



The Process of Consensus Organizing

4

Purpose: This chapter explains the basic process used in consensus organizing. It begins by highlighting the differences between community organizing and community outreach, which are often confused. The next section describes the overall process of consensus organizing, including the basic steps that consensus organizers use in working with neighborhoods, in particular key tasks and intended outcomes.

Learning Objectives:

- To examine the main differences between community organizing and community outreach.
- To understand the overall process of consensus organizing.
- To identify and apply the basic steps in the consensus organizing process, including what consensus organizers hope to accomplish and how to get there.
- To understand the importance of group development and goal setting in helping to implement win-win projects and action plans.
- To understand how to build sustainability into your organizing efforts.

Keywords: community outreach, community organizing, win-win projects, action plans, strategic partnerships, sustainable neighborhoods.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING VERSUS COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Community outreach is often confused with community organizing, so it's important to understand the differences (see Table 4.1). Many social service programs do community outreach, which is designed to promote programs or services provided by the organization. For example, the YMCA might deliver fliers door-to-door to recruit children for their after-school programs. A local hospital might use outreach workers to promote a new prenatal clinic. Although these efforts might engage residents, they are often focused on meeting the needs of the organization, not necessarily those of the neighborhood.

Community outreach efforts are often designed around demographic data. For example, an agency that serves teen parents might target a certain neighborhood because the demographic data indicates that a large percentage of single teen mothers live in the area. Therefore, the agency may conclude that serving teen mothers is one of the most important needs in the community. This may be true; however, the sponsoring organization has typically already decided with the solution is. Because of this, conversations with residents are usually one way and all about the organization's programs and services. Dialogue with residents might produce information and feedback that would

Table 4.1 Community Organizing Versus Community Outreach

| <i>Community Organizing</i> | <i>Community Outreach</i> |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Views people who live in communities as experts on their own lives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach is used to promote the expert opinions and solutions of agencies |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begins with a goal of relationships—that is the only agenda | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach is a way to get people interested in the agency's agenda |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands that success in organizing is people being motivated to create change in their own lives and in their community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach helps agencies gain clients and new programs and services |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community organizing is a two-way conversation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach is usually a one-way conversation |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community organizing meets the needs expressed by residents and builds their capacity and power | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach often meets the needs identified and prioritized by agencies |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community organizing is focused on improving the community at large, and helps residents gain a "voice" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outreach is often focused on narrowly defined clients (e.g., the elderly, or high-risk mothers), not comprehensive neighborhood improvement |

point to a different solution. A consensus organizer would capture that information, and work with residents to analyze and test out their solutions to the problems they identify. However, an outreach worker might not find this process useful to the goal of promoting services.

Using the example of teen pregnancy, what would happen if the outreach worker knocked on the door and the following conversation occurred?

Outreach Worker: I am with agency X and we are here to share information with you about a new program we are offering this summer. It's a teen pregnancy prevention and education program.

Parent: I have some ideas about how I can keep my daughter out of trouble, and keep her busy.

Outreach Worker: Well, we can keep her busy for two hours a week at our life skills planning classes held every Thursday.

Parent: Are you going to hold classes? That sounds a lot like school.

Outreach Worker: Well, part of the class is instruction, but we also have some fun too. And, we always serve a healthy snack!

Parent: What about a summer job? That would keep my daughter busy, help her learn life skills, and earn a little spending money.

Outreach Worker: Oh, I don't know anything about summer jobs, but our program is great. I hope you will read our literature and try it . . .

Parent: I really don't think that's what my daughter needs.

It would not be uncommon at this point for the parent to stop listening and politely wait for the outreach worker to finish the sales pitch. What do you think happened here? Do you think the outreach worker was just doing his or her job? The outreach worker promoted the agency's program, but did he or she listen to the parent? The parent was providing a solution to keep her teen out of trouble in the summer, but her solution didn't fit the script of the outreach worker.

Now, let's look at the same scenario using a community organizing approach. In this scenario, the organizer knows that there are a lot of teens in this neighborhood with too much time on their hands. The statistics demonstrate an increase in teen pregnancy and teenage mothers, as well as crime, drug use, and violence among teens.

Community Organizer: Hi, I'm Jane Smith, a community organizer with Fairhaven Church. I am out in the neighborhood talking to parents of teenagers to learn more about your concerns and how teens are keeping busy this summer.

Parent: Well, I can tell you my daughter is 16 and has way too much time on her hands. She and a lot of her friends are bored and just hanging out.

Community Organizer: Really, where do they hang out?

Parent: Well, mostly at the community park. There is a pool up there and when it's really hot they go swimming. But they also tend to just sit around, you know? My daughter really wants a job, but it's been hard to find one.

Community Organizer: Where has she looked for a job?

Parent: I think she has talked to the pizza place down the street and the nursing home on Fourth Street, and I am not sure where else. I guess I should be helping her more, but with two little ones, I don't have much extra time. I do think a job would help her mature more. She is very smart. Of course, that spending money wouldn't hurt!

Community Organizer: Yeah, you're right about that! My mother couldn't wait for me to get a summer job so I would stop bugging her for money!

Parent: You got that right!

Community Organizer: Well, listen I might be able to find out about summer employment opportunities, but I need some more information. Do you think your daughter and some of her friends might be willing to talk to me?

Parent: Sure, I can ask her. She is usually sitting on the porch every evening around 7:00 p.m. with her friends. Why don't you stop by then?

Community Organizer: I think I will. Thank you so much for talking to me.

