Reflecting for Change: A Discussion on the Benefits of Reflection in Community Organizing

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“Careful consideration” is one of the dictionary definitions of “reflection.” For experienced community organizers, it goes beyond sitting back and thinking about things. It is part of the organizing process that is designed to change how campaigns are conducted.

The community organizing field is constantly changing and is filled with opportunities for problem solving. Community organizers need reflection in order to use resources effectively, evaluate efforts, and plan for the future all while facing social problems that groups want to change. It occurs by creating a place for open discussion, using information gained to provide direction for next steps in the campaign, and bringing people with different roles together. Ongoing reflection and innovation is widely considered to be one of the Core Components of Community Organizing.

Holly Holcombe, Associate Director of DART, a nationwide organizing network that works work congregations, shares how reflection on a network level changed way they train organizers:

“Deep reflection and evaluation has resulted in a change to the content and length of DART's national and regional training events, the development and evolution of DART’s Organizers Institute, the increased focus on member-raised funds and the deep building of networks in congregations to increasingly engage local people in powerfully shaping their communities.”

Reflection benefits organizers’ work and ultimately influences the broader field of community organizing, bringing together those in different roles to discuss analyze tactics and reasoning. Examples of how organizers us reflection have been collected through interviews with individuals with different roles in the community organizing field.

CREATING A PLACE FOR OPEN DISCUSSION: Washington Interfaith Network

By creating a place for open discussion on organizing strategies leaders, constituents, and other key players in the community are able to delve deeper into the reasoning for their organizing tactics. By dissecting the methods of addressing social problems on a regular basis, evaluation is embedded in their organizing process. Jahi Wise talks about how the Washington Interfaith Network promotes free flowing discussion regularly; “After every public event, we have a way of debriefing, recapping, and evaluating the action is relating to the bigger strategy.” Reflection is a priority and creates a safe space for initial review of the action. “The discussion takes place in an open forum setting immediately after the action. Facilitators take turns leading the reflection discussion,” he explains. “Each organizer and community leader working on a
campaign will get a turn to lead the reflection session.” Wise then goes on to explain the three components that they focus the evaluation on; “We focus on leaders, political reaction, and people and community involvement.” WIN addresses issues that are neighborhood and housing based, specifically permanent supportive housing, affordable housing preservation, and public and tenant housing organizing.

First they discuss the leaders of the event. They talk about what elements of that preparation made the event run smoothly. Then they discuss how they got people engaged, what their goals of the event were, and how they interacted with the community at the event. “We discuss the role that the leaders played, and talk about what types of things went according to plan and what did not.”

Second they reflect on the political reaction. This part of the evaluation examines the attitude of the person they are targeting during and after the event. Wise stated that they ask the questions, “Has this event changed their stance on the issue? What was the reason for the change in attitude? Are they acknowledging or ignoring their efforts?” Wise also stated, “We also might predict the next actions of the target as a result of the action.”

Finally they address the community involvement in the campaign. Wise says, “We explore why people are or are not coming to the events and the history of involvement of the constituents.” This discussion around evaluating level of involvement is helpful for their practice because it helps them gauge what constituency support will be like in the future. It also helps them see what outreach tactics have worked in the past so they can use them again.

**USING INFORMATION GAINED FOR NEXT STEPS: DART**

Reflection is a key part of making good decisions and prevents burnout among organizers. The sustainability of organizers and constituents impacts the future of any organizing campaign. Reflection as the first step of self-evaluation informs the future steps in the campaign and avoids regression. According to Holly Holcombe, DART organizers connect with congregations to deeply engage them in building a justice ministry. Holcombe states:

“DART’s organizing is anchored in religious teachings on justice. Through a bottoms-up organizing process members of the congregations reflect on and determine the community problems to solve. The ability to listen and reflect on community needs identified by congregational and community leaders is a key principle of the DART evaluation process.”

DART organizers are trained on their ability to listen to and build relationships with congregational leaders. The training is part of an annual process which includes moving from “research to action” to solving a host of serious community problems.
ACOSA is a membership organization of professionals in the community organizing and social administration fields. It aims to bring people with different approaches to community organizing together in order to advance social change practices. Mark Homan, the Grand Chairman of ACOSA explains, “The members of ACOSA fall into three major categories; professors and students in social change and community organizing programs, community organizers, and professionals in social administration. ACOSA knows that different kinds of community organizers need different types of tools. When information is shared easily through the association, we are working toward our mission of advancing the social change field.”

ACOSA provides its members with a quarterly newsletter and sponsors the Journal of Community Practice, a scholarly journal dedicated to research in how direct service and community practice promote social change. Homan also writes about how reflection is beneficial in his book Promoting Community Change: Making It Happen in the Real World.

“Reflective practice is a form of experiential learning that encourages you to seek out other perspectives as well. You will learn from conversations with others engaged in your work, particularly those who have had more experience than you do, and you will think about how you can use the guidance you are receiving.”

Reflection is one of the RECO Seven Core Components of Community Organizing. For more discussion on reflection visit http://bolderadvocacy.org/tools-for-effective-advocacy/reco/core-components

To find more resources on reflection in community organizing visit the RECO Compendium http://bolderadvocacy.org/tools-for-effective-advocacy/reco/resources and use the search tool on the right to search based on component.