At the meeting, "no one said a word. . . . No one laughed or smiled or nodded his or her head to break the ice. The discipline, as the director unraveled and became more and more volatile, was superb." They got "more of a reaction than [they] had bargained for by being simple and quiet and focused—not by waving or shouting a slogan."

"Several days later, work crews appeared at Betsy Head Park and Pool. The renovation went at a feverish pace after years of delay. Within months, the entire facility was upgraded and the city scheduled a grand reopening."

The EBC team attended the ceremony. The director "flinched" when Alice McCollum approached. But "she smiled a broad, warm, welcoming smile and stuck out her hand. 'Congratulations,' she said, 'We appreciate your prompt response and your fine work. . . .'

"From that day on, he was one of the most responsive and professional public officials that [EBC] leaders had the pleasure to relate to." The director's experience with EBC led him to "recognize" McCollum as a legitimate "Power Player." "The quality of her organization, and her ability to turn the tables on him" showed that EBC was deserving of public respect.

REPUTATION

Power is carried by your name. What you have been able to do in the past creates a reputation for what you can do in the future. A group that has done nothing has no reputation. Until you accomplish something, no one will take you seriously

Many organizations that have accomplished much in the past have become hollow shells. They can't actually do much. But until people realize they are toothless, they still wield power and influence.

As Saul Alinsky noted:

> "Power is not only what you have, but what the other side *thinks* you have"

ONGOING RELATIONSHIPS

A group that achieves a reputation for being able to put pressure on the powerful develops ongoing relationships with people in the power structure. The development of power is not anonymous. Real human beings with real interests are on all sides.

Achieving long-term power is rarely about *destroying* the opposition. Most of the time you will continue to have to work with people even after you may defeat them on a particular issue. As the organizer David Liner notes,

> [an important moment comes when] "the target has agreed to do the right thing." [At this point, it] "is immediately time to 'de-polarize.' Now we're back in the world of negotiation. This is also the time to 'de-personalize.' Now, it is no longer 'us' (the outsiders) demanding justice from 'them' (the people in control of things). Now it is 'all of us' working together as partners."

(Of course, what the opposition thinks is reasonable will have to be "pushed" in your direction. And you may, sometimes, have to leave the table and go back out into a more confrontational stance to get them to be the kind of partners you need them to be.)

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Developing the reputation that you are unable to negotiate in good faith with anyone hurts your ability to win in the future. Organizations need to be able to maintain a relationship of respect with others over time. "Power players" may not always agree, but they recognize each other as legitimate participants in dialogue.

Sometimes, of course, you do want to "destroy" the opposition (in a public sense). You want to get the bank president fired, or kick an alderperson out of office. Done effectively, this can accomplish two goals: (1) it can bring a new actor into the mix who *is* willing to negotiate in good faith, and (2) it can put other "power players" on notice that if they don't treat you fairly they may also be targeted for (public) elimination as well. But be careful. If you fail you may have created a permanent enemy who will never negotiate with you again.

Story: Relationships with Powerful People
Quotes from *Going Public*, by Michael Gecan

Building a Relationship
During the New York City mayoral election campaign in 1993, an organization called Metro worked hard to develop a relationship with candidate Rudy Guliani. And for a few years after he became mayor, they "worked reasonably well together." Metro had access to key people in his administration. Guliani supported Metro initiatives and took them into account when he made decisions.

The Relationship is Severed
Then Metro decided to pursue something the mayor vehemently opposed: a bill to force city contractors to pay a living wage. Hundreds of Metro leaders helped introduce the bill in the City Council, which passed it. And with Metro's support, the Council overrode Guliani's veto.

Guliani was incensed that Metro opposed him. "The lines to city hall went dead." Metro was relegated to "Siberia." Its hard won relationship with was severed.

Metro knew from the beginning that "one casualty of the [living wage campaign] could be our relationship with the mayor." It took a calculated risk for a much desired goal. Metro believed that it would eventually "find a way to force the mayor *back* into the relationship, or there would come a day when he would see the need to renew his relationship with" Metro.

Renewing the Relationship
A few years after the living wage campaign, four police officers gunned down a black man, Amadou Diallo. Guliani asked Metro to work with him to calm down a polarized city. Without asking for an apology, or getting one, Metro came up with a plan, and demanded renewed access to his administration in return for its help.