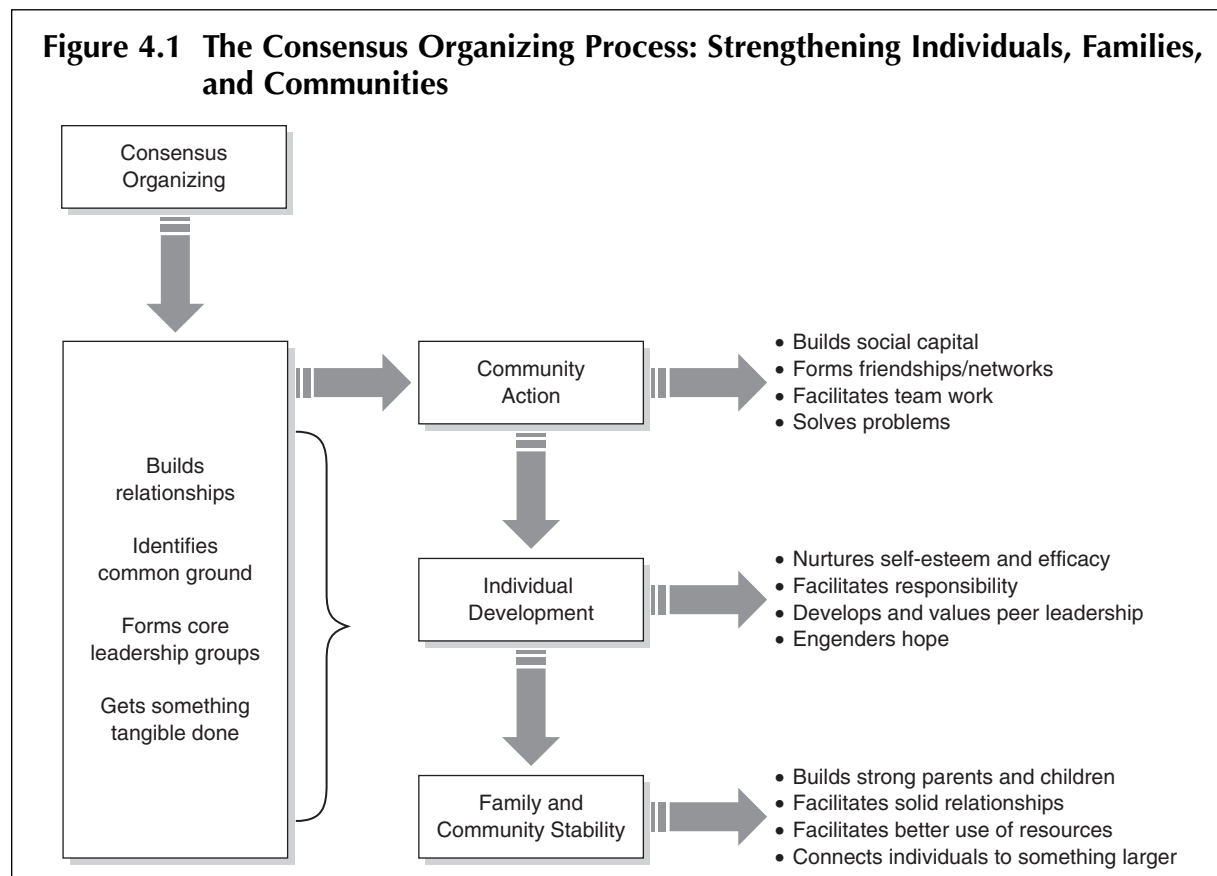
Parent: You're welcome. See you tomorrow.

Can you see how this conversation is different? For one thing, the organizer does very little talking. Instead, through probing questions, she gets the parent to tell the story. The organizer also finds a way to join with the parent by sharing her own anecdotal experience of summer employment. She is also friendly, open, and accommodating. Through this exchange, she has accomplished some important next steps for her organizing work. First, she has learned that teens in the neighborhood tend to hang out at the park. So, if she wants to meet some young people, that would be a good place to go. Second, she has an opportunity to engage in one-on-one dialogue with some neighborhood teens tomorrow. These teens may provide her with legitimacy to approach the others. If it's a good conversation, by the end of the week more teens in the neighborhood are likely to know who Jane Smith is. In community organizing, residents and key community stakeholders are genuinely engaged in developing solutions, and this is particularly true for consensus organizing.

THE CONSENSUS ORGANIZING PROCESS

The heart of consensus organizing work is the ability to build relationships with and between groups of people. As discussed in Chapter 1, a product of solid community organizing work is social capital, the glue that holds all communities together (Putnam, 2000). The consensus organizing process should lead to the development of a web of relationships that exist inside the community among its members and outside the community with members of the external resource community. This requires that the consensus organizer wear many hats, including peacemaker, broker, and bridge builder.

Figure 4.1 illustrates the consensus organizing process. Consensus organizing builds relationships, identifies common ground, forms core groups of leaders, and gets something tangible done. The process impacts individuals, families, and communities in multiple ways. First, at the community level, social capital and networks are developed, and teamwork leads to problem solving. At the individual level, self-esteem and leadership are developed, which engender newfound responsibility and hope. Families and communities are ultimately more stable, and community resources are more effectively utilized. Ultimately, consensus organizing strengthens the capacity of individuals, families, and communities to overcome adversity and take advantage of opportunities.



BASIC STEPS IN THE CONSENSUS ORGANIZING PROCESS

What does a consensus organizer do? This question is frequently asked. The response can be fuzzy and somewhat ambiguous, depending on whom you ask. However, there are distinct skill sets that consensus organizers have and a specific way they go about their activities. In consensus organizing, organizers carry out some very basic steps that are fundamental to their job. While consensus organizing is clearly more circular than linear, some things happen first. For example, consensus organizing emphasizes a thorough community analysis as an initial step in organizing work. While one could argue that the community analysis is an ongoing function of the consensus organizer, the first community analysis is critical to developing realistic strategies. Table 4.2 summarizes the nine basic steps of consensus organizing. Each of these steps is described in more detail below.

