

## IAF Organizing

The Industrial Areas Foundation probably does the best grassroots organizing in the US. Legendary organizer Saul Alinsky (See *Rules for Radicals*) set up in the IAF in the 70's to train organizers. The IAF still emphasizes the training of organizers. But it has shed its confrontational approach and adopted negotiation and compromise as the main way of meeting the needs of low income people. The IAF has been instrumental in increasing wages, providing housing, and improving schools in poor neighbourhoods. This is not the place to spell out the IAF's accomplishments or the details of its approach to organizing. But it is worthwhile summarizing a number of highly successful IAF methods that differ from those usually found in community organizing. Anyone interested in a more complete rendering of IAF practices should read Mark Warren's excellent book *Dry Bones Rattling, Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*.

### **The IAF organizes through church networks**

Much of IAF organizing occurs through Christian churches particularly the Catholic church. Because of this, it is often called faith-based organizing. The IAF taps existing parish networks to find the people it needs to achieve its goals. (This approach resembles the way successful social movements co-opt existing communications networks; see *Social Movements: A Summary of What Works at <http://www.citizenshandbook.org>*). In Texas, the IAF obtained the support of the bishop, who then encouraged parishes to join the IAF. The congregations of these parishes contribute dues to the IAF and volunteer for IAF campaigns.

If the community organizing through churches seems unusual, remember not so long ago church and community were intimately intertwined. Every community of place was also a community of faith.

The IAF is working to broaden its organizing beyond church networks. It has begun developing relationships with secular institutions such as schools, health care providers and unions.

### **Tapping church networks solves the mobilization problem**

For many community organizations a recurring problem is getting people out for an action. An intimate link to a network of people who attend church every week makes this much easier. A common IAF action is an accountability night when leaders extract commitments from politicians standing at the front of the room. For accountability nights churches can deliver thousands of people because parish priests explain the reason for the action and encourage members of their congregations to attend.

### **IAF organizing depends on identifying and training leaders**

In modern egalitarian society the recent trend has been to downplay leaders, and create flat, decentralized organizations with no clear lines of authority.

This works for small groups. But larger organizations with weak leaders and no hierarchy often wind up being run by small cliques. Then anything can happen. Because cliques have no formal authority there is nothing to hold them accountable.

**The IAF tries to identify as many natural leaders as possible.**

In IAF terms a leader is anyone capable of delivering a following. Leaders have to commit in advance to bringing a certain number of people to public actions and accountability nights for politicians. Organizers count heads and hold leaders responsible for meeting their quotas.

The IAF has three tiers of leaders. Tertiary leaders are usually parish members who bring friends, family, neighbours and work associates to IAF actions. With this approach the IAF formalizes what is generally recognized as the way most people get involved. A friend or family member asks them to take part.

Secondary leaders, are the leaders of member institutions, often pastors or influential parishioners. They are more involved in particular action campaigns and in meeting the needs of their own organizations. They also meet in an assembly every few months to ratify the decisions of an executive committee made up of the most experienced “primary” leaders. Secondary leaders are expected to deliver a following from their institution; as well they must commit to the IAF training process.

**Professional organizers train leaders; leaders conduct campaigns**

The IAF's is famous for its “iron rule”: Never do for people what they can do for themselves.” Applied to organizing it means that professional organizers should train leaders on how to run an action campaign, not do it themselves. In practice organizers often assist leaders. This way they help the leaders to grow, and avoid the risk of costly mistakes.

The staff of most community organizations conduct campaigns themselves, and give little time to developing new leaders. As a result their member base gets smaller and smaller. By making the focus of staff the recruitment and training of leaders the IAF continually expands its member base.

**The IAF responds to the motivations of leaders**

In Texas, a third of primary leaders are clergy; the remaining two thirds are middle-aged women from poor and working class congregations in communities of color. Lay leaders are inspired to volunteer their time, first by self-interest in making tangible improvements to their lives, secondly by a deep religious caring for community, and thirdly by opportunities for personal growth and the potential to become a “mover and shaker.”

Those who remain involved over a long term are motivated by a belief they are doing “God’s work”, as well as concern for their community, and “cold anger” at the injustice it has had to suffer.

### **Organizers develop individual relationships with leaders**

First, organizers identify potential leaders by holding 30 minute one-on-one meetings with candidates referred by existing leaders. According to Ernesto Cortes, organizers look for a clear sense of self-interest in getting involved, a willingness to act, and the presence of controlled or “cold” anger. They also look for a sense of humour, imagination, maturity, risk-taking, responsibility, aggressiveness, integrity, and a healthy ego.

