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ROOTS FOR RADICALS

Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice

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with Michael A. Cowan

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The Practice of Public Life: Research, Action, and Evaluation

"Great deeds are not done by strength or speed or physique, they are the products of thought and character and judgment."

CICERO

Oxygen for the Body Politic

After Saul Alinsky's death, one commentator noted that part of his legacy was a new twist on a familiar word in our vocabulary: an "action." "Action" is an abstract word. It can never be understood in itself. Its conjugal partner is the inevitable reaction. IAF defines an action as a public meeting of leaders of a broad-based organization with political, business, or other officials for the purpose of being recognized and getting them to act on specific proposals put forward by the organization. Alinsky said, "Action is to the organization as oxygen is to the body." The creative development of this public art form is what the IAF network is justly famous for.

We call them actions, not meetings. We activate the dynamics of action and inevitable reaction. Our organizers and leaders are sophisticated enough about politics to know that you won't get what you want now, but you can run a tactic or an action that gets you some of what you want next week. Our strategies and actions are designed to get the powers that be to give and to capitulate; that requires massive numbers of organized people aimed at the right targets at the right times.

All real political action is aimed deliberately and is calculated and focused, and our actions are that way. We play to win. That's one of the distinctive features of IAF: We don't lead everyday, ordinary people into public failures, and we're not building movements. Movements go in and out of existence. As good as they are, you can't sustain them. Everyday people need incremental success over months and sometimes years. IAF organizations didn't get

power in the states of Texas and Maryland easily; it took us fifteen or twenty years.

When organized people claim some power, the usual power brokers have something new to contend with.

> New York City Mayor Ed Koch had persistently refused to meet with East Brooklyn Congregations' black and Hispanic leaders about building affordable housing in East New York. That changed when Bishop Mugavero of Brooklyn called for an appointment. The bishop, who understood the ways of power, volunteered to lead the EBC delegation to City Hall.
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> Upon arrival, the small delegation was ushered into the private quarters of the Mayor and served coffee by women wearing white gloves. The servers seemed amazed at the presence of two black women in the delegation. When the meeting began, only the mayor and the bishop spoke. Their talk was formal for the first three minutes, with Koch calling Mugavero "Your Excellency." Suddenly, Bishop Mugavero changed gears. "Ed," he said, "my Protestant brethren and I have committed $12 million for this affordable housing program, and I need $10 million from the city. The money is needed for one-time grants of $10 thousand each to the first thousand homeowners." Koch spluttered and pleaded that the city's money was already committed. The bishop paused, looked him in the eye, pointed his finger across the small table between them, and said, "Ed, this is important. If necessary, steal it." After another pause he added, "And I'll forgive you."
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> Ten days later on the steps of New York's City Hall, the bishop and the mayor officially announced the Nehemiah affordable housing program, to the cheers of thousands from East Brooklyn.

In describing Alinsky's law of change ("Change means movement; movement means friction; friction means heat; heat means controversy") in the first chapter, I said that all significant change comes about through a threat or pressure. The movement tactics of the 1950s and '60s are not relevant at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but you still can't get social change without confrontation, because the haves never give you anything real. If you're a have-not, they'll give you crumbs—they'll give you low-paying jobs, minimum-wage jobs if they can, when you're fighting for a living wage. They'll resist and fight you—like Koch.

Consensus is nice, but it belongs in the private realm. Unity, harmony, and good feelings happen with your friends and your kids and a few others.

But public life is about power, self-interest, and the ability to make change happen. There's no nice way to get change. Read the Book of Job. God is trying to teach Job about struggle, and Job is begging God to give him life. All life is an eternal struggle, and it's as much a struggle at seventy-five, as it is at fifty-five, or fifteen.

Practicing public life starts with people in their institutions, central-city people and suburbanites, where they are in the world as it is. We try to take people in that world of real needs and necessities and move them toward the world where they ought to be. That's an ongoing, tension-filled struggle with victories, learning experiences, and some failures. It's a process. John Dewey called democracy a way of life. Nice words, but what do they mean? In IAF that way of life involves a way of doing public actions invented and continually crafted over the last half-century as means of creating the pressure that leads to change. Without action, an organization is only a paper tiger or a bureaucracy.

IAF organizations understand that digested actions are worth more than a university degree because they result in social knowledge.