Step 1: Conduct a Community Analysis

Consensus organizers begin their organizing work by identifying the interests, strengths, and resources of the community they are working in. They also attempt to understand its history and culture, as well as current conditions, including the characteristics of existing residents, community resources, and local institutions and businesses. Consensus organizers also want to know what people care about (i.e., their self-interests), and what they have done to address problems and issues in their community. During the community analysis, consensus organizers not only attempt to connect with and understand the self-interest of residents, but also members of the external resource community. They analyze the potential for the development of mutual self-interest between residents and external players, as well as the potential for a broad-based organizing effort. They want to know what other community efforts have already occurred in the community and who else may currently be doing organizing work in the community.

The consensus organizer focuses on the assets and strengths of communities, rather than its deficits. It is very hard to build momentum for consensus organizing based on community deficits, because residents are all too aware of their community's problems. The consensus organizer's job is to be cognizant of the realities that exist in the community, including its deficits, but identify and focus on the community's strengths and potential. In short, the consensus organizer asks what the community is doing right. John McKnight (1995) in his seminal book *The Careless Society*, points out the damage done to communities when the focus is mainly on problems. The consensus organizer needs to consider and identify the resiliency of neighborhoods and the people who live there.

The consensus organizer completes the community analysis by preparing a written report of his or her findings. The report identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the community, as well as opportunities and threats, including the opportunities for doing consensus organizing. Most important, consensus

Table 4.2 The Basic Steps of Consensus Organizing

| <i>Step 1: Conduct a Community Analysis</i> | <i>Key Tasks and Intended Outcomes</i> |
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| Identify the interests of internal and external players. What do they care about? What roles can they play? Focus on the strengths and assets of low-income communities. Get a basic understanding of the community's history and culture. Who lives in the community? What resources exist in the community? Who is already engaged in community life? What is the potential for a broad-based organizing effort? What community building or organizing efforts have already occurred in this neighborhood? | Prepare a written report of your findings. Identify what you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the community, as well as opportunities and threats. The analysis should reveal the self-interest of internal and external resources. Your report should also describe an initial action plan based on your observations and meetings. Most important, identify the relationships you have built through the analysis process and areas of potential mutual self-interest. Identify real roles for residents in your action plan. |
| <i>Step 2: Build Relationships</i> | <i>Key Tasks and Intended Outcomes</i> |
| The quality of your organizing effort will depend on your ability to build relationships with people and between people. Build upon your earlier contacts. Of the people you met, who seemed most interested in the community's improvement? Who displayed leadership abilities? Who else can you meet? The consensus organizer begins the relationship building process during community analysis and continues building relationships through the life of the project. | Review the list of people and institutions you have met through the analysis process. Begin to organize what you know about people and their self-interest. Nurture the relationships that are most promising. Where is there common ground? Begin to identify a core group of potential leaders in the neighborhood. Develop ways to "test out" the external resource people you have found through the analysis to determine if they would be good partners. Further develop your relationships with internal and external players. |
| <i>Step 3: Design and Implement Win-Win Projects</i> | <i>Key Tasks and Intended Outcomes</i> |
| Build trust by helping residents solve an immediate problem. Start with issues identified through the community analysis and the organizing work. Bring people together around the issues they care about. Are there any issues that can be readily solved (such as cleaning up a vacant lot with a community garden)? Often, people feel isolated because they believe no one cares about an issue except them. Hope is created when people realize that others care about the same things they do. | Design a few small projects with your core group based on the issues you discovered that could get people working together. These projects are called "win-win" because typically they are small, can be accomplished quickly, give the opportunity for wide participation, and will most likely be successful. Within the first three months of an organizing effort, at least one of these projects should be designed and completed. These projects solve problems and help create momentum for a longer-term planning and organizing process. |

(Continued)

Table 4.2 (Continued)

| <i>Step 4: Disseminate Information</i> | <i>Key Tasks and Intended Outcomes</i> |
|---|--|
| <p>Develop a system for sharing information about the organizing project and the issues people care about. Find out how the neighborhood gets information about what is happening inside and outside the neighborhood. Information is power. Who has information? What is the quality of that information? How can this information be better gathered and disseminated?</p> | <p>This step should result in the development of methods to share information, such as resident-designed and resident-delivered flyers and newsletters; community meetings; telephone trees; and block-level discussions and meetings. If technology is not an issue, a Yahoo Group or e-mail list could work. The best methods involve some level of personal contact. This step should result in a greater flow of information so people can become engaged in decision making.</p> |
| <i>Step 5: Strengthen and Solidify a Core Group</i> | <i>Key Tasks and Intended Outcomes</i> |
| <p>As the consensus organizer begins to really know people and has “tested out” their leadership potential, he or she should begin to build and solidify a core group. Organizing is a long-term activity. Identify a group of residents who are in it for the long haul. This group should also cut across existing lines of neighborhood interests, leaders, and organizations. The core group can begin to tackle some of the issues that cannot be addressed through win–win projects. These are often large-scale initiatives that may involve housing and economic development.</p> | <p>This step should result in a core group composed of hard workers who are open to the views of others and are willing to share power. Often core group members are found after the completion of win–win projects. For example, many people will complain about a problem, some will even say they will help resolve it. The organizer should note who actually shows up and who does the work that needs to be done. This also helps the rest of the neighborhood to see who the real leaders are.</p> |
| <i>Step 6: Develop Strategies</i> | <i>Key Tasks and Intended Outcomes</i> |
| <p>In this step, the consensus organizer helps residents examine the issues they have identified from different angles. What are all the potential ways the identified problem might be solved? What solutions are likely to gain the most support from both residents and external resource players? The organizer also helps to ensure that the identified issues are a concern to the majority of the people in the community, and that the potential solutions are achievable.</p> | <p>The organizer works with the core group to test out the “issues list” with more neighborhood residents (e.g., through a town meeting). This helps clarify concerns and helps the emerging leadership group identify priorities. In this stage of the organizing process, residents develop written action plans, which provide more detail about how they wish to address issues (including tasks and timelines). These activities legitimize the residents’ voice and teach important skills such as problem solving, conflict resolution, and negotiation, all of which will be important to the long-term viability of the neighborhood.</p> |

