



# CENTER FOR NONPROFITS

## University of Wisconsin–Madison



### SUMMARY

Getting people involved, keeping them engaged, and turning new participants into seasoned community leaders are some of the biggest challenges facing nonprofit organizations, particularly those that are focused on making social change. This digest draws insights from recent research on community organizing and empowerment.

The goal is to succinctly present some of the “take home” messages about how to increase community members’ empowerment and engagement in social action.

The intended audience includes grassroots organizers and stakeholders in nonprofit organizations that aim to build a broad base of engaged grassroots leaders.

## Tips on Building a Broad Base of Engaged and Empowered Volunteers

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Community organizers sometimes say that there are two ways to exercise power and make change: through organized people and through organized money. Sadly, today’s political decision-making is frequently driven by money. Organized money works continually to reinforce its own political power. For example, a recent Supreme Court decision (*Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*, 2010) grants corporations an unlimited ability to fund and air political broadcasts during campaigns, greatly increasing the power of organized money to determine electoral outcomes.

Organized money even plays a powerful role in the nonprofit sector through large foundations and ‘checkbook membership’ organizations that take donated money from citizens to hire professional lobbyists. However, grassroots organizations cannot effectively counter the influence of organized money only by fighting back with money. Only a very few of the largest nonprofits have annual revenues over a billion dollars, while large corporations have annual revenues in the hundreds of billions. To counter the influence of organized money in politics, today’s nonprofit organizations need large, committed groups of organized people who are dedicated and empowered to conduct research, strategize and take collective action.

Organizing a large, committed group of empowered citizens is no simple task. In fact, there is evidence that people today are less engaged in their communities, less informed about important issues, and less likely to take part in democratic action than in previous generations. In the face of these challenges to our democracy – corporate personhood, mass society, 24-hour partisan news broadcasts, consumerism, alienation and isolation – the work of community organizers has never been more important.

Community organizing seeks to build networks of engaged citizens to take action on social and policy issues (including, for example, affordable housing, living wage jobs, public safety, public health, and public education). At its best, community organizing can harness the collective power of citizens to have an impact on several of these issues at once. However, many organizing initiatives have limited impact. Many are short-lived. Others ebb and flow between activity and dormancy. Moreover, many organizations in the nonprofit sector claim to be doing “community organizing”, but are really doing professional advocacy with

minimal opportunities for volunteers to become genuinely engaged in the process (i.e., at a level beyond phone-banking, canvassing, or turning out to a rally).

## **What Gets People Engaged, and Keeps Them Engaged Over Time?**

In short, the answers to these questions are: (1) relationships with other participants and, (2) the opportunity to play a role that is meaningful and challenging.

These answers are supported by research on local community organizing (Christens & Speer, 2011), and are also related to theory on human development and community settings. In research on five local community organizing initiatives over a five-year period, we found that people who participated in short one-to-one meetings with other participants were more likely to continue their involvement in community organizing than those who did not. This was true even when we took many other factors into account, such as overall levels of previous involvement, and individual and neighborhood demographic characteristics. Similarly, people who attended certain types of meetings were more likely to continue or increase their involvement in community organizing over time.

The meeting type that was found to be particularly powerful for getting people engaged is called a research action. Research actions involve a small group (e.g., 8-12) of people who are working on a particular issue (e.g., improving public schools). A research action involves inviting decision-makers on the issue at hand to join the group for a meeting. For example, a group working on issues related to public education might invite school principals, a superintendent, or a member of the city council. The group carefully plans the research action meeting in advance, so that they will be able to gather the information they need regarding the issue, and so that each volunteer participant is integrally involved in the discussion with the decision-maker. In other words, every person who attends has an important role to play.

Research actions are powerful because they give people the chance to directly engage in the tough, strategic questions about public issues and community change processes. Too often, organizations send their volunteers an unspoken message that such decisions are better left to the professional staff of the organization. By involving everyday people in all

aspects of the process, even the important conversations with powerful people, the organizations we studied were implicitly communicating to their base of grassroots leaders that they were valued – not just as bodies at a rally or signatures on a petition – but as strategists and communicators. Their volunteers responded by becoming more committed to staying involved in the organizing campaign.