> A hard campaign to unionize garment workers in Mississippi seemed to have resulted in success when a majority of workers at one plant voted to join the union. The celebration tuned into a funeral when the "victorious" workers reported the next day only to be informed by the manager that the plant was shut down. "Go home," he said. That same afternoon, a video crew recorded a bulldozer demolishing the building. When the now-discouraged labor organizer went fifty miles down the road to another plant, the workers greeted him with ridicule, telling him to move on. The company had shown the video at all its other plants in the state. Low-wage worker organizing in Mississippi was over.

Drawing on sixty years of experience, IAF organizations understand and teach what this story makes plain: "The action is in the inevitable reaction." An action is initiated to get a response, to start a negotiation process. That's why a good action is aimed at provoking specific responses from carefully chosen targets. "If elected, will you, Mr. or Ms. Candidate, meet with a delegation of our leaders during your first month in office to establish a deadline for installing pedestrian crosswalks at the three intersections we have identified this afternoon? Please answer yes or no. If you can't, we have a third category called wishy-washy." Pointed questions expecting answers aimed at officials with the power to respond start a public conversation.

In private life, we understand that it's important to get to specifics with family and friends when there's a problem. People inexperienced and untrained in public action tend not to initiate pointedly and strategically. They react. They protest. They vent their grievances, trying to catch attention that fuels some outrage and hoping that something constructive will come about. The movers and shakers who dominate public life, however, understand the shelf life of such events. They just wait for the public's attention to flit elsewhere. Do you ever see the same headline two days in a row?

> The local headline read, "Church and Civic Leaders Confront Legislators on Casino Vote." The story described several hundred community leaders boarding buses on the day of the final vote to stand on the steps of the state capitol to protest the legislature's likely passage of a bill allowing a land-based casino in New Orleans. Their numbers were impressive, their speeches forceful and eloquent. Political observers agreed that the outcome of the vote was not affected in the slightest by the protest. It was too little, too late. The land-based casino had become a money winner.

An effective action isn't activity for its own sake. It must be aimed, focused, and deliberate to provoke the inevitable reaction. In an action, your moral stance must be twofold; one side obviously is your position, but even more important is what you do to cause a reaction of recognition or rebuff. You must weigh both the action and the potential reaction. That's how real-world morality works. Kick-in-the-glass or burn-baby-burn activists and terrorists ridicule this real-world morality. Their answer is, "From the ashes a new phoenix will arise." Kamikaze types are amoral and antipolitical. Violence is antipolitical; it destroys politicalness.

The exercise of democracy requires a space where citizens can appear publicly, not as individuals acting on single interests, but representing collectives that do politics. This space for exercising politicalness is what a broad-based organization creates. Staying in the public dialectic of action/reaction over time with those who have serious political and economic clout requires organized people. People seek justice, and they may seek it right now, but their wiser political selves recognize the truth of Weber's classic description of politics as "a long, slow boring of hard boards." The work of justice is the work of people organized for the long haul.

Research

The public practice honed by the IAF over the past sixty years is "research, action, evaluation." Planning for an action begins with identifying targets in

hundreds of relational and small-group meetings. The key word in the preceding sentence is "action." Actions are aimed toward something you can do something about. It's called an issue. Some things are so large as to overwhelm action efforts. These we term "problems," something you can do nothing about. The number of children living in poverty in America is a problem; training for single mothers with children is a possible issue for an organization with some power. The sale and consumption of illegal drugs is a problem; tearing down six specifically identified crack houses in a neighborhood is an issue. The dysfunction of urban public schools is a problem; getting rid of an abusive sixth-grade teacher is an issue. Effective actions target issues, not problems.

The research preceding an action begins with an internal power analysis. Do we have a winnable issue (not a problem) here? Do we have a sufficient number of leaders with followers who feel the issue is in their interest? Will they mobilize their supporters? Is it immediate enough? What are the turnout quotas for each group in order to win? Will the action build our organization? Answers to these questions will determine whether or not it is feasible and timely to proceed.