Metro was again consulted on issues relevant to its constituency.

A key lesson of this tale is that people in power are people. They are not abstract forces. One has *relationships* with them over time. And deeply damaging a relationship with someone like Guliani is not a step to take lightly—even if it is sometimes necessary.

CHART: "Getting to the Table": Two Forms of Power

Power for the Opposition

"Organized Money"	"Institutional Command"	Membership as a "Power Player" at the Tables Where Decisions are Made
To Buy Influence and Publicity	To Direct Staff and Make Rules	

Power for Communities

"Organized People"

Strategic Collective Action

↓ Threatens

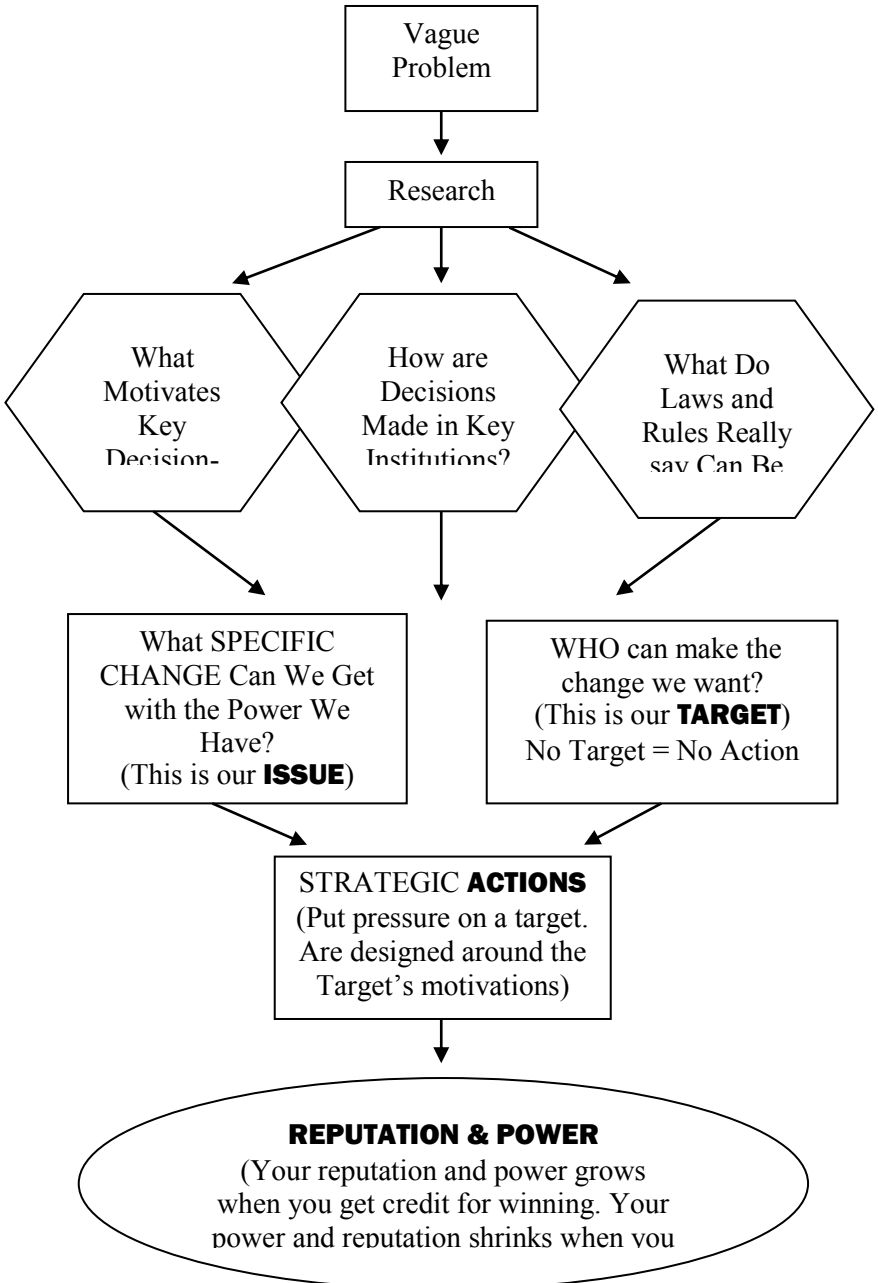The Self-Interests of Powerful Individuals

↓ Creating

"Public" Fear of the Organization

↓ Leading To

A Relationship of Equals & Real Negotiation for Change:
RECOGNITION AS A "POWER PLAYER" AND MEMBERSHIP AT THE TABLE WHERE DECISIONS ARE MADE

CHART: From Problem to Action to Power

Vague Problem

↓

Research

⬊   ↓   ⬊

What Motivates Key Decision-

How are Decisions Made in Key Institutions?