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|---|---|
| <p><i>Step 7: Identify Internal and External Resource Partners</i></p> | <p><i>Key Tasks and Intended Outcomes</i></p> |
| <p>Residents should identify issues, but many neighborhood problems cannot be solved by residents alone. A good consensus organizer teaches the value of partnerships as a way to solve problems. It is important to help the neighborhood learn how to evaluate potential partners so that good partners are selected. Organizers help residents understand how self-interest can be a bridge to participation. The organizer should actively engage residents in a process to learn more about potential partners.</p> | <p>The consensus organizer may review the community analysis with the core group to identify potential partners. What potential partners were discovered during that process? What else do we need to know about them? At this point, the organizer begins to introduce more information about external partners who may have been helpful to earlier efforts (win-win projects) and have the potential for helping the neighborhood make further gains in the future.</p> |
| <p><i>Step 8: Develop and Implement Action Plans</i></p> | <p><i>Key Tasks and Intended Outcomes</i></p> |
| <p>Residents develop and implement action plans based on strategies that were developed in earlier stages. These action plans should be based on community approval and support, and should have engaged the interest, resources, and support of external players. They should specifically identify overall goals for improving the neighborhood, as well as specific objectives and projects related to the overall goals. Committees, which are developed around specific goals, take the lead in analyzing and implementing potential projects. Members of external resources are also engaged in the process of analyzing and developing projects.</p> | <p>Action plans are developed and implemented that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have the support and buy-in from the community. 2. Provide residents with real roles. 3. Develop a mechanism for disseminating progress, where milestones are noted and celebrated. 4. Engage both internal and external resources in the success of the project. 5. Produce tangible results in the community and result in new leadership and relationships. |
| <p><i>Step 9: Develop Sustainable Neighborhoods</i></p> | <p><i>Key Tasks and Intended Outcomes</i></p> |
| <p>Consensus organizers often serve as mentors and role models to residents. As organizers achieve short-term goals, they should be positioning residents to make greater gains in the future without their help. Leadership is not developed overnight. The seeds must be sown throughout the organizing process. Sustainability requires an interest of external resource players beyond the life of the project.</p> | <p>Sustainable neighborhoods develop when residents are in control of their destiny. As the organizing process moves along, residents are leading most efforts and rely less and less on the organizer. There is evidence that the “community voice” is being heard as additional resources are being directed toward the community. More and more people become involved as they see real change happening. External resource players view the community leadership as effective and legitimate.</p> |

organizers identify areas of mutual self-interest, and identify where common ground can be built. The community analysis should reveal both internal and external resources available to the organizing process. Fundamentally, the community analysis provides enough information for the consensus organizer to create an initial action plan based on his or her observations and meetings. In the report, the organizer should also specify the relationships that have been developed through the community analysis process and identify real roles for residents in the action plan. In Step One, the core work of consensus organizing begins by connecting people to one another, and then connecting people to opportunities. Because of the importance of the community analysis, a whole section of this workbook (Section III) is dedicated to this vital first step in consensus organizing.

Step 2: Build Relationships

Relationships matter and are often the key to solving almost every problem individuals experience in their lives. Relationships also matter in poor communities, yet they are often overlooked. The attitude of the consensus organizer matters also. It is important that a consensus organizer enters a community somewhat as an anthropologist would: by having a curious attitude about the people who live there and striving to understand them. It is important to keep in mind that somehow community residents survived before they met you. Your job is to understand how: What are the factors that contribute to the community's resiliency and strengths?

A consensus organizer engages individuals by identifying their self-interest and the contributions they can make to the organizing effort. To effectively engage individuals in a consensus organizing effort, a consensus organizer should:

- *Begin with strengths.* Everyone can relate to times when they were successful at solving a problem. Help them remember these times and what worked.
- *Be useful.* With poor families living in disinvested neighborhoods, talking about issues and solutions is only the first step. Finding something tangible to do that solves an immediate problem proves your worth to the community, and builds trust.
- *Listen.* We all think we do this well, but we don't. Often, individuals don't really listen, waiting for the speaker to finish so they can interject what they want to say. Consensus organizers pay attention to what is said and *not* said, and also observe body language (more about listening will be discussed later in this chapter).
- *Connect.* Find a way to connect with people. Think like an anthropologist. Be curious about the people and the place. No work can really occur until a connection is made. Real connections don't happen in a few minutes. In fact, they may take several months to develop.

- *View residents as experts.* Remember that the people who live in the community know the community the best. You may have knowledge and skills, but residents are the experts about their community. Show proper respect and elicit this knowledge.
- *Never take credit when things go well.* Make sure that the residents of the neighborhood you are working with get credit for and celebrate successes.
- *Go with the energy.* When you are trying to build relationships and are meeting people for the first time, let them talk about whatever they want. Remember your goal is to make a connection.
- *Make your role clear.* For example, you can say: “I’m here to learn more about your neighborhood,” or “Do you have a few moments to speak with me about your neighborhood?”
- *Instill hope.* Ensure that your message is: “Together we will succeed.” Remain upbeat during the conversations, be positive, and don’t act as if you have all the answers.

The consensus organizer also identifies the individuals who seem the most interested in the community’s improvement, as well as those individuals who have displayed leadership ability. The community analysis has likely revealed common concerns among a broad spectrum of residents and institutions. The consensus organizer needs to understand why they aren’t aware of each other, and how he or she can connect these individuals to build relationships and mutual self-interest. Through the relationships they have built, consensus organizers carefully begin to weave opportunities for group action and organization. While fundamentally necessary to solving problems, building relationships also breaks down the isolation that often exists in impoverished neighborhoods. The consensus organizer begins the relationship building process during community analysis and continues building relationships through the life of the project.