### **The IAF emphasizes praxis over action**

Praxis is practice grounded in knowledge combined with reflection and evaluation. According to Ernesto Cortes, the most important part is the reflection and evaluation that follows an action. This takes place in group meetings with other leaders. It also takes place in more candid one-on-one meetings with organizers. Here organizers will often agitate and challenge leaders to learn and develop. The objective is to overcome obstacles that block a leader’s growth. This kind of strong personal tutoring is unheard of in most citizen’s groups.

### **The IAF works on personal development**

Most community organizations do project evaluations; but they are quick, cursory and impersonal. Once again the IAF version is more formal, but it’s also deeper and more personal. At 10 day national training sessions, the IAF devotes a full day to the analysis of each person’s self-interest. Trainers steer participants toward a relational rather than personal view of self-interest, since a person’s interests form in a context of relationships with others.

So many community-based efforts run into trouble because they allow campaign objectives to sideline the self-interest of participants. It’s worth taking time to align public interest objectives with the self-interest of participants. The exercise deepens the commitment to public action, and avoids competition between public and private life.

### **The IAF uses personal stories to forge alliances .**

The IAF’s approach is often called “relational organizing” because organizers spend a lot of time teaching leaders how to build relationships within and between organizations. To build relationships between organizations the IAF tries develop strong personal ties between people from different organizations, as well as from different races, and different income levels. To do this it brings leaders from different organizations together in small groups where they share personal stories and engage in “deep listening”. People are encouraged to speak about important experiences that have shaped their lives. The process is not a quick preamble that precedes “getting down to business”; it often takes place over many days. Sharing life experiences

creates an intimate bond between different people, and the trust that is necessary for inter-group cooperation.

The IAF 's use of personal stories and deep listening is not unique. It is practiced in traditional cultures; it also resembles M. Scott Peck's approach to building deep community described in the *Different Drum*.

Sharing personal stories does more than create bridges between different groups of people. When leaders understand and share their own stories, it clears the way for candid reflection following an action that will contribute to a leader's growth.

For many reasons, most citizens groups don't engage in this kind of work. Most focus on devising actions, not on building relationships. Most spend no time at all building relationships with people outside their own circle. Many feel that telling personal stories is too personal, like group therapy. But pragmatic groups should consider the practice because it works. Developing deep relationships between the leaders of different parts of civil society breeds a willingness to cooperate that makes it much easier to get things done. Relational organizing appears to be one of the best ways to bridge the many disconnected parts of civil society. It also seems to be a way of facilitating the partnership arrangements advocated by John McKnight and John Kretzmann in *Building Communities from the Inside Out*.

#### **The IAF mixes consensus with decision-making by leaders**

The IAF believes people operate and should operate through leadership. The most experienced leaders make most of the decisions at the IAF, leaving less experienced leaders and the rank and file to ratify these decisions at regular assemblies. The process usually goes smoothly because agreements on contentious issues are worked out by consensus before formal ratification meetings. In fact, IAF leaders spend a lot of informal time reasoning with one another to reach a consensus that will be supported.

IAF leaders are chosen through a similar process. They are not elected; instead they are recommended by lead organizer, then chosen through informal discussion and consensus amongst top leaders, and finally ratified at an assembly or larger convention.

#### **The IAF tries to prevent cliques**

The IAF warns leaders about limiting friendships that seem to be coalescing around a clique. Cliques get in the way of broad-based relationships that cut across diverse communities.

#### **No permanent political ties**

The IAF maintains a strictly non-partisan position so that it can work with people on the right or the left or anywhere in between.

**House meetings link to the grassroots**

The IAF will often ask its network of leaders to invite friends and neighbours to their houses to discuss a particular issue, such as how to provide job training for low income wage earners. These conversations are intended to find a basis for action on the problem. They include people directly affected by the issue, and they usually collect personal stories that will motivate others.

**Research meetings create allies**

The IAF combines the bottom-up approach of house meetings with the top-down approach of research meetings with experts, business and public officials. Research meetings create allies, add credibility, and help to define the details of public policy initiatives. It's worth noting that research meetings are face-to-face meetings. The IAF rightly believes that the art of politics is best conducted face-to-face, not by telephone, letter or email.

For a job training program for low income residents in San Antonio IAF leaders met with local business and found there where shortages in certain well-paid jobs,. They met with community college representatives to identify program possibilities. They met with city politicians. They met with other IAF groups in the state to identify opportunities for cross-network collaboration. They met with state and local experts on labor force development. In addition, they met with a number of national labor force economists who could make suggestions, and would endorse an initiative that followed.

**The IAF recognizes the importance of resources**

Most IAF affiliates have an annual budget of around \$150,000, enough to pay at least one organizer, cover office staff and organizational overhead, and pay the cost of extensive leader training. About 20% comes from dues, 20% from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, 30% from private foundations and corporations and the rest from local fundraising and other faith based funders. Like most progressive organizations the IAF's activities are limited is limited by the resources it can mobilize.

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