What Do Laws and Rules Really say Can Be

What SPECIFIC CHANGE Can We Get with the Power We Have?
(This is our **ISSUE**)

WHO can make the change we want?
(This is our **TARGET**)
No Target = No Action

STRATEGIC **ACTIONS**
(Put pressure on a target. Are designed around the Target's motivations)

↓

REPUTATION & POWER
(Your reputation and power grows when you get credit for winning. Your power and reputation shrinks when you

Strategies that *Don't* Create Power

1. **ACTIVISM** Doesn't Create Power

2. Short-term **MOBILIZING** Doesn't Create Power

3. **LEGAL ACTION** Doesn't Create Power

4. **SERVICE** Doesn't Create Power

Activism Does Not Create Power

Activists like to "do things." They get up in the morning and they go down to a main street and hold up some signs against the war. Or they march around in a picket line in front of a school. (Activists love rallies and picket lines.)

Activists feel very good about how they "fight the power." But in the absence of:
- a specific target,
- a coherent strategy,
- an institutional structure for mobilizing large numbers, or
- a process for maintaining the fight over an extended period of time,

they rarely accomplish much.

People in power love activists, because they burn off energy for social action without really threatening anyone.

There are moments, of course, when enough activists get together to create a real social movement, but these moments are rare. And even when they do, without much sense of strategy they often don't really change much.

Obama Better Watch Out!

After the Obama election, we heard a story on National Public Radio (NPR) that captured how activists often fool themselves about their importance.

A small group of people were protesting the Iraq war in a small town. Every Sunday, beginning soon after 9/11 at the same street corner, they shouted at traffic and waved antiwar signs.

After Obama was elected president, they decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. They figured he would get us out of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and decided to discontinue their weekly protests.

"But if he starts backsliding," one of the lead protesters declared, "then we'll be back!"

We are sure Obama was terrified . . .

Mobilizing Does Not Create Power

Mobilizers get pissed off about a particular issue or event. They bring out a lot of people who are hopping mad, and they get some change made (for better or worse).

Like activists, they generally feel pretty good about what they have accomplished. But then they go back to watching TV, or playing golf, or whatever they were doing before. They accomplished what they wanted and now they're done.

But winning a single battle is often meaningless. Once a mobilized group dissolves, the people they were struggling against are free to do what they were doing before. Mobilizers often actually make things worse.

Throw the Bums Out!

A few years ago Milwaukee's county government passed a horrible pension rule that was going to cost an enormous amount of money. People banded together to "throw the bums out" and successfully recalled the county executive and some other supervisors.

But very little thought was given to who would replace these officials.

On many issues the recalled county executive and supervisors had been quite progressive. As a result of the recall, however, an extremely conservative executive, Scott Walker, was elected in this majority democratic county. He used this position as a springboard to governor.

The mobilizers just wanted "those" people out. They knew what they *didn't* want, but they didn't think much about what they *did* want.

No organization was created to give the mobilizers some say about who would replace the officials they threw out. They didn't think much about the long-term impact of their action.

They generated a lot of energy for change, but they didn't create any power to control that change. In the end, from a progressive standpoint, they caused a lot of harm.

Legal Action Does Not Create Power

Lawyers are often quite important to those engaged in social action. Lawyers can get you out of jail, and they can help you overcome bureaucratic hurdles. The problem comes when a social action strategy is designed primarily around a lawsuit.

Our own state provides a good example. For a number of years, a major lawsuit worked its way through the courts. They sought to force Wisconsin to increase funding for poor schools. In the end, the lawsuit mostly failed.

Over this time, people interested in reforming school funding didn't do much to create power. They were waiting for the court to solve their problem. By the time they lost, not much infrastructure still existed to fight for change. It took years to slowly rebuild power.

Lawsuits, then, can actually have hurt power-building.

