

GOING PUBLIC

AN ORGANIZER'S GUIDE
TO CITIZEN ACTION

"If you want to know how ordinary Americans accomplish extraordinary things—build affordable homes, create effective schools, win living wages—then the story and the strategy reside in this remarkable book. *Going Public* is at once pragmatic and profound."

—Samuel G. Freedman

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CHAPTER 8

The Hard Edges of Effective Organization

In a leafy suburban town, a close friend invited me to a breakfast meeting devoted to the topic of developing the suburb's town center. After we helped ourselves to eggs and toast, coffee and juice, we sat at tables of ten, in a pleasant hotel dining room, and did the rounds. About forty people—business leaders, library and YMCA directors, university professors, neighborhood residents, and others—introduced themselves. Some people spoke briefly. Others took a great deal of time—quietly grinding an ax or two. It took nearly one hour of the proposed ninety-minute meeting just to get through the rounds.

The chairman mentioned a closed-door meeting of architects scheduled to take place in three weeks. The architects would produce several preliminary plans. But that announcement triggered a strong reaction from another friend and neighbor who argued that a more open process of house meetings, involving hundreds of residents, should occur before any closed-door sessions with professionals.

In response to this critique, the meeting veered into an ex-

tended discussion about where and when these proposed house meetings should be conducted. Lists of locations appeared on large sheets of poster paper. Someone suggested using trained facilitators for the house meetings. Another person, a little distracted and disconnected, asked about the budget for this effort. At the ninety-minute mark, I put my yellow pad away and prepared to leave. I whispered a question to a woman who represented the local library. "How long have you been talking about library expansion and these other things?" She hesitated a bit before she said, "Twenty-seven years." The chair was now talking about setting up a website (a website! I muttered to myself). And then he announced the formation of committees, including a "process" committee, which would meet soon. I headed for the nearest exit.

A few weeks later, in an inner-city parish, the pastor invited me to assist him and his lay leaders in organizing a stewardship campaign—an attempt to increase the weekly giving of people in the pews. On a Tuesday evening, I sat in a dimly lit room with the pastor and a dozen of his leaders. Several important leaders were missing. I wondered where they were. The pastor informed me that they were next door, running the parish bingo game. I then learned that the parish sponsored bingo two nights each week. Many of the most talented people in the parish called out numbers, inhaled clouds of cigarette smoke, argued with maniacal bingo players, cooked in the kitchen to keep the grouchy bingo players fed, and spent untold hours in meetings coordinating their efforts. On top of all of this, the bingo games netted very little income for the parish.

One of America's most precious social resources is the vast and deep pool of time and energy that scores of millions continue to commit to their communities, congregations, union locals, tenants councils, homeowners groups, chambers of commerce, political clubs, community boards, PTAs, sports programs, and citizens organizations. Like oil, the supply is enormous, but not unlimited. It

can be polluted, wasted, or exhausted. Many voluntary organizations squander that commitment. Like American car companies in the seventies, they continue to operate in ways that succeeded for decades, when supplies of fuel seemed unending and costs remained low, but have since become obsolete. Groups have become too predictable, too slow, too inefficient, too costly, too similar to one another, and more vulnerable to competition for people's time and attention.

This trend will continue—and more Americans will choose either to bowl alone or not bowl at all—until the leaders and organizers of our voluntary associations confront a few major failings.

Leaders Don't Disorganize Enough

Very few people argue with the need for reorganizing. But they become timid, tense, or defensive when you suggest that they disorganize anything. The pastor in the inner-city parish should disorganize the bingo games that sap the energy of his best leaders and produce little or no income for the congregation. Until he does, he will not have access to the majority of his best leaders. Any attempt to run a stewardship drive that depends on the complete commitment of all of his talented people will struggle or fail. He worries about the implications of doing this, as he should. Bingo players may be irate. Bingo workers may feel that they have failed somehow. Confused parishioners, believing the bingo to be profitable, may protest. And the archdiocese, already tired of subsidizing the congregation, could interpret this as an attempt by the parish to ignore its financial obligations. The political consequences of disorganization seem much more complicated than the cost of just letting it continue. But the costs of maintaining the status quo keep increasing—and may include a failed stewardship drive.

In many congregations and organizations, thirty of the thirty-

five groups are useless—with thirty sets of officers, thirty monthly meetings, thirty needs for meeting space, thirty demands for staff attention, thirty sets of minutes, and thirty additional occasions for infighting and frustration. People dutifully serve. People “plug into” slots into one or more these groups. People spend four or five nights a week out, instead of one or two. People sleep less, relax less, and create less. There may be no clear financial loss in these organizations, but there is clearly an enormous social loss to congregations, communities, and cities when large numbers of their most valuable leaders squander their time in meaningless tasks and numbing meetings.