In preparing for an action, you must conduct an external power analysis of this issue. Who are the key decision-makers? Who will oppose us, and what is their relative strength? Who are our potential allies, and will they help on this? What allies must be talked to before we proceed? Who will our action upset and at what cost? Some of these questions can be answered by pooling the social knowledge of people in an organization. Others will require small, focused "research action" meetings with public officials and corporate power brokers. Remember: In organizing, there are no permanent allies and no permanent enemies.

Action

Read *Rules for Radicals* by Alinsky—especially his chapter on tactics.[3] He's right on target. When done right, an action is a public drama, like a play. Its basic plot has movement—personalizing and polarizing. In creating the plot for an action, "personalizing" means deliberately making someone the target of the attention of the group. Broad-based organizations understand better than most people that what's wrong is rarely one person's fault. The drama of an action, however, requires that a person—not a nameless, faceless bureaucracy like "city hall" or "the administration"—be put on the public hot seat, to be held accountable and urged to make a commitment to change something. It's not possible to confront the anonymous "system," which is

an abstraction, and then hold it accountable for its response. That's why names and faces must be put to targets in plotting an effective action.

An action must not only personalize the issue but also polarize around it. Polarizing means creating public tension around an issue by confronting the target(s) with a large, diverse, disciplined crowd that plainly expects him or her to respond favorably to their proposals. Pointed questions to specific persons hang in the air during an action until answered by the target(s): Are you with us or against us on this issue? Polarizing means deliberately bringing the inevitable tension between change and harmony to the forefront. Of course, no situation is ever 100 percent one way or the other. Real life is more or less always ambiguous. Personalizing and polarizing are means to an end.

> A group of leaders from a New York City organization had been rebuffed repeatedly when they tried to get a meeting with their councilman to discuss an issue. So they took a delegation to his office and announced that they were waiting for him in the council meeting room and that a press conference would start in thirty minutes outside his door if he didn't show. When he appeared, the delegation members were sitting in the elevated chairs ordinarily reserved for the council. "So this is how you make your point," he said. They replied, "We've been going through channels for six weeks to get a meeting with you, our elected representative. You didn't even have the courtesy to return our calls. So why don't you take a seat down there for once, and get a taste of what city hall feels like to your constituents."

When personalized targets do 75 percent of the right thing (what we want), they're taken off the public hot seat by the citizens and receive an acknowledgment for their commitment. One classic way for this to happen in large meetings is through audience applause; another is for on-stage leaders to shake hands with the former targets. This is called depersonalizing and depolarizing, and it's critically important. Activists rarely do this. Ideologues never do it. Our cause is at best sixty-forty or seventy-thirty right. You could make an argument for the target's position. In electoral politics, fifty-one to forty-nine is a victory, but real-world democratic decision and action requires a much higher differential.

Among IAF affiliates, personalizing is not demonizing, and polarizing is not coercing. Like all powerful, nonviolent forms of political action, personalizing and polarizing create tension and make people uncomfortable. Like Gandhi's sit-down strikes and Martin Luther King's civil rights tactics, IAF actions have a way of afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted.

It's as important politically to know how and when to relax the tension as it is to initiate and sustain it, when to depersonalize and depolarize.

The moral standard by which IAF leaders and organizers judge an action is not middle-class politeness. Rather, they must use their collective political judgment to calculate the reaction—the likely chain of effects that an action may produce. This requires social knowledge not only of the organization's interests but also of the interests of its allies and opponents. It means giving serious forethought to the likely responses of all three. It demands that an organization consider not only where things are likely to move around the issue for the action but also how other issues will be affected, as well as the effect on the organization's overall growth. This is the complex, real-world morality of using relational power.

Enacting such a public drama requires more than a plot. The stage must be appropriately arranged. Diverse roles must be assigned in a way that takes into account and stretches people's talents and limitations. The flow of events must be carefully crafted within a time frame of sixty to ninety minutes. Parts of the event must be rehearsed in advance like a play. The audience must be in place and disciplined. A floor team of leaders must keep on-stage leaders, invited officials, and the audience on task, and be prepared to improvise when necessary. Powerful actions start on time and end on time.

Evaluation

As a young boy growing up in Iowa, I loved to climb trees, especially if they were loaded with green apples. I also had a habit of falling out and breaking bones. That was in the Depression, when money for a doctor was a hardship. When I would slink in the back door holding my broken limb, my dear mother would berate me: "Edward, Edward, why don't you think before you climb?" The fact is that people act first and think afterward. Self-preservation demands that we defend everything we do and what we don't do. We defend our action with a rationale. When confronted with rationalizing, it's better to duck and weave and go on to something else.