The problem is not just that you might lose. Even if you win, you need power to make sure courts put decisions into effect. Winning in a court case is usually only the *beginning* of a long campaign to produce social changes.

For example, the Supreme Court decision against school segregation in *Brown vs. Board of Education* was really the start of a long struggle. It did not, by itself, desegregate schools. Many districts resisted for many years. There are many other examples of successful court cases that have never had much effect.

The point is not that you never want to use lawsuits as a strategy. Many important changes have been won at least in part through lawsuits.

But you need to be careful to distinguish between power building and lawsuits as a strategy. And you need to develop strategies for keeping your groups engaged in an issue while a case is moving through the courts.

Service Does Not Create Power

Americans have been programmed to look to social service as a solution to social problems. While people will always need services, the problem is that ALL we do is serve. One of your most challenging tasks will be moving beyond a service mentality.

Helping individuals does not threaten the powerful. Helping does not produce systematic change. Soup kitchens don't challenge the system. Too often services just make people dependent on the next handout.

Many training programs are just another form of service. They either train people badly, or they train people for jobs that don't exist.

- Only **collective power** can change systems of power.
- Only **collective power** can force local agencies to hire locally.
- Only **collective power** can change a transportation system that leaves people trapped in the central city.

Power Builders Support Services, But Don't Provide Them

Power organizations do not oppose services. In fact, they often fight for resources for services. But they do not provide services themselves.

Why *not* provide services?
- Because service efforts too often divert the energy of power organizations from a focus on struggle.
- Because service providers depend on funders. And funding is the first thing the opposition attacks during a struggle. Today, fear of defunding prevents much action by churches and nonprofits.

Strategies for Generating Power

> Some of these are **"action"** strategies: they generate power by building a reputation for your organization.
>
> Others are **"recruitment"** strategies: they generate power by adding numbers to your organization.

1. **Political Action**

2. **Legislative/Program Changes**

3. **Service Efforts Focused on Recruitment and Reputation Building**

4. **Organizing Existing Organizations**

5. **Organizing Block Clubs**

6. **House Meetings**

7. **Organizing Individuals One-by-one through Door Knocking**

8. **Mobilizing Quickly in Response to Emergency**

9. **Youth Action Groups**

> Power never takes a back step—only in the face of more power.
> —Malcom X

Power Strategy #1: Political Action

Political Action seeks to elect or recall specific elected officials, putting the political class on notice that they are not invulnerable and should listen to/fear the power of your group. Usually, the core aim of political action in a power organization is NOT to get particular people elected (although electing someone good can also be helpful). You want to create fear of your organization in the ENTIRE POLITICAL SYSTEM, not just sin a single campaign.

Examples of Political Action (strategies for creating fear in the political class)

- Recall an elected official.
- Win an election that throws an existing candidate out.
- Win an election for an open seat.
- Come close to winning a seat that no one thought was in danger.

These actions are listed in order of effect. Recalling an official will create much more fear of your group than almost winning a seat. In a city like Milwaukee, however—where politicians often feel invulnerable—even a close call could make the power structure sit up and take notice.

Problems with Putting Too Much Faith in Particular Candidates:

- Once someone is elected, you don't control them.
- Most elected officials are quickly co-opted by the system.

This is why power organizations don't focus on electing particular individuals. They seek to get the entire political class to listen.

Summary: Key Components of Political Action

- Electing a particular person is much less important than actions that give notice to (create fear in) the current power structure.
- Elected officials ONLY pay attention to groups that can affect their future.

Power Strategy #2: Program/Legislative Action

Program/Legislative action seeks to change or create programs and laws.

Examples of Program/Legislative Action:
- Force the city to put up traffic signals on a dangerous street.
- Pressure the local Alderperson for a permit to allow a church to put a soup kitchen in the basement.
- Force a racist company to start hiring people of color.
- Pressure the City to fund summer jobs for 2,000 youth.
- Pass a law expunging felony records after 10 years.
- Force a local bank to start lending in the inner city.

This is the approach commonly used by most community organizing groups, and it is the "bread and butter" of power organizations.

Used in isolation, however--without a connected political power strategy, for example--it often fails to achieve the kind of success oppressed communities need.

Power Strategy #3: Service Actions

We said, above, that the "power builders" don't do service, but. . .

Service Actions focused on power are exceptions.

Service focused on power seeks to
   1) build your reputation
   2) recruit more people
   3) educate your members and the community.

