



Network Organizing: A Strategy for Building Community Engagement

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Across the country there is a fundamental condition that consistently undercuts even the most successful community development efforts: chronic disengagement. In most cities, public or civic life is a hostile environment for the average person, ruled by cynicism and division, and dominated by entrenched habits of isolation and detachment. Unfortunately, while our community development field is engineered to build the physical things communities need – new homes, community centers and small businesses – and to some extent, to influence the policy that supports those products, we are not designed to attack this condition. CDCs, other community building groups, and the funders and intermediaries that support them, have to confront the possibility that if we do not build resident power and engagement and repopulate the barren public landscape in our cities, then we are ignoring one of the key challenges in the field today and undermining all our other efforts.

At Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW), a CDC in Lawrence, Massachusetts, we joke that, for years in our city, everyone has had just enough clout to stop anyone from doing anything, but not enough to actually get anything done. Lawrence is one of those places where disengagement has left a vacuum of energy, vision and leadership in public life. The result is a city that has stagnated physically and economically for years, unable to adapt to a changing economy and population and resistant to individual efforts to improve it.

Our response to this situation is a “network organizing” strategy that connects people to each other and to opportunities for people to step into public life – from the neighborhood group to the City Council – in a way that feels safe, fun and productive. Our approach is a

hybrid of many of the established practices of community organizing. The principal twist is the application of network theory, a set of ideas that come from the technology and economics fields but that are proving useful for understanding and shaping our community environments. Applying this thinking to our work has helped us to challenge some of the common obstacles to genuine engagement, and shape a strong *demand environment* for change.

The idea of a demand environment is central to our network organizing approach. In this civic and political environment, inclusive, democratic deliberation and decision making become the cultural norm. This gives rise to a robust marketplace where the individual and collective voices of thousands of residents begin to shape policy, service delivery and the community development agenda. At present, the supply side of this marketplace (the CBOs, intermediaries, service agencies, etc.) is defining the problems and shaping the solutions. This, combined with anemic resident engagement, produces an environment where there is little relation between what people demand and what they are supplied. Most comprehensive community initiatives are committed to reforming the supply side by investing in the capacity of CBOs to better engage the community. We invest in the community's capacity to produce demand, by providing abundant opportunities for people to come together, articulate and act on those things that are important to them. Another way to think about it is that many community development and organizing efforts are reactive: building affordable housing in the face of a crisis or organizing against a budget cut. A demand environment is proactive: residents create the network of relationships that support productive deliberation, and practice this process at the institutional, neighborhood and city levels to shape the community (including the institutions) they want.

Our City

LCW was built on the remnants of a CDC

that, after years of hard work, struggle and some success, had effectively become dormant by 1999. There were several dedicated board members, one staff member, a single funding commitment for \$20,000 and little strategy or focus. The board asked several of us who were volunteering in Lawrence to form an organizing team and find a way to reinvent the organization to “make a difference.”

Like good organizers, we started by going out and talking with many people. We wanted to engage residents in planning efforts toward launching a comprehensive development strategy. We found great people with great ideas, but we also found what a lot of CBOs find when trying to engage residents – a wall of cynicism, distrust and disinterest. As universal as this cynicism can be, every place has its own particular brand. To understand it, you have to understand the place.

Lawrence is a former textile manufacturing city of about 75,000 that has struggled economically for over 40 years and is today one of the poorest cities in the country (see [Back From the Brink](#)). The Lawrence story is a common one among so-called “weak market” cities, particularly in the Northeast and throughout the Rust Belt. What you see in these places, in the housing stock, the industrial buildings, the roads, rails and waterways, are the remnants of the urban industrial machine that was the city of the 1800s and early 1900s. The path toward economic success is not obvious and the obstacles to redevelopment can seem overwhelming. Cleaning up dozens of urban brownfields, retrofitting millions of square feet of industrial buildings, renovating a 19th century housing stock and reinvigorating miles of downtown commercial districts is all daunting enough.

But these are also places where the ethnic, racial and class alignments that defined political and civic life have undergone radical change in recent years. New immigrants now

populate the neighborhoods abandoned through white upward mobility and flight. In Lawrence, the immigrants are slowly and doggedly taking root, buying homes, starting businesses and learning English. But the aging white population clings tenaciously to power and control of the rusty public apparatus. The scant public dialogue that exists is saturated with racial and old-timer/newcomer tension, and the public decision-making process is unresponsive to clear community needs and marked by blame and cronyism.