The relationships a consensus organizer builds with and between people can fundamentally change the way a community functions and what it can achieve. Building relationships is hard work. Relationships require reciprocity, which is the natural give and take of friendship. They require listening, and bearing witness to another person’s experience to understand where he or she is coming from. Most of all, they take time. A consensus organizer builds relationships over time and begins to look for common values and concerns. Often an organizer will meet people who are extremely isolated and believe that no one cares about a given situation. As the organizer builds relationships, he or she seeks an opportunity to demonstrate that many other people in the neighborhood share the same values and concerns. A functioning core group is built on strong, in-depth relationships based on mutual self-interest. When people realize they share similar goals and dreams, they feel empowered and want to work together. Relationships are the key to everything else that happens and the most important job of a consensus organizer.

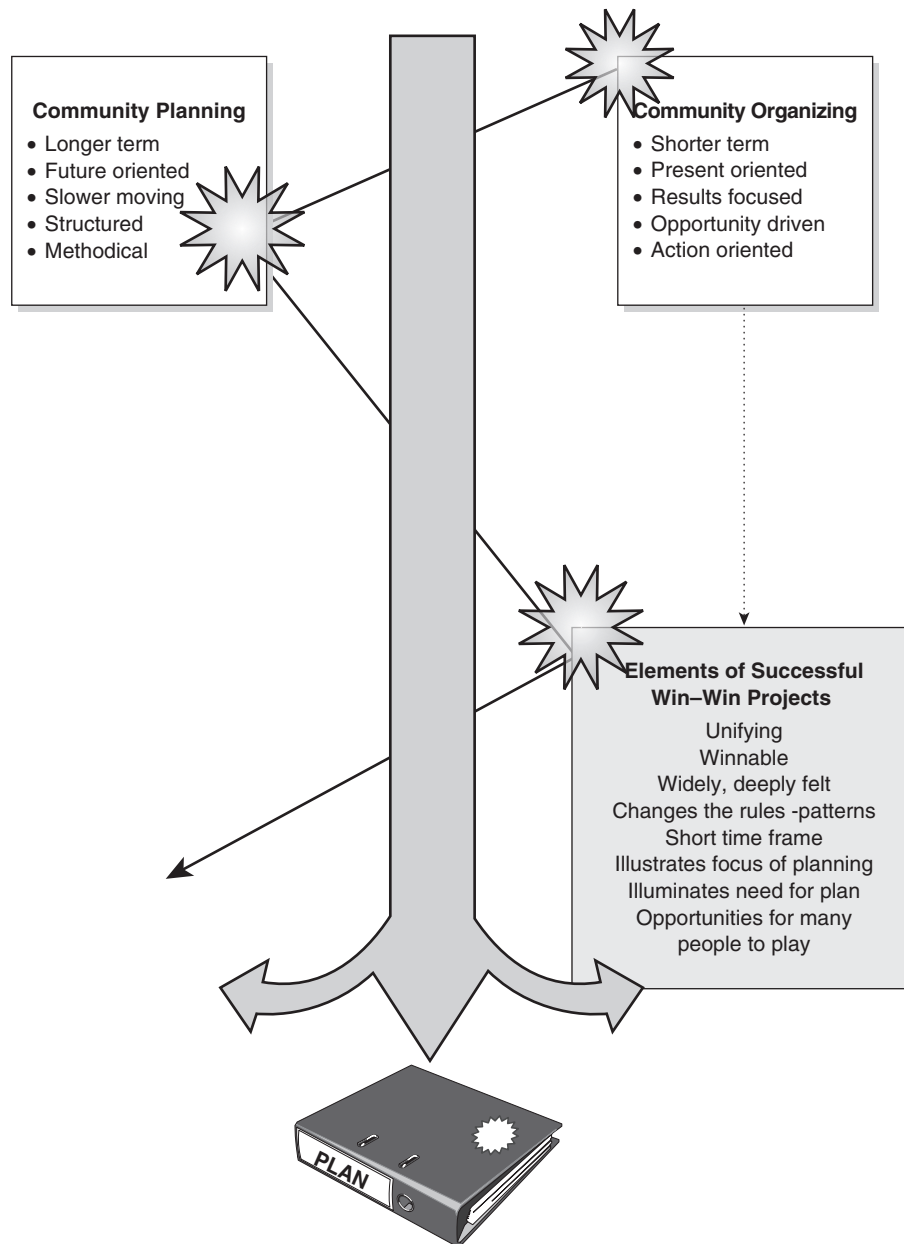
Step 3: Design and Implement Win–Win Projects

One way a consensus organizer builds trust is by helping residents solve an immediate problem. As the organizer meets people, issues begin to be identified. Often people believe no one cares about an issue except them. The consensus organizer works to bring people together around a common issue by designing small projects that are “winnable,” meaning that they address an issue or problem that many people care about, a goal that can be achieved readily, that has broad roles for people to play, is seen as a positive action by many, and can solve immediate problems. An example might be a neighborhood cleanup, or petitioning the local government for a stop sign that is needed on a busy corner. These projects help to break down the isolation people feel, build relationships between people who might not know each other well, and most important, accomplish something. Residents begin to see the organizer as a person they can trust, and as someone who will work with them to solve problems. As the organizer works with a group of people to develop solution-oriented projects, he or she is also gaining insight into who works well together and what alliances might need to be strengthened to tackle larger issues. Win–win projects also help community residents define norms for how they will work together: for example, agreeing to respect dissenting viewpoints and not dwell on the past, and committing to a plan of action based on consensus. Through these small projects, the group learns what is necessary from each person in order to move the project and the community forward. They are, in effect, defining a new way for their community to act and to be.

Win–win projects help residents begin to dream about what else might be possible if they worked together and help keep the momentum going. These projects also help residents understand that larger-scale neighborhood improvement efforts will require a greater commitment of their time invested in planning. It’s difficult to get people excited about planning, particularly in disinvested neighborhoods where outsiders have been long on promises and short on action. Organizing win–win projects is an effective strategy for helping residents take action, learn skills, and see the complexity of some of the larger issues that plague their communities. These projects help residents see the value of planning and how they can play an important role in shaping what happens to their communities. Figure 4.2 below illustrates how community organizing and community planning can be integrated to develop win–win projects.