One-to-one conversations play a similar role in motivating continued involvement (Christens & Speer, 2011). In some models of community organizing, one-to-ones are intentionally geared toward building “public relationships” (Christens, 2010). In other words, they are about listening to another person’s story and understanding how their interests and issues are connected to community issues. The goal is not necessarily a close friendship, but a personal relationship that is trusting and has the capacity for growth and even accountability. Having a multitude of public relationships with other residents motivates volunteers to continue their involvement, and connects the work on public issues to the personal lives of fellow volunteers.

## **Which Comes First – Participation or Empowerment?**

The process of building a base of committed grassroots volunteers involves encouraging both certain types of actions (i.e., community participation) as well as capacity building, such as leadership development and psychological empowerment. One question in these processes concerns where to focus limited energy for training and leadership development. Another set of questions involve timing and order – should the focus initially be developing individual leaders, encouraging broader participation, or large-scale community action?

Findings from recent research on community organizing over time (Christens, Peterson & Speer, 2011) indicate that it is likely more effective to focus, at least initially, on encouraging community participation, rather than focusing on changing the beliefs or capacities of individual leaders. As it turns out, people who are participating more in civic affairs demonstrate gains in psychological empowerment over time. Therefore, giving participants more opportunities to become active – attending meetings, having conversations about issues, gathering information, writing letters – will,

over time, increase their knowledge and skills, as well as their confidence and sense of effectiveness on social and political issues.

## **Should Strategies be Different for Different Populations?**

Some strategies tend to work regardless of the demographic characteristics (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, income, or levels of formal education) of the populations that a group is seeking to organize. For instance, in one study (Christens & Speer, 2011), we examined the impact of different factors on participation, such as attending different types of meetings, individual characteristics, and the characteristics of the neighborhoods in which participants lived. It turns out that attending one-to-one meetings and small, intensive meetings like research actions are much more powerful predictors of continued participation than individual or neighborhood characteristics. Indeed, many of the types of experiences that get us motivated and make us effective agents of community change are similar across diverse groups.

On the other hand, in a study of the psychological changes that take place as people participate in their communities (Christens, Speer & Peterson, 2011), we have uncovered some insights that can help to hone more tailored strategies for engaging and empowering populations with different characteristics. Specifically, our findings indicate that it is likely that those with higher and lower socioeconomic statuses will have different initial strengths and weaknesses related to their abilities to make community change. Accordingly, different strategies might be needed to more effectively engage and empower different types of volunteers.

On average, those with less household income and less formal education are likely to have a keener understanding of how social power operates in society. For example, they are more likely to understand how people with power use it to shape public perceptions and ideology. Yet, despite this knowledge, individuals with a lower socioeconomic status are less likely to feel as though they themselves can make change in their communities. In other words, they are relatively more cognitively empowered, but relatively less emotionally empowered than other populations. When working with groups that contain many people with low

socioeconomic status, it is therefore critical to get people participating as often and as actively as possible, since we know that this will, over time, build their sense of social and political efficacy.

For groups organizing people with middle or higher socioeconomic status, the challenges are somewhat different. These individuals are likely to feel emotionally empowered, but tend to lack some of the critical understandings of power and social issues. What's more, there is evidence that middle and upper class people do not necessarily gain these understandings as they participate more in communities and organizations. Therefore, when working with individuals and groups with higher socioeconomic status, it may be beneficial to engage in activities and reflections designed to raise critical consciousness and awareness of social power, rather than focusing primarily on encouraging community participation. In groups that are more socioeconomically diverse, both of these aims can be accomplished through one-to-one conversations geared toward building public relationships.

## **Conclusions**

Giving volunteer leaders opportunities to take on meaningful responsibilities in the organization and to form meaningful interpersonal relationships – not only with other volunteers, but also with powerful decision-makers – can seem inefficient, beside the point, or even risky from an organizational standpoint. Research on community organizing suggests, however, that this is a path toward building a powerful grassroots organization with a broad base of active and empowered volunteers. Giving people opportunities to learn and develop through their first-hand experience is also the best way to instill skills and the necessary perspectives for leading community change initiatives.