In our view, Lawrence had stagnated because civic life in the city had been grossly underpopulated for decades. It was too hard, too scary, too boring and too unnatural for people to find ways to get to know and learn to trust their neighbors, or to take part in public life. Larger influences such as capital flight, the decline of organized labor and globalization played their parts in this stagnation. But without a healthy civic environment and local leadership, the city had no way to forge a path through these changes. Too few people had taken up the challenge of healing and reinventing the fractured community, and those who did had been isolated and marginalized. Our challenge was to attack this epidemic of disengagement.

Building the Network

In the face of disengagement, a network-building strategy that values change, flexibility, choice and relationships is more helpful than a traditional institution-building strategy (even one that seeks connections to other institutions) that engages fewer people in a more narrow set of leadership roles and a more rigid organizational structure. CDCs, instead of being an end in themselves, must become a part of a network – not just suppliers, but catalysts of the demand environment.

An important first element of network organizing is to **create choices**. We strive to create an environment that recognizes the demands of people's lives. It has to offer

multiple opportunities and many levels of involvement. Some people turn out once a year for a park clean-up and planting, while others come once a week to plan a community center fundraiser or design the next housing project. It also has to allow people to opt out for a period of time and still feel welcomed and a part of the group. Finally, it has to recognize that a primary strength comes from the human need for fun, affection, connection and recognition.

One way that people get involved is through our Family Asset Building Department, which offers adult programs, such as Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) and English as a Second Language and computer classes, and holds regular networking nights where people who are in various programs can gather socially. Different participants provide food, showcase unsuspected talents or recruit guest speakers to talk about a community issue or opportunity. Another way for people to connect with us is our NeighborCircles, a variation on the traditional organizer's house meeting. LCW-trained resident facilitators convene a group of neighbors in a given block or area for a series of dinner discussions focused on getting to know each other, identifying common challenges in the area and developing discrete, manageable projects for tackling those challenges.

The network needs **many points of entry** that are accessible and interesting to a wide range of people. The Family Asset Building and NeighborCircles programs are just two of these points. Because they are different kinds of "doors," we have the ability to attract a variety of people who have different needs and interests.

Then, by intentionally connecting these doors, we create the **linkages** that are critical to building a strong network. For example, several of the women participating in our IDA program have become hosts for NeighborCircles, reaching out to others on their block or in their personal networks. In

doing this, they are moving from an activity focused on personal development (such as IDAs) to an activity that fosters dialogue among neighbors and addresses issues of common concern. They are also reaching people who might not come to us for the IDA or other programs.

Networks grow through both strong and weak linkages. Over a period of years, the 12 women in LCW's first IDA program have built strong personal connections and relationships that manifest in everything from carpooling and mutual child care to job referrals. Other people come in with existing strong ties – two participants go to the same church or they are cousins. While these linkages are invaluable, forging weak links across groups is what builds a network. Weak connections open new opportunities for people and provide a safer way for them to step out of their comfort zone.

A network needs agents who are actively engaging and connecting people to the network – being **Weavers**. LCW board members, residents, allies and staff are all encouraged to be Weavers. The Weaver's job is to be intentionally curious about people, their interests and connections; to connect that person to our organization; and to link that person to one other thing going on in the Network. As a team of Weavers, we also work intentionally and thoughtfully to create pathways to a deeper level of engagement, for example, by recommending people from NeighborCircles to our Poder Leadership Institute. Poder (the Spanish word for power) is a five-month intensive course in organizing, power analysis, collaborative governance and facilitation skills, culminating in a community campaign or project that participants implement. It is explicitly formulated to develop leaders who can carry their new capacities out into the wider public arena. They might run for City Council or School Committee, join other nonprofit boards or bring more people into city institutions and decision-making processes.

Let People Decide What Works

Another element of network organizing is **provisionality**. In community building we suffer greatly from dysfunctional structures that persist long after they are no longer useful. All our programs and committees have to be seen as provisional – useful only in that they get us where we need to go. We downplay formal leadership roles and structures and embrace the notion that the form should change a lot, depending on the stage of the work we are in. Having committees and working groups end is a good thing. Creating an environment where no one gets too comfortable in positions of power is an important precondition to creating accessible and accountable groups, where new people can come in at any point along the way and quickly be engaged in shared activity.

The NeighborCircles are an example. Some NeighborCircles never coalesce beyond the initial three-meeting stage. Some come together for a small project and then disband; some go on meeting as a group and regularly address issues on the block such as garbage collection or snowplowing; others develop into a Property Improvement Committee and work with LCW staff on large-scale projects such as an affordable housing development or a local park. The NeighborCircles actually developed out of the ashes of our first organizing effort, building a local neighborhood association, which accomplished some good work but got stuck on issues of internal structure and hierarchy.