It is very important to design and implement at least one win–win project within the first three months of an organizing effort. These projects solve problems and help create momentum for a longer-term planning and organizing process. Win-win projects also help to identify neighborhood leadership and give residents an opportunity to learn how to work with the external community to solve problems. They provide an early opportunity to begin engaging external resources in the organizing effort. Ultimately, consensus organizers help residents design projects aimed at expanding opportunities in their community and paving the way for the community to build upon each of its successes.

Figure 4.2 Keeping the Momentum: Integrating Community Organizing and Community Planning



SOURCE: William Traynor, 1995.

Step 4: Disseminate Information

Knowledge is power. Those who have the information tend to make the decisions. It is not uncommon to find, through the community analysis process, that neighborhood information systems have broken down. The grapevine may be alive and well, but it is not a reliable source of information,

particularly for neighborhoods that are in serious decline or those with “development” potential looming at their doorstep.

There are many reasons why consensus organizers must work to develop a communication system in neighborhoods. First, if residents are going to be able to solve problems, they need data to work with. Many funding and program decisions are based on information regarding the needs and opportunities in the community, and residents need to be familiar with this process. It is important for the organizer to develop a system for sharing information about the issues people care about. The organizer should find out how residents get information now about what is happening inside and outside the neighborhood, and discuss with residents how they might improve the process. In addition, the organizer can work with residents to analyze how to access and disseminate information to solve specific community issues. For example, residents may want a stop sign installed at a specific corner of the neighborhood because of the prevalence of accidents. The organizer should work with residents to help them analyze which city departments should be contacted to determine the process for securing a new stop sign in their community. The organizer could ask residents to volunteer to contact the city government to find out about the process and bring this information back to the larger group. Residents may need to petition their neighbors, arrange for a vehicle traffic count, and gather information on accidents at that corner. As the consensus organizer works with residents to solve this problem, the need for gathering and disseminating accurate information becomes clearer.

Information also keeps people connected. One method of information dissemination that is widely used in an organizing process is a community newsletter that can be delivered door-to-door to share news and neighborhood happenings. Residents can often design and lead the development and distribution of a community newsletter with minimal assistance from the organizer. The more roles that residents begin to play in a neighborhood, the more residents are likely to trust the organizing effort.

Every neighborhood is different, so consensus organizers should use the information they gathered during the community analysis to effectively develop new and improved methods to disseminate information throughout the community. Often, the best methods involve some level of personal contact, such as resident-designed and resident-delivered fliers and newsletters, community meetings, telephone trees, block-level discussions, and house meetings. Remember, a good consensus organizing process should yield a greater flow of information so people can become more engaged in decision making.

Step 5: Form a Core Group

Consensus organizers may meet literally hundreds of people through the organizing process. Through personal interactions and win-win projects, the organizers begin to see which individuals are the most interested in taking a more active role in improving their community. The following questions are helpful in identifying a core group of residents to engage in the organizing effort: (1) Which individuals demonstrated real leadership?

(2) Which individuals have actually showed up and done what they said they would? (3) Which residents have demonstrated that they are the most interested in taking on a leadership role? The consensus organizer begins to identify a group of residents who are willing to become involved in the process for the long haul. The members of the core group are selected deliberately. These individuals should be hard workers who are open to the views of others and are willing to share power. This group can begin to tackle some of the larger issues facing a community, such as housing and economic development, that cannot be solved through small projects.

Consensus organizers engage dedicated, capable, and pragmatic leaders from communities to form the core group. These are often individuals who are highly trusted and respected by their neighbors. It is also important to build a core group of new leaders and organizations with broad representation that cuts across lines of existing neighborhood interests, leaders, and organizations. The core group should cross racial, ethnic, and class lines and bring together residents, as well as other community stakeholders such as local social service agencies, businesses, and institutions, including hospitals and schools. Most important, the core group should bring together individuals with common interests that will sustain their involvement over the long haul.

Developing a strong core group consumes most of the organizer's time, and requires the greatest skill. Neighborhood competence is demonstrated through effective groups. Through the group, a vision for community change is created. This is important to external players, but also to other residents in the community who have been taking a "wait and see" attitude. As the neighborhood group succeeds, its power and numbers grow. However, there are several challenges to building and developing an effective core group that consensus organizers should keep in mind, including:

- *Time.* Organizers who are too quick with their agenda and do not let relationships develop naturally will not be able to form a cohesive group. Although the organizer may have some ideas about the neighborhood and potential solutions, residents must create the agenda for change. Organizers must be willing to invest the time in this important activity.
- *Culture and diversity.* Organizers who do not pay attention to different cultures and diversity in neighborhoods are often not successful in building relationships. Everyone cannot be approached in the same way. An effective community analysis should reveal information about the culture and diversity of the community that should be considered in building the core group. It is important for the organizer to understand who lives in the community, and then think about how to strategically approach people. One trusting relationship usually leads to another.
- *Mistrust.* Chances are pretty good that you are not the first community organizer to enter the community. Don't expect to be trusted immediately; you need to earn it. The easiest way to earn trust is to act responsibly. Don't make promises you can't keep, show up on time, and be respectful.

- *Perceived apathy.* Apathy is often confused with mistrust, but if the organizer genuinely encounters negativity, he or she should consider how to engage people in a more positive conversation. For example, if residents say their neighborhood is going “downhill,” or if they complain about everyone and everything, the consensus organizer may ask: “Can you tell me about a time when you felt more optimistic about your neighborhood? What was happening then?” It may not always work, but everyone has a story to tell. See if you can get the people you meet to tell you their story.