Services Focused on Power Should:
- Not cost much.
- Create opportunities for education.
- Be highly visible to the larger community.

Examples of Power-focused Service Actions:
- Hire a bus with your symbol to take families to see their children in a detention center on Mother's day. (Those on the bus are a captive audience for low-key education, while the action gives the organization a reputation for caring.)
- Create an after-school program for older adolescents. (The program creates an opportunity to educate youth about power and form a youth action group.)
- Run a job fair. (The fair will draw an audience deeply concerned with the jobs issue, and you can recruit participants to your organization.)

Service Actions Focused on Recruiting

Real help of some kind must be provided at actions like the "job fair" example, above. Groups need to treat their community honestly—the "bait and switch" approach that doesn't actually provide what was promised is a good way to destroy your reputation. Nonetheless, the *main* goal can still be to draw those attending into collective action efforts and, hopefully, your organization.

Power Strategy #4: Organizing Existing Organizations

Efforts to organize existing organizations (churches, ethnic groups, community organizations, and the like) build power by drawing organizations' existing membership together to build power.

History of the "Organizing Organizations" Approach

This strategy was developed by Saul Alinsky in the 1930s. Today, however, many of the groups Alinsky brought together no longer exist. Strong ethnic organizations, grassroots service clubs, and the like have largely dissolved. Community groups in low-income areas mostly focus on service, not membership. And they are usually led by people from *outside* the community.

Shift to a Focus on Churches

Today, Alinsky-based groups in America focus mainly on churches, one of the few membership-based organizations that still exist. Most participants in these efforts, however, come from relatively privileged congregations. Low-income, "faith not works" churches tend not to join. Too often, congregational groups end up *advocating for* communities instead of *representing* them.

Power Strategy #5: Block Clubs

The block club power model seeks to recreate small communities in low-income urban areas by bringing residents together to solve local problems. Organized "blocks" or "buildings" then become ongoing organizations to draw membership and leadership from.

As we noted in our discussion of organizing existing organizations (#5), most of the community groups that Alinsky organized in the 1930s no longer exist. Connections between community members, today, are much weaker. People in poor areas depend on family and may even fear their neighbors.

Building Organizations to Organize

The block club approach builds mini power organizations that recreate a sense of neighborhood solidarity in inner-city areas. These efforts often start with primarily homeowner occupied blocks, because homeowners are necessarily more committed to the area, but can work in any context where there is enough stability to build strong relationships of mutual support.

Start Small, Build Toward Coalition

Block clubs exist in all cities, but most focus on "neighborhood watch" programs or "community clean-ups." Few seek to build power. But block clubs can get rid of drug houses, force the city to clean up trash, and more.

Block clubs usually start with small campaigns to help residents learn how power operates. Clubs soon realize, however, that they cannot solve big problems alone. A *coalition* of block clubs, however, can organize power over wider areas of the city.

> It is extremely important not to assume that there are "communities of color" out there [in urban areas] fully formed, conscious of themselves, just waiting for vanguard organizers to mobilize them into action. . . .
>
> [W]e have to think about organizing as *producing* the communities, as generating community, as building communities of struggle.
>   --Angela Davis

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Power Strategy #6: House Meetings

The House Meeting model uses leaders' relationships, not the geography of a particular area, as the basis for organizing.

A leader invites people they know to a "house meeting" where concerns are heard and information about an organization is given out. Those who are interested join the organization and then hold more house meetings.

Over time, the organization builds a group of leaders with relationships to people they know and can draw upon when action is necessary.

A Leader Can Get People to House Meetings

In a house meeting organization, to be a "leader" you must be able to bring a significant number of people to a house meeting. If you can't get anyone to come, then you don't have that many relationships. You are not a leader, because there isn't anyone who is actually willing to "follow" your lead.

A Good Strategy for Communities without Strong Organizations

Like the block club model, the house meeting model is very effective in communities where trust and friendship has broken down. It is also good in areas with lots of mobility. The house meeting depends on *who* people know, not *where* they live.

You Had Better Have Something for People to Do

People attending house meetings don't have a local block in common, so they don't have easy and clear local issues to address. If you bring people to house meetings, and then don't have anything for them to do, they may decide that you are not serious. Too many groups have asked for input about community problems and then done little or nothing.