Thinking and calculating go into preplanning an action, but not much thinking goes on during the action itself. We cannot think and act simultaneously. Try rubbing your belly and patting your head at the same time. Unless leaders draw off immediately after an action and evaluate it, little or no education takes place. During IAF's first thirty years, we didn't practice evaluation. Our action, both successful and failed, remained unprocessed. The art form of evaluation needs to happen immediately and on the spot. Talk to an orchestra

director or a baseball batting instructor about how important timely feedback is. Movement activists don't believe in critical evaluation, and charismatic leaders avoid it, never allowing their charisma to be critiqued. Modern IAF lives and dies with the quality of our collectives' evaluations. Evaluations are our school of higher learning. No undigested happenings allowed.

Twenty people will hear and see the same event differently. These different feelings and takes have got to be voiced, discussed, and digested. This is where growth goes on and judgments are adjusted. The thirty or thirty-five minutes spent in evaluation are organizationally more important than the action. The action provides a common grist for reflection. The evaluation by the collective's leaders turns it into social knowledge. The same event is evaluated two weeks, two months, and sometimes two years later, providing ongoing food for learning and growth. A few years of taking part in high-quality evaluation is worthy of a B.A. degree in citizenship.

> Several very large outdoor actions were held in the campaign to secure new Nehemiah homes for families in East Brooklyn. Immediately after one of them, which had brought out 4,000 people, forty-five leaders gathered for an evaluation. It went smoothly until a brave layperson said to the charismatic pastor who had rallied the troops, "This is the third time we've heard that same speech." Tough medicine for a key celebrity pastor. He sheepishly confessed, "I guess I will have to prepare for these events like I do for my sermons." Applause, growth, and the two men shaking hands afterward.

An effective evaluation begins with participants getting their feelings about the action out in one or two words. Then leaders analyze their behavior and the opposition's. Did the two sides recognize each other? Was there an exchange of power? What did we do well? What did we learn from them? How did you feel when our speaker told the mayor to shut up and listen? Did we have the right research? What do we do now? And on it goes for thirty to forty minutes.

Senior IAF organizer Arnie Graf recalls that as a young activist with the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) in the 1960s, evaluation was simple: "Where's the next action?" Hearing this, Alinsky accused Graf of being a "pile of undigested happenings." Good, frank evaluation is IAF's tested antidote for undigested happenings. It generates social knowledge. And it keeps us from believing our own propaganda.

Recognition

A more fundamental concern underlies every issue on which organizations initiate an action. The need to be recognized as somebody and something is the deepest drive inside us. Infants work parents for recognition day and night. Young adults thrive on being noticed. The world of fashion feeds on the need to be recognized—white teeth, good hair, etc. Individuals, groups, and organizations develop in healthy ways only when their existence, identity, and importance are recognized and affirmed by others.

It was the early 1960s, and The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) was in a battle with the University of Chicago over a land grab south of the Midway. Many of the TWO residents had enough money to purchase a house after twice being removed by the city's slum clearance program. They and their relatives were facing the juggernaut of the University of Chicago and Major Richard J. Daley expanding the university's campus south by a mile. In the '50s, they had land-grabbed most of Hyde Park. The university's Law Department had been instrumental in drafting and enacting the hateful and un-American restrictive covenants for Hyde Park whites, keeping blacks out in the purchase of property.

On a hot Thursday night, 500 Woodlawn residents crowded into the church to plan for the showdown meeting with the mayor at city hall at 10:00 A.M. on Friday. Arthur Brazier was the elected leader and held forth on what awaited the mayor the next morning. Before the rally ended, he had the leaders on their feet cheering.

The large room on the fourth floor at city hall had 200 fixed seats, so TWO brought 205 residents, Reverend Brazier, and one white guy—me, the organizer. I stayed in the back row, a mistake. The mayor came in five minutes late, flanked by two policeman. Eight aides stood near the railing separating the black citizens from the mayor's team.