As the core group comes together and begins to meet, the organizer works hard to make sure the meetings are productive and well run. The organizer may begin each meeting by reminding everyone of the reason the group was formed, for example, “We are here this evening because we want to make sure that the Shadyside neighborhood has affordable housing and supportive services for working families.” The organizer must set the tone for the way business will be conducted. To get maximum participation, he or she makes sure that everyone is listened to and that adequate deliberation is given to topics. The organizer encourages mutual understanding of various points of view, and helps move the group to a consensus on a goal they all care about. When its time for work to be done, the organizer helps the group determine their goals and the action steps needed to achieve them. As tasks are delineated, the organizer works to match skills and abilities with activities so the work assigned is meaningful. Above all, the organizer helps the group achieve real progress.

Finally, while the consensus organizer begins to work more intensely with the core group, the organizer also ensures that the core group develops strategies to share power, build relationships, and communicate with the rest of the neighborhood. Consensus organizers continually play the role of bridge builder, challenging the core group to develop additional opportunities for resident engagement.

Step 6: Develop Strategies

Consensus organizers are able to help residents examine the issues they have identified from different angles, including: (1) What are all the potential ways the identified problem might be solved? and (2) What solutions are likely to gain the most support from both residents and external resource providers? Often the organizer will develop a process for the residents to actively discuss their concerns so that people are on the same page. The core group is engaged in determining strategies to solve problems and issues they care about and that are important to other residents. The following questions are helpful in working with residents to develop strategies:

- What do you want for your neighborhood? Was there a time when your neighborhood had the characteristics you just described? What was different about the neighborhood then? What was the same?

- What is happening now in the neighborhood? What do you think has changed?
- What could you do now to make this neighborhood better?
- Who do you think can help us solve this problem? Why? How?

Through this process, the consensus organizer helps the core group gain clarity on issues. This process also helps ensure that the identified issues are of concern to the majority of the people in the community, and that the potential solutions are achievable. Another way of describing this process is the idea of “results accountability,” a form of outcome measurement related to communities being pioneered and taught by Mark L. Friedman (n.d., see www.raguide.org). Although Friedman’s work is focused mainly on evaluation and outcomes, the process uses thoughtful, probing questions that are simple but instructive. In short, starting with the end in mind and working backwards to achieve success resonates well with the consensus organizing process. Friedman’s process begins with the following questions: (1) What do we want? (2) How will we recognize it? and, (3) What will it take to get there? Ultimately, these are the same questions a consensus organizer should ask the core group when working with them to develop effective strategies. Through effective relationship development and probing questions, the consensus organizer begins to build an agenda for change.

Often the consensus organizer will encourage the core group to test out their “issues list” with the community at large. Methods to engage the larger community include holding a town hall meeting, developing committees to analyze and develop specific proposals for projects (e.g., housing development, youth, crime and safety committees), and engaging external players in active discussions about potential projects and their feasibility. This process helps the emerging core group clarify concerns and identify priorities.

Step 7: Identify Internal and External Resource Partners

A basic value of consensus organizing is the belief that partnerships are essential to solving problems. The value of partnerships is often first experienced through the completion of small projects. Later, as residents are trying to develop detailed strategies, they begin to identify the partners they will need to solve larger and more complex problems. For example, if the neighborhood is working on safety issues, potential partners would include the police, local businesses, residents, and local government. It is important to help the neighborhood learn how to evaluate potential partners inside and outside the neighborhood. In consensus organizing, partners are identified by understanding and engaging them around their self-interest. As described in Chapter 3, a key principle of consensus organizing is using self-interest as a bridge to participation. Consensus organizers work with residents to help them identify the self-interest of potential partners, as well as mutual interests that will engage them around specific issues and opportunities. Using the example of safety issues, the potential self-interest of the police is the desire to solve crime problems. Local businesses want customers to feel safe when

shopping, residents want to feel safe in their neighborhood, and the local government wants neighborhoods to remain vibrant. Members of the core group can work with these groups to identify solutions around their mutual interest to address community safety.

Step 8: Develop and Implement Action Plans

In this stage of the organizing process, written action plans are developed, which provide more detailed information about how to address specific issues, including specific steps, tasks, and timelines. Planning in an organizing process is much different than a traditional planning process, because through relationship building and win-win projects, momentum for community change exists. This momentum helps build a mandate for written plans developed by and for the people. Action plans should include overall goals for improving the neighborhood, as well as specific objectives and projects related to each goal. For example, an overall goal may be to improve housing conditions in the neighborhood. One objective could be to rehabilitate existing housing stock that is poor condition, and a specific project could target housing rehabilitation efforts on specific blocks in the neighborhood (e.g., the plan would specify which blocks were chosen and why, which homes would be targeted, and specific strategies and resources to rehabilitate these homes).

Developing action plans helps to legitimize the voice of the core group and community residents, and teaches important skills such as problem solving, conflict resolution, and negotiation, which are important for the long-term viability of the community. The written action plan also solidifies goals, and provides a tangible document that can be shared with other residents and members of external resources. Successful action plans have four major ingredients:

- community support and buy-in,
- real and tangible roles for residents in the implementation of the plan,
- criteria to evaluate progress toward meeting the goals of the plan, and
- internal and external resources engaged and invested in the plan's success.

Once the core group has identified strategies and partners, they are ready to begin implementation. Often, specific committees are developed to address specific goals and projects in the plan (e.g., real estate development, youth services, crime and safety, or business development). The core group members typically serve as leaders and coordinators of these committees, and residents and other community stakeholders volunteer to serve on these committees. The organizer also engages members of external resources in the process of implementation by working with the core group to set up strategy and other informational meetings to get feedback and information on potential resources for specific projects. These projects should result in tangible improvements in the community, as well as new and improved community leadership and relationships.