If you use the house meeting approach, you should have a concrete issue for people to work on pretty quickly. Otherwise you will lose them, and you will start getting the reputation as another do-nothing group.

Power Strategy #7: Door Knocking

The door knocking strategy does what it says: you go door to door in a community making a pitch for people to join your organization.

It's Time Consuming

The door-knocking approach is time-consuming. You must knock on a lot of doors to recruit, and you only have a brief time to speak with each person.

But It Reaches Deep into a Community

At the same time, like few others, the door-knocking approach, allows you to reach deeply into a community and contact a wide range of residents.

ACORN and Door Knocking

The most important "door knocking" power organization in America was ACORN, a national group, now mostly dissolved.

The ACORN approach produced a lot of power, but also had some significant limitations. It experienced a lot of turnover and sustained too few long-term core leaders. It was very staff- instead of community-driven. And it could alienate allies with its aggressive, often non-strategic actions.

Why did ACORN act this way? Members of door-knocking groups are only connected to each other through the organization. This makes it hard to establish clear and durable leaders. And a loosely-connected membership needs constant dramatic action—effective or not—to keep it engaged.

Durable Power and Door Knocking

A mass of members who are only weakly connected to an organization won't build durable power. You need loyalty, not just quantity.

But the door knocking approach can still be an extremely useful strategy. On a political campaign, for example, the door-knocking approach is always a critical component. And door knocking can identify some leaders that one might not reach in any other way through existing networks.

Power Strategy #8: Mobilizing Quickly in Response to an Emergency

Sometimes, emergency issues emerge that allow you to mobilize a large number of people quickly to act around their self-interests. Quick mobilization is okay as long as it:
- *Enhances a group's reputation, and*
- *Helps the group recruit more long-term members.*

Short-term mobilization that isn't connected to an ongoing organization, however, is usually a mistake. Unless you can keep power players accountable over the long term, those in power often just wait till an angry mob goes away and then just do what they wanted to do in the first place (see **Strategies that *Don't* Create Power**, earlier).

Most participants in quick mobilizations won't become long-term reliable members. So don't let short-term mobilizations fool you about your power. (Of course, it may fool other people into thinking you are more powerful than you are . . . that's part of the goal.)

As we noted earlier, short-term mobilizations around emergencies, *by themselves,* rarely translate into long-term mass power.

Story: Mobilizing Quickly—Saving Pre-School in LA
--Story from Mary Johnson, President of Parent U-Turn

At the end of the 2011 school year, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) announced that all pre-schools would be eliminated the following year because of budget cuts.

When the district refused to speak with her about this issue, parent organizer Mary Johnson and her organization of about 20 parents, Parent U-Turn, went to pre-schools across the district, informing parents and parent coordinators about this issue. And they held a meeting with some of the pre-school teachers who would be fired.

They also did their homework. They met with experts and conducted research on the budget, figuring out how to close the budget hole without closing pre-schools. They figured out which school board members were most likely to cave, and focused on recruiting in schools from these districts.

At the next School Board meeting, Parent U-Turn brought 500 parents, teachers, and children. The 500 arrived at 7:30am. The School Board delayed their meeting till 6pm, attempting to wait out the group, but the 500 didn't leave: playing music, singing songs, cooking meals out on the sidewalk. When the meeting opened, angry parents, teachers, and children packed the hall, spilling outside. Parent U-Turn's relationships with key reporters paid off with extensive media coverage.

In this effort, a small number of active leaders mobilized a large number of participants in response to an emergency. While all 500 participants will not become reliable members of Parent U-Turn, some will join. At the same time, the action enhanced the group's reputation.

Power Strategy #9: Youth Action Groups

Youth organizing groups are not generally organized like adult groups. Effective youth groups usually provide safe "hang out" spaces for youth to build tight-knit communities and draw on adult mentoring and resources.

For core youth leaders, groups become part of an ongoing social life. Youth participate to meet many different needs—friendship, support, advice, emergency resources, etc.

They have to Own It

Youth of color in oppressed areas are used to being let down by and talked down to by adults. They are used to "tuning out" the usual "school" talk.

Effective youth action efforts draw on the interests and ideas of youth. They find a *balance* between *giving* them information and training, and *waiting for them to ask* for information and training before giving it to them.