The strategy was to interrupt Daley, who always filibustered, after two minutes, get our demands on the table, and get out. You only had about fifteen or twenty minutes during these prearranged hearings. Reverend Brazier was glued to his seat for five minutes, ten minutes, and then finally as Daley was beginning to leave, Brazier demanded another meeting two weeks hence to consider and respond to his advice.

The 200 blacks from the previous night's rally had come to see their leader, Reverend Brazier, stand up to the powerful Irish mayor in this critical housing battle. When I got to the lobby with the four elevators, clusters of disappointed leaders were huddled in front of three of them.

Brazier was alone at the last elevator with his head down. I approached and asked if I could ride home with him instead of going on the buses.

As we headed south on Lake Shore Drive, he started: "I don't know what is wrong. I just can't interrupt the Mayor of Chicago." I said, "Reverend Brazier, last night you promised the troops you would." "I know," he said, "I just can't do it. Maybe I should quit." I had to change his thinking. From somewhere, I said, "Do you shower every morning?" "Why yes, certainly I do," he replied. I said, "You did one good thing today; you got us back there in two weeks. Now every morning for the next two weeks as you shower, you have a companion, Mayor Richard J. Daley. He's naked like you are, and he is soaping himself like you are, you got the idea? He puts his pants on one leg at a time, you know."

During the next twelve days, as Reverend Brazier strode into our headquarters, I rose from the back office and said "Good morning. How is our project coming?" He took a quick look to see if the secretaries were listening and then said, "Fine, Ed, fine."

Two weeks later, TWO was back at the fourth floor of city hall. This time, I was in the row directly behind Reverend Brazier. The plan was to strike on the mayor's first words: "Good morning." The mayor came in and stood near the podium with his white cops and white aides. On his "*Good* morning," Brazier sprang to his feet, leaned forward crossing the rail with hand and finger extended, coming within one foot of Daley's nose and shouted, "Mr. Mayor." Two cops went for the hips where their guns were. Daley drew back and blushed red, which he retained during the whole twenty-minute confrontation. Brazier got it all out in five minutes: "The injustice, the displacement again, we Negroes have rights too, etc. You can help resolve this, call a meeting between the university and TWO. Force a settlement." Flustered and beet red, without promising anything, Daley said he would see what he could do. The leaders cheered; Brazier was celebrated at the elevators. The folks saw public courage and felt recognized as they went back to their South Side homes.

The civil rights movement in Chicago was under way, because of a proud, dignified former mailman who knew his value and the value of his people.

Don't miss this point. In interaction, individually or in collectives, we crave the recognition of others. But people with some social knowledge of how power works understand that in the world as it is, recognition given can

be taken away. In a working democracy, we must not only have the power to elect people but also to hold them accountable. That's what broad-based political collectives do.

Practice the trilogy: research, act, evaluate. But you can't do it alone. Serious action on public matters requires an organization, a diverse collective of people.

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Reflections of an Organizer

> "Our first intellectual obligation is to abandon the myth of stability that played so large a part in the modern age. . . . The future belongs not so much to the pure thinkers who are content—at best—with optimistic or pessimistic slogans; it is a province, rather, for reflective practitioners who are ready to act on their ideals. Warm hearts allied with cool heads seek a middle way between the extremes of abstract theory and personal impulse."
>
> STEPHEN TOULMIN

As doctors are to patients, as lawyers are to clients, as coaches are to athletes, so are professional organizers to volunteer leaders in public life. In the United States, Tom Paine and Sam Adams come to mind as political organizers. In the arena of religion, Moses and Paul are classic examples of organizers. Organizers are not the center, but they place themselves at the center. Their focus is the human person, the holiest work of creation, embodied in family, congregation, and workplace. In IAF organizing, we birth and parent public life and public relationships. Organizing in the IAF network is a distinct and valued profession, a vocation. The kind of organizer I'll describe here has been trained and developed in the broad-based organizing approach of the IAF over the past thirty years.

An Organizer's Journey

I was raised in rural Iowa in the 1930s and '40s. I thought life came down to family and Roman Catholicism. Midwestern Iowa was hardly the center of the universe. For us five kids, contact with the outside world was sitting on the living room floor and listening to Father Coughlin's raves and FDR's fireside radio chats. There was no preparation in those days for a role in public life. (There still isn't.) The only three career possibilities ever mentioned to me were priest, lawyer, or schoolteacher, with priest heavily pushed.