Step 9: Develop Sustainable Neighborhoods

Consensus organizers ask themselves several questions about the potential results of their work throughout the organizing process, including: (1) What will I leave behind? (2) What will the products of my organizing work be? and, (3) How will my work contribute to a healthy, sustainable, and capable neighborhood? Sustainable and capable neighborhoods are able to advocate for themselves and solve problems. Through the formation of a credible group, community problems are tackled and power is built. Through the group, advocacy positions can be crafted around issues and concerns that impact the community. Perhaps residents are concerned about a developer that has not adequately connected to the community, or a local park that is not being maintained. While some people may choose to fight back as individuals, an organized group is in a better position to be heard (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001).

In addition, healthy communities have strong social capital (e.g., the web of relationships inside and outside the neighborhood is strong). To achieve a healthy and sustainable neighborhood through consensus organizing, it is important to recognize that *the process is more important than the product*. While consensus organizing aims to solve real problems, the ultimate contribution of consensus organizing is leaving behind the capacity for neighborhoods to be able to continually solve problems and build and sustain effective relationships and partnerships. The consensus organizing process should leave behind capable leaders who can break down complex community problems in a way that is understandable and leads to effective strategies and solutions. The organizer also works hard to develop the leadership potential of the core group so they remain strong and welcoming to new members.

Sustainable neighborhoods have, at their core, residents and community leaders who are in control of their destiny. As the organizing process progresses, residents are leading most of the efforts, and rely less and less on the organizer. There is evidence that the “community voice” is being heard as additional resources are being directed toward the community. More and more people become involved as they see real change happening in the community. External resource players view the community leadership as effective and legitimate. Ultimately, residents and external players learn the skills and strategies of consensus organizing, and begin to use them in improving their communities.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think organizations are so quick to do community outreach instead of community organizing?
2. How does advocacy fit into the consensus organizing process?
3. As you consider the steps in the consensus organizing process, what do you believe is the most difficult step? Why?

4. What is the value of building relationships around mutual self-interest?
5. How can you sustain and motivate groups?
6. What challenges do you think are common in trying to engage the private sector in consensus organizing efforts?
7. Knowing more about the process of consensus organizing, what skills do you think a consensus organizer needs to do the job effectively?

CASE STUDY EXERCISE: THE JAMESTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD

Instructions: Review and discuss the case example below, which describes the work of a consensus organizer in the hypothetical Jamestown neighborhood. The case study illustrates the process a consensus organizer might use with a group of residents to better understand their concerns about neighborhood safety and help them figure out solutions. Answer the last question as if you were the consensus organizer working in the Jamestown neighborhood. Then break into small groups to discuss your answers.

| Questions a consensus organizer might ask: | What residents of the Jamestown neighborhood might say in response: |
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| What do you want for your neighborhood? | We want our neighborhood to be safe. |
| How would you know your neighborhood was safe? (What would be different?) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ There would be less crime. ■ People would be comfortable on the streets and on their front porches. ■ The parks would be drug free and families could use them in the evenings. ■ Young people would not be afraid of the police. ■ More people would watch out for one another. |
| Why are things the way they are currently? (Note: The consensus organizer would try to get people to tell their stories.) | Jamestown has lost population over the years, first from white flight and again through sprawl. Now the neighborhood is primarily an African American working class community. Up until the early 1980s, the neighborhood was doing fairly well. When crack cocaine came into the neighborhood, it took a downward turn. Drug activity occurs in certain pockets of the neighborhood, but mostly in two small parks, which |

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| | <p>were previously gathering places for families, especially on summer evenings. The neighborhood has easy access to I-75, which makes it convenient for the sale of drugs. The racial unrest last year has further exacerbated tension among young men in the community who feel profiled, as the police tried to get a handle on drug activity. Jamestown had a strong neighborhood association once, but now it's nearly defunct. However, there are community elders who remember when it was strong.</p> |
| <p>Is anything happening now? Who is involved? What are they doing?</p> | <p>The groups involved include the police department; the city parks and recreation department; Jamestown residents, elders, and youth; youth organizations; local politicians, the Department of Justice, and local funders. They are trying to establish a "Weed-n-Seed" program in the community (e.g., a federal crime prevention program).</p> |
| <p>What works now?</p> | <p>Community organizers have built some strong relationships with residents especially community elders. The YMCA outreach director is interested in organizing young people to do something positive. The city parks and recreation manager has been attending some community meetings organized by the community organizers. The chief of police has met with residents about neighborhood problems.</p> |
| <p>What could we do better?</p> | <p>Develop deeper community relationships and rebuild the neighborhood association. Develop the capacity of residents to articulate the issues they care about and solutions they believe will work. Identify external resources players who are important to Jamestown's future.</p> |

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| <p>With this information, what strategies might you suggest to the people living in the Jamestown neighborhood? What would the action plan look like? Specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What steps are necessary to make Jamestown safer? ■ What players are necessary to bring to the table? What roles could they play? What resources are necessary for the plan to succeed? ■ What are the short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes? ■ What are the intended or desired results? | |
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FIELD EXERCISE

Instructions: Identify and research a community organizing effort in your community. If you are unable to identify a community organizing effort, identify an initiative designed to improve low-income communities. Examples include: crime prevention programs, comprehensive planning efforts, advocacy campaigns around specific issues, affordable housing initiatives, or community development efforts. You can research community organizing and improvement efforts on local government and community organization Web sites and in local newspapers.

Answer the Following Questions and Be Prepared to Share Your Observations in Class:

1. What issue, challenge, or problem did the program, initiative, or effort attempt to address?

2. Did the effort include any of the nine steps of consensus organizing? If so, which ones?

3. What roles did residents have in the initiative or effort you identified? How were these roles similar to and/or different from the roles they might play in a consensus organizing effort?

4. What were the tangible results? How were these results similar to and/or different from the intended results of a consensus organizing effort?

WEB RESOURCES

Community Building: Asset-Based Community Development Institute:
<http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd.html>

Results and Performance Accountability Implementation Guide: Mark Friedman: <http://www.raguide.org>

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