If one person is passionate about a project or thinks they have a solution, it has to stand the test of **resonance**: Does it capture other people's imaginations, attract their time and energy? If we are hearing the same idea from many disparate parts of the network, then we have resonance. When LCW first started organizing in our target neighborhood in 1999, we were looking to develop a land use agenda for the area. But all people wanted to talk to us about was their kids and how there was nothing for them to do. Embracing resonance, we created our first summer youth

program with parent volunteers before we built a single house. Training ourselves to respond to resonance is central to developing programs that have a broad base of support and to successful collective actions. It is also a key element in developing the habits of democratic deliberation and decision making.

The ability of our network to **broadcast information** quickly to the right places determines its effectiveness. Thus, over the past two years we have made significant investments in our database, Web site and newsletter, and are starting a new effort – Las Rutas (the ways) – in which network members create a written and Web-based record of their experiences for use by other members. This ranges from instructions on how to organize a block party to a record of the process for getting better trash service. We have also developed a “Communication Compact,” an internal document that our board and staff, as network stewards, use to support honesty and ownership in verbal communication, so that “word of mouth” transmission is an effective method of moving accurate information through the network.

Building the City

If our eventual aim is a healthy civic environment, then we can't be the only player on the field. One of the primary characteristics of a well-functioning network is the presence of **multiple hubs and nodes** – institutions and forums that connect people to each other and that can also take on distinct projects that further network goals. If all the good stuff was only happening through LCW, what would happen to the city if something happened to us? At times we make the conscious decision to funnel resources to other organizations or projects, again, to invest in network building rather than institution building. When LCW received three years of substantial operating support from a regional bank, we re-granted a portion of that money to several other Lawrence nonprofits to help them build capacity as well. This has translated into both stronger partnerships in later joint ventures and better services and points of engagement

for city residents.

As we have put this thinking into practice over the past few years, there has been doubt among some in the field about whether this is a “real” organizing strategy aimed at building power. It is true that people come to our network for many reasons. But it is also true that many gravitate toward higher levels of engagement – and a broader definition of self-interest – once they are part of the network. We cultivate and encourage this path toward collective action, principally through reflective practice – groups of members taking action, reflecting on that action and then taking a larger step. It is important that people practice democratic deliberation in the safety of a NeighborCircle or a Poder class before bringing that new skill to a larger environment such as City Council. The students in the pilot class of Poder finished their session by organizing an action, the March Against Garbage, to win better garbage collection for the neighborhood. This led the group to question the distribution of city resources, which led to questions about city budget priorities and process. This in turn has led to LCW’s Fair Budget Campaign, an effort led by Poder graduates to reform the city budget process through participatory budgeting.

We are just at the beginning of our efforts to shape and refine our network organizing approach. The early results are encouraging, but we face myriad challenges as we move forward. We have to challenge each other constantly to trust the process. We struggle with how to manage an organization that is deliberately in flux, yet needs to tackle specific real estate and other critical projects. But the most important challenge is personal, as the network-organizing ideal requires all of us to break down our individual habits of detachment and find a comfort level in an environment where the successes, the failures and the power are shared.

Today the 900 members of LCW have thousands of relationships and connections to

bring to bear on the challenge of community change. We have found this to be an enormously powerful force that can be organized for actions and leadership roles needed to reinvent our city – and other cities like it. Our principal role, as an organization and a network hub, is to let loose this power of collective demand in the neighborhood environment, a place where the suppliers have ruled for quite some time.

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The Power of a Network

Given the condition of Lawrence, Massachusetts, in recent years, Lawrence CommunityWorks would have found it difficult to do as much as it has without its network organizing strategy. In less than six years,

LCW has:

- . Built a network of 900 members, over 400 of whom are active on a monthly basis, and have been the power behind many of LCW's successes, as well as 150 young people engaged in educational, leadership and civic activities;**
- . Leveraged over \$12 million in new investments for neighborhood development;**
- . Built 25 new affordable housing units (homeownership**

- and rental) and two new playgrounds, transforming a dozen distressed properties;**
- . Acquired an abandoned school and six other vacant parcels to develop a community center, a park and up to 50 more units of affordable housing;**
 - . Created the Reviviendo Gateway Initiative, a collaboration of residents, mill owners, small business people, elected officials**

- and agency heads driving smart and equitable growth as the guide for redevelopment of the city's downtown, mill and adjacent residential districts;**
- . Passed the first major zoning change in the city since 1946, creating a smart growth overlay district that includes an affordable housing set-aside for mill redevelopment;**
 - . Launched an effort to create a participatory city**

**budget process –
as people who
have not entered
City Hall in years
(or ever) are
drawing on their
experiences in
LCW’s
NeighborCircles,
Poder Leadership
Institutes and
other programs to
advocate for
change.**

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