Youth are very sensitive to adults ordering them around or disrespecting their experience and knowledge. This is why youth action groups often work best if they are *not* under the direct umbrella of adult organizations. Youth action groups often need a clear sense of their separate existence.

Motto: If they don't want it, they probably won't hear it.

Support and Services

Youth have more needs and less experience than adults, so youth action groups are often linked more directly to services of different kinds.

It's not Just Education

Education without action is not empowering. Action without results (a hip-hop concert that doesn't change anything, a rally that doesn't really put pressure on the powers that be) is, ultimately, disempowering.

It's About Building Power. Don't Forget it.

Our goal is coherent, collective action that builds power for real change in their communities. Anything less miseducates youth about how social change happens. More on youth organizing: http://www.fcyo.org/aboutyouthorganizing.

Youth...dislike program settings that are designed to "fix" them....

Too often [such programs] only reinforce youths' view that something is wrong with them, that they are somehow deficient, and that they are a problem.
> --Daniel Hosang and colleagues, "Youth and Community Organizing Today"

Appendices: Additional Essays

Pragmatism, Principles, and Integrity

> Only those with absolute power or those with no power and no desire to get any can afford to act on "principle." Everyone else has to be 'unprincipled' enough to compromise**.**
> —Ernesto Cortes, paraphrased from Mary Beth Rogers

Against Principle

Power seekers have integrity and moral limits but don't act on principle.

For example, they generally don't support a "purer than thou" third party candidate with no chance of actually winning an election—especially when votes for this candidate may throw the election to someone evil.

There are exceptions of course—pragmatic ones. It *can* make sense to use a third party to toss a nice "liberal" out of office *if* it scares other "liberal" politicians into listening to you in the future.

For too long we have acted on principles that serve others but not ourselves. We have avoided confrontation. We have loved others without holding them accountable for their actions.

Power seekers must constantly think about the plusses and minuses of different actions. But they can't afford to be "pure" for the sake of principle.

Committed to Integrity

Too many leaders are not heard because people look at their moral indiscretions or at their inability to keep their commitments. Our larger community will neither respect us nor accept us as a representative of their interests unless they believe we hold a core commitment to personal and collective integrity.

While we cannot act on abstract principles that simply empower our opponents, we must keep faith with our own sense of morality, of what is right and wrong.

To Gain Power You Start Where You Are

> I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be.
> —Saul Alinsky

Power seekers use what they *have* to get what they *want*. Instead of *wishing* the world was different, power seekers work to *make* the world different.

People seeking power see problems around them with clear eyes. But they don't sit around bemoaning how "kids these days" don't respect their parents, or badmouthing their own community members as lazy.

You can only empower a community you love. Power seekers celebrate resilience, uncovering strength and energy where others find only failure.

People seeking power are *artists of the "possible."* They can take great risks, and they often fail. But they never act unless they can map out some realistic path between where they are and where they would like to be.

To Pastors and Service People: It's Not About Individuals

Pastors and service people nurture individuals. Power builders don't have time to worry much about individuals' needs or problems. This creates enormous conflict for caring people who start working on power.

In fact, the famous organizer Saul Alinsky often struggled with organizers who came from religious backgrounds. As Nicholas von Hoffman writes:

> Saul . . . knew that every so often he had to administer a kick in the pants to some of these people of faith lest they turn an organizational drive into . . . a Salvation Army soup kitchen. . . .
>
> The risk with religious organizers is that they may sacrifice the cause to save an individual member. . . .
>
> Social work or charity is a draining distraction unless it can be used to recruit or strengthen the organization. Heartrending cases of sick people without decent care, innocent people marooned behind bars, children in worthless schools . . . are of no interest unless they can be used to build the organization.
>
> With organization comes power and with power comes the possibility of helping the sick, springing the innocent from the jailhouse, [and] finding jobs for the jobless.

Power builders serve communities, not individuals.

Of course we don't simply ignore those who suffer. We direct them to services. Or we switch "hats" and pastor to them. We don't stop being caring people just because we are building power.

But *when our power hat is on* we don't have time for constant convincing or cajoling or support. We need to move those people to a different space. People who don't have it together or aren't reliable aren't useful to us.

If they want to go, let them go. Focus on those you can depend on.

This principle is difficult for pastors and service people to accept. Maybe it's too hard for you. Think about this before you decide to participate.

(Yes, youth will need more individual support than adults. In a general sense, however, the same principle applies.)

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