On the other hand, the leaders who inspected the ten food stores in Brooklyn many years ago had a wonderful time. They enjoyed the preparation, the action, and the capitulation of the food storeowners. The only mistake that the leaders could have made would have been to form a permanent food store inspection committee. They were smarter than that. They scheduled a recognition event for those who had worked the hardest on the campaign, treated everyone to a night of soft drinks and pastry and informal discussion, and then disbanded the ad hoc group. The mission had been accomplished. The results were positive. It was time to turn to other matters—either in people’s public or private lives. No one objected. Several of the people involved never did another thing but always remembered their participation in the inspections as a wonderful and enjoyable moment. The majority took a break and then began to ask one of the most beautiful questions in all of organizing: “What do we do next?” The answer to which was: “What do you *want* to do next?”

It takes a high level of confidence and security for leaders in voluntary organizations to disorganize failing groups and an even higher level to succeed at something, like the inspection of the stores in Brooklyn, and then let the leaders go.

One answer to the question—why do bad organizations happen to good people?—is that “good” people don’t demand that their institutions disorganize more. They don’t insist that they be allowed to drop doing something else, when asked to do something new. They don’t see disorganizing as vital to the health and well-being of their fellow leaders, their treasured institutions, and themselves. And they don’t see it as a first step toward starting or refunding new and better organizations.

People Rarely See Themselves as Founders or Refounders of Organizations

The very word—organization—seems to imply certain un-questioned qualities. Organizations have buildings and offices, physical structures and modern equipment. Organizations have committees and meetings and conferences—all of the procedural structures that we have grown used to and that universities train scores of thousands of people per year to manage or study or improve. Organizations have “old” paper—letterhead, cards, stationery, and reports. And they now have what we call “new” paper—videos, websites, and PowerPoint presentations. When pressed, people often describe their organizations by telling others where they are located, what nights of the week they meet, and where to write or e-mail to get material.

Since most of us inherit organizations that we manage, rather than starting organizations that we build, we either have a limited sense or a faded memory of what organizations looked like, felt like, and acted like when they began. We forget that labor unions used to be action organizations, that the organizers and leaders were more important than the lawyers and business agents, that the first contracts were one-page documents that the least educated worker could understand and promote and defend. Now

contracts run into the hundreds of pages. Now unions need entire law firms, costing millions per year, to read and interpret them. Now the business agents and executives dominate. Now every union needs a fancy headquarters. All this while membership plummets and participation fades.

We walk into churches, synagogues, and mosques that other people built. We serve on committees set up by leaders who are long gone, who were responding to different pressures and demands. We take roles in activities originally designed to address needs that were real fifty years ago, or twenty years ago, but that have long since disappeared or changed.

We fail to appreciate the unconscious, powerful, magnetic pull of an organizational culture focused on buildings, procedures, and paper until we find ourselves sitting in a hotel dining room twenty-seven years after the first discussion of the need to expand a small suburban library, until we survey an auditorium jammed with three hundred executives and activists who work for development groups that produce almost no housing, or until we glance into the basement of a Manhattan church and see harried leaders running a noisy, unprofitable bingo game.

We can counter this magnetic pull first by recognizing its existence and its strength, then by asking the radical questions Peter Drucker posed more than a half century ago. What is our business or mission? What should it be? What will it be? And who are our customers or constituents? Who will they be? Who should they be? If we answer honestly, we will disorganize many of the organizations, committees, and groups that we now waste our time with. We will begin to think of how to start from scratch or, sometimes more practically, how to refund or restart an organization we value but which needs gut rehabilitation, not a new layer of paint.

In the Industrial Areas Foundation, we deliberately create new organizations—each with a new mix of leaders, different set of

member institutions, new name, new bank account, new founding assembly, and new identity—not coalitions or alliances of existing groups. The process of founding a new organization is freeing, demanding, and exhilarating. Leaders can become equal co-owners of the new entity—a critical opportunity rarely open to us in a public arena largely crowded and dominated by established groups with well-entrenched operatives clinging to most of the lead roles. Leaders can confront the critical questions of origin and mission. Should we even be? What should we be? How should we be and what should we do? Leaders can engage in actions that are not in the least canned or stale. Leaders can learn to plan, act, experiment, fail, evaluate, act again, and succeed. They can experience directly the joys and sorrows of creating an organization that may have the power to shape communities and cities, to improve whole regions, and to influence, someday, a nation. By doing so, they can become refunding brothers and sisters of their country and can write the next and newest chapters in American